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

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

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

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

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

Children and young people—Emerging drivers of declining AEDC results in the ACT

Ministerial statement

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) (10.01): The early years are a critical period in every child's development, laying the foundations for lifelong learning, health and wellbeing. As Minister for Education and Minister for Child Development and Wellbeing, I am committed to ensuring that every child in the ACT has the support, services and opportunities they need to learn, grow and thrive.

The Australian Early Development Census, or AEDC, is a national population measure of early childhood development. The 2024 results highlight a concerning trend in child development outcomes in the ACT and reinforce the need for continued action across government, communities and services. The AEDC looks at five key areas or domains of early childhood development: physical health and wellbeing; social competence; emotional maturity; language and cognitive skills; and communication skills and general knowledge. Every three years, children in their first year of full-time school are assessed by their teachers and given a score between zero and 10 in each domain. These scores are then classified into one of three groups, using benchmarks developed for the first census collection in 2009. These categories are known as "developmentally on track", "at risk" or "vulnerable".

The good news for the ACT in 2024 was that 97 per cent of our kindergarten children participated in the census, with every ACT school across the government, Catholic and independent sectors taking part. This strong participation gives us a comprehensive picture of how our children are developing. Unfortunately, what the data showed was not so positive. In 2024, 28.1 per cent of ACT children were identified as being developmentally vulnerable on one or more domains, compared with 23.5 per cent nationally. Within this, 14.9 per cent of ACT children were found to be vulnerable on at least two domains, compared with 12.5 per cent nationally. Only 43.8 per cent of

ACT children were developmentally on track across all five domains. Of significant concern, developmental vulnerability among ACT children starting school has worsened in every AEDC cycle since 2015. This evidence indicates that developmental vulnerability is increasing across all parts of the ACT community.

The results for ACT Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are particularly distressing, with 52 per cent developmentally vulnerable on one or more domains, 37.6 per cent on two or more and just 24.1 per cent on track across all five domains. This gap in developmental outcomes between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and non-Indigenous children has continued to widen. Addressing this gap must be a key priority as part of the ACT's broader response to increasing developmental vulnerability.

These findings highlight the importance of continuing to work with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and organisations to improve outcomes for children and families through Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership and self-determination. This is central to our commitments under Closing the Gap, including the national target to increase the proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children who are developmentally on track across all five AEDC domains to 55 per cent by 2031.

It also aligns with the ACT Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Agreement, including our commitments to supporting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people to grow up safely in their families and communities, improving health and wellbeing outcomes and strengthening Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership and self-determination. We will continue to work with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities to ensure future responses are informed by community priorities and support improved outcomes for children and families. More broadly, our response requires both targeted supports for children and families experiencing greater disadvantage and universal supports for all children across the ACT.

To better understand the factors contributing to the AEDC results, the ACT government engaged independent consultants, through Nous Group, to examine the potential drivers of declining developmental outcomes and identify evidence-informed responses that could strengthen outcomes for children and families. Drawing on ACT and national AEDC data, desktop research and targeted engagement with government, community sector representatives and kindergarten teachers, the review found that declining developmental outcomes in the ACT reflect a broader system-level challenge rather than any single cause.

The review found that declining developmental outcomes are being driven by a complex set of interconnected factors, including increasingly complex behavioural and developmental needs within our community, growing pressure on families, barriers to accessing support, uneven access to services and fragmentation across the early years service system. The AEDC indicates a greater decline in children's social competence, emotional maturity and physical wellbeing, rather than language and cognitive development—highlighting the importance of early intervention, family support and children's social and emotional development.

The Nous report proposes a clear pathway forward through seven policy responses.

They are focused on: strengthening support for parents and carers; improving early identification and access to support; strengthening a "no wrong door" approach so families can access coordinated support through multiple entry points; investing in the quality and capability of early childhood education and care; targeting additional support to communities where need is greatest; strengthening Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community leadership in early years services; and strengthening cross-government coordination and accountability. These responses are guided by a simple but important principle: a strong universal system for all children and families, complemented by more targeted and intensive support where it is needed most.

Many of the challenges identified through the review are already being addressed through reforms and investments underway across the ACT government, including Best Start for Canberra's Children, Set Up for Success, Thriving Kids and the development of an integrated child and family network. Together, these reforms aim to ensure children and families receive support earlier, more easily and in ways that improve developmental outcomes before children start school, while helping to strengthen coordination across the early years system.

In 2022, the ACT government launched Best Start for Canberra's Children: The First 1000 Days Strategy and expanded Child Development Service therapeutic supports for children aged 24 to 36 months, providing earlier intervention for young children and their families. We are also investing in high-quality early learning through 300 hours of free three-year-old preschool, supporting more children to access quality early childhood education before they start school, and we are committed to expanding this to 600 hours. This universal program builds on the targeted Three-Year-Old Initiative launched in 2020, which provides two full days of early childhood education and care for children experiencing disadvantage and vulnerability. A recently released longitudinal study of this initiative has found that two years of preschool prior to formal schooling is effectively closing the gap in educational outcomes for participating children. Together with the pilot of three-year-old health and development checks, these initiatives are helping identify developmental concerns earlier, improve access to support and ensure more children start school ready to learn.

The commencement of Thriving Kids on 1 October 2026 marks a significant milestone in strengthening the ACT's early years system and delivering the first phase of Foundational Supports. Supported by an initial $21.8 million investment over five years and forming part of a broader $63.4 million joint ACT and commonwealth reform package, Thriving Kids represents one of the most significant reforms to developmental supports for children and families in the ACT in recent years. Since its launch on 1 October, Thriving Kids is progressively expanding access to intake, referral and navigation services, targeted therapeutic supports, parenting and peer supports and supports for priority cohorts, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families and culturally and linguistically diverse children and families. Importantly, children do not need a formal diagnosis before receiving support through Thriving Kids, reducing delays and enabling earlier intervention. Supports will be delivered in places where children live, learn and play, including early childhood education and care services, preschools, schools and community settings. These reforms will not solve every challenge overnight. But they provide a strong foundation for earlier support, stronger family capability, better-connected services and improved developmental outcomes over time.

Families know their children best and play the most significant role in supporting their development, learning and wellbeing. Thriving Kids recognises parents, carers and kin as children's first and most important educators, and strengthening family confidence and capability is a key part of the reform. Through information, navigation support, practical guidance, parenting supports and peer connections, Thriving Kids will strengthen the confidence, capability and developmental literacy of families, carers and kin. It will help families identify concerns early, understand developmental needs and support their child's learning and development through everyday activities and routines. When families have the information, support and connections they need, they are better placed to support their children's development, learning and wellbeing.

Importantly, our approach cannot be about lecturing busy parents or giving them information and leaving it up to them to figure it out. The adage that it takes a village to raise a child is so often repeated because it rings true—especially today, when many parents are struggling with the pressures of work, cost of living and social and technological change. Parents need to know they have safe, non-judgemental and accessible sources of help and support where and when they need it, whether that is online, over the phone or in person at a Child and Family Centre, playgroup or parents' group—or a combination of all these.

In this context, I want to give a particular shout-out to Playgroups ACT for the work its dedicated staff and volunteers do throughout the year in connecting children, parents and carers with one another and with support services. Last Friday, Playgroups ACT hosted the annual PlayFEST in Gungahlin to celebrate the importance of play and the beginning of Children's Week. It was wonderful to see so many children, parents and carers connecting with our incredible government and non-government services as well as just enjoying time and space to play. This is what a village looks like, and it was a great reminder that we already have so many elements of that village in the ACT.

As implementation of Thriving Kids and the broader child and family network progresses, we will continue to identify where gaps remain, where further action is needed and where stronger collaboration could improve the way children and families are supported. Some of this work is already underway through existing reforms. Other opportunities will continue to emerge as we work alongside families, communities and service providers to strengthen the early years system. This work is about improving the developmental trajectory of Canberra's children by ensuring they receive the right support at the right time, so they can start school ready to learn, developmentally on track and with the foundations they need to thrive. Over time, we expect to see this reflected in improved outcomes across future AEDC cycles. But, ultimately, it is not about numbers; it is about children living their best lives.

The Nous review provides a strong evidence base regarding the factors influencing developmental outcomes for children. It confirms that improving outcomes requires earlier support, stronger service integration, better coordination across government and more accessible pathways for children and families. We will continue to work across government and alongside families, educators, schools, health professionals, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, partner organisations and service providers as we consider the review's findings and next steps.

We will continue to learn from our partners and from the evidence of what works. The AEDC results tell us where we need to focus our efforts. The Nous review tells us where the opportunities for improvement are. Our job now is to work together across government with our non-government partners and with the community to turn that evidence into better outcomes for children and families. Our goal is clear: to give every child in the ACT the best possible start in life and to ensure children and their families can access the right support at the right time to learn, develop and thrive. Thank you, Mr Speaker, and happy Children's Week.

I present the following papers:

> Emerging drivers of declining AEDC results in the ACT: Final Report—Commissioned by the ACT Health and Community Services Directorate (HCSD), dated 26 August 2026.
>
> Australian Early Development Census Results Drivers—Ministerial statement, 28 October 2026.

I move:

> That the Assembly take note of the ministerial statement.

MR EMERSON (Kurrajong) (10.14): I thank the minister for the statement this morning, for tabling this important report and for taking on this piece of work, which is a significant and absolutely critical piece of work. Our society is the wealthiest and most technologically advanced in human history. Our living standards are higher than they have ever been, yet our children are suffering. Rates of developmental vulnerability are high and increasing.

Here in the ACT, where we have the highest median incomes and the highest standard of living in the country, child developmental vulnerability is higher than any other state, and second only to the Northern Territory. Twenty-eight per cent of our children are developmentally vulnerable. That figure has increased with every three-yearly census over the last decade. For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, the rate of developmental vulnerability rises to 52 per cent. Despite clear commitments to significantly reduce child developmental vulnerability under the National Agreement on Closing the Gap, the gap is widening here in the nation's capital. How have we allowed this to happen?

I think we have allowed the development of economic and technological conditions that conspire to make it increasingly difficult for parents just to spend quality time with their children. Unaffordable housing, the cost of living and the immense pressures of getting by in the current economic climate create an impossible challenge for parents with young children. As the minister rightly points out, families know their children best and play the most significant role in supporting their development, learning and wellbeing. Yet so many families are under so much pressure just getting by—bombarded by so many pressures; have so little time; are so stressed; and have so little agency over how their time is spent—that they cannot play the role they want to play in the development of their children. We need to work harder to give parents time back and to create the social, economic, technological and cultural conditions that allow what is best for our kids to actually come first, which is ultimately, of course, what every parent wants.

The minister is right to say that lecturing busy parents or giving them information will not solve these problems and will not be a popular move either. There are societal problems that require societal solutions, and it is up to all of us and both levels of government to tackle these problems in a coordinated way with a clear goal in mind—to build child-centric communities capable of raising socially, emotionally, cognitively and physically competent children.

What can the ACT government do now to start addressing the worrying decline in child developmental outcomes across our community? Hopefully, this report provides us with a direction forward. The data shows that high-quality early childhood education and care is a protective factor; yet low-quality providers putting profit ahead of children's development have been allowed to proliferate, supported by billions of dollars in government subsidies, threatening the viability of dedicated, local high-quality providers who really want what is best for our kids. We need far more support for these high-quality early learning providers—they are under immense pressure—and for the dedicated professional educators and centre directors who keep them running.

This is why, as members know, I have been pushing hard for more scrutiny—so families can make decisions based on quality. I think we are starting to see that happen with some of these big, major for-profit providers. We cannot allow our early childhood sector to be a race to the bottom, characterised increasingly by corporate profit-seeking to the detriment of the local community-run centres and the children they support. We need providers to be competing on quality. We need far more support for educators and increased pay and conditions. We need to attract and retain staff in the sector and support their professional development—and I hear from the sector their challenges with this.

Here in the ACT, we have the highest rates of participation in early childhood education and care in the country; yet we have Australia's least experienced and lowest qualified early childhood education and care workforce. The sector needs far more support to cultivate quality, while weeding out operators who are not willing to support their staff to provide high-quality education and care for our kids. While early childhood education and care decreases developmental vulnerability, data from the federal government's *The first five years* report, published in December last year, showed that child developmental vulnerability increases with higher rates of low-quality care. That is especially pronounced when it comes to social competence and emotional maturity—two of the three domains in which the ACT has seen the most significant increases in developmental vulnerability over the last decade.

So, alongside giving parents the choice to spend more quality time with their children and providing them with stronger support networks through the incredibly important yet under-resourced work of organisations like ACT playgroups, we also need to give the early childhood sector the support and resourcing it needs to continue providing high-quality education and care for all families, not just those lucky enough to secure a spot in one of our fantastic community-run centres.

If we are going to grapple with worsening social, emotional and physical developmental outcomes among our children, we also need to talk about our relationship with technology—about screens. The negative effects of digital device use on brain

development and socialisation are clear. The evidence is growing and other jurisdictions, both here in Australia and across the world, are starting to take action. Prevention is obviously the solution here, which is why I would like to take this opportunity this morning to signal my intent to seek the Assembly's support in the next sitting week for a sensible package of policies to prevent excessive screen use among children in the ACT. We should have a policy in place to start removing direct and indirect child-facing digital devices from early childhood education and care centres and from preschools.

We need clear government guidelines on safe screen use and the kinds of screen use for children—distinguishing low-stim from high-stim programs, for example. These need to be accompanied by strong, effective public health education and awareness campaigns, engaging families from pregnancy onward to understand how exposure to digital products can negatively impact the development and wellbeing of very young children. This is not parents' fault. Parents have been flying blind for far too long, and I think we have as a culture. I acknowledge this is a complex issue, given the digitisation of society and our reliance on technology, on screens, in so many parts of day-to-day life, but we need to tackle this. We cannot expect families with very young children—which, as a father of two young kids, I am confident has to be one of the most challenging times of life—to tackle this alone. We need to tackle this collectively, as a community, as a society, making its own choices about our interactions with technology. We also need evidence-based screen use restrictions in schools, as other states have started introducing. Regulating artificial intelligence use has to be part of this conversation too. So I look forward to working across the Assembly to secure support for these measures.

When children are experiencing developmental delays, we need strong service systems in place to identify those delays—and not just to do that, but to step in and help to provide the support that is needed. This is where we need to talk about Thriving Kids, and I am glad the minister touched on that this morning. The ongoing NDIS reforms and transition to state and territory-led Foundational Supports have, as we all know, not been a welcome change for the disability community. Families are being cut off from the essential safety net that has supported them to participate and thrive in their communities. This change has, unsurprisingly, caused immense anxiety and stress for families, especially due to the uncertainty surrounding the new scheme and what the impact of these changes will actually be across our community.

At the same time, this undeniably presents a massive opportunity for the territory that cannot be missed—to intervene and pick up the kids who are falling behind. The minister has rightly recognised the vital role that Thriving Kids must play with a "no wrong door" approach. We need to leverage existing institutions like our early learning centres, preschools, schools, GPs, child development services and child and family centres to connect families to the supports they need for their children to remain developmentally on track, or get back on track when they are falling behind. We either get this reform right or a lot of families across our community will suffer, and it will be the children who are suffering the most.

I am encouraged by the level of interest in this Assembly every time we talk about Thriving Kids, every time we talk about these reforms. There is a clear mandate and clear support across the Assembly to get this right and to really invest in this area. So I

call on the government to be ambitious and diligent in its planning and its communication with families about these reforms as they are rolled out and, most importantly, to make sure we create a system that does actually work for our families—to ultimately turn our AEDC trends around, so that our trajectory for child developmental vulnerability starts going down instead of continuing to increase.

Again, I thank the minister for her statement and for sharing this report with the Assembly today and, most importantly, for her clear interest in this critical issue. As I have said before, I think it is a fantastic sign that we have a minister dedicated to this area, because it has been a concerning trend that has not been tackled in a whole-of-government way. So I am really hopeful that having the Deputy Chief Minister responsible for this policy area is a sign that this will be tackled across government, that this is going to be taken seriously and that the report that has been tabled will lead to action, because that is what Canberrans want, that is what our communities want and, most importantly, it is what our children need.

MISS NUTTALL(Brindabella) (10.24): I also rise to speak to the ministerial statement on the AEDC results. I start by thanking the minister for acknowledging from the outset of her speech that things are not where they should be when it comes to giving our little ones the best start at life in the ACT. This is something that really troubles me. I know I am far from the only one in this place and our community who feels this way.

It is critical that we reckon with the fact that these outcomes are not being experienced equally in the ACT. Low results on early childhood development outcomes affect families without a safety net the most: families who are struggling the most with cost-of-living pressures and families for whom our government services simply must work for. In order to improve our markers of early childhood development, which place the ACT as the second-lowest jurisdiction in the country, we must uplift the most vulnerable in our community.

The results for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are particularly alarming and show a widening gap in developmental outcomes. We must re-affirm our commitment to self-determination in this context and recognise—not just through words or sentiment but also through real funding and investment in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-led organisations—that First Nations families should have services and supports that are shaped by the knowledge and wisdom of their own community and country.

The AEDC results tell us there is serious work to do, and they have been telling us this for some time now. They affirm anecdotes and correspondence we have received from parents, early childhood educators, allied health professionals, and sometimes even little people themselves. They tell a common story of service gaps which need filling, that the difficulties children are having in their first years of school are linked to the years prior, and ultimately that our early childhood education and care system needs real and substantive change. We need to think about the current services for kids and how to make sure that they are best placed to meet their early childhood development needs. Much like primary school, early childhood education and care is where most of our kids are already spending a significant amount of time.

The minister refers to the importance of high-quality early childhood education and care, and we cannot overstate how important that is. I have been heartened to see both the general public and politicians increasingly recognise the professionalism of early childhood educators. Heck, I presented a motion last term which sought to improve government support for upgrading qualifications and career pathways for early childhood educators, because putting good educators in front of children is one of the most powerful things you can do. I particularly want to give a shout-out to the Baringa early childhood education program for the wraparound support for new and continuing educators.

Now is the right time to talk about system stewardship and to talk about government playing a more active role in coordinating the early childhood education and care sector in the ACT. We all know primary school is important. We have entrenched students' rights to education through universal public primary school. It is still a bit wild to me that, before primary school, when children's brains are growing even faster, we would leave it up to the private for-profit space to determine the availability and quality of offerings. We want to see government step up and start to lead the system. That system should, like primary and secondary education, be underpinned by universality and quality. It should prioritise education, which is a human right, over profit, which is not.

The report has only just been tabled. It looks like it is almost 90 pages long—oh, my goodness! I hope to have more articulate things to say about it once my team and I have read it in full. I hope we can draw carefully and cleverly from this report to make the changes to our system that will help our kids—not just future generations but also the fully-fledged, if not tiny, humans of today.

MR COCKS (Murrumbidgee) (10.28): The minister has just delivered a statement on the Australian Early Development Census. It contains a lot that I think all members of this Assembly will agree with. The early years are so important. Families need support. Early intervention can change the trajectory of a child's life, and every child in Canberra should have the opportunity to start school ready to learn, participate and thrive. It is very important that every one of us in this place recognises that the figures that were highlighted in this statement are deeply concerning.

It says a lot when the good news—the highlight—is the participation rate. In 2024, 28.1 per cent of ACT children were developmentally vulnerable in at least one domain, compared with 23.5 per cent nationally; almost 15 per cent were vulnerable in two or more domains; and only 43.8 per cent of ACT children were developmentally on track across all five domains. Maybe most concerning is that developmental vulnerability has worsened in every AEDC cycle since 2015. That has to see us all asking a very simple question: how are so many of Canberra's children being left behind? We are one of the most prosperous jurisdictions in the country. We have relatively high incomes, strong institutions, a government that has spent years announcing some new strategies, new programs, new initiatives and new spending, but the outcomes are going in the wrong direction.

The minister has pointed to a number of programs already underway, including Best Start for Canberra's Children, Set up for Success, Thriving Kids, and the Child and Family Network. The Canberra Liberals will always support practical early intervention where there is evidence that it is improving outcomes for children and families. But it

is the outcomes that matter. The measure of success cannot be the number of programs that are announced, the strategies that have been launched or the money that has been spent; the measure has to be whether children are actually doing better. Right now, the data not only says they are not doing better but also says things are getting worse.

The review identified pressures contributing to these results: more complex behavioural and developmental needs, pressure on families, barriers to support, uneven access to services, and fragmentation across the early years system. You have to ask: how is this still the case? After so many years, how is it still the case in Canberra? How can it possibly be, after so many years, that in Canberra it is still the case today? Families are stretched. The cost of living is higher. Housing is more expensive. Parents are working longer and carrying more pressure just to get by. Accessing health and developmental support is difficult, confusing and slow, not to mention an extra cost burden that not all families can afford. When a child needs support, parents should not have to become experts in navigating government systems just to find it.

The minister's statement talks about a "no wrong door" approach. I love it. I have talked about "no wrong door" across all sorts of government services sectors for years. "No wrong door" has been a driver across different government policy principles for a long time, but the principle has to mean something in practice, in the lived experience of families trying to navigate the systems.

Also, I want to acknowledge the deeply concerning outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children. According to this statement, 52 per cent were developmentally vulnerable in at least one domain and 37.6 per cent in two or more, and only 24.1 per cent were on track across all five domains. Those numbers are utterly unacceptable, because, despite the years of statements of good intentions, there is still this massive gap. The answer cannot simply be another statement of good intentions. It has to be a relentless focus on what actually works, with local communities, local families and service providers all involved in shaping those responses.

Parents and families are at the centre of a child's development. Government plays a role, particularly where children need additional support, but government cannot replace families and it should not try to. The best systems strengthen and support parents rather than sideline them. They give families the information they need, the choice and the practical support to do the best for their children. That is where government policy needs to be centred. There should not be anything politically partisan about wanting the best possible start for every child, but the government has to be accountable for outcomes, not just hopes. When developmental vulnerability has been worsening since 2015, the government cannot simply point to everything it is already doing and all the things it has been doing for a long time, and ask us to keep being patient.

Kids get only one childhood, and every study shows that the first five years are the most important in a child's development. A five-year-old who is struggling today cannot wait for another strategy in five years. Children should not be left behind simply because the system is too fragmented, too difficult to navigate or too slow to respond, and the response cannot just be a bandaid fix or solutions after children have already been left behind. We have to consider the root causes and find a way to set up our children for success. Frankly, it might take a fundamental shift in attitude, because every child in

Canberra deserves the opportunity to reach their potential.

MS CARRICK (Murrumbidgee) (10.36): The AEDC results are a wake-up call. In one of Australia's most prosperous jurisdictions, more than one in four ACT children are developmentally vulnerable in at least one measure before they even start school. The proportion of children on track across all five development domains has fallen over time, while vulnerability continues to rise. The results for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are particularly concerning, with more than half being developmentally vulnerable in one or more domains and fewer than one in four being on track across all five domains. These are not the results we should expect in the ACT.

What is most concerning is that these outcomes have worsened despite years of strategies, plans and investment. The ACT is going backwards in every area that matters most to a child's readiness for life and learning: social competence, emotional maturity and wellbeing. We need a stronger focus on the things we know help children thrive. Parents need the time and support to spend as much time as possible with their children in those critical early years. Children benefit from positive interactions with their parents and carers, and they benefit from being around other children.

As the minister said, it takes a village to raise a child, but a village does not exist because the government says it does. A village is built when families have opportunities to connect, children have places to play together, and communities have spaces that bring people together. If events like PlayFest are what a village looks like, what is the government doing to make sure those opportunities exist across Canberra and not just once a year? What are we doing to create the community hubs and local events that bring families together, build belonging and get children and parents away from screens and into their communities?

The government must do more than announce another strategy; it must also explain how it is creating places and enabling families to come together to build social competence in their children and have a sense of belonging in the community they live in.

Question resolved in the affirmative.

Housing—Canberra House Pattern Book
Ministerial statement

MR STEEL (Murrumbidgee—Treasurer, Minister for Planning and Sustainable Development, Minister for Heritage, and Minister for Sport and Recreation) (10.38): On Monday this week, I announced another important milestone in delivering more housing and more housing choice for Canberra and our commitment to enabling 30,000 new homes by 2030. The government has opened an expression of interest process for the national design competition to develop the Canberra House Pattern Book for missing middle designs.

Canberra's population is growing and the government's priority is housing supply. The government is delivering on our election commitment to give Canberrans more housing and more housing choice through enabling missing middle housing. This is critical to meet the diverse needs of our community with high-quality, sustainable and more

affordable homes where Canberrans want to live. It is why we introduced the missing middle housing reforms which commenced in July in the Territory Plan, making it possible for townhouses, terraces, low-rise apartments and a wider range of multi-occupancy housing to be built on RZ1 blocks, on over two-thirds of Canberra's residential land where these homes were previously effectively prohibited.

Alongside the commencement of these reforms and the new accompanying Missing Middle Housing Design Guide, we have halved the codified lease variation charges for eligible missing middle housing developments in RZ1 and RZ2 areas, and we have abolished stamp duty for Canberrans purchasing a unit off the plan or new turnkey units to live in. So we are not only enabling housing choice in the planning system for the first time; we are also lowering the cost to make this choice.

Last week in the Assembly we saw the passage of the government's Planning (Missing Middle Housing) Amendment Bill 2026, which will now deliver faster approvals for missing middle housing projects, moving them out of the planning system and into construction sooner. And now we are delivering on Labor's election commitment to develop a Canberra House Pattern Book to fast-track the delivery of well-designed sustainable homes that fit in well with Canberra's streets and suburbs.

This week, we have invited Australia's best architects, building designers and design teams to contribute to a new generation of high-quality housing designs made for Canberra's unique character and climate. Following this expression-of-interest process, a shortlist of professional entrants will be selected to further develop design concepts into housing patterns through a design competition. Winners of the design competition will then procced to developing those designs for the Canberra House Pattern Book—designs that will ultimately be built in Canberra neighbourhoods.

The government has released the Canberra House Pattern Book Design Competition and the design brief for the competition. We are looking for designs for homes that are adaptable across a wide range of household types and life stages that consider ageing in place, accessibility and changing family needs; designs for homes that are attractive and will contribute positively to streetscapes, neighbourhoods and the broader city; designs for homes that are functional, prioritising energy efficiency, climate responsiveness and reduced operating costs; and designs for homes that are ultimately buildable and demonstrate how high-quality design can be delivered in an efficient, replicable and cost-effective way.

Our Labor government has legislated for housing choice and now we are making access to high-quality missing middle homes possible for more Canberrans. Development of the Canberra House Pattern Book is about helping more Canberrans access well-designed, sustainable and cost-effective housing which showcases excellence in architecture and urban design.

Following the design competition, two winners from four categories—dual occupancy, tri-occupancy, townhouse and terrace housing—will go forward to develop their designs to be included in the Canberra House Pattern Book. The pattern book designs will be available for purchase for $1,000, which is significantly cheaper than the professional fees usually paid for architecturally designed plans. Importantly, the idea of the pattern book is that it will provide prequalified housing options that will simplify

and fast-track the planning process, reduce costs, improve certainty for homeowners and incentivise industry to build more of this form of housing.

Ahead of the finalisation of the Canberra House Pattern Book, the government is already progressing regulatory changes to support an exempt development pathway for homes in the approved pattern book without need for a development application. This will be similar to the current streamlined exemption pathway that already exists for single-detached homes.

The Canberra House Pattern Book is not only a practical way to support our commitment to enable 30,000 homes by 2030; it also supports our broader objectives for housing diversity, sustainability and design quality across the territory. It is about giving more future homeowners across our city the opportunity to live in a well-designed home which meets their needs and is made for Canberra. I look forward to seeing the high-quality designs that come forward for the homes that will shape Canberra's streets and suburbs in the decades to come.

I present the following paper:

> Canberra House Pattern Book—Ministerial statement, 28 October 2026.

I move:

> That the Assembly take note of the paper.

MS CLAY (Ginninderra) (10.43): I would like to make a few comments following Minister Steel's statement on the Canberra House Pattern Book and thank him for bringing forward this piece of work and design competition. The Greens have been calling for greater density and diversity for a long time. Getting the right house in the right location will provide greater opportunities for people to live close to shops, schools, jobs, public transport and other community facilities and services.

Improving density goes hand in hand with setting an urban growth boundary and protecting areas of high environmental and ecological values. As a general rule, it makes financial sense to increase densities as it is cheaper to build within established suburbs as opposed to building in greenfield areas, where government has to put in all of the roads, all of the utilities and all of the services in areas that do not yet have them. Making these new homes as energy efficient and environmentally sustainable as possible is critical to reducing their climate impacts, and making the dwellings accessible allows people to age in place, giving people greater opportunities for the connections that they have established within the community.

Good design of the missing middle homes is really important in their acceptance, so we are really hopeful the best architects and the best designers in Canberra and elsewhere in Australia will take up the challenge to design and develop high-quality housing designs for us here in the ACT. Canberra has many public buildings that are examples of high-quality design, and they have inspired a lot of people over the years. We also have a broad range of residential dwellings designed by many well-known national and local architects. I am really looking forward to seeing the designs that come forward and seeing more high-quality designed homes in our suburbs.

MS CARRICK (Murrumbidgee) (10.45): I rise to support the Canberra House Pattern Book and the government's efforts to make it easier, faster and less expensive to deliver well-designed, missing middle housing across the ACT. The concept is a sensible one. If a housing design has already been professionally designed, independently assessed and approved against the required standards, there is merit in not forcing proponents to repeatedly undertake the same design assessment every time that house is built.

Standardisation can reduce costs, improve certainty, support a high-quality design and help deliver the housing supply that Canberra needs. The pattern book also has the potential to reduce barriers for smaller builders and homeowners while accelerating the delivery of diverse housing options in our established suburbs.

However, as we pursue greater density, we must also ensure that community confidence in the planning system is maintained. The pattern book focuses on pre-approved designs, but neighbours experience the impact of the development, not the design. A design that works well on one block may have a very different impact when placed on another block. As the government considers exempt development pathways and streamlined approvals, it is important that Canberrans understand how the rights of neighbouring residents will continue to be protected.

I therefore seek further information from the government about the mechanisms that will be used to assess and manage impacts on neighbouring properties. Specifically, how will reasonable solar access be maintained, and overshadowing impacts minimised?

What safeguards will exist to address visual bulk and ensure new developments remain compatible with neighbourhood character?

How will parking pressures be managed in areas with limited public transport or pedestrian infrastructure?

What consideration will be given to noise impacts, particularly where developments accommodate multiple dwellings on smaller blocks?

And how will the government ensure the retention of established trees, and protect neighbourhood amenity as densification occurs?

These are not arguments against the pattern book; they are questions about implementation. The success of these reforms will ultimately depend on whether Canberra can both increase housing supply and retain the qualities that make our suburbs attractive places to live. If the government can demonstrate that neighbourhood amenity, environmental outcomes and local character will continue to be protected then the pattern book has the potential to be an important tool in delivering more housing choice across the territory, while maintaining public confidence in the planning system.

Question resolved in the affirmative.

Legislative Assembly
Sitting pattern 2027

MS CHEYNE (Ginninderra—Manager of Government Business, Attorney-General, Minister for City and Government Services, and Minister for Transport) (10.48): I move:

That:

(1) the Assembly shall meet as follows for 2027 unless an absolute majority of Members request, in writing, that the Speaker or, in the absence of the Speaker, the Deputy Speaker, or in the absence of both the Speaker and the Deputy Speaker, the Clerk, fixes an alternative day or hour of meeting or the Assembly otherwise orders:

February	2	3	4
	23	24	25
March	2	3	4
April	6	7	8
May	4	5	6
	11	12	13
June		16	17
	22	23	
August	10		
September	7	8	9
	14	15	16
October	12	13	14
	19	20	21
November	23	24	25
	30		
December		1	2; and

(2) so much of standing orders be suspended to allow the Assembly to proceed with its business on Tuesday, 10 August 2027 in the following routine:

Acknowledgement and Prayer or reflection

Presentation of petitions

Take note of petitions

Assembly/Committee Business

Questions without notice

Private Members' business

Member 90 second statements

Adjournment:

provided that at 2 pm, the Speaker shall interrupt the business before the Assembly in order that questions without notice shall be called on.

Members have all seen this pattern for some time now. I appreciate the extensive engagement that we have had in finalising it. It results in 41 days of sitting.

There are two changes that are worth pointing out. The first is that budget week will be four days but split over two weeks. I think this is to reflect that, really, we cannot have the budget any earlier than the week beginning 14 June. 14 June remains the Sovereign's birthday holiday for now, so, while ever that is the case, we cannot really

sit until Wednesday. But I think we all agree that sitting on Friday, and indeed late into Friday night this year, was less than ideal. So, we will sit Wednesday, 16 and Thursday, 17 and then Tuesday and Wednesday of the following week—which I think is a neat solution though I cannot claim credit for it.

I also appreciate that there was concern about the amount of business that we had when we came back this year, in September. For that reason, 10 August will be, effectively, a clearing-house day. The way that the motion is drafted is that executive business will not occur on that day. However, if we do find that we need to for whatever reason, we will of course seek the Assembly's support to amend this motion.

Really, what we are trying to achieve is to address the build-up of petitions and committee business and other Assembly business, as well as private members' business. I look forward to working with my colleagues across the floor as to what that day looks like. It will be a bit different to what we are used to, but I think it is a novel idea worth trying out.

Importantly, I know that there is continued concern about why we cannot have the budget any earlier. I have explained that extensively to anyone who has asked. I would note that, even with where we have landed for this budget timetable, it still creates significant overtime across successive weekends for our public servants—including public holidays—and this is a significant WHS concern. Nevertheless, this is the best we could do in the circumstances, and I appreciate no one is happy so that means that it is probably the best outcome.

Importantly, I think, to last budget—not this one that we have just had, but the budget last year—there was significant concern about the date when we had our budget and how close that was to the end of the financial year, and that a number of community organisations did not find out—or felt that they did not find out—the status of their funding arrangements until quite late. We have really taken that feedback on.

Mr Speaker, you would note that this year we have provided for a considerable number of long-term arrangements for our community sector organisations. I can confirm for the record that we have committed to the sector to provide earlier notification of decisions about community sector contracts; and that we can now undertake decision making about those contracts up to six months earlier, which certainly helps with their planning.

This is a practice, Mr Speaker, which will continue in advance of the 2027-28 budget, and there are established protocols in place between Treasury and the relevant directorates that allow that information to be shared with community organisations. In the spirit of that, I would stress to anyone in this place, if they are aware of a community organisation who is hanging out to hear of an outcome and we can assist with that, please do let us know. No one likes uncertainty, so we are very happy to make good on that promise, if there is anyone that we may accidentally miss.

So, with that, I commend this sitting calendar to the chamber. Bring on 2027.

MR COCKS (Murrumbidgee) (10.54): Navigating negotiations around the sitting calendar is one of those things in this Assembly, particularly in its current state with a

minority government, that take a large amount of work behind the scenes. I thank the minister for sharing her initial plans for the sitting calendar relatively early so that we could engage in that work—because there has been significant development and significant negotiation behind the scenes to land at this place today.

I think it does make a lot of progress in terms of providing more time for this chamber to do its work, but also dealing with some of the problems that we experienced with this year's sitting calendar—while at the same time, trying to protect the very important work of committees, and in particular the estimates committee that we establish every year, because that is vital scrutiny work.

It also adopts a particular innovation in ensuring we have the right opportunities to bring community views to this place through petitions, without creating a massive gap in the middle of the year. It makes some good strides in that same innovation, in being able to bring committee business to this place without a significant gap. I think we are looking forward to a better structure overall for next year.

The one concern that I think we have to talk about a little bit more is budget timing. The estimates committee that I was on a couple years ago did very clearly indicate a preference for a significantly earlier budget than we currently see—even with this amended calendar. I accept that it is essentially the government's prerogative when it is going to bring a budget to this place, but it should be noted that it is the absolute will of this chamber—certainly the majority of members—to see that budget presented as early as possible.

Late presentation of the budget impacts more than just the community organisations that might be waiting for funding decisions. Not seeing the budget until so close to the end of the financial year has real impacts on community certainty about what is happening for the next year, and on this place's ability to scrutinise that budget, moving into the estimates process. I hope the innovations that we are seeing, and planning to see, around how budget estimates might work might also see that alleviated. But it is still deeply concerning to me that this budget is so late in the piece.

MISS NUTTALL (Brindabella) (10.57): I want to start by acknowledging that this proposal for the 2027 sitting pattern has substantially improved upon what we have had to work with in 2026. I would like to thank Ms Cheyne and Mr Cocks in particular, for their engagement over the last few weeks as we have explored options and handled concerns. There has been a significant amount of negotiation.

Last year, the government proposed a sitting pattern with only 12 sitting weeks for 2026—one of the lowest on record. At the time, the Greens questioned whether that was enough. The government defended its proposal on the basis of needing to give enough time for committee business, while the Greens suggested that a three-month gap between sittings was unconscionable. I moved an amendment to include an additional sitting week in August to provide effectively a pressure release valve on parliamentary business. Unfortunately, that proposal was defeated; eight to 15. I would like to thank Ms Carrick, Mr Emerson, Ms Lee and Mr Cain for supporting our attempt.

Given the experience we had in September with a very congested sitting fortnight, I believe our position was vindicated. In the September sittings, there was a very

substantial amount of business to get through. It was not just petitions—which seemed to take about 10 minutes just to announce, and I thank the Clerk at the time for doing that—but also committee reports and statements, a condolence motion, the fulfillment of orders for the production of documents, a new search order, a censure motion, and an absolutely ginormous stack of papers. That was on top of the government seeking expedited passage of a new bill concerning the validation of seatbelt offences, and wanting to debate the budget. Now, we do not normally sit past 7 pm here, out of respect for the personal lives of everyone who works here. We all think it is an excellent arrangement. We did sit past 7 pm on Wednesday, 23. In fact, we sat until about 10.30 pm.

This time around, Labor has proposed 41 sitting days for 2027. It includes a budget tabling fortnight of four sitting days held over two weeks. It also includes that single sitting day in August to try and handle the build-up of business during the preceding two months in which we will not have been sitting.

I want to draw attention to what is, we think, the underlying issue. The budget is being proposed for delivery in the third week of June—Mr Cocks has spoken about this—five weeks after the commonwealth budget is handed down in May. I realise that there is a good deal of consequential work that flows from getting the commonwealth budget, but the ACT Treasury has not needed that long in the past, neither historically nor recently. This year, for the 2026 budget, they were ready in four weeks.

If the government were prepared to deliver a budget on Tuesday, 8 June, estimates could be held before the school holidays, and we would have no issues coming back for sittings in August. That would be the normal way of things. It is important that we have opportunities for discussion and negotiation before the end of the financial year.

In 2025, the government did see what happens when the Assembly develops concerns about the plans for government fees and charges, and there is only a very short amount of time to resolve them before new instruments and rates notices are issued.

There are parts of the community which can struggle to plan for the financial year ahead if government cannot tell them how much they are receiving in grants until the last minute. We appreciate the government signalling their willingness to notify these organisations as early as possible, and certainly before the budget is tabled. Thank you.

MR EMERSON (Kurrajong) (11.01): I wanted to thank members for collaborating on this and finding an agreed position on the sitting calendar for the next year. Of course, this is of critical importance, and I appreciate Mr Cocks reaching out late last week or over the weekend to check in on views from me and, I think, the other independents. We did not have much work to do on this, so I appreciate all the negotiations that have happened to reach this point, and I am in agreement of the sitting schedule that has been landed on.

Question resolved in the affirmative.

Planning—Curtin Presbytery—order to table documents

MR COCKS (Murrumbidgee) (11.01): I move:

> That, in accordance with standing order 213A, the Assembly orders the Minister for Planning and Sustainable Development to provide the Assembly with the following documents relating to Development Application 202645654, previously DA 202644959, and any subsequent development applications, at Strangways Street, Curtin, Section 61, Blocks 7-8:
>
> (1) the final evaluation report and any corrigenda;
>
> (2) complete score sheets, timing score and moderation notes;
>
> (3) any clarifications sought from and provided by the applicant;
>
> (4) assessment reasoning for every proposal, including unsuccessful ones;
>
> (5) the business case, financial model and any sensitivity analysis;
>
> (6) the letter of intent, schedule of grant assistance and any executed deed of grant and variations;
>
> (7) the statement of amounts approved, committed and paid;
>
> (8) the original and current milestone schedules; and
>
> (9) all signed conflict of interest declarations, updates and management plans for each panel member and chair, including nil and perceived declarations and any related to subsequent board appointments.

I move this call for papers in response to continuing calls from the Curtin community for transparency around the proposed redevelopment of the presbytery on Strangways Street. There are concerns that the project did not meet all the requirements for the Affordable Housing Project Fund at the time that it was assessed in 2023. In the following two years, certain planning settings were changed to allow the proposed use of the site as community housing. This raises questions about the earlier funding decisions.

More recently, the development was re-lodged as a Territory Priority Project. This decision has the potential to limit independent merit review and circumvent community scrutiny. And throughout this years-long process, key documents pertaining to the Housing Australia Future Fund have not been released. These are the documents which I am calling upon the government to make available, today.

Mr Deputy Speaker, the local community needs transparent access to all the relevant information on this development proposal in order to have confidence in the government's decision. Local communities and individuals should be able to engage with the development process. They deserve to have their voices heard. The government should acknowledge their concerns and their experience. The local community is far better placed to understand how a development will impact their neighbourhoods and their way of life.

I have spoken with residents across Curtin considerably, over a long period of time around the impact of different development applications. Among the people in the suburbs, I think, really, there is not an irrational opposition to new housing. In fact, a lot of them are hugely supportive of the principle of more housing—indeed, more housing within their suburb and around their suburb. It would be utterly unfair to dismiss their concerns as NIMBY-ism, and the government should stop doing so.

The community acknowledges that development, including community and affordable housing, must happen somewhere. But they also have reasonable concerns about the location and impacts of this development, just like they have had concerns around the impact of other developments and ensuring that there is appropriate infrastructure in the suburb to support people moving in.

The development in question in this motion would directly overlook a preschool, in addition to its potential impact on a busy commercial area which is already struggling to cope with high traffic and limited parking.

I am grateful to the Curtin locals who, in raising this issue, are displaying the kind of community advocacy and engagement that makes Canberra one of the nation's greatest places to live.

Releasing the requested documents is the bare minimum the government must do. It gives the community a chance to fully understand exactly what has happened, and the nature and implications of the proposed development, and have confidence that the system is working as intended. I commend the motion to the Assembly.

MS CLAY (Ginninderra) (11.05): The Greens are happy to support this order for the production of documents. Transparency is always useful, and there is certainly community interest in this matter. So we are happy to support this.

MR STEEL (Murrumbidgee—Treasurer, Minister for Planning and Sustainable Development, Minister for Heritage, and Minister for Sport and Recreation) (11.06): The government is happy to support the motion brought by Mr Cocks today. The Development Application 202645654, or "the current DA" as referenced in this motion, relates to the Affordable Housing Project being delivered by Marymead CatholicCare Canberra and Goulburn on land leased by the Catholic Church at Strangways Street, Curtin, delivering 54 affordable rental units rented to eligible tenants at less than 75 per cent of market rent. The delivery of this project by Marymead, a registered community housing provider, is being supported by the ACT government through our Affordable Housing Project Fund and has also received commonwealth funding through round 1 of the Housing Australia Future Fund policy.

I thank Mr Cocks and his office for their collaboration on the scope of this motion and confirming that the documents being sought are those related to the round 2 request process for proposal process related to the funding received through the Affordable Housing Project Fund and not the DA itself, which are of course publicly available on the ACT Planning website. The DA itself proposes the demolition of the existing presbytery, church and carpark on block 7, section 61, Curtin, and the construction of a five-storey community housing project. The DA incorporates both blocks 7 and 8 of section 61, as minor boundary alignments between the two are required to allow the primary development and associated access to be wholly located on block 7.

As noted in Mr Cocks's motion, this proposal was previously the subject of DA 202644959. As members would be aware, in December last year the Planning (Territory Priority Projects) Amendment Act was brought forward by the government and it expanded the definition of a "Territory Priority Project" under section 216 of the

Planning Act 2023 to automatically include development proposals related to public housing and community housing. This development proposal meets the definition of community housing in the Planning Act as introduced and amended by the piece of legislation. The original DA application by Marymead did not identify the proposal as a Territory Priority Project on the application form. Therefore, a new DA has now been lodged to replace it and identify the proposal as a TPP. The new DA also addresses matters raised by referral entities and public representations received during stage 1 of the public notification process for the original DA. This clarification is provided within the application form for the new DA, which is publicly notified on the ACT Planning website.

I originally provided information on the original DA in my response to the petition "Reject the Curtin Presbytery Development", sponsored by Ms Carrick earlier this year. I would like to assure members that information included in this response, specifically about the proposal constituting a significant proposal and therefore requiring consultation by the National Capital Design Review Panel and two stages of public consultation still stands. The new DA application by Marymead corrects an administrative error by the applicant and will go through the same process. It is under consideration by the Territory Planning Authority and is currently going through the first stage of public notifications, with representations able to be submitted to the authority until Monday 9 November.

Under the Planning Act, the Minister for Planning and Sustainable Development is the decision-maker for development applications for Territory Priority Projects. However, when I first introduced the Territory Priority Projects bill, I made it clear that my intention was to delegate my decision-making on public housing, Territory Priority Projects and community housing to the Chief Planner. The designation of certain community housing projects as Territory Priority Projects was then, of course, included in the bill as amended by the Assembly. While it was understood at the time that the general delegations power under the Legislation Act could be used, further advice has come through that there needs to be a specific delegation in the Planning Act. So I can advise members that, in the next sitting week, I will be introducing a bill which would allow me to delegate my decision-making power for both public housing and community housing Territory Priority Projects, as per my original intent, and the expanded scope of housing proposals which are now considered Territory Priority Projects, for which I will be seeking the Assembly's support.

MS CARRICK (Murrumbidgee) (11.11): I rise to support Mr Cocks's order for the production of these documents. Where Territory Priority Projects are used and there are no appeal rights on the governance decisions, it is important that transparency is available through the analysis and scrutiny of these documents.

Question resolved in the affirmative.

Paediatric allergy clinic—order to table documents

MR EMERSON (Kurrajong) (11.11): Together with Ms Vassarotti and Mr Parton, I move:

> That, in accordance with standing order 213A, this Assembly orders the

Government to table:

(1) the following documents from the 2026 calendar year:

(a) all decision briefs to ministers and Senior Executive Service staff regarding the Paediatric Allergy Clinic waitlist;

(b) any clinical reviews of the eligibility criteria for the Paediatric Allergy Clinic;

(c) any risk assessments undertaken prior to changing the eligibility criteria for the Paediatric Allergy Clinic; and

(d) any complaints from Canberra Health Services staff regarding proposed changes to the eligibility criteria for the Paediatric Allergy Clinic; and

(2) an aggregated summary of:

(a) data showing the number of patients on the Paediatric Allergy Clinic waitlist over the last five years, including how many patients have been treated and how many patients have been added to the waitlist every six months; and

(b) the number and proportion of patients that have been removed from the Paediatric Allergy Clinic's waitlist through the recent changes to eligibility criteria.

I want to especially thank Mr Parton and Ms Vassarotti and their teams for their collaboration on this OPD. We obviously debated this issue at length yesterday, and I thank the Assembly for the tone and rigour of that debate. I will be quicker here. I think in that debate it was very clear that what has taken place regarding the Paediatric Allergy Clinic waitlist was unacceptable to a majority of this parliament and was unacceptable to our communities and the families who received those letters.

I again want to note the government's intent here and the genuine need to reduce the inappropriately long waitlist for outpatient clinics in the ACT. I really do want to reiterate that I understand this is a complex problem to fix and that it needs fixing, and I empathise with that. That does not mean this decision and the way it was rolled out and consulted on—or not—should go without proper scrutiny and accountability, and that is what this motion this morning is about. It is not about politicising a decision of government; it is about getting answers, both for the parliament and for our community.

Canberrans are concerned about how this decision was made and why it was implemented in the way that it was. To the reason for this OPD, they want answers about that. They want to know who was involved in the decision and who made the decision. They want to know why the criteria was changed on them and how. They want to know why they were not warned about this. Most importantly, they want to know what they are supposed to do next and where the child is supposed to go for care. Given the debate yesterday and the concerns that were shared widely across the Assembly and our community, I hope to see the government not just support this motion this morning but also welcome it and make the next waitlist review—given we know many more are coming—more effective, more consultative and more compassionate for the over 65,000 Canberrans who are waiting for care on outpatient lists.

Obviously this order to produce documents is specific and designed to be narrow to this decision about the Paediatric Allergy Clinic. We have prepared this call for documents

in a way that is intended not to be too onerous on the government but to provide sufficient information so we can learn from this and make sure any mistakes are rectified. What decisions were made? What were the decision briefs, and who signed off on them? What clinic review occurred? What risk assessments were undertaken prior to changing the eligibility criteria? Did Canberra Health Services staff raise concerns about these issues? More broadly, how many people have been going onto and off this waitlist over the last five years? We need to ensure any lessons from this case are applied to the reviews that we have been told are likely coming for the rest of our 40-plus outpatient waitlists.

I also want to again give a huge shout out to Dr Liz Allen, who first brought this issue to my attention and to the attention of many of us, as well as being, I think, the first to raise this as being potentially a larger problem than just hers and her family's. Dr Allen's post about this online, revealing what was in these letters to families, got enormous engagement from our community and showed us this was a big issue that had affected many Canberrans. In thanking Dr Allen, I also want to share some words she has provided to be heard by the Assembly this morning:

- We've been waiting to see a specialist for my daughter's allergies since January 2024.
- When she was 7 my daughter reacted to a food allergen by simply shelling Christmas prawns.
- She received fabulous care at the local emergency.
- The treating medical team assured us the best place to receive support for her was through the Canberra allergy outpatients clinic, especially given her other medical needs.
- We were advised the average wait to be seen in the specialist paediatric clinic was around two years.
- Since her referral, my daughter has had numerous reactions to unknown allergens.
- Anaphylaxis is present among a number of my children and it's terrifying.
- I took comfort in knowing my daughter would be seen by the team at outpatients when it was her turn.
- On Friday my children checked the mailbox and my daughter opened a letter addressed to her.
- Canberra Health Services, without notice or any communication, kicked my daughter off the wait list.
- I read the letter in disbelief.
- Had I missed something? Should I have done something more?
- Surely a health service cannot simply unilaterally decide to change the rules without consulting impacted patients and their families?!
- I've since learned that many other families, like mine, with children experiencing serious and anaphylactic reactions have been cut from the waitlist. Without warning. Without consultation.
- For what? To make the statistics look more politically palatable?
- Surely children aren't simply collateral?
- This week I was told my daughter does meet the medical criteria for the clinic waitlist she was kicked off of.
- But we need to start again: collate all the medical records and provide the case once again to Canberra Health Services.
- I'm gobsmacked that in the nation's capital, children and their families have been treated so poorly by a health system meant to help.

Thank you, Dr Allen, for those words and for bringing this issue to public awareness and to this Assembly. Not only is there a call for accountability and transparency in these words, as well as concern for the safety and care of Dr Allen's child, as you would expect from any parent, there is also a deep care and concern for our community, for other Canberrans, for other children and parents and carers.

Inherent in our society is this want to care for one another, to look after one another, and to know that our friends, our neighbours, our bus drivers, our mechanics, our fellow soccer parents, our friendly neighbourhood spideys—and, of course, our baristas, who secretly keep this place running, are cared for, are safe and are being served and looked after by their governments at all levels. In seeing how this decision was rolled out, I do not think that principle was embodied in this case, and hopefully we can all accept that. There was not the care here that our community expects. It would serve us all well to hold on to that principle closer, as we understand what went wrong here and how we make sure it does not happen again.

Thank you to the Assembly for getting this through. I again thank Mr Parton and Ms Vassarotti for agreeing to co-sponsor this motion and engaging so collaboratively and constructively on this issue. I look forward to working as a parliament on rectifying this together and moving forward with the government and with our community.

MS VASSAROTTI (Kurrajong) (11.18): I rise today to table this OPD alongside Mr Emerson and Mr Parton. I think this is quite a significant motion, with the Greens coming together with the Canberra Liberals and Mr Emerson to call for these documents. It shows a united front in relation to ensuring that we see greater transparency regarding how we have got to the point we have got to. I would like to thank Mr Parton and Mr Emerson for the really collaborative work in getting this motion to the floor of the Assembly. I also acknowledge the extensive debate in the chamber yesterday regarding this issue and welcome the fact that the motion that was brought by Mr Parton was supported and significantly improves the process moving forward.

As we have noted, this issue has caused significant stress across the community The stories we have all heard about the issues that children and families are managing around potentially life-threatening conditions is really concerning. Taking patients off a waiting list for a health service is no little thing. The decision can have serious and lasting consequences. When the waitlist is for children who have experienced allergic reactions, a mistake could mean the difference between life or death for that child. So these decisions must be done carefully to ensure that patients who still need care will indeed receive it, whether by a specialist, a GP who has the skills necessary to treat the condition, or some other clinically-appropriate care.

As I noted yesterday, GPs do not make referrals lightly. They do this when they cannot treat the patient and have understood that a patient cannot afford to see a private specialist. The Greens believe in a universal, affordable healthcare system. This highlights the really significant gaps in a universal healthcare system that we believe that we should be delivering. It is what the community wants. It is what the community often believes that they have, until they find a situation where they cannot actually get the care that they need without having to look at things such as private specialists.

Since the government have said that they will be reviewing the other outpatient waitlists, we need to make sure that we push the government to get it right on this first one. Otherwise, a bad precedent will be set for all other waitlists. We need to know why and how the decision was made to take patients off the paediatric allergy waitlist without ensuring that they necessarily had access to another form of appropriate care. That is why we are asking for information that will give us a clearer picture of how the reviews of the waitlist for that clinic were done. We need to know how the decisions were made, who made them, if they received any pushback, what key risk assessments were undertaken and how many patients were removed from the waitlist.

Key issues we are particularly concerned about include understanding the clinical basis and how the decisions were being made; understanding what alternative referral and treatment pathways are available for people who have been removed from waitlists; understanding why GP organisations and the Australian Medical Association were not seen as key stakeholders in making this decision or even being communicated to around this decision; and understanding what work was done in relation to ensuring that patients were provided the right information, including their review and appeal rights. Information provided in discussions since letters were sent out to people suggests quite a different process than was originally communicated. We need to have confidence that administrative decisions have been underpinned by a good and legal process.

We recognise the challenge faced in relation to long waiting lists and agree that it is an issue where people may be sitting on waitlists for extremely long periods of time. We support proactive work to address this. But this needs to be done in a way that is clinically safe, is compassionate and is orderly. We need to learn the lessons from this initial process, given that we know that there is more to come. That is why we are tabling this OPD today.

MR PARTON (Brindabella—Leader of the Opposition) (11.23): I think a motion with these three names on it displays very, very clearly that, although we do have some ideological differences in this chamber, there is much more that unites us than divides us. Yesterday, this Assembly debated the concerns facing patients and their families who have had their paediatric allergy clinic referrals closed following changes to eligibility criteria and advised so by a faceless letter from CHS. I think that the experience that was communicated to this chamber directly from the words of Dr Liz Allen has really captured that moment.

This government is clearly out of touch and demonstrated it clearly with the way it has handled this issue. Today's motion takes the next step. It asks the government to provide the documents and data needed to understand how these changes were made, why they were considered necessary and what impact they have had on patients and families waiting for care. We are seeking the decision briefs provided to ministers and senior execs, clinical reviews of the eligibility criteria, any risk assessments undertaken before the changes and any complaints from Canberra Health Services staff about the proposed changes. I think these are reasonable requests, and I am glad that we have a critical mass of members in this chamber who are of that view, because I am not sure that the government on their own would have made the call that this was a reasonable request. So I am pleased that we can make that happen. If the changes were clinically justified, properly assessed and implemented with patient safety in mind, the government must demonstrate that through the documented evidence.

The motion seeks five years of waitlist data, including how many patients have been added, how many received treatment and how many have been removed as a result of the recent eligibility changes. That distinction matters. A smaller waiting list does not necessarily mean more young patients have received care. We need to understand whether the numbers are falling because patients have been treated or because some no longer qualify under revised criteria. This motion is not asking the Assembly to second-guess individual clinical decisions, despite the minister's assertions; it is asking for the so-called transparency that this government talks so frequently about but so infrequently demonstrates—about process, the evidence behind the changes and the consequences for children and their families. Families who have waited for specialist care, sometimes for years, deserve confidence that decisions affecting their access are clinically sound, appropriately considered and clearly communicated.

The government should have no difficulty providing this information. Transparency is essential if we are to understand what has happened and ensure that children who need specialist assessment are not left without an appropriate pathway to care. I commend Mr Emerson for leading this motion, because he has done most of the heavy lifting on it, and I thank him for it. I thank also Ms Vassarotti for her work here and for the collaborative way in which we have been able to work together on this issue, on the matter considered yesterday and the ongoing work of holding this government to account, as Canberrans expect that we do. I commend this motion to the Assembly.

DR PATERSON (Murrumbidgee—Minister for Health, Minister for Mental Health, Minister for Police, Fire and Emergency Services, and Minister for Gaming Reform) (11.26): Just to put it on the record, the government is supportive of this and has no issues with being transparent with this information.

Question resolved in the affirmative.

Building and Construction Legislation Amendment Bill 2026

Debate resumed from 24 September 2026, on motion by **Mr Steel**:

> That this bill be agreed to in principle.

MRS MORRIS (Brindabella) (11.27): The Canberra Liberals will be supporting the Building and Construction Legislation Amendment Bill 2026. This is a welcome, practical step towards reducing some of the cost and complexity of construction, but it addresses only part of a much larger problem. It is too hard to build a home in Canberra and it is simply too expensive to buy one.

Helping Canberrans realise their dream of owning their own home is a social, economic and moral imperative. A home provides stability, a place to put down roots and security for the future. Yet too many hardworking Canberrans are watching that dream of home ownership move further and further out of reach. For a first homebuyer saving while paying rent, additional cost imposed by red tape can mean another year of waiting and saving to get that deposit. For a young family already stretched to secure finance, it can mean being forced to abandon their plans altogether. We need to remember those people whenever we add another requirement to the cost of building.

Regulation may be well-intentioned—safe, durable and comfortable homes matter—but good intentions do not remove the need to consider costs and consequences. Every unnecessary delay has a cost. Someone pays the interest while an application sits unresolved. Someone pays when plans must be redrawn halfway through a project or completed work altered. Those costs ultimately bear down on buyers, including ordinary first homebuyers simply desperate just to get their foot in the door. When projects become unviable, homes do not get built, which further restricts choice and drives up costs.

Earlier this year, the Canberra Liberals sought to freeze the adoption of the latest iteration of National Construction Code changes. We did this because industry have raised concerns about the pace of change, the cumulative costs and whether builders have sufficient time to understand and implement the requirements that have been placed on them. The Canberra Liberals acknowledge that this bill that we are debating today responds to at least one aspect of that problem: it provides a pathway for substantially completed buildings whose approvals have expired to be finished under the building code as it stood when their plans were approved. This is a very sensible change. To be honest, I find it quite unreasonable that we even have to make this change in the first place, but it is sensible and it needs to be done. Requiring costly redesign or reconstruction of work already lawfully undertaken can impose a substantial burden on people trying to build more homes. These are practical improvements and we support them. But the government must apply the same willingness to remove unnecessary obstacles across the wider planning and building system. The limited uptake of missing middle housing should prompt serious questions about the barriers that still remain.

As I said earlier, it is just too hard to build a home in Canberra and it is far too costly for too many people to buy one. Homeowners and builders must be able to navigate approvals and deliver homes that everyday Canberrans can afford. The government needs to understand why opportunities are not being taken up, listen to those trying to build and address the obstacles that they identify. A planning announcement does not give a young family somewhere to live. What matters is whether a home can actually be built and delivered into the community.

This bill is a welcome step. There is more to be done on approval delays, regulatory complexity, land supply and the cumulative burden of government charges and regulations. We should judge each reform by whether it helps to put more homes into the reach of more Canberrans. Canberrans who work hard, who save and who want to build a life here deserve a realistic path to home ownership. The Canberra Liberals support this bill and will continue pressing for the broader changes needed to make that aspiration a reality.

MS CLAY (Ginninderra) (11.33): The Greens will be supporting this bill. The bill makes a number of changes to what is best described as the building regulatory system. Overall, the amendments to the Building Act and the Building (General) Regulation, as well as the Construction Occupations (Licensing) Act and associated regulations are designed to enhance the administration, efficiency and enforcement of that framework.

The main amendments allow partially completed buildings to be completed, notwithstanding that various building requirements, such as accessibility, have been

strengthened since the original approval was granted. These buildings may not have been completed within the designated construction timeframe for a variety of reasons. The intent is to create a category of developments that have been lawfully approved and substantially completed and will be permitted to be completed under the National Construction Code that applied at the time at which the approval was given. There are around a thousand dwellings in that category at the moment. If the amendments were not passed, there would need to be modification of the buildings to meet the requirements of the updated building code. The cost of that could be substantial and it would materially impact the form and function of the building. This change would provide for the builder and incoming certifier that the existing partial works meet the necessary standards, thereby reducing a lot of the risks.

The exemption of a building approval for the installation of photovoltaic panels and solar hot water heaters on commercial and multi-unit developments is really welcomed. These buildings can present opportunities for large-scale energy generation in the ACT. The Greens are very supportive of natural energy generation.

I note that the Standing Committee on Economics, Industry and Recreation decided to not conduct an inquiry into the bill, but the Standing Committee on Legal Affairs suggested some changes to the explanatory statement, which Minister Steel has responded to. I would also like to thank Minister Steel and his office for taking the time to point out the comments from the scrutiny of bills to make sure that we clocked them.

I am pleased that the government is looking at ways to improve the delivery of dwellings. In times of a housing crisis, we should be looking at how we allow people to get into their homes quicker. Those homes still need to be well-built. We still need to make sure that people have the best knowledge about what they are buying and we still need to make sure that consumers are protected.

I thank Minister Steel and his office for providing me and my team with a briefing on this legislation and for answering our questions. We had quite a lot of questions on this and we had concerns. The answers were good and robust, and we very much appreciate the briefing that we received from directorate officials. The Greens support the passage of this bill.

MR STEEL (Murrumbidgee—Treasurer, Minister for Planning and Sustainable Development, Minister for Heritage, and Minister for Sport and Recreation) (11.36), in reply: I am pleased to close the debate and reiterate my support for the Building and Construction Legislation Amendment Bill 2026. The government is committed to building more homes for Canberrans. I am pleased that this bill—which at its core is about removing unnecessary barriers and helping the industry to get on with the job of delivering more homes—is yet another step in achieving this. This is the second bill brought forward by our government to do so in as many weeks. The government is also committed to supporting productivity across the building and construction sector, with this bill also delivering the second tranche of reforms under the ACT's construction productivity agenda.

We need a regulatory system that maintains high standards whilst reducing unnecessary costs and delays. The bill goes towards this by making three targeted amendments across the Building Act, the Building (General) Regulation, and the Construction

Occupations (Licensing) Act and regulation. The first is to exempt photovoltaic panels and solar hot water installations on existing commercial and multi-unit buildings from requiring building approval. The second is to allow the Construction Occupations Registrar to offer a different licence to the licence that is sought to be renewed in the same construction occupation at the time of renewal. And the third is to introduce a new pathway allowing substantially completed buildings with an expired building approval to obtain a new approval for a further year and complete construction under the same version of the National Construction Code that applied when the project was originally approved.

I would like to speak to the reform put forward in the bill. Currently, where a BA expires before construction is completed, owners would need to obtain a new approval that could be assessed and issued under a more recent version of the National Construction Code. In some cases, this means significant changes are required to comply with the newer code and may require owners to demolish part of their building or redesign and reconstruct elements of a project, even when the building is already substantially complete. The amendments in the bill would instead allow eligible buildings that were lawfully approved and largely constructed, however, for whatever reason—such as workforce shortages, supply chain challenges or business failure—were not completed within the three years before the original BA expired.

Without imposing significant upgrades and structural changes that could otherwise be required under the new version of the National Construction Code, and without imposing significant cost and productivity losses that come with those changes, and without imposing the waste and environmental impacts that come with essentially having to discard work done to date, by introducing a Certificate of Partial Completion—a line in the sand which confirms that the building has reached a legislated state of construction—the work completed to date under the original approval was lawfully undertaken and the building is suitable to be finished. These reforms also provide certainty for homeowners, builders and certifiers by clearly distinguishing responsibility for work, making it easier for a new builder and certifier to step in, manage risk appropriately and complete the project.

These are not theoretical scenarios. Recently I was contacted by a home owner who was facing the impending expiry of their existing building approval. They battled their builder to rectify and complete unacceptable work, and, while they face the stress and potential costs of their current dispute, they are also very concerned about the additional costs that would come from the expiry of their approval and the likely need to demolish, redesign and rebuild some of their home in order to receive a new building approval to finish the job. They are in this circumstance through no fault of their own. These reforms will provide a pathway forward for this home owner and many others like them. As Ms Clay mentioned, there are an estimated 1,000 homes across the territory which may be eligible for and elect to utilise this new pathway to complete construction. This reform is about helping owners and builders get unfinished homes completed sooner and at a lower cost.

I thank the Standing Committee on Legal Affairs for their constructive feedback on the bill. Relevant updates have been made to the explanatory statement to provide further information on the limitations, and the rationale, the proposed exemption of photovoltaic panels and solar hot water installations will have from requiring building

approval. I thank members of the Assembly for their support of the bill. These are practical, targeted and focused amendments which will help to deliver more homes, complete stalled projects and ensure our regulatory system supports rather than hinders the delivery of housing and the infrastructure that Canberra needs.

We will continue to bring forward reforms based on the ACT's construction productivity agenda and based on feedback that we are hearing, not only from homeowners but also from the construction industry, whom we regularly meet with and are engaging in this agenda. They are putting new items on the agenda every quarter as we meet with them. We are looking forward to continuing to engage in that work.

I note today's Building Council of Australia report which has acknowledged the work that is being undertaken in the ACT in their annual report, *Regulation rumble*, which has acknowledged that the ACT is the third-best jurisdiction when it comes to cost and regulation for business, and that includes our major focus on planning regulation as well. I am particularly pleased that we have gone up the charts, from fourth to third out of eight jurisdictions, and further regulation reform is coming. There is every expectation that we could even improve on our current standing in that scorecard with the planning reform that is underway, not just through the construction productivity agenda but also through reforms like transit-oriented development to enable more homes in well-located areas, the work that we are doing on the pattern book, and streamlining approvals pathways for new homes and new missing middle homes. I am very pleased to continue the work and to work with industry and homeowners to make sure that we have a fit-for-purpose planning and building system. I commend the bill to the Assembly.

I present a revised explanatory statement to the bill.

Question resolved in the affirmative.

Bill agreed to in principle.

Leave granted to dispense with the detail stage.

Bill agreed to.

Sitting suspended from 11.43 am to 2.00 pm.

Questions without notice

Former Minister for Health—performance

MR PARTON: My question is to the Minister for Health. The former Labor Chief Minister Jon Stanhope has declared that the years of policy decisions under the reign of Rachel Stephen-Smith are directly to blame for the deterioration of the ACT's public health system. Does the minister accept that the state of the system inherited from the previous minister is in significant crisis and in fact is an indictment on the leadership of Minister Stephen-Smith?

DR PATERSON: I thank the member for the question; it is an excellent opportunity to talk about how our health system has been going from strength to strength, particularly

under the previous minister's leadership. We have seen significant improvements in our emergency department wait times over the past few years. We have seen significant investment in elective surgeries. And, as we have been very much discussing this week, we are beginning a massive reform project through implementing the Walsh reform recommendations, for which I will come to the chamber with a government response in the not too distant future. So I feel that the health portfolio is in a very strong position and feel very proud to take the leadership position.

MR PARTON: Given the scale of the problems inherited, has the minister sought additional funding or changes to the government's health policy settings to address the underlying causes of the system's decline?

DR PATERSON: I am two months into the role, and we have not yet gone through a budget process with me in this position. I will absolutely, wholeheartedly, embrace that process when it begins.

Mr Cocks: A point of order, under 118AA: the question was specifically about the underlying causes of the system's decline. It wasn't about budget processes.

MR SPEAKER: Mr Cocks, I think it was specific.

Ms Stephen-Smith interjecting—

MR SPEAKER: Minister, there is a point of order. I would ask you to either raise a point of order or let me rule.

The question was: has the minister sought additional funding? She did respond to that. She was responsive. There is no point of order.

MRS MORRIS: Has Minister Stephen-Smith enabled the most significant decline of our public health system since self-government, as per Mr Stanhope's comments?

DR PATERSON: No, not at all. Minister Stephen-Smith, when she held the health portfolio, directed the health system through a major international pandemic. We have seen year on year increases in demand for our health services across the board, including our ambulance service, so we have a health system that is under strain, as the chamber would be aware. There are all sorts of workforce pressures as well. But despite all those things, we continue to have a health system that is improving. We are seeing emergency department wait times reduce. We are seeing massive investment in elective surgery wait lists. We will continue to invest in our health system to see improvements for the Canberra community.

Economy—cost of living

MS CASTLEY: My question is to the Chief Minister. Today's ABS data confirms a months-long trend where CPI is increasing more in Canberra than the national average, hitting almost five per cent over the past year. Why is the cost of living rising faster in Canberra than the rest of Australia?

MR BARR: I thank Ms Castley for the question. Looking at the data, transport costs,

recreation and housing were the main drivers of the increase. I think on an annualised rate, though, the ACT is within 0.1 per cent of the national rate over the course of the last 12 months.

MS CASTLEY: Chief Minister, what are the implications for the ACT budget of inflation that is almost double the government's forecasts?

MR BARR: Well, that is somewhat speculative as we will not be delivering a budget until June next year. We will see where inflation is at that point, noting of course that the Reserve Bank are exercising their monetary policy levers, with the desire to return inflation to the two to three per cent underlying rate.

Waste—soft plastics

MS CLAY: My question is to the Minister for City and Government Services.

Construction has begun on the replacement recycling centre. Infrastructure Canberra said that soft plastics recycling is a problem for all of Australia and that "It's a national thing that is being worked on." But it is not a national thing that is being worked on. A month ago the federal Labor government backflipped on their promise to bring in mandatory federal product stewardship laws nationally. Those laws would have made the big corporations who make and sell plastic packaging responsible for paying to recycle it and for designing it out in the first place. Given this backflip, what was Infrastructure Canberra referring to when they said soft plastics and packaging waste were "A national thing that is being worked on?"

MS ORR: I am going to take that as the policy for waste recycling and the circular economy sits with me as Minister for Environment. In reference to iCBR, they would probably report to Minister Cheyne. I am going take it on notice and come back to the chamber because my computer has an automatic software update going on and I cannot check my notes.

MS CLAY: Since federal Labor abandoned their promise to bring in national packaging laws that would make polluters pay, what has the ACT government done to deal with soft plastics in Canberra?

MS ORR: Mr Speaker, that will cut across a few areas so I will take it on notice and come back with a full answer.

MR BRADDOCK: Minister, when will Canberrans be able to recycle soft plastics in a free and convenient way like other cities such as Albury, Ballarat, Adelaide, Tamworth and the Central Coast?

MS ORR: I will add it to the list of things I am taking on notice and come back with a comprehensive answer.

Phillip Swimming and Ice Skating Centre—lease conditions

MS CARRICK: My question is to the minister for planning, regarding the Phillip pool. The owner of the Phillip Swimming and Ice Skating Centre has erected fences very

close to the 50-metre pool. Minister, are the current works, including fencing and decommissioning of the smaller pools, allowable under the current lease?

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

MS CARRICK: Minister, has there been a safety assessment relating to the clearance around the pool that is needed to facilitate a rescue operation? If yes, when did this assessment occur and what were the findings? If not, why not?

MR STEEL: I thank the member for the question. I will seek as to whether I can get information from the independent Territory Planning Authority about that, if they hold that information.

MR EMERSON: Minister, when was the last inspection for compliance with the Crown lease conditions, and what were the findings?

MR STEEL: Again, I will seek some information about that from Access Canberra who acts as the delegate for the Territory Planning Authority when it comes to enforcing planning regulation.

Out of home care—Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children

MR EMERSON: My question is to the Minister for Children, Youth and Families. Minister, yesterday during question time you said:

> The government is committed to reducing the over-representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in the out of home care system and the Our Booris, Our Way recommendations and the committee are foundational in that work…

If that is the case, Minister, why hasn't the partnership agreement with the Our Booris, Our Way Implementation Oversight Committee been reviewed as was promised? And why hasn't a new partnership agreement been signed, given the existing one expired in March?

MR PETTERSSON: I thank Mr Emerson for the question. There is a disagreement afoot as to whether the review of the partnership agreement has taken place. I understand the views of the committee on this matter. And there was a second part to the question, Mr Emerson?

Mr Emerson: Why there is no agreement given the existing one expired in March?

MR PETTERSSON: A decision to enter into a partnership agreement has been a decision of the directorate. I am not in a position to provide any further information on any decisions of a future agreement.

Mr Emerson: Mr Speaker, a point of order on responsiveness. The question was on why one has not been signed; it was not whether a new partnership agreement would be signed at some point in the future. If the minister is unable to comment today perhaps

he could take that part on notice.

MR SPEAKER: On the point of order, do you have anything—

Mr Pettersson: Why has one not been signed? Yes, one has not been signed. I am not in a position to attribute particular reasons at this point in time as to why that has happened—and it would be a future decision to do so.

Mr Emerson: Well, I seek your ruling then.

MR SPEAKER: I think it is a fine line that one. I will have a look at the *Hansard* and come back with a ruling later on.

MR EMERSON: Minister, is it true that the Our Booris, Our Way implementation team within the directorate has been unstaffed since October 2025?

MR PETTERSSON: I thank Mr Emerson for the question. There have been changes in the staff allocation across the directorate that works to these matters. I would not be able to speak precisely to the time lines; so I will have to take that on notice.

MS VASSAROTTI: Minister, is the ACT government committed to ongoing oversight through the Our Booris, Our Way Implementation Oversight Committee beyond 30 June 2027 when their current funding expires?

MR PETTERSSON: The government is deeply appreciative of all of the work that the committee undertake providing oversight as well as their original work in providing recommendations. The role of the committee is important. The role of the committee takes place in the wider context of the oversight of the children, youth and family service that exist here in the ACT, with a range of independent oversights. The government will meet at some time in the future to consider what the appropriate settings are. That should and will be done in conversation and consultation with community.

Cleaners—long service leave

MR COCKS: My question is to the Minister for Health. Minister, on 1 October, more than 300 Canberra Hospital cleaners transferred into direct government employment from the private sector. What arrangements has the government made to ensure these workers receive full recognition of their previously accumulated portable long service leave?

DR PATERSON: I will take that on notice.

MR COCKS: Minister, how many of the insourced cleaners had less than five years of accumulated portable service, and how many have had that service recognised towards their public sector long service leave entitlements?

DR PATERSON: I will take that on notice.

MR PARTON: Minister, will an insourced Canberra Hospital cleaner who returns to

private sector cleaning after five years lose both their portable and their government long service leave under your scheme's provisions?

DR PATERSON: I will take that on notice.

Small business—impact of federal and territory policies

MR COCKS: My question is to the Minister for Business and Industry. Minister, small businesses are dealing with the ban on credit card surcharges, federal Labor's proposed changes to family trust taxation, and uncertainty over the future of credit card payments for tax bills following the Albanese government's decision to postpone the ATO's proposed ban. The government has also lowered the payroll tax threshold and intends to impose another employment levy on hospitality and hairdressing businesses from January. This comes on top of yet another inflation result that may drive interest rate rises.

Minister, what assessment has the government undertaken of the cumulative impact of these decisions and outcomes on the viability of Canberra small businesses?

MR PETTERSSON: I cannot immediately point to a singular piece of work that would have considered the totality of each of those decisions, many of which were undertaken by entities that are not the ACT government. The government, in considering any policy decision, is cognisant of the wider settings in which a decision is taken. We are very confident the decisions we make are in line with Canberrans' expectations.

MR COCKS: Minister, how many small businesses does your government expect will have to increase prices, cut staff hours or delay hiring because of the additional cost of Labor's higher tax, aggressive compliance, agenda?

MR PETTERSSON: I would like to thank Mr Cocks for the supplementary question. I cannot accept the imputations, inferences and claims contained within the question. There is a range of economic circumstances taking place. We make decisions in the best interest of our city. We will continue to do that. We want Canberra to be a place where business thrives. We are a good place to do business, Mr Speaker.

You might have seen, Mr Speaker, the BCA just recently announced their rankings of the states when it comes to business sentiment and regulations, where the ACT has actually gone up in the rankings. Couple that with the fact that in the ACT we have got the third-highest growth rate for businesses. This government will continue to support the local business community. We will not talk it down like others.

MR MILLIGAN: Minister, why is the government imposing another cost to employment from January, when the federal Labor government has finally realised the severity of the cash-flow pressures facing small business?

MR PETTERSSON: I would like to thank Mr Milligan for the question and, as always, his strong interest in all matters local business. The ACT government is expanding portable long service leave to services and hospitality because we know these are industries that have high rates of business turnover; they have high rates of casualisation, and in these industries it is nigh impossible for working people to access

long service leave, which is why we support portable long service leave.

Now, there are some people that do not support the premise of portable long service leave. They do not think that working people deserve access to this entitlement. But we, on this side of the chamber, do. We believe this is an important workplace entitlement that all working people should be able to access, which is why we support portable schemes, and we will continue to do so.

Business—hospitality businesses—portable long service leave

MR COCKS: My question is to the Minister for Skills, Training and Industrial Relations. Minister, in May this year, following my announcement of legislation to postpone the expansion of portable long service leave pending an independent assessment of its impact on businesses and workers, the government postponed the expansion by six months because of difficult economic conditions and offered substantial introductory levy discounts. Since then CreditorWatch has reported that 12 per cent of Australia's cafes and restaurants closed over the previous year, while Restaurant & Catering Australia has reported that average restaurant and cafe net profit margins had fallen to just 2.5 per cent before further increases in employment and operating costs. Minister, what independent economic evidence demonstrates that proceeding with the expansion on 1 January 2027 is unlikely to have materially adverse effects on employment or business viability in Canberra?

MR PETTERSSON: The government does seek advice when considering changes to these schemes. An analysis, as described in Mr Cocks's question, I do not believe has taken place. This was a decision taken by the government in response to what we were seeing in the community and representations from business. We make decisions cognisant of the wider circumstances that are taking place, which is why the government has delayed the commencement of this scheme, which is why we have sought to structure the introduction of this expansion of the scheme to provide as much support to these industries which are experiencing challenging economic circumstances. We are living in an inflationary time, and many businesses are experiencing that challenge. We know that portable long service leave is a good thing for working people, and it is a good thing for these industries.

When I speak to hospitality businesses, commonly the first thing they talk to me about are their challenges in training and retaining staff. If this industry wants to retain more of their staff, then it is important that schemes like portable long service leave are implemented.

MR COCKS: Minister, has the government commissioned any independent economic assessment of the expansion's expected impact on business viability, staffing levels and working hours? Or is it all just on the vibes?

MR PETTERSSON: I would like to thank Mr Cocks for the supplementary question. I reject the premise of the question. This is a decision that was considered and was made informed by the representations that were made to us and our understanding of the wider economic circumstances. There are important considerations for government when making this decision. Mr Cocks in his previous questions has gone to some of the record high hospitality business closures in recent times. These are things that are front and

central in our decision-making. But, when I cite a statistic like that, it is important to consider why a scheme like portable long service leave is so important, because if portable long service leave had been in place before those businesses had gone under, those entitlements would have been protected. I am cognisant of the challenges that are being experienced by industry, but it is important that this scheme is implemented so that those entitlements for those workers are protected going into the future as soon as possible.

MR CAIN: Minister, what has improved in the hospitality sector since May that makes the government believe businesses can now afford Labor's hospitality tax without cutting staff hours or jobs?

MR PETTERSSON: This government does pay attention to wider economic circumstances. I am confident, as we enter into the summer period, that there will be more Canberrans spending their money locally, supporting hospitality businesses. We have gone through a challenging time in recent years. There has been uncertainty in the local jobs market. There have been challenges in the provision of public spending in the city. We have gone through election periods which have seen a reduction in spending locally. I acknowledge that in recent years, off the back of a pandemic, it has been a challenging time for hospitality, but we need to be very clear that there are bright spots in the local economy and there are lots of ambitious, entrepreneurial Canberrans that see the bright future ahead for hospitality, which is why we are seeing new venues opening up in this city, because Canberrans are optimistic about the future of hospitality, which is why we want to support that workforce, those industries and those employers to make sure that industry continues to thrive.

Canberra Health Services—specialist waiting lists

MS VASSAROTTI: My question is to the Minister for Health. As we know, the government has sent out 1,000 letters to patients who are on outpatient waiting lists telling them that they have been removed from it without explaining why or providing advice to their GP as to where their patient should go or what they should do instead. Yesterday you told the media that each case taken off the waiting list was done by a clinician. We understand that clinicians developed the clinical guidelines for the new waitlist criteria, but what were the qualifications of the person or people who then applied that criteria and made the decision to remove people from the paediatric allergies waitlist?

DR PATERSON: The clinicians there were specialised doctors who made that decision and assessed each of the cases.

MS VASSAROTTI: Can the minister advise whether automated decision-making tools, algorithms, scoring systems or other decision-support systems were used at any time in determining whether or not a patient continued to meet the clinical criteria?

DR PATERSON: No, I can absolutely confirm that was not the case, and, in fact, members who were at the briefing yesterday morning heard the clinician say that each case was reviewed by a highly specialised medical practitioner.

MS CLAY: What administrative safeguards apply when Canberra Health Services

removes a patient from a specialist waiting list, including the information provided about reasons for the decision and any rights to seek review or reconsideration?

Dr Paterson: Can you start the question again, sorry?

MS CLAY: What administrative safeguards apply when Canberra Health Services removes a patient from a specialist waitlist, including what information is provided about reasons for the decision and any rights to seek review or reconsideration?

DR PATERSON: The letter that went out to the families had contact details for Canberra Health Services to contact the health services if they did require a review of their situation. And just to correct the record, all referring GPs also received a letter that outlined the changes to the criteria for referral and also outlined the process that was being undertaken. I think, as we have discussed yesterday, there is a process for review. If an individual still believes that they would like their child to see a specialist, it is recommended that they go back to their GP to again have the discussion with the GP to understand whether a referral is necessary at this time. This was a really rigorous process, the clinical guidelines—

Ms Clay: Point of order, and we may be getting there. We have an answer about review or reconsideration. We have not got anything about reasons for the decision in the letter. That was part of the question; reasons for decision, in the letter.

DR PATERSON: It does say in the letter that there has been a clinical review and a revision of the clinical guidelines for access to the service.

Working With Vulnerable People scheme—accessibility

MISS NUTTALL: My question is to the Minister for Community Services. Minister, accessibility issues with our Working With Vulnerable People scheme have been raised in several committee inquiries now in relation to information sharing barriers within the system and how this is negatively impacting the community groups and volunteers who engage with the system and require a Working With Vulnerable People card. The government has said they will 'look into how to improve information sharing and development of resources regarding the Working With Vulnerable People scheme in partnership with Access Canberra in the ACT Volunteering Strategy Action Plan and said they will conduct a review with key stakeholders.

Minister, has this review been conducted and are community sport stakeholders being included in this process?

MS TOUGH: I thank Miss Nuttall for the question. Working With Vulnerable People checks are a really important part of keeping our community safe. And there is work going on, not just here in the ACT, but nationally around working with vulnerable people and working with children checks, as they are known in in a lot of other jurisdictions. The Attorney-General and I are involved in those discussions at a national level. Part of that is we are reviewing how our system works here in the ACT. While I cannot announce government policy in question time, we are undertaking that work to have a review commence soon. I have recently met with Volunteering ACT and a few other stakeholders to discuss what is not working for them at the moment, so we can

shape that thinking as things progress into the next steps.

MISS NUTTALL: Minister, if the government is still yet to commence the review, when can volunteers, community organisations and particularly community sports organisations expect to see actual changes rather than just review or further consultation?

MS TOUGH: I thank Miss Nuttall for the question. I know community sport organisations, Volunteering ACT and so many of our amazing volunteers in the community want to see what happens next. It is just important that we take those steps both here in the ACT and nationally so that we get it right as we do it and not have to come back multiple times. I appreciate there is a lot of anticipation in the community on what happens next, but I will keep the Assembly updated as things progress.

MS VASSAROTTI: Minister, how is the government considering how other jurisdictions promote efficiency and accessibility in their working with vulnerable people systems?

MS TOUGH: I thank Ms Vassarotti for the supplementary question. As part of the work that is being undertaken at a national level through the Standing Council of Attorneys-Generals and meetings for officials, states and territories are in discussions around how different schemes work in different jurisdictions and so we can share those learnings with each other. I think there are also some informal discussions that happen between officials in different areas on how schemes work best and how they can be made more efficient.

Disaster Ready Fund—commonwealth funding

MS BERRY: My question is for the Minister for Police, Fire and Emergency Services. Minister, can you please update the Assembly on what the recent Disaster Ready Fund round 4 announcement means for the ACT and how this investment will help to build a more disaster-resilient territory?

DR PATERSON: I thank Ms Berry for the question. The ACT has secured a record investment through round 4 of the Disaster Ready Fund, with seven projects across the territory receiving support and more than $30 million being invested through a partnership between the ACT government, the Australian government and project partners. This includes funding for stormwater infrastructure, nature-based flood mitigation initiatives and camera-based bushfire detection technologies. This investment recognises a simple reality: that natural disasters are becoming more frequent and severe, and governments have a responsibility to invest in mitigation and preparedness before emergencies occur.

Examples of the successful DRF projects include the renaturalisation of urban waterways for flood mitigation. This is a $15.8 million project which will renaturalise the section of Yarralumla Creek to demonstrate how nature-based solutions can reduce flood risk. We also have the Hall Village stormwater infrastructure improvements, a $5.9 million project; and SmokeBench, a $4.3 million project which will establish Australia's first national capability for independently evaluating camera-based fire detection technologies while enhancing smoke intelligence for camera networks. The

funded projects will help strengthen the territory's ability to prepare for and withstand the risk of hazards, including bushfires, storm and flooding. They will reduce risk to lives, homes, businesses and critical infrastructure, while helping communities recover more quickly when disasters occur.

MS BERRY: Minister, how will this record investment complement the ACT government's preparations for the 2026-27 bushfire season?

DR PATERSON: I thank the member for the question. It has been a busy season of preparing for this storm and bushfire season in the territory. The funding from DRF complements a broad program of work underway for this season. Earlier this month, the ACT government launched the Chat. Plan. Act campaign, encouraging Canberrans to take simple steps to prepare for emergencies by understanding their risks, making a plan and knowing what actions to take during an emergency.

While community preparedness remains at the heart of our approach, the Disaster Ready Fund enables us to strengthen the systems and infrastructure that support that preparedness. This includes the investment in bushfire technology and other resilience measures to help us improve identifying risks early and responding effectively. These investments sit alongside recent capability upgrades, including the introduction of new heavy-tanker fire trucks for the ACT Rural Fire Service ahead of this bushfire season. Together, these initiatives strengthen both prevention and response capabilities.

The message to Canberrans is clear: chat, plan, act. Emergency preparedness is a shared responsibility. The government is continuing to invest in capability, technology and infrastructure, and I encourage all Canberrans to take steps to ensure they are prepared for the season ahead.

MR WERNER-GIBBINGS: Minister, why is investing in disaster mitigation and preparedness before an emergency occurs so important for the safety of Canberrans?

DR PATERSON: I thank the member for the question. The evidence is very clear that every dollar invested in disaster mitigation and preparedness can help reduce the social, environmental and economic costs of future disasters. While we cannot necessarily prevent every bushfire, storm or flood, we can reduce the risks they pose and lessen their impact on our community. Investments in mitigation infrastructure, improved planning, early detection technologies and community resilience help protect lives, reduce damage to property and critical infrastructure, and support faster recovery when disasters do occur.

This is precisely why governments at all levels are investing in initiatives such as the Disaster Ready Fund and the projects it supports. Rather than waiting for disasters to happen, we are taking practical action to identify risks and address them before they become emergencies.

Taxation and levies—commercial land rates

MR MILLIGAN: My question is to the Treasurer. Treasurer, city businesses already pay commercial rates, yet they are charged an additional city centre marketing and improvements levy for services, including cleaning and graffiti removal. Can the

Treasurer guarantee that local businesses are not being charged for extra services that should be part of the government's ordinary responsibilities?

MR BARR: The city centre marketing and improvements levy is levied on businesses within the various precincts that the CRA covers. The CRA works with a representative group of businesses to allocate those funds to a range of activities, and that includes the staging of events. It also includes a range of other things that might be described as market failures on private land, where no individual business would have responsibility for the totality of an area but they would have a shared interest in the area being maintained on private land. The answer to the question is that we can guarantee ruling out the issue that Mr Milligan has raised. Of course, this levy has been in place for some time and is broadly supported across the precinct.

MR MILLIGAN: What evidence can the Chief Minister provide property owners and businesses that are funding this levy that the levy is delivering measurable improvements and value for money?

MR BARR: It is reported against in the annual report of the agency and information on each specific event; the increase in footfall in the precinct and the economic impact is also reported.

MR COCKS: Why are local business owners paying for Labor's fiscal failures?

MR BARR: They are not.

Strata properties—electric vehicle charging

MR BRADDOCK: My question is to the Attorney-General. With the rapid uptake of electric vehicles, an issue repeatedly identified by Canberrans is accessibility for charging for those who live in strata communities under the Unit Titles (Management) Act.

Attorney-General, how does the government plan to help existing stratas, owners and residents under that act to access EV charging at home?

MS CHEYNE: I thank Mr Braddock for the question. I think it was in September 2024 that the Unit Titles (Management) Act was amended to make it easier for residents to install sustainability and utility infrastructure, including EV chargers. Effectively, the way that the legislation works, and the ensuing policy, is that an owners corporation, executive committee or building manager cannot prevent or restrict an installation without good reason. That is the legislative framework that we are operating in for our existing buildings.

Within Minister Orr's remit, there has also been the Residential Strata EV Ready Pilot Study, with some practical guidance to help owners corporations, strata managers and residents assess their buildings, understand the technical options and plan installations safely and equitably. Importantly, that study has found that most participating buildings would not need an upgrade to their incoming power supply if they used a properly designed load management system. So I think that has done some great work in terms of addressing some of the anxiety that some of our executive committees or owners

corporations have had.

And of course, for new developments—and this might be what I was referring to with September 2024—the Territory Plan has required that new multi-unit developments include EV-ready infrastructure for every unit's car space, and that complements the National Construction Code.

MR BRADDOCK: Attorney-General, is the ACT government going to implement a right to charge as the New South Wales government has just done?

MS CHEYNE: I thank Mr Braddock for the supplementary. As I flagged, we already do protect residents against EV charging infrastructure being blocked without good reason. Under our act, an executive committee or building manager cannot prevent or restrict the installation of sustainability or utility infrastructure, and that includes EV chargers. They cannot prevent that without good reason. And an owners corporation can also approve infrastructure on common property by ordinary resolutions. So the barriers are not there.

The recently passed New South Wales provisions we will certainly take a look at; from my understanding, they adopt a similar underlying principle, but the process that residents go through has been explicitly prescribed in the legislation. We have got a broader framework that applies to our infrastructure, while New South Wales has introduced a dedicated, individual application process enshrined in legislation, with statutory deadlines, approvals and express remedies.

The principle is the same. We will look at the New South Wales legislation and its implementation, but a right to have a charger should not mean a right to impose an unmanaged or technically unsuitable installation on the rest of the building. If we were to go down the path that New South Wales has taken, any consideration would need to preserve the legitimate role of owners corporations in managing the shared electrical infrastructure, safety load management, billing and equitable access.

Quite honestly, I think the process that we have designed appears to be working, so I am not sure that there is a need to go down the path with New South Wales, but we will certainly keep an eye on how that implementation rolls out.

MISS NUTTALL: Minister, what is the status of the announced plan for interest free loans for multi-unit buildings to become electric vehicle ready?

MS STEPHEN-SMITH: Mr Speaker, I will take this as the Minister for Finance responsible for the Sustainable Household Scheme, and I thank Miss Nuttall for the supplementary question. Before I get to the specifics of Miss Nuttall's question, I do want to reiterate, as Ms Cheyne has said, that the ACT government has already sought to lower the barriers to sustainability measures like EV charging being implemented in strata communities.

The ACT government has also provided guidance material and made that available to strata and owners corporations on how to approach the installation of EV charging facilities in existing buildings. Owners corporations can already seek tailored advice through the newly established Sustainable Apartments Program, which covers

electrification options for their buildings, including EV charging. The service provides a comprehensive assessment at nil cost to the owners corporation. I think that stands them in good stead for the introduction of a program for multi-unit buildings to become EV-ready.

The Sustainable Household Scheme as it is has supported funding for loans for EV charging infrastructure in 185 homes, and it has also provided loans for the purchase of 813 new electric vehicles and 109 used electric vehicles.

The program for multi-unit buildings to become EV-ready is being finalised, with industry consultation currently occurring. We expect that it will be launched in early 2027. This will be one of the first programs of its kind in Australia, so careful design and planning have been required. But the programs I mentioned earlier will place strata owners corporations in a good position to understand whether this is something that they may be able to use and would wish to access.

Economy—National Competition Policy

MR COCKS: My question is to the Treasurer. Treasurer, later this week the Assembly will debate the Competition Legislation Amendment Bill 2026, which gives effect to the revised National Competition Policy agreement. That agreement requires governments to assess the competitive impacts of major policy decisions and includes the principle that government and private businesses should compete on a level playing field. Treasurer, what assessment has the government undertaken of whether imposing portable long service leave levies on private cleaning contractors, while excluding the government's own directly employed cleaners, distorts the choice between contracting and insourcing cleaning services?

MR STEEL: I thank the member for his question. The answer is that the revised National Competition Policy is only in the process of being implemented at the moment. Of course, that decision was taken prior to the implementation of the new policy, which of course our government supports, and we do support that element of undertaking those assessments going forward for major policy decisions.

Certainly, what we know is that the ACT government offers very competitive conditions for its public service employees, and I do not believe that this would have a very significant impact on competition with private contractors. It is certainly within the government's remit to undertake government work with government employees, and there is that flexibility within the National Competition Policy to make those sorts of decisions.

MR COCKS: Treasurer, when comparing the cost of private cleaning contracts with directly employed government cleaners, does the government ensure that equivalent long service leave costs are included in both cases?

MR STEEL: I thank the member for his question. Certainly the government does take into account what the cost would be for the ACT government to be able to insource employees, and we have undertaken work over the last term on developing an insourcing framework that considers those costs in making a decision.

MRS MORRIS: Can the Treasurer identify any published assessment demonstrating that the government's different treatment of private cleaning contractors and its own directly employed cleaners does not unfairly disadvantage private sector providers?

MR STEEL: This is government work being undertaken by government employees. It is absolutely within the remit of the ACT government to be able to fund our own employees as government employees to undertake this work, and there is nothing in the National Competition Policy that would suggest that we cannot do otherwise.

Education—Future of Education Equity Fund

MR WERNER-GIBBINGS: My question is to the Minister for Education. Minister, can you please update the Assembly on how the ACT government's Future of Education Equity Fund is helping Canberra families with the cost of schooling and ensuring that every child can fully participate in their education regardless of their circumstances?

MS STEPHEN-SMITH: I thank Mr Werner-Gibbings for the question and for his ongoing passion for public education and for equity for all children and young people. I know it was only last week that Mr Werner-Gibbings was engaging with a local P&C in his electorate, hearing and learning about the local experience at one of Tuggeranong's public schools.

The Barr Labor government is committed to ensuring every child and young person has access to high quality education and that ACT public schools can be an excellent first choice for every family. One of the ways we are delivering on that commitment is through the Future of Education Equity Fund. This is a lasting and transformational program that was championed and delivered by Ms Berry, and I want to acknowledge that. By reducing financial barriers, the fund helps students participate fully in school life. Whether it is sporting equipment, uniforms, music lessons or excursions, we know that the cost can add up and sometimes families have to make difficult choices. So the Education Equity Fund takes a bit of pressure off eligible families, supporting the wellbeing of their children and young people and ensuring they can access the same opportunities as their peers.

So far in 2026, more than 3,200 applications have been approved, delivering around $3.7 million in support for Canberra families. Eligible families can receive annual payments of $400 for preschool students, $500 for primary school students and $750 for high school and college students. Importantly, the fund is available to eligible students attending public and non-government schools, recognising that cost-of-living pressures affect families right across our community.

The equity fund is a practical demonstration of ACT Labor's commitment to equity in education, because all students should have access to enriching learning opportunities.

MR WERNER-GIBBINGS: Minister, how is the equity fund supporting student wellbeing and participation in school life beyond the classroom?

MS STEPHEN-SMITH: I thank Mr Werner-Gibbings for the supplementary. By helping the families with the costs of education, the Labor government is ensuring more

students can engage, participate and thrive in school. The government knows that education and school engagement are about more than what happens in the classroom. Students are more likely to succeed when they feel connected to their school community and can participate fully in the opportunities that school provides. The Future of Education Equity Fund supports this broader vision of education by helping eligible families access activities and experiences that contribute to student wellbeing, engagement and inclusion.

As I mentioned, funding can be used for school excursions, it can be used for sporting activities or equipment, it can be used for music lessons, or a myriad of other opportunities that allow students to participate alongside their peers. These experiences help students build confidence, develop social connections, discover new interests and strengthen their sense of belonging. We know that student wellbeing and educational engagement are closely linked and that participation in extracurricular and enrichment activities can have lasting positive impacts.

The fund is not simply financial assistance; it is an investment in ensuring that students can take part in the full life of their school community. It helps create opportunities that might otherwise be out of reach for some families and supports our commitment to ensuring every young person can access the benefits of education. By supporting participation, inclusion and wellbeing, the equity fund helps ensure that all students have the opportunity to learn, connect, grow and thrive throughout their educational journey.

MS BERRY: Minister, who is eligible for the Future of Education Equity Fund, and how can Canberra families access this support?

MS STEPHEN-SMITH: I thank Ms Berry for the supplementary and her absolute commitment to equity for Canberra's children and young people. This program that she delivered is making a real difference for Canberran children and young people. The ACT government wants to ensure that families who need support can easily access the Future of Education Equity Fund and the educational opportunities it provides.

The fund is available to eligible low income families with children enrolled from preschool through to year 12 in either ACT public or non-government schools. It is also available to eligible independent students and young people undertaking other approved forms of education, including home education and certain equivalent courses through the Canberra Institute of Technology. To be eligible, applicants must live in the ACT, be financially responsible for the student and be able to demonstrate low income status. This is typically done through a means tested Centrelink healthcare card or pensioner concession card, but other evidence of financial hardship may also be considered.

Applying is straightforward. Families can apply online through the ACT government's Education Directorate website and a single application can cover all eligible children in a family, even if those children attend different schools. Applications for the 2026 school year remain open until the end of November 2026, and an announcement will be made about the opening of 2027 applications. So I encourage any who may be eligible to visit the ACT government website and apply for this important support.

Taxation and levies—residential land rates

MR COCKS: My question is to the Treasurer. Treasurer, the government confirmed during estimates that Labor has imposed an average general residential rates increase of eight per cent across Canberra this year, with some suburbs being hit with up to 19 per cent increases. Average residential rates in each and every Canberra suburb now exceed those of Sydney's northern beaches.

Is the Treasurer aware that, despite the government's claim of 20,000 households being better off on rates this year, the total number of properties with a calculated general residential rates reduction—though excluding the expiry of the temporary health levy—is actually seven?

MR STEEL: I thank Mr Cocks for his question. Of course, he well knows that he is not taking into account the fact that we abolished the health levy in the budget, and that is why we have seen around 20,000 households better off, in terms of their rates. And when the health levy abolition is included, the average rates increase is no more than five per cent across the territory.

And of course, rates is an important source of revenue to be able to fund the services and infrastructure that Canberrans rely on. But we certainly recognise that households and businesses are under pressure and that is why we did not increase rates further. But we are seeing massive rate increases in other jurisdictions around us, including Yass Shire Council where I believe they are contemplating rates increases in the vicinity of over 70 per cent.

We have been measured and balanced in the decisions that we have made in the budget, recognising the pressure on families. We have provided cost-of-living support. Minister Stephen-Smith just spoke about the Education Equity Fund, which is one of the measures outlined in the budget, that we have made to support cost of living in a targeted way. But of course, yes, we are continuing to charge rates and of course they are apportioned partially based on valuation.

It always is extraordinary—they say there is no such thing as a dumb question—but sometimes it does reveal something about the questioner. It is worth having a look at the QONs from Mr Cain on this subject for he clearly does not understand the rates system after two terms.

Members interjecting—

Mr Parton: Point of order. Very clearly, the minister is now debating the question.

MR SPEAKER: Yes. I think there is an inference in there as well, Minister, and I would ask that, when you are answering, you not have imputations or inferences as you were leading towards.

Mr Cocks: On the point of order, I ask that you request the minister to withdraw the—

MR SPEAKER: I will do that, Mr Cocks. I would ask that you withdraw those comments.

MR STEEL: I did not say that he was dumb, but I withdraw if there was an inference.

MR COCKS: Treasurer how does the expiry of a temporary levy make a permanent increase in residential general rates of eight per cent, on average, any more affordable for households struggling to pay their bills?

MR STEEL: I thank the member for his question. As I note, again, as I did in the answer to the first question, of course that figure does not take into account the fact that the health levy has been abolished. And so that means that, overall, rates have not increased by more than five per cent on average, across the ACT.

And we have had to be measured about the decisions that we have made; measured because we know that there is pressure on households and businesses at the moment, with the current macroeconomic climate, the war in the Middle East that is driving up transport costs and driving inflation across the economy. But the government also faces those same pressures, Mr Speaker, in terms of the cost of delivering services to the community like free public health care, for example, and that means we need to be able to fund those.

Mr Cocks: Point of order on relevance. The question was actually about how the expiry of a temporary levy makes a permanent increase in general rates of eight per cent any more affordable. It does not go to the pressures on the government's budgets, but households' budgets.

MR SPEAKER: Treasurer?

MR STEEL: I think I have answered it. It goes directly to the question that taking off that levy does result in a reduced increase in the overall rates bill of no more than five per cent, on average, across the ACT. And of course, the government receives that revenue to be able to fund services and infrastructure which is, absolutely, relevant. And the government is under the same pressure that households and businesses are under in terms of the inflation that we are seeing in the economy, and we do to fund services like free public healthcare that help to take pressure off people when they are accessing healthcare services, for example, and a range of other services across the community that, of course, our government prioritises.

MS BARRY: Treasurer, why are Canberra homeowners paying for Labor's fiscal incompetence?

MR STEEL: I reject the premise of the question, and Mr Speaker, I refer the member to the Business Council of Australia's report today, *Regulation rumble*, and I have to say these gloves remind me of Alistair Coe and the election campaign, Mr Speaker. And the reason it is relevant is—

Mr Parton: Point of order. On relevance, the report (a) is prop, (b) has got nothing to do with the question. There is no relevance whatsoever.

MR SPEAKER: Yes. I think that the question was verging on inference about Labor party incompetence, so a question like that is going to lead to some latitude in the response.

Mr Cocks: On the point of order, Mr Speaker, on relevance: while I acknowledge that the minister is talking more broadly about incompetence, the question was very directly about fiscal incompetence rather than regulations.

MR SPEAKER: There is no point of order. Minister, do you have anything further to add?

MR STEEL: Mr Speaker, they hate this report. They hate this report and the reason why is that it is all about comparing regulations and tax policies across states and territories, to inspire a race to the top. And I am inspired, Mr Speaker. I am inspired because the ACT has not only gone up in our rankings but we are second, in terms of cost and regulation in this report.

Members interjecting—

MR STEEL: And it goes to the fact that we have abolished insurance duties in this territory; we have abolished stamp duty for first home buyers; we are doing better than other jurisdictions; and that is taking pressure off businesses and households.

And we are also improving our regulations across the planning system, to prioritise building new homes—and it has been recognised in this piece of work, as well—providing more affordable options for people to get into a home.

Members interjecting—

MR STEEL: This is a report that the Liberals hate, but it shows that the ACT government's concerted effort, led by Minister Cheyne on the Better Regulation Taskforce, the work we have been doing on planning system reform and tax reform is working— *(Time expired.)*

Education Directorate—conduct in procurement

MR PARTON: My question is to the Chief Minister. Chief Minister, in question time on 16 September, when asked about the review you commenced to look into Education Directorate procurement during the period involving the former director-general and the former chief of staff to the then education minister, you advised the Assembly that the review is being conducted by the Head of Service. Chief Minister, is this review separate from the desktop review undertaken by the Education Directorate that was tabled earlier this week?

MR BARR: I understand that there are intersecting pieces of work here. The Head of Service, obviously, does not personally undertake every single element of an audit of that size and will task elements to other parts of the bureaucracy. So, perhaps in the interest of getting a fulsome answer to Mr Parton's question, I will take it on notice.

MR PARTON: Chief Minister, are you satisfied that the desktop review that has been tabled is capable of identifying any serious procurement issues, given the Integrity Commissioner found that an earlier desktop review of the Campbell project had significant limitations and would not have "elicited these facts"?

MR BARR: Certainly the desktop review has looked at the fundamental question of whether a delegate or decision-maker varied a decision from that that was recommended by the procurement panel. So that is one of the threshold issues, clearly, that is contained within the Integrity Commissioner's Kingfisher report. There are of course other avenues where issues that might exist from a perspective of tenderers of, indeed, others involved in the process can be brought to the attention of not only the audit committees of each of the directorates but also the Auditor-General, as an independent entity, looking over the entire ACT Public Sector or, of course, the Integrity Commission itself.

MS LEE: Chief Minister, why was the Education Directorate allowed, at least in part, to mark its own homework, given the corrupt conduct identified in Kingfisher was carried out by the then head of the Education Directorate?

MR BARR: I think the answer to the question is partly contained within Ms Lee's question itself. Someone was not marking their own homework; a different group of officials was looking at issues at that time, and just because they happen to work in that directorate does not mean that they are incapable of looking at the work that was undertaken five years ago.

All further questions can be placed on the notice paper.

Supplementary answers to questions without notice

Canberra Health Services—specialist waiting lists

MS CLAY: I am concerned that the Minister for Health may have inadvertently misled the Assembly, and I have checked the records. I asked the minister what information was provided to people in relation to their rights to seek a review or reconsideration, and the minister has told us that the letters sent out by Canberra Health Services did include that information. The minister specifically said, "On the letter that went out to families, it had contact details for CHS to contact their health services if they did require a review of their situation." I have checked the letter, and I will just read from the letter. The letter says:

> We understand that this can be difficult to hear, and if you have feedback or concerns in relation to this, please contact the CHS Feedback Team: HealthFeedback@act.gov.au, phone 5124 5932 or visit the website www.canberrahealthservices.act.gov.au and click on Feedback at the bottom on the homepage to access the online feedback form.

Nowhere in that does it advise people of their administrative or legal right to a reconsideration or a review. That is simply saying that if you have got feedback, here are some ways to lodge the feedback. The minister has told us that people were advised of that right. The reason I am concerned about it—I do not often raise matters in question time—is on the GRIP program government did not respect human rights and administrative legal decision-making principles. They did not advise the people who received those letters about that program of their legal and administrative rights to reconsideration, review and appeal.

I am looking at another letter that looks an awful lot like it. It also does not advise people of their rights to a reconsideration or review. The minister has just told us that it has. I would like to invite the minister to reconsider all that information and the letter and then come back to the Assembly and let us know if people were in actual fact advised of their rights to a review or reconsideration.

DR PATERSON: Exactly as the member read the letter, that is what the letter stated. I will correct the record. It did not advise a review specifically, but it advised patients if they had feedback or concerns in relation to this, which was in relation to the reclassification of their referral, that they could contact Canberra Health Services. When they do contact Canberra Health Services, they can ask for a review. I take on Ms Clay's point that it does not have other information there, but, as she read out, that is what it states.

Out-of-home care—Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children

MR PETTERSSON: In Mr Emerson's question he asserted that the partnership agreement between Our Booris, Out Way Implementation Oversight Committee and HCSD had expired in March and asked why a new agreement had not been signed. I can advise the chamber that the agreement did not expire in March. It is not a time-limited agreement. Any consideration of a different and future agreement would be a matter for consideration at that time if it occurred. That is why no new agreement has been signed.

MR EMERSON: Just very quickly in response to the clarification, it is certainly the Our Booris, Our Way Implementation Oversight Committee's view that the agreement was a one-year agreement, so given one party of that agreement thinks it is one year long, it is an interesting correction, but I just wanted to put that on the record as well.

Suicide Prevention Bill 2026

Mr Parton, pursuant to notice, presented the bill and its explanatory statement.

Title read by Clerk.

MR PARTON (Brindabella—Leader of the Opposition) (3.06): I move:

> That this bill be agreed to in principle.

Before I begin I acknowledge that suicide and suicide prevention can be distressing topics for some people, particularly those who have been personally affected by suicide or who are experiencing difficult circumstances themselves. I encourage anyone who may find this discussion and its subsequent debate distressing to take care of themselves and to seek support if they need it.

Every death by suicide represents a profound loss for families, friends and communities. The consequences are devastating and they are enduring. For those experiencing suicidal distress timely support, effective intervention and a system that responds to their needs can be critical. I think we must therefore ask not simply whether suicide prevention is a government priority but whether our systems are organised, equipped and accountable to deliver on that priority.

This bill is designed to strengthen that framework in the ACT. The bill seeks to establish a legislative basis for a territory-wide suicide prevention plan, supported by suicide prevention plans across government directorates and agencies, including ACT Policing. This recognises that suicide prevention cannot be the responsibility of a single minister, directorate or service. It indeed requires a coordinated response across the institutions that interact with people, families and communities at different points in their lives.

The bill will establish a suicide prevention council to provide ongoing advice, promote collaboration and strengthen the role of lived experience in shaping policy and practice. Those with lived and living experience, their families, carers, frontline workers and community organisations must have a meaningful role in informing the decisions that affect them.

Importantly, the bill seeks to move suicide prevention beyond broad commitments by establishing expectations for planning, implementation, evaluation and public reporting. It provides for annual reporting to this Assembly on progress, relevant data and trends and the government's response to advice and recommendations. We think that matters, because commitments must be capable of scrutiny. This Assembly and the community should be able to understand exactly what action is being taken, whether it is making a difference, where gaps remain and what further work is required.

The bill recognises the importance of reliable information and evidence in provisions for a register of confirmed and suspected deaths by suicide. Alongside appropriate safeguards for the handling and sharing of information, they are intended to strengthen our capacity to understand patterns, identify emerging risks and inform prevention efforts. Effective suicide prevention must also recognise that different people in communities experience different risks and barriers to support. Policy must be informed by evidence, responsive to priority populations and capable of adapting as circumstances and needs change. That includes taking seriously the experiences of men and boys, who account for the overwhelming majority of suicide deaths in our community, while ensuring that prevention efforts respond to the needs of all people who are at risk.

No single piece of legislation can prevent every death by suicide. We cannot do that by passing laws, and we should not pretend that establishing plans, councils or reporting requirements is sufficient in itself. These mechanisms must lead to practical action, stronger coordination, better-informed decisions and a willingness to address shortcomings when they are identified. We now must establish the structures through which that work can be sustained, measured and scrutinised. Suicide prevention cannot be left to good intentions alone.

This bill seeks to make prevention a more deliberate, coordinated and accountable responsibility across the ACT government, with a stronger foundation for collaboration, continuous improvement and transparency. I want to acknowledge the way in which the ACT Greens have engaged with my office in good faith and the minister and government in expressing their willingness to work together on this truly nonpartisan issue. It gives me great pride and pleasure to commend the bill to the Assembly.

Debate (on motion by **Dr Paterson**) adjourned to the next sitting.

Public schools—funding

MS LEE (Kurrajong) (3.12): I move:

That the Assembly:

(1) notes:

(a) that in August 2026, ACT school leaders were presented with indicative 2027 budgets, with many advised they faced significant cuts;

(b) that *Canberra Times* reporting, based on Education Directorate data, shows at least 58 ACT Government schools face budget cuts in 2027 compared with 2026, with 37 facing cuts of more than 5 percent;

(c) reports that some ACT schools have already laid off Learning Support Assistants (LSAs) as a result of budget cuts, while others are considering cutting programs for 2027;

(d) that the Education Directorate introduced measures to address a suspected increase in occupational violence, stating principals may suffer stress, anxiety and conflict when communicating the impact of budget cuts, including staffing changes, to their communities;

(e) that the risk assessment acknowledges reduced student supports could escalate student behaviour and increase incidents of occupational violence;

(f) that according to data obtained by the *Canberra Times*, some of the ACT's most disadvantaged schools are facing some of the largest cuts, despite the Government justifying these cuts by saying there needed to be more focus on equity and need;

(g) the distress and anxiety caused by the mismanagement of the 2027 school budgets for principals, staff, parents, students and broader school communities;

(h) the Minister for Education's continued denial of budget cuts in the Assembly, adding to the confusion, distress and uncertainty facing school communities;

(i) that the Australian Education Union ACT Branch has called on the Minister for Education to take responsibility and accountability for those decisions and be honest with the community rather than throwing principles under the bus;

(j) that this is occurring when our government school system is at breaking point, with increased reports of violence, chronic staff shortages, increased splitting, collapsing and flexing of classes and declining student outcomes; and

(k) the Government has indicated that it is revising the Student Resource Allocation (SRA) model; and

(2) calls on the Minister for Education to:

(a) take responsibility for the mismanagement of the 2027 school budget process, which has caused confusion, anxiety and stress for school leaders, staff, families and students;

(b) establish clear budget development protocols, in consultation with principals and key stakeholders, that include defined timelines and

meaningful consultation to ensure principals have a genuine role in school budget decision-making; and

(c) report back to the Assembly by 3 December 2026 on the timeline and progress of the work the Government is undertaking on revising the SRA model.

Back in August this year, principals across the ACT were blindsided when the Education Directorate presented indicative budgets for 2027. These were not just minor adjustments. They were not just small efficiencies. For many schools, these were significant funding cuts, with losses running into the hundreds of thousands of dollars and in some cases millions.

When concerns were raised publicly, the Director-General of Education sought to reassure the community, saying:

> The review said we needed to look at that whole funding formula, and we are commissioning a holistic review of that funding formula, but as a first step for 2027 we've made a small adjustment to the weighting for colleges … so that we can get a better distribution of funding across the system.

A small adjustment—there is nothing small about what was foisted on principals. The *Canberra Times* obtained figures setting out exactly what these changes would mean for individual schools. Principals were alarmed. Parents were alarmed. Staff were alarmed. The union was alarmed. The minister later suggested principals should not have been surprised by these changes, and yet they were.

We saw reports of shock and disbelief throughout the education community. Even the director-general herself acknowledged the scale of the cuts when she said, "The really important thing, where there's larger decreases, is we do recognise that this is a transition we need to support schools through." At the very least, the director-general recognised that some schools were facing substantial reductions. That is more than we have heard from the minister.

Let's look at the reality of this so-called small adjustment. At least 58 public schools were facing a cut to their budgets in 2027 than the actual funding they received in 2026. Some of the schools facing the largest reductions are schools serving communities with significant needs. Caroline Chisholm School was projected to lose around $1.5 million, Kingsford Smith School almost $3.5 million, Latham Primary School more than $1.6 million, Majura Primary School approximately $2.2 million and Throsby School more than $1 million. Theodore Primary School faced an eight per cent reduction, equivalent to around $300,000, and the list goes on.

How can the minister repeatedly claim that these cuts are designed to better support students with the highest need when some of the largest cuts are being felt by schools serving exactly those student communities? Perhaps the most shocking example was what was revealed about ACT specialist schools. Malkara, Black Mountain, Woden and Cranleigh were collectively facing reductions of almost $10 million. Let's think about that. The schools that educate and support students with some of the most complex and intensive needs in our education system were presented with budgets showing a cut of almost $10 million between them. It is little wonder school communities reacted with

concern.

Angela Burroughs from the Australian Education Union warned that schools could be forced to cut entire programs, whether that be performing arts, languages or other opportunities that enrich student learning. She also highlighted the extraordinarily short timeframe principals were being given to absorb and implement these changes, and she raised concerns on what these budget cuts would mean. She said:

> They know that staff are being moved on, and principals are in this dreadful position of having to make cuts, and there's just no clarity or transparency.

Ms Burroughs went on to say:

> We just want honesty and transparency, and the minister to take accountability in explaining to the community what the impact of these cuts will be on school support.

That gets to the heart of the problem. The government is attempting to make significant changes to school funding without consultation with the very principals that have to implement these cuts, importantly, before completing the work necessary to justify those changes.

The director-general herself has said that a holistic review of the student resource allocation model is underway, yet before that review is completed, before the evidence has been finalised and before the sector knows what the future model looks like, schools have already been told to cut their budgets and to find savings. Parents and stakeholders have consistently argued that the review should come first. Veronica Elliott from ACT Parents summed it up well when she said, quote:

> We'd like to see a staged approach to the changes … rather than implementing a budget decision that requires schools to do the work, where the system doesn't have the supports available or the guidance already available for them to follow.

She went on to say:

> I'm concerned that we're asking schools to make changes to how they operate next year without having any formalised guidance on what we're asking them to do.

That concern has been echoed across the education sector. Ms Burroughs put it bluntly:

> The resourcing review has not yet delivered a settled operating model for ACT public schools.

Until it does principals are effectively being asked to manage an unfinished reform process.

The minister repeatedly points to the Public School System Resourcing Review to justify these decisions, but she rarely acknowledges another key recommendation and finding from that review: transparency. The review called for greater transparency in how school budgets are calculated, yet transparency has been sorely lacking throughout this process.

In successive question times the minister refused, failed and struggled to explain how specialist schools will be protected from these cuts despite numerous questions calling on her to explain where the shortfall of almost $3 million of funding cuts to our specialist schools will come from. The minister has dithered and wilfully been opaque with her attempt at deflecting from what all principals, teachers, parents, students and the broader community can see: that she cannot pretend there are no cuts and is just continuing to deny and hoping that everyone just swallows it all.

The minister has repeatedly referred to an exceptions pool while simultaneously admitting that the criteria for accessing that pool have not even been finalised. She has then attempted to say that the exceptions pool is not the only source to make up the shortfall but then refuses to explain if there are other sources to make up the shortfall and if so, where it is coming from. Principals do not know how this exceptions pool will operate. School communities do not know how it will operate. Parents do not know how it will operate. Confusion remains high. Anxiety remains high. Distress remains high. That is no way to manage major reform. It is no way to treat school leaders, and it is no way to treat Canberra families.

The ACT Public School System Resourcing Review also found that schools often feel decisions are imposed on them by the directorate without sufficient consideration of their impact. This seems to be exactly what this government has done. We have heard that principals were "briefed", not consulted, on the budget cuts, and we have heard that principals felt blindsided by the decision to cut their budgets—exactly what the resourcing review raised as an issue: transparency.

We know the government knew what they were doing was going to cause more stress, more pressure and more anxiety on our principals. It was revealed that the Education Directorate actually planned for this very outcome. It developed a multihazard risk assessment document and created a crisis management team to deal with the fallout from changes to public school budgets in 2027. Information obtained by the *Canberra Times* detailed how the risk assessment shows there was a medium risk of occupational violence as a result of the budget cuts. Let me repeat that: the minister's own directorate undertook a risk assessment which revealed a medium risk of occupational violence as a result of the budget cuts. It said principals may suffer stress, anxiety and conflicts as they communicate the impact of budget cuts, such as changes to staffing, to their communities. Most worryingly, the directorate's own document states:

> Where student supports are changed or decreased, this could lead to escalated student behaviour resulting in increased incidence of occupational violence.

As much as the minister tries to duck, weave, and dodge accountability, as much as the minister tries to shift the blame to everyone else, including the opposition, this is purely a mess of her and her directorate's own making. We are not making up concerns we are hearing on the ground. They are coming from the very people at the coalface, the very people responsible for delivering public education every day.

As Ms Burroughs called on the minister to do:

> … come clean with the public about budget cuts to ACT public schools, to stop

> the political trickery of arguing that there's no cut to education budgets because the school communities know otherwise.

She said school communities know the reality because they are already seeing staff moved on and difficult decisions being made. A staff member from an ACT primary school put it even more starkly: "We have a lot of high-needs children. I don't think that has been looked at," and, "It's absolutely disgusting that this has been kept such a secret."

The Australian Education Union Vice-President and college principal Simon Vaughan warned, "There is a quantum of savings I will have to find." He acknowledged the obvious consequence when he said, "If we have to, for example, cut staff, that may cut programs."

Parents are worried too. ACT Parents has reported that parents and citizens associations are increasingly feeling pressure to fill gaps in funding for core school programs—something fundraising was never intended to do. As ACT Parents asked:

> How can we expect principals to make these decisions when they have to choose from a really difficult list of options, such as reducing what might be considered a core public education offering of music or art, having bigger class sizes, or providing less inclusion support?

This is ultimately what this motion is about, not spreadsheets, not formulas, not bureaucratic processes, not some public relations doublespeak or political trickery; it is about whether school communities are being given clarity, transparency and confidence about the future. It is about whether our teachers, who are entrusted to deliver a world-class education to our children, including some of our most vulnerable children, are being supported to do so.

The government called these changes a small adjustment, but for principals balancing their budgets, for teachers worried about programs, for parents concerned about support services and for the students who rely on those services every day there is nothing small about it. The government owes school communities honesty, transparency and a clear explanation of how these decisions are being made, because right now these communities are being asked to bear the consequence of a reform process that even the government itself has not yet finished designing.

They need to do better. They need to learn from this debacle and bring principals to the table, because principals are the people responsible for making these difficult decisions on the ground. School leaders deserve certainty. They deserve transparency. They deserve to know that major changes to the way their schools are funded will not be sprung upon them without warning and without proper consultation. They deserve confidence about a process of this magnitude and that it will be undertaken openly, collaboratively and with the respect of their expertise.

Let us learn from what has occurred. Let us commit to a funding and budget process that is transparent, consultative and evidence based. Let us ensure that principals are partners in reform, not recipients of decisions that have been thrust upon them after. Let us give our school leaders the certainty that they will never again be blindsided by changes of this scale. This is what my motion seeks to achieve, and I call on every

member in this chamber to support it. I commend my motion to the Assembly.

MISS NUTTALL (Brindabella) (3.26): I move the following amendment circulated in my name, to Ms Lee's motion.

> Miss Nuttall moved the following amendment: After all text in paragraph (1)(k), insert:
> "(l) the ACT Public School Resourcing Review Final Report said, "Given the significant number of high schools and colleges over budget, there is not scope to rebalance within the existing funding envelope. Instead, this requires medium-term consideration within the national context;".

I rise to speak in support of Ms Lee's motion, and I thank her and her team for bringing it before the Assembly today. This motion seeks to clarify the current budget situation which has brought extreme confusion to the community and, honestly, at times also to many of us in this place. I know we will all be grateful if this debate brings clarity for the community where possible, and serves as an opportunity for us to constructively bring the community the answers and system improvements that they deserve, so that the government's handling of school budgets does not cause the community further distress, anxiety and confusion.

I especially call for clarity and transparency in the context of the government's new standard lines on school budgets, which emerged after the fallout of the cuts; that this process is ongoing and that school budgets are still being finalised.

I am not suggesting that this is not the case. However, there are real questions as to how much the government is actually going to adjust school budgets in response to the feedback of principals and community—and how much of this is a media-friendly line. It is also not something that helps principals plan for their staffing next year.

My doubt around this largely stems from how this budget process has been handled and the ongoing confusion around the collective funding pool, which is also referred to as the school budgets exceptions process. Since announcing changes to school budgets for next year, the government has pointed to the collective funding pool of roughly $8 million as evidence that this process is ongoing and that there is wiggle room for cases where cuts are found to be unviable. But what the government has repeatedly failed to do is actually clarify what constitutes a viable cut; what criteria schools are being judged against when seeking to access additional funds to what was in the budget handed down to them.

It is not for lack of asking and trying on our part. We have asked the government whether reduced subject offerings or an inability to fully staff a classroom are grounds for a cut to not go ahead. We did not get a clear answer. We asked them whether a reduction in language offerings and pathways would prevent a cut. And, you guessed it, we got no clear answer.

Whether the directorate themselves even had a red line drawn, going into this budget process, is still unclear. In saying that, I think it has got to the point where their inability to provide a clear answer says something in and of itself. The directorate does not appear to have a clear red line—or at least one they were willing to communicate publicly—as to what constitutes a viable cut for a school's budget, when they started

this process.

It remains unclear what data informed these budget cuts for so many of our schools. And the data we have seen from the *Canberra Times* on which schools have been hit the hardest by the cuts makes it pretty clear that the government's new "needs-based funding model" has not shaped up to its name in practice.

When schools hit the hardest include some of the least socio-educationally advantaged—when we looked through the ICSEA statistics—and include schools with roofs leaking, with inadequate cooling, and schools considered some of the smallest in their network, then reductions in their funding have not been for lack of need.

Last week, we asked the minister to provide an update on the criteria for schools to access the collective funding pool, to which she indicated it would be finalised by the end of that week. I invite the minister, if she has the time and the information available to her, to please provide an update on this. In the meantime, I would like to speak to this order of events.

I think it says a lot about how poorly things have been handled that, regarding the exceptions process which the directorate signposted as their contingency plan to assist schools with their budget cuts: (1) there was only a total funding bucket of $8 million, where it looks like there have been approximately $47 million worth of proposed cuts to provisional individual school budgets; (2) there was no established criteria for how to access this funding; and (3) despite weeks of concern and repeated questions from across the Assembly, clarity on this criteria has still not been provided, to this day.

If this is no longer the case, again, I would be glad to hear an update on this from the minister, because what we have gotten to date has not been the clarity our communities deserve.

The impacts of these cuts are real and something we must consider in this debate. And again, while I know the government has said that the process is ongoing, we have heard principals announce that there are certain resources which they will have to get rid of, should they not receive access to additional funds.

Mount Rogers Primary announced they will have to cut 27 of their 30 LSAs. This is horrifying, especially when you consider who these school assistants are in classrooms to help. They support students with complex needs, students with disability, students who the schools resourcing review clearly found are not being adequately supported in our public schools—let alone after said school has to operate with nearly $1 million less in its budget, as is the case for Mount Rogers. Incredibly importantly, LSAs are also people losing their jobs.

The review also made clear that schools have become increasingly reliant on LSAs as their primary intervention for supporting these students. Yet rather than addressing the underlying pressures driving that reliance, schools are being asked to absorb funding reductions that may directly reduce LSA numbers.

We have heard from parents of schools facing significant cuts. We have heard of instances of violence within schools which required other children having to step in.

Now, LSAs are the people qualified to step in, and if you start cutting their jobs, you undermine the safety of both staff and students. Schools should not need to rely on LSAs but in our current public school system, they are one of the only ways students can be safe and teachers can properly teach.

Our students need a better system. Our educators need a better system. Yet the government has decreased individual schools' funding instead, directly resulting in the cut of LSAs in schools which rely so heavily on them.

It is the ACT Greens' hope that in establishing clear budget development protocols, in consultation with principals and key stakeholders, that we have a school budget system that considers, most centrally, what resourcing means for student and staff experience in our schools. Not as an afterthought, not as a collective funding pool or exceptions process, but at the start, in the middle and at the end of all decision making.

Reform of our public-school system's resourcing cannot simply mean reducing individual school budgets and expecting schools to apply for additional funding later.

Parents from ACT public schools stressed deep concern over the cuts their children's schools are facing. As a parent in Latham stated:

> I expect that when I send my children to school each day, they will be safe, supported and able to learn in an environment that meets basic safety, educational and environmental standards. Increasingly, that confidence is being whittled away.

When the public school community has needed clarity the most, the government has been unclear—causing confusion, stress and anxiety for school leaders, staff, families and students. Communities should not need to wait for an article in the *Canberra Times* to tell them if their school's funding is being cut. We in this room have not even had clear communication, as at the briefing paper that we received in August which stated that 18 schools would have a greater than 5 per cent reduction. That goes against what was reported in the *Canberra Times*. The government needs to take accountability for this mismanagement and this discrepancy, and acknowledge the distress they have caused.

Similarly, the government cannot cut public schools' funding to focus on need when non-government schools are not facing the same issues. This is not about politics; it is about equity. A parent at Theodore primary sent my office the following question and asked me to put it to the government directly: Does the government consider it appropriate to fund infrastructure at non-government schools while a local public school is being asked to reduce its operating budget?

I think it is a good question to ask. The directorate has repeatedly referenced the resourcing review to justify these school budget cuts. Yet although the minister has referred to the recommendations to justify reallocation, the findings explicitly state "there is not scope to rebalance within the existing funding envelope".

This brings me to our amendment that we put forward to Ms Lee's motion, which inserts an additional note to include this fact. It reads:

> The ACT Public School Resourcing Review final report said, "Given the significant number of high schools and colleges over budget, there is not scope to rebalance within the existing funding envelope. Instead, this requires medium-term consideration within the national context."

We want to add this note because we think it is a critical piece of evidence that must be considered when we think about how this process has gone so wrong. Review of the current differential base funding model under the Schooling Resourcing Standard, and potentially the Student Resource Allocation between primary and secondary school students, was a recommendation of the resourcing review and served to reform the school funding model to be increasingly based on need. It reflected that the inequity in our current system goes right down to the SRA and SRS funding model and that a shift towards more needs-based funding in our system to rebalance funding across schools was not something we could do in the following year's school budgets with a limited bucket of money. It required "medium-term consideration within the national context".

I do want to recognise that the government has committed to reviewing the SRA model and that it set aside funds in this year's budget for the directorate to complete that work. This is positive, albeit dampened by the fact that we are still awaiting an implementation plan for the "one system" reforms. I appreciate that Ms Lee's motion today has sought to compel a timeline for the SRA review and transparency for how it is progressing. I think we need it.

I also want to thank the minister and her team for engaging with me and my office on this motion. I believe that the minister has taken some responsibility in question times and in public communications for how this budget process was not handled well.

However, the reason we support Ms Lee's motion in its original form is because fallout remains and there is still a lot of clarity needed for the community. Ultimately, this debate feels like a culmination of collective work since the changes to school budgets were announced about a month ago, for 2027; alongside work from the fierce advocacy of parents and carers who have spoken out against cuts to their local public schools; and from others who have stood in solidarity and know the value of our public education system.

That advocacy has also come from teachers, from LSAs, school staff and, of course, principals, who have been under extreme stress since these budgets were handed down. I want to directly thank them for their incredible responsibility and strength that they have shown, supporting their staff, students and community while trying to balance their books and absorb cuts which in some cases are just absolutely inconceivable. I am in awe of their leadership.

We have heard from students too, who often get left out of these conversations about the decisions that affect them. It is them whom I ultimately want us to think about today. It is their education, it is their lives that are impacted at the end of the day, and we owe it to them to do better and work with the people who know and care for them, to do so.

To everyone who has written to us, spoken to us at stalls and at education union rallies, thank you so much. The community outcry against how the 2027 school budgets have been handled, and at the budgets themselves is loud and clear. The ACT Greens have

heard it, and we will continue to stand up and call for system change to create fair processes for school budgets—because things never should have gone this way. Communities deserve answers. Principals deserve clarity. School staff deserve respect. And students deserve better than a funding process that has created weeks of anxiety and confusion about the future of their schools.

We should not have a school funding model based on what schools can afford to lose, but based on what students need to succeed. I commend the motion and the Greens' amendment along with it.

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) (3.39): I will start by thanking Ms Lee for bringing this motion to the Assembly today. The government will not be opposing this motion, largely because, while we would take issue with some of the notes, they are mostly factual and the "calls on" are asking us to do things that we are already doing and report back in a way that is absolutely possible. But I do want to respond to some of the things that have been said already in the debate today, and I think this will help to maybe clarify why we are in the situation we are in.

The first thing I have to say is to repeat what I have been saying almost every day for the last two weeks, and that is that not only will specialist schools not be receiving a reduction in funding but also specialist school principals were specifically advised from day one that the Education Directorate understood that the student resource allocation model does not reflect the needs of specialist schools—indeed, that was also a finding of the Public School System Resourcing Review—that they would not lose funding and that the student resource allocation model would not be the model that was used to determine specialist school funding allocation. Despite being told this multiple times, Ms Lee continues to take the funding amounts that were reported in the *Canberra Times* as some kind of gospel and then continues to spread misinformation and confusion about specialist school funding. I am pleased that—

Ms Lee: Point of order, Mr Assistant Speaker.

MR ASSISTANT SPEAKER: Please take a seat, Minister. Point of order, Ms Lee?

Ms Lee: The minister has been asked twice now by the Speaker—

MS STEPHEN-SMITH: Would you mind stopping the clock, please?

MR ASSISTANT SPEAKER: Yes; stop the clock.

Ms Lee: But, in saying that, accusing me of spreading misinformation is unparliamentary, and I ask you to ask her to withdraw.

MS STEPHEN-SMITH: I think it was identified that it was not, but anyway.

Mr Cocks: On the point of order, Mr Assistant Speaker, I would reflect that the Speaker earlier in the week reflected that accusations of misinformation are not necessarily unparliamentary if it is misinformation in the community.

MS STEPHEN-SMITH: No; I was talking about the community.

Mr Cocks: However, I believe what the minister just said was in in relation to Ms Lee's speech just now in the chamber, which would, in fact, fall within what the Speaker suggested would be unparliamentary.

MS STEPHEN-SMITH: I can assure Mr Cocks that I was talking about Ms Lee's comments in the community.

MR ASSISTANT SPEAKER: I will have to refer the *Hansard* to Mr Speaker and let him get back to you all.

MS STEPHEN-SMITH: Thank you, Mr Assistant Speaker. One other comment that Ms Lee has repeatedly made is to quote the words "small adjustment" as if those words were applied by the directorate to every decision made in relation to 2027 school budgets. In fact, my understanding is that that particular term was related specifically to the reduction of 0.1 to the stages of school weighting applied to college student resource allocation budgets. I do not believe that at any time the Education Directorate has used the term "small adjustment" in relation to the 2027 budget more broadly.

Miss Nuttall talked about Mount Rogers, and I believe that she said Mount Rogers announced—"announced"—that it would be having to let go 27 out of 30 LSAs. That is not true. Someone unnamed told the *Canberra Times* that they had heard this. The *Canberra Times* published this information as if it was fact and it has been used in debate ever since. I would like to read an email that the principal of Mount Rogers sent to Mount Rogers families and communities:

> Dear Mount Rogers families and community,
>
> I am aware that recent media reporting regarding school budgets and staffing has raised some questions and concerns within our community. I wanted to take the opportunity to acknowledge this directly and provide some clarity about what this means for Mount Rogers. The information that has been reported in the media regarding Mount Rogers is factually incorrect and does not reflect our current staffing arrangements or decisions being considered for 2027. For example, reports of a reduction of 27 learning support assistants at Mount Rogers is not correct.
>
> Like schools across the ACT public education system, Mount Rogers is working through budget and staffing planning for 2027. This includes considering how our staffing aligns with our available resources, projected enrolments, and—most importantly—the needs of our students. This work is still underway. Our staffing model for 2027 has not been finalised, and figures currently being reported publicly should not be interpreted as confirmed staffing decisions or a final picture of what Mount Rogers will look like next year.
>
> I also recognise that uncertainty around staffing can understandably create concern, particularly for our staff and families. Any changes that we make will be worked through carefully, with a strong focus on maintaining high-quality teaching, learning and support for our students.

> There is a great deal happening at Mount Rogers as we plan for 2027 and beyond, and I remain very positive about the direction of our school. Our focus continues to be on creating a stable, consistent and high-quality learning environment for every student. As our planning progresses and decisions are confirmed, we will continue to communicate relevant information directly with our staff and community.
>
> While it will not always be appropriate or possible to communicate every detail of internal staffing and budget processes, I will aim to communicate openly where decisions or changes are likely to have a direct impact on our students, families, or the operation of our school. In the meantime, I would encourage families not to regard figures or proposed staffing arrangements reported in the media as final decisions for our school.

The principal goes on to say that they would be happy to meet individually with staff. I would encourage everyone in this place to take the advice of the Mount Rogers principal and not regard figures or proposed staffing arrangements reported in the media as final decisions for any school in the ACT. I would repeat, as I have many, many times in this place, that school budgets for 2027 have not been finalised.

In saying that, I recognise, as I have repeatedly, the distress and anxiety caused by this process, and I recognise, as the Education Directorate has, that this process could have been managed better. This is the first time that we have done school budgeting in this way, and we understand that lessons will be learnt. Indeed, the process has changed as we have gone through it on the basis of the feedback from principals and school communities. I would say in that regard that, as Minister for Education, I have regularly and publicly taken responsibility for the 2027 school budget process. Indeed, there was an op-ed of mine published in *Region Media* on, I believe, 12 September that covered this school funding budget issue for 2027 and stated:

> For others—

for other schools, that is—

> the fairer funding approach means their student resource allocation funding will be reduced. Each of these schools has its own story, with different pressures and different opportunities to navigate while adjusting to the new model. Some will find it harder than others. That is why the Education Directorate has been working with each school on how they can deliver for their students, staff and community within their new funding allocation. Built into this process is a consideration of whether more support is needed and transitional funding is required to help them adjust.
>
> But I want to be clear—no principal, no business manager, and no school will be left to work this out on their own. We remain committed to ensuring every public school is a great school, where teaching is evidence-based and our students are safe, valued and respected for who they are.
>
> If we work together, as one system, we can grasp the opportunities to deliver higher-quality teaching and learning, reduce teacher workloads and deliver excellent student outcomes more efficiently.

I stand by that. It reflects the fact that the 2026-27 ACT budget allocated $1.2 billion to

the ACT public school system, representing a 7.3 per cent increase on the 2025-26 budget, with fewer students—recognising the absolutely important and critical role that public schools play in our community. Every ACT public school is funded above the National Schooling Resource Standard. The ACT is the only jurisdiction in Australia where this is the case. But we are working to ensure greater equity and fairness in the way we distribute resources across the system to support all students.

I think the debate today has really got to the nub of the matter, In fact Miss Nuttall's amendment, which we are not going to oppose, really highlights the confusion here. I get the impression that sometimes members in this place think that the budget setting process for 2027 reflected a review of the student resource allocation process, because the quote that Miss Nuttall has included relates specifically to and is a preamble to recommendation 22 of the School Resourcing Review:

> The finding is that there are now significant additional cost pressures associated with the early years of schooling which are not adequately accounted for in the base funding model. These impact early childhood, primary and combined schools P to 10 for the primary allocation component. At present, primary students are allocated only 79.6 per cent of the base funding of secondary students in 2026.

The commentary goes on to say:

> This points to the need to reconsider the differential based funding allocations for primary students compared to secondary. However, given the significant number of high schools and colleges over budget, there is not scope to rebalance within the existing funding envelope. This requires medium-term consideration. The recommendation is: given the increasing costs associated with early childhood and primary schools, consideration must be given to reviewing the current differential based funding model under the student resource standard and potentially the student resource allocation between primary and secondary school students.

But this is not what we are doing for the 2027 budget. So, yes, that finding is absolutely relevant when it comes to reviewing the student resource allocation. But the recommendation we are responding to is recommendation 5:

> School staffing currently above the Student Resource Allocation (SRA) should be redeployed to schools based on identified needs and equity principles, or to support system-wide strategic priorities. In the short- to medium-term, the overallocation should be corrected so that staffing levels are consistent with funding available for school staff within each school and across the system under the SRA.

That is, under the existing student resource allocation. It goes on to say:

> A senior executive within the human resources area should have responsibility for allocation and redistribution of staff.

We did not do that. The Education Directorate is working with schools to address recommendation 5, the short-term recommendation, that over-allocation and under-allocation under the existing student resourcing allocation needed to be addressed in the short term to provide equity of funding across our schools. It is not fair that schools who have had principals who have been able to secure additional funding who have overspent their budgets and then have never been asked to live within their

budgets are benefited at the expense of those schools that have not had that advantage—that those historic imbalances of funding are perpetuated. That is not fair on the schools that have missed out through those differential allocations in the past.

In the time I have left to me, I want to be clear about what is happening this term. In week one, there was a budget planning tool that was received by schools and completed and provided back to the Education Directorate. Weeks two to five are the school budget assessment framework implementation. All school profiles are checked against a consistent framework to assess proposed school budgets and workforce profiles. The assessment considers the whole picture, including each school's budget and financial position; workforce; timetabling and use of resources; school operation and curriculum needs; student support needs, including support for students with disability; and work health and safety risks. Specialist reviewers and subject matter experts from within the Education Support Office have provided advice and assessed risks relevant to each school submission.

An assessment and moderation panel is now in the process of reviewing feedback from all schools to determine the impacts of any changes to school budgets. The panel is working through each school individually based on data, risk assessments and information provided from schools and support teams. As the Education Directorate has worked with schools, it has identified school-specific circumstances that have required more detailed analysis and risk mitigations. There is a work health and safety staff consultation underway in weeks three and four. Consultation is taking place now, so that staff feedback can inform assessment before arrangements are confirmed. Staff feedback on a school's risk assessment will inform the broader assessment for its proposed 2027 arrangements. Final budgets will be determined in week five. Again, at present, no ACT public school has had its budget finalised for 2027 and no final decisions have been made about staffing profiles or individual employees. Final 2027 budgets will be adjusted when actual February 2027 enrolments are known. Thank you to those doing this hard work.

MR EMERSON (Kurrajong) (3.55): I thank Ms Lee for bringing this motion forward today, and I also thank Miss Nuttall for her amendment, both of which I will be supporting. This is an important matter, of course, and one that has caused real confusion and real anger across our community. I also want to acknowledge that the minister is making difficult decisions when it comes to the resourcing of our public education system. These changes do not come from nowhere, either; they stem from a review, as she has remarked, that this Assembly requested. Due to that, part of me understands the minister's frustration and feels as though this place will not get behind difficult decisions like this.

I support a public education system that is fair and equitable. It is abundantly clear that the devolved model of managing our schools has not delivered that—far from it. Now, it is a crisis point. Every student in Canberra deserves the same chance at a great education, and change is needed to provide that. My concern is with how we get from here to there.

First, on the timing: we are hearing loud and clear that schools and families have not been given the time or the clarity they need to adjust or prepare for what are pretty daunting changes for many schools. The principals, as Ms Lee remarked, have been

told about these changes rather than really brought along on the journey as part of them, as Miss Nuttall spoke to.

Second, on the messaging: as Ms Lee points out in the motion, the minister has said that there will be no cuts, at least not to the overall education budget, and we have heard repeatedly that school budgets have not been finalised, but these assurances mean little to parents who have heard of, in some cases, millions of dollars potentially being cut from their child's school. These parents are genuinely worried about their children's education and their future. Everyone accepts that hard decisions have to be made but making them without a plan for how that will land, and assuming this information will not be leaked, leading to serious anxiety across our community given what it could mean to some of our schools, I think does show a lack of foresight. Making them in a way that creates such significant uncertainty is deeply damaging for confidence in a public education system which has already seen declining enrolments.

How the information and messaging around this have been managed or mismanaged—to the motion—has real consequences. I have heard from one parent at a primary school, whose proposed budget suggests significant cuts, that 10 families they know—these are just among the families they know—have already made the decision to move their children into the private system next year. For them, this is the last straw. They are already seeing split, collapsed classes. They are already frustrated at the poor quality of their school's infrastructure. They already do not have any language classes at their school. And for them, they have had enough. For them, it does not matter that these are proposed budgets and they are not final. They will not be around to see budgets finalised. Their decision has been made.

Finally, I am frustrated at the lack of engagement across the Assembly on making difficult decisions before they are made. This is a pattern that keeps emerging. We have seen it with libraries, outpatient wait lists, and school budgets. You cannot expect us to support a decision made without our knowledge when our community is crying out for us to oppose it. It is harder still when we have not been given an explanation ahead of time of why it had to happen this way. I only speak for myself. I do not know if the information has been provided to others. But whether we want to call it mismanagement, bad planning, a comms failure, poor information control or a lack of foresight, the result is the same. I think the government does need to take responsibility for that today.

This for me is not a criticism of the directorate or public servants. Officials are working hard on this, and I do not want to devalue that; I acknowledge that. There is just clearly a gap here: a gap between the decision being made and whether or not our community and this Assembly are actually prepared for it. There is a gap between what families have heard, what they have been told and what they are actually seeing on the ground at their schools. That is where trust is lost, and the government does need to step up.

I also have concerns about the potential downstream consequences of these changes. The Student Resource Allocation works on a per student basis. Fewer students mean less funding. In principle, of course, that makes sense, but in practice, it does risk creating a vicious cycle. Parents pull their children out because of under-resourcing, and we have seen this in some of the schools in my electorate. So the school's funding falls because of that. Other parents see a school with fewer resources, and they enrol

their kids into private schools instead, and it repeats again and again until our public schools are stripped bare. That is the risk I think we are running here.

At the end of question time yesterday, the Chief Minister acknowledged the reality of minority government, although in relation to a very different matter. He said that ACT Labor:

> … operates in a parliament where it does not hold a majority in its own right. Therefore, every piece of legislation and every major reform is subject to debate and scrutiny by other parties, by independents, both inside and outside of executive government.

This is true, so please engage with us earlier. Work with us. If every major reform is going to be scrutinised and debated, and the Chief Minister is right about that, then perhaps it makes sense to bring people in at the start, not leave them to react at the end.

Governments need to make their own decisions. I accept that. I am not asking to be involved in every one of them. But when you are making major changes like cutting library opening hours, changing school funding like this, or taking people off medical waiting lists, you cannot expect us in the Assembly not to react. You know the community is going to react.

Most of us support, I think, the principles behind these policies, but we are being asked to defend them while our communities are alarmed, and none of us have been given the information to understand the justification for the changes ahead of time or the longer-term vision for how to make them work for Canberrans.

We are here to fight for what is best for our electorates, so please bring us in on how these decisions are made and explain so that the message our communities hear is more accurate, consistent and reassuring, including when difficult decisions are being made—although, I understand that that can require trust as well.

Mr Speaker, I appreciate the challenging position the minister is in here. We need to move from an inequitable system to an equitable one, which means redistribution and redistribution at a time when many schools already suffer from under-resourcing. But I am also hearing every single week from parents who are deeply distressed at what they are hearing about what is happening to school budgets—what they are seeing on the ground. They deserve more clarity and better communication, and our public schools deserve sufficient investment across the board to, per the minister's vision, make every local public school an excellent first choice for every family. The ACT rightly prides itself on our public education system, and we cannot afford for our community to lose faith in it.

MS CARRICK (Murrumbidgee) (4.02): The school resource allocation review has made a clear case for reform if we are to better support student and improve outcomes across our public education system. This reform, however, cannot come at the expense of transparency, certainty and trust.

I have been hearing from the community about the funding changes. Many school communities have been left confused about what the changes mean for funding,

staffing, programs and support services. In some cases, they have struggled to get clear answers.

Principals should not be put in the position of having to explain budget impacts to their communities without having the information they need. They should be genuine partners in the process. That is why it is entirely reasonable to ask the minister to establish clear budget development protocols, with defined timelines and meaningful consultation, so that school leaders have a real voice in decisions that affect their schools. This is particularly important at a time when resources are already stretched, teachers are campaigning for better conditions and schools are dealing with increasing student complexity. The uncertainty about the budget adds unnecessary pressure to this already difficult situation.

I am also concerned that some families are losing confidence in the public education system because they cannot get clear information about what these changes will mean for their local school. That is an unacceptable outcome. Strong public schools depend on strong community confidence. While I accept that not every answer can be provided before decisions are finalised, there is no excuse for failing to communicate clearly and consult meaningfully to prepare school leaders to engage with their communities.

The revision of the student resource allocation model is one of the most significant pieces of education reform currently underway. The Assembly, school leaders, staff and parents deserve regular updates on its progress, its timeline and the principles that will guide future funding decisions.

Changes may well be necessary, but accountability, consultation and transparency are essential. For these reasons, I will be supporting the motion and the Greens amendment. It sends a clear message that as the government reforms school funding, it must bring principals, teachers and school communities along with it.

MR PARTON (Brindabella—Leader of the Opposition) (4.05): Ms Stephen-Smith characterised it as scaremongering. We characterise it as standing up for parents and students, and standing up for teachers and standing up for school communities. School communities are so happy that Ms Lee is here because they know that she is a dogged, stubborn, loud fighter for fairness and a better deal for the people in those communities.

The minister continues to assert that budgets have not been finalised, and she would be right. But I think what is clear is that, left to her own devices, the minister would be making the sorts of cuts that have been flagged in recent weeks. Ms Lee, I am so glad you are here to raise these issues in the way that you have and to put the government on notice that these cuts will not be tolerated and that Canberra families will not pay the price for this government's financial mismanagement, which is at such a scale that it compromises so much that should be a priority for government.

I want to share some of the correspondence that I have had from people down in the southern suburbs regarding these cuts. I am not going to mention any names. This person says:

> I saw your Facebook post on school funding cuts. I want to remain anonymous. I am not sure how much is allowed to be shared. My husband is on the P&C at our

> primary school, and they have been told the funding cut is $800,000. We already do not have a school librarian and regularly have split classes because there are not enough relief teachers or casuals. We are horrified at what this will mean for the school going forward. Please keep pushing.

Someone from Theodore—I know they are in Theodore because they start the email with, "I live in Theodore."

> I live in Theodore. I have three children who attend or will attend Theodore primary. I am writing to express my concern about the reported reduction of approximately $300,000 or around eight per cent in the school's 2027 budget. Based on recent enrolment figures, this reduction equates to roughly $1,300 per student.
>
> But to me this is about more than numbers on a spreadsheet. It is about the quality of education and opportunities my children receive at their local school. I worry that cuts of this size could affect staffing, learning support and educational programs, reducing the opportunities available to my children and other Theodore students.
>
> What I struggle to understand is how a reduction of this magnitude aligns with the government's commitments to needs-based and equitable funding? The public reporting suggests that some schools and more advantaged communities may receive funding increases over the same period. I would appreciate a clear explanation of how these outcomes fit with the government's own objectives.
>
> As a parent, I want my children to attend a well-supported, local public school. As a resident of Theodore, I want confidence that decisions affecting local students are being properly scrutinised and that my elected representatives are actively advocating for the children and families that they were elected to serve.

This is known by some in the chamber as scaremongering, but that is what this resident of Theodore suggested. Shannon writes:

> Thank you for keeping this travesty in the public conversation. This is the height of mismanagement by the ACT government. Not one public school in the territory should have to face the prospect of budget cuts. No matter how you slice it, vulnerable students are going to be the worst affected, and if they lose their supports, their peers and teachers are directly affected, not to mention the learning opportunities, the specialist classes, that are threatened. These cuts simply have to come from elsewhere in the territory's budget. Leave education alone.

I think that there is enough genuine angst, and angst which is extremely warranted in the community, to absolutely support this Assembly passing this motion today, and I am pleased that we are talking about it.

MR WERNER-GIBBINGS (Brindabella) (4.09): I did have a much too long speech critiquing this motion's criticism of the government for actively reviewing how resources can be directed more effectively towards ACT public students with the greatest need. Essentially, the members opposite support educational equity for all, in theory if not in practice, provided nobody's allocation ever changes. I have cut all of that bit. The minister spoke too well and lucidly. Instead I am going to add some context to this motion's gratuitous but characteristic craving to ascribe blame and demand

reparation.

I am very disappointed with its description of the ACT government school system, in part (1)(j), as being at breaking point. I am not an area expert on as many issues as I would like to be. I do a lot of listening to improve my understanding of issues but really to maintain my own sense of legitimacy. If and when I would come out with grandstanding claims about the viability of an institution, a sector, a community, a key element of the social contract, the main seam in the fabric of Australia's framed vision of itself as an egalitarian society, and when the aim of those claims is to pour petrol on the institution and watch it burn, I really want to be sure I know what I am talking about, or at least I want to be able to rely on my lived experience to ballast my rhetoric with some authenticity.

On this topic, even if I do not understand it perfectly, I live it proudly and with more personal investment than anyone else in this chamber. The health, success and prospects of ACT public schools directly affect me. I made a choice. It was an easy choice, and I am proud of it. I am the only member of this Assembly with a child in each tier of the ACT public school system. Each of those schools, based on current modelling, is facing a negative adjustment. None of those schools is happy about that prospect if it manifests. None of them—primary school, high school, including one Ms Lee helpfully mentioned, and college—are at breaking point.

I had a very interesting conversation with the fabulous P & C committee at one of the schools last week. They are concerned—fair enough. They are doing some thinking, which is great. A couple of members asked about the possibility of a glide slope if the funding reallocation was confirmed. They are looking forward to more information and clarity about how these provisional new funding amounts were determined. Essentially, they want the government to show its working, how the student resource allocation model crunches numbers on equity and need—fair enough, yet we come back to the term "breaking point". None of them mentioned that the school was at breaking point. When I read it in the motion, immediately I thought, "Breaking point compared to what?" It cannot be other Australian jurisdictions.

ACT's 26-27 budget, inclusive of new and continuing initiatives, allocates over $1.2 billion in recurrent funding to the public school system. That is an increase of 7.32 per cent on the 2025-26 estimated outcome. Every ACT public school is funded above the schooling resourcing standard. The ACT is the only jurisdiction in Australia where every public school is funded above that standard. Over 98 per cent of Australian public schools are not funded to 100 per cent of the SRS. The 1.3 per cent that are are all and only ACT public schools. The commonwealth government will contribute 22.5 per cent of the SRS in 2026. The ACT government contributes more than its minimum required level of 80 per cent. In 2024 ACT government funding to public schools was 92.2 per cent of the SRS.

For comparison, see Queensland—a schooling system whose commitment to school air conditioners was lauded in the Assembly earlier this year. When you consider the four per cent in non-school costs states can claim as part of their SRS share, Queensland contributed 66.5 per cent of the full SRS in 2024. Queensland public schools are underfunded by 13.5 per cent. Under the existing commonwealth Queensland funding agreement, Queensland public schools will only ever be funded to 91 per cent of the

SRS at best. Queensland private schools will continue to be funded at over 100 per cent. As the Queensland P & C states, it is impossible to deliver a system which promotes excellence and equity without full funding.

The ACT public system is not at breaking point based on its funding. It is not at breaking point based on its outcomes. Completion rates remain high. School retention rates are among the strongest in the country. The system continues to invest heavily in inclusion, wellbeing and infrastructure support for students with additional needs. See what the government is doing. The ACT consistently records among the highest NAPLAN results in the country—74.9 per cent of year 7 students in the "strong" or "exceeding" bands in reading and the highest proportion of any jurisdiction in the "exceeding" category, at 25.5 per cent.

Breaking point compared to what? Not funding relative to other Australian jurisdictions, not outcomes relative to other Australian jurisdictions. Is the vision of separated secondary public schools at breaking point because its design is more expensive per student and relies on more separate sites than a comparably cost-efficient system would need? I believe it was this purported inefficiency that Saul Eslake focused on in his report on the ACT economy earlier this year. That design in the 70s and 80s was viable under conditions that are no longer present: strong commonwealth funding, rising enrolments and a public enrolment share well above today's.

The territory is now funding that vision under deficit. What the vision truly did not anticipate was how much of Canberra's population would eventually choose not to use it. Canberra's advantaged and privileged families are disproportionately choosing private schools. Perhaps that is the tacit point of comparison this motion's use of "breaking point" is alluding to. Is the ACT public system at breaking point due to the flight of privileged Canberran children from the public system to the private system, which is creating an increasingly segregated school system, as private schools use fees and testing to weed out and exclude the socially disadvantaged and educationally undesirable? I do not have any experience or insight into the need for that expensive choice, but I can guess. I presume it is partly about preference, partly about cultural signalling, but substantially about the fact that decades of federal education funding policy have actively subsidised that choice with public money. The policies are designed to produce this pattern. Resource advantages help some schools pull privileged students in. High fees push children from low-income families away.

I cite here a stark example from the excellent work of Tom Greenwell, who in a 2020 article noted that the suburb of Pearce in Woden was in the top tenth of Australian suburbs. It hosted—still hosts—two high schools, one commercial and Catholic, one public and secular. In 2020 some 58 per cent of the students at the non-government school came from the most privileged quarter of Australian families and one per cent from the most disadvantaged quartile. The proportion of most privileged students at the public school was 28 per cent; 16 per cent of its students came from the most disadvantaged quarter of Australian families. The Australian Index of Community Socio-educational Advantage, or ICSEA, the policymaker's measure of how lucky our home circumstances are, gives an average Australian school a score of 1,000. In Pearce the government school's ICSEA was 1,049 in 2020. The non-government school's was 1,132.

Tuggeranong schools, Kambah and Wanniassa are in the second-tenth most affluent Australian suburbs, but the social divide between the northern slopes of Mount Taylor and the southern slopes of Mount Taylor is minimal. The educational divide is vast. The 2020 ICSEA scores assigned to the public schools in Kambah and Wanniassa were 980 and 983 respectively. A third or more of their students came from the most disadvantaged quarter of Australian families. More than 10 per cent of their students were Indigenous. The differences between Kambah, Wanniassa and Pearce are nowhere near enough to explain the differences between the schools, but the educational segregation looks very similar to Australia's increasingly unique education system, focusing on separating young Australians into schools characterised by concentrated privilege or concentrated disadvantage, resulting in outcomes increasingly the result of differences in wealth, income, power or possessions.

If only one per cent of students at the Pearce Catholic school are from tough backgrounds, then there have to be very high proportions of these kids at other schools in the area. While successfully recruiting out-of-area students from well-educated, high-income families who were, or should be, leaders and role models at their local public schools underlines even further the egalitarian, opportunity-for-all cultural approach that our public school system is trying to foster, and that is some of the context that this motion needs.

Amendment agreed to.

MS LEE (Kurrajong) (4.19): In closing, I thank all members for their contribution to this debate. As Miss Nuttall pointed out, despite the minister's accusations about the opposition, the Greens have also been asking numerous questions about the mismanagement of the budget process, which has caused undue confusion, stress and anxiety and has not being awarded with satisfactory answers. That is why the Greens have supported my motion today. I also thank Mr Emerson for his contribution. He made a good point about the lack of consultation or the consultation that does not happen before decisions are made, and that seems to be the practice across the board, not just on school budget cuts.

The minister has employed a very strange tactic when it comes to dealing with this issue. Her first approach was to deny point blank the cuts at all by wilfully talking about the education budget as a whole when clearly she was asked about school budgets. Then she pivots to claiming that budgets have not been finalised, that they are only proposed budgets, but then herself admits that final budgets will be pretty close to the proposed budgets. This of course totally ignores the reality on the ground: despite what principals are telling her, it does not matter if the budgets are finalised in April, January, November or September next year, the fact is that the principals are making decisions right now about staffing, programs and what is going to happen at their schools next year. As we have been told by multiple principals, staff have already been told that they no longer have a job next year.

Even in this debate the minister continues to claim that specialist schools will not lose funding, but refuses, despite numerous opportunities to do so, to come clean about where the shortfall of funding is coming from. I note, despite once again saying "No cuts", she expects all of the principals and teachers to just swallow it without explaining where the shortfall is coming from.

It is incredibly disappointing that a minister who has had this much experience continues to accuse me repeatedly of spreading misinformation and blame me personally for the distress, anxiety and stress that principals, teachers and the school communities are feeling. Throwing the blame directly at the opposition and at me personally is the very definition of not taking responsibility, and that is why my motion calls on her to do so. As we know, despite the fact—

Ms Stephen-Smith interjecting—

MS LEE: Did you have something to add, Minister?

Ms Stephen-Smith: No, I am good.

MS LEE: Despite the fact that she finally said the words "I take responsibility" only this week after sustained pressure, we all know that words are meaningless if they are not followed up with action. Let's talk about—

Ms Stephen-Smith interjecting—

MS LEE: Sorry, I do not want to be interrupting you, Minister. What was that again?

MR SPEAKER: Ms Lee, just ignore the interjections, please.

MS LEE: These are the words of the minister:

> I really would encourage Ms Lee to stop scaremongering parents of children and young people in specialist schools.

More words from the minister:

> I do not know how many times I have to say this before Ms Lee will stop scaremongering parents of children and young people with disabilities.

Again from the minister:

> Any assertions that Ms Lee makes about reductions in funding to any school at this point are not accurate.

Again from the minister:

> Ms Lee, as the shadow education minister, I believe has had a briefing and can have another briefing. She can have as many briefings as she wants until she gets through her head what this model was and that we have another process that we are currently going through with principals.

Again from the minister:

> I really wish Ms Lee would move on from scaremongering about this particular issue.

Again from the minister:

> I do want to recognise that this matter has caused distress in school communities, but I would ask Ms Lee to look in the mirror as to who is partially responsible for that. The amount of misinformation the opposition is putting out is not helpful.

Again from the minister:

> It would have been less difficult if people were not taking the political opportunity to spread misinformation about it and continuing to raise questions, despite firm assurances and indeed guarantees.

Again from the minister:

> Scaremongering, as the opposition is doing, is not helping.

Again from the minister:

> I do not resile from my comment last week. She was spreading misinformation and causing distress.

Those are the words of the minister, who has spent that entire time going, "Mm-hmm, mm-hmm"—agreeing. Those are not the words of a minister who is taking responsibility for the mishandling of the budget process. Of course, it is all good for her to say that it is just us doing the scaremongering. Let's hear from some of the parents and the emails that we have been receiving:

> For me, this is not an abstract discussion about budgets and government priorities. It is about the safety of my children and their future.

Another one said:

> The proposed cuts are particularly difficult to understand when the school is already struggling with significant infrastructure issues. Parts of the school have a leaking roof. Some classrooms lack adequate cooling, making them hot and uncomfortable during Canberra's summer months, resulting in children less likely to engage with proper learning.

And another one said:

> Families are concerned about the possible impacts on classroom and relief staffing, learning and disability support, intervention programs, specialist subjects and wellbeing services.

And another said:

> I am particularly concerned about the impact of funding cuts on students and teachers. Teachers are already working under significant and increasingly unsustainable pressure. Reducing the resources available to the school risks placing even greater demands on teachers while reducing the support available to students. Teachers cannot wait for a future reform model while being routinely placed in situations where class sizes increase dramatically and additional support

> disappears.

And another said:

> Students with additional needs cannot simply be expected to cope without the support they require. And teachers cannot continue to absorb increasing levels of responsibility without the staffing and resources necessary to provide safe, inclusive and effective education.

The list goes on, but I think you get the point. For the minister to come into this place—

Ms Stephen-Smith interjecting—

MR SPEAKER: Minister. Ms Lee.

MS LEE: For the minister to come into this place and continue to deflect is the very definition of not taking responsibility, and that is why, despite her very, very many attempts to try and get that ruled out of my motion, that is going ahead as is.

In the few minutes I have left I do want to go to Mr Werner-Gibbings's contribution, because I saw that the minister gave him a round of applause, and he deserves it for the most dramatic sequence that I think he has done to date, and that is saying something. Once again he talks about and criticises my motion, so I look forward to seeing him vote against. Let it be said that Mr Werner-Gibbings's lived experience—"lived experience"—trumps the lived experiences of the principals, it trumps the lived experiences of the teachers, it trumps the lived experiences of the many other parents, it trumps the lived experiences of the learning support assistants, it trumps the lived experiences of the student, who have all reached out, not just to me, not just to Mr Parton, Miss Nuttall, Mr Emerson, Ms Carrick. We have all received emails. According to Mr Werner-Gibbings, his lived experience is the one that trumps them all.

He goes on about the words "at breaking point". That seems to be the thing that he had the most concern with. Those words came directly from the union. Those words are from the organisation that represents teachers on the ground. The fact is that this motion was required because, despite the numerous opportunities to do so, the minister—in fact she said herself in the debate that Miss Nuttall, in bringing her amendment, was confused. That is the entire point. This whole process has been confusing. The whole process has created anxiety and stress, and she knows because politically she does not have the numbers.

We know that actions speak louder than words, and she needs to make sure that she can learn from this. From the attitude and the interjections during my sum-up speech, I have no faith that she is going to take on board what I have called for in the motion, despite the fact that she is not voting against it purely because they do not have the numbers. Who knows? Given Mr Werner-Gibbings's contribution, perhaps he will, because I look forward to seeing him vote against the motion.

Original question, as amended, resolved in the affirmative.

Gambling revenue—community contribution scheme

MS VASSAROTTI (Kurrajong) (4.28): I move:

That this Assembly:

(1) notes that:

(a) the community gaming model that operates in the ACT is a key way that clubs generate their social licence to provide gambling products that are known to cause significant harm in the community and have design features that are addictive;

(b) the ACT's Community Contributions Scheme requires 8 percent of net gaming machine revenue to be provided back to the community and clubs report that these contributions fund sporting organisations, charities, community service providers and others;

(c) the scheme provides significant financial support, particularly to community sport, however the amount is difficult to quantify due to the lack of data; an estimate is between $12 million and $40 million per year;

(d) there is a lack of transparency and accountability around how individual clubs administer the scheme. While the scheme was reviewed in 2018, and revised, reviewing and auditing has been limited since then;

(e) the Gaming and Racing Commission's audit of 19 club licensees in 2024-2025 found that none were compliant with community contribution reporting obligations;

(f) the Government's gambling reform agenda will reduce gambling revenue and reduce the funds available through the Community Contributions Scheme; and

(g) it is important that sporting clubs, charities, community service providers and others benefitting from the Community Contributions Scheme have access to long-term, sustainable funding sources that do not depend on gambling losses and that these organisations do not bear the costs of the transition; and

(2) calls on the Government to:

(a) review the operation of the Community Contributions Scheme, including transparency, compliance, the appropriateness of including in-kind contributions in calculations, the value for money delivered by the current model and expected funding changes from the proposed gambling reforms;

(b) conduct a feasibility study into a centralised, independent fund for community contributions to ensure long-term, sustainable funding for community purposes, including appropriate governance models, streamlined distribution models and mechanisms to maintain and enhance the value to the community of community contribution funds;

(c) consider funding a peak community sports body to ensure the interests of community sport are represented through this transition; and

(d) report back to the Assembly on the outcomes of the review, feasibility study and peak community sports body by the Tuesday of the final sitting week of 2027.

This is a motion that recognises the vital importance of charities, community groups

and community sport to the ACT's social and community fabric. This motion seeks to safeguard the funding and the wellbeing of these groups into the future. It calls on the government to take action now to safeguard community organisations, charities and community sport.

Central to this issue is the fact that over many years the ACT has established a model whereby many community groups, charities and community sports organisations have become reliant on funding that comes from poker machine revenue. ACT legislation requires that clubs operating poker machines return eight per cent of their net gaming machine revenue—that, their pokies profits—to the community. It is this eight per cent that my motion focuses on, although I note that the legislation also requires 0.4 per cent of gaming revenue to go to the Chief Minster's charitable fund and another four per cent to go to the Gambling Harm Prevention and Mitigation Fund.

What we have set up is a kind of poisonous recycling system. It is a system that takes money from communities through harmful and addictive gambling products and then presents a portion of that same money back to these communities as philanthropy. We should be clear about the fact that it is a legal requirement for poker machine operators to make these community contributions. Clubs are very active in using the fact that they make these contributions to help generate their social licence to continuing to provide harmful and addictive gambling products to the community.

This whole arrangement is a broken system, for obvious reasons. Firstly, poker machines cause extensive harm in the community. We are funding community groups from a funding source that is harmful and destroys communities. This harm of course is experienced by people who gamble as well as their families and social networks. Pokies are the primary source of gambling harm in the ACT. This is borne out by the prevalence survey. And according to a report from Charles Livingstone and FARE, the level of harm associated with gambling in the ACT is on a level similar to that of a major mental illness.

We cannot only look at the contributions that are flowing from pokies revenue and ignore the harm. Gambling harm causes financial harm, relationship harm, physical health harm, legal and criminal harms and psychological and emotional harms, including links to suicide. I will, in the next few minutes, speak about some issues related to suicide, and I just wanted to give warning of this to people who might be impacted by these comments. I think it is really important that we do talk about the link to suicide. It is not discussed enough. I note that just today the Canberra Liberals have tabled a bill about suicide. I do not doubt the real concerns and care that Mr Parton has in relation to suicide regarding these very distressing issues, but you have to engage in the reality of what is driving some of these issues.

Research shows that there are strong links between gambling and suicide. Researchers say the documented and understood cases of gambling-related suicide are likely to only be the tip of the iceberg when it comes to gambling-linked suicide, because people suffering often keep it secret—and the real-life stories are harrowing. Members have probably all read about the tragic case of Mr and Mrs Kasurinen. Mr Kasurinen tragically died by suicide, and his family have made public commentary about his death and the hundreds of thousands of dollars he and his wife lost on the pokies at the Woden Hellenic Club over several years. These kinds of stories are not uncommon.

The ABC recently reported on another young man who died by suicide. Jake Van Berlo was a popular and outgoing 19-year-old. His parents say the suicide was linked to his gambling problem. When he just turned 18, he won the equivalent of his full-time apprentice fortnightly wage, but his parents say this was probably his downfall, because he saw it as such a good thing. Another story from the ABC is about a gambling harm advocate, Ben Hamilton, who says that his gambling started at the age of 16. He says for a decade he spiralled, and he still dreams about the colours, music and the flashing lights of the machines conditioning their users to fall in love with. Ben says that, over the years, he attempted suicide on multiple occasions, and, since he started his organisation, he knows of at least 10 people who have taken their own life. These tragic stories are all too common.

According to the Australian Institute of Family Studies, gambling harms are also often under reported and unidentified. I dwell on this because we often hear from clubs that operate poker machines, as well as from members of this Assembly, about the benefits that clubs bring to the community, including through their community contributions. But what we do not hear about is the extent of harm caused by their pokies operations and how they will address this harm. We need to acknowledge this harm and we need to address it. The harm from pokies is a pernicious force that destroys communities. It is not a defence to say that some of the money from pokies trickles back to the community. Even if we were to turn this into a simple economic equation, the report I mentioned earlier from Charles Livingstone and FARE points out that community contributions made by clubs in the ACT do not outweigh the harm caused by gambling. These contributions are not offsetting the serious harm caused by this form of gambling.

The second point I want to emphasise is that supporting community groups through poker machine funding is inherently an unstable funding source for everyone—and everyone, I think, agrees it needs to change. This is not a funding model that we want for the future. It is not good for community groups or for the community at large. Charities, community groups and community sport are fundamental to the fabric of our city and we need to put them on a stable footing.

As my motion points out, the government's gambling reform agenda is expected to reduce gambling revenue, which is a good thing. This will reduce the funds available through the Community Contribution Scheme. The landscape is changing. We need to get ahead and plan for this transition. It is critical that these community groups have access to long-term, sustainable funding sources that do not depend on gambling losses. We do not want them to disappear or be disadvantaged from this transition. These community organisations should not have to bear the cost of the transition.

Because of this historical entanglement with pokies money, through no fault of their own, groups such as community sports clubs will possibly face uncertainty through the upcoming years of transition. My motion asks the government to start addressing these issues now and to plan ahead to be proactive. One important component of this, as my motion asks, is that the government considers funding a community peak body to ensure the interests of community sport are represented through this transition. Along with my Greens colleagues, I have enjoyed meeting and hearing the concerns of the Community Sports Alliance ACT, and I am really supportive of establishing a peak body.

My motion asks the government to take a close look at the existing Community Contribution Scheme. It needs review, oversight, transparency and reform. The Community Contribution Scheme does not have a fantastic history. In 2018, there was an Auditor-General's report on the Community Contribution Scheme which found a range of problems with how the scheme was functioning: it lacked supporting objectives or guidance about how to interpret the legislation; the clubs had too much flexibility on allocating contributions; and monitoring and reporting was poor. Some of the concerns raised about the old Community Contribution Scheme included things like apparent community expenditure actually going to things like airline lounge membership fees, massages and newspapers.

The result was that the system was overhauled in 2019. This brought in new guidelines. It also devolved responsibilities to clubs individually and independently to manage and report their contributions. It appears, though, that this system is not working particularly well. First of all, I have confirmed in questions on notice that there has been very little auditing or policing of the Community Contribution Scheme. The auditing that has been done shows that there are problems. The Gaming and Racing Commission has done one partial audit of licensees, in 2024-25. It audited 19 club licensees and found that none of them were compliant with their community contributions reporting obligations. There have not been any other audits of the scheme. This does not bode well for how the scheme is functioning. What appears to have happened is that the Community Contribution Scheme has become somewhat invisible. It is lacking transparency. For confirmation, we need only look at the final report of the independent panel inquiring into ClubsACT. That panel attempted to look at community contributions, but concluded in its final report:

> The Panel was unable to perform detailed economic analysis of the community contributions made by clubs, whether in-kind or direct financial payments. This was due to the lack of availability of high-quality, verifiable and complete data related to such contributions.

I think we can all agree that that is not a good outcome. When the commissioned expert panel cannot even report to the government on the functioning of the Community Contributions Scheme, we know that something needs to change.

A related issue I want to touch on is the fact that a good proportion of the community purpose contributions are being made via in-kind contributions. That means, for example, that a club can acquit some of its community purpose obligations not by providing direct grants to the community but by, say, allowing a community group to use a room in their club. Usually that will be a room that would otherwise be sitting empty. These in-kind community contributions work to limit the amount of real money that is invested in our community. I am not saying that the provision of a room or other in-kind contributions are not helpful—they are. The list of groups benefiting from these arrangements lists into the hundreds. Affordable or free access to venues, sporting fields and meeting spaces are very important for the viability of sporting and special interest groups. I believe that clubs can and should provide many of these community services and supports without being forced to. They can do it as often it is so connected with their core purpose, because they are good community citizens or because they genuinely care and are connected to their community. But they can do that without counting it as part of their legislated community contributions obligations.

I will conclude by emphasising the need for action on this issue. The government needs to take action and start addressing the issues I have raised. This should be based on a vision of freeing us from gambling harm, while ensuring that we maintain thriving communities where we have community sports, clubs, charities, support services and all those fantastic real-life activities that make up our community. The government needs to review the operation of the Community Contributions Scheme, including in relation to the various issues I have raised concerning transparency, compliance, the appropriateness of including in-kind contributions and, naturally, in relation to the expected funding changes from the proposed gambling reforms.

The motion also calls for a feasibility study for a new centralised, independent fund for community contributions. This is a model that would make the distribution of community contributions independent. Centralising the funds would allow the establishment of a corpus that could generate interest and contribute to long-term sustainability of this funding source. It would allow a level of coordination and streamlining. I have said publicly that I expect such a fund would require an injection of government funding as well. It is a core principle of this transition, as my motion makes clear, that we do not leave our sporting clubs, charities and community service providers worse off through this transition process. They cannot be left to bear the burden of this transition.

This motion is a modest call to get the work started. I am hopeful that this is something that the parliament can agree on and will support this motion. I commend the motion to the Assembly.

MR PARTON (Brindabella—Leader of the Opposition) (4.44): This motion from Ms Vassarotti is fascinating. It does make a very important acknowledgment. It very clearly states that the government's gambling reforms will reduce the funds available to sporting organisations, charities and community services through clubs. That is something that has been made clear on a couple of occasions by the minister, but I think it is really important for us to focus on that.

I do not think that the government is going to amend that out, because it is true that the club sector is bracing for the fight of its life—and it is a fight simply for survival. The gambling reforms that have been presented and outlined by the government will send a wrecking ball through the sector, and we have long raised these concerns. The Greens are now recognising that community organisations should not bear the costs of transition, as has been clearly articulated by Ms Vassarotti—one of the things that she and I agree on in this space. The minister must respond to that concern, and the Greens must follow their own argument through to its logical conclusion: replacement funding needs to be secured before existing support is put at risk. That is why I want to move an amendment to the motion.

Members, I am sorry, but it has become a little convoluted. We have a version two in front of you at the moment, which actually says "amend (3)(d)", but the version that is with the Clerk has been amended by pen to say "amend (2)(d)". It is (2)(d) that we are going to amend. That is to insert how the government intends to replace any reduction in community contributions as a result of government gambling reforms. We think it is extremely important. We want to know what is going to happen in this sector, and it

has not been clearly outlined. I move:

> In paragraph (2)(d), after "sports body", insert: "and how the Government intends to replace any reduction in community contributions as a result of Government's gambling reforms".

The government is about to trash the not-for-profit club sector in pursuit of some ideological prize of getting rid of poker machines, at least here in this little island, as in the ACT, all while knowing that the genuine problem gamblers will simply go to Queanbeyan to play the pokies and Queanbeyan will just become Las Vegas. I want to know how the government will replace the community contributions that will be lost as a consequence, because the community should not miss out because of this fixation that Dr Paterson is clinging to.

The government has yet to put before this Assembly a comprehensive, publicly available assessment of the combined impacts of its reforms on community contributions, club sustainability and also on territory revenue, because it is going to provide quite the hit. How much community funding will be lost? What will happen to gaming tax receipts and other government revenue? What additional demands will fall on this already stretched budget? We have just had a long conversation about school budgets and about librarians and learning assistants. How on earth is the government going to step in and say, "That is all right; we will find a million here and we will find $5 million there," when the organisations that are getting support can no longer rely on club support? If the minister has this modelling, she should provide it. If she does not, the Assembly is being asked to support substantial changes without knowing their full financial and community consequences. I know that that is not the debate that we are having, but it is linked to this debate. It is extremely linked.

These concerns were also addressed by the independent inquiry the government itself commissioned into the future of the club's industry. Recommendation G3 placed structural change ahead of material gaming change reductions. Recommendation G18 sought to protect community organisations and infrastructure from adverse transition impacts. Advancing revenue reductions without first establishing those protections amounts, in practical terms, to repudiating the inquiry's advice on sequencing. The government cannot credibly claim to be delivering a sustainable transition while leaving the community safeguards with, "We will just consider them later. We will get to them a little bit later down the track."

Transition support was also a part of Labor's own clubs policy and community clubs plan. Its community clubs plan promised an innovation fund providing seed funding for diversification, a review of existing funding arrangements and an examination of the long-term consequences for community contributions, which are at the core of this debate. I think the minister should explain where that promised funding is, how much is available and when the clubs can access it. The government's inquiry response does not provide a costed transition funding package. The financial support needed to make transition possible has been left behind while measures reducing club revenue move forward.

The Greens' proposed reporting deadline also deserves a little scrutiny. I understand that there has been discussion between the Greens and the government on this and

I understand that there were some good reasons that were put forward as to why the reporting date had to be pushed down the line a little bit. The motion would allow this work to run until the final sitting week of 2027, although government measures are scheduled to commence very soon. The EFTPOS withdrawal ban is due in weeks and reduced gaming operating hours on 1 July 2027. If the Greens accept that community organisations must be protected, they should support bringing this work forward and delaying measures that threaten that funding until the protections are in place.

I do not have an additional amendment, but I just wanted to make the point that a review after support has been lost will not pay a sporting organisation's bill or restore a cancelled community program. The proposed examination of a centralised fund does not resolve the underlying funding question. Changing who distributes the money does not replace revenue that has disappeared. Once the money has gone, it is gone. Once this model has been trashed, it is not resurfacing—it is done. Any alternative must identify the source of replacement funding, its adequacy and the arrangements that will maintain support throughout transition. It must also recognise the practical values of facilities, sporting infrastructure and affordable meeting spaces. Transparency and accountability are legitimate expectations, but they cannot substitute for a properly funded plan.

We are talking about genuine not-for-profit community clubs. Let's talk about the Vikings, for arguments sake, down south, who are doing their best to diversify into another jurisdiction because they can see that it is all going to come crashing down here. Look at the Vikings, who were set up originally to support rugby union in the valley. They have now grown into this wonderful organisation with regards to their support for so many community sporting organisations that have adopted that Vikings logo. There are all sorts of Vikings clubs now that gets support from the Vikings so that people in Tuggeranong can enjoy that activity. To then go to a role whereby the Vikings are going to get their community contributions, shift them to this central body and then these Vikings organisations are going to write to that central body and beg for money, which they may not get, all of a sudden the whole community aspect of that community club has just evaporated. This motion raises an issue the minister must not ignore. The Assembly should require comprehensive costings, accessible transition funding and secured alternative community funding mechanisms before further progression and implementation of the revenue-reducing reforms. I have obviously put that amendment in with regard to how it is that we are going to guarantee that community funding remains once we have trashed this model.

I would respond to Ms Vassarotti, who spoke of our suicide prevention bill. I think she is right to speak of a link between gambling and suicide. It is why we would prefer that people were gambling in a club where there is genuine and active support from club staff rather than sitting alone in a dark bedroom at midnight and gambling online. We think that there are many more safeguards in place. I am also of the belief—well, I know—that the protections that are offered here in the ACT are also much stronger than the protections that are offered in New South Wales. I commend my amendment to the Assembly.

MS CARRICK (Murrumbidgee) (4.54): This motion raises an important question about the future of funding for community sport in the ACT. Sporting clubs are at the heart of our communities. They bring people together, keep people active and

connected, and provide opportunities for young people to develop skills, competence and lifelong friendships and mentors. This is particularly important in current times due to the impact of media algorithms that drive division in our community. For many clubs, funding received through the community contribution scheme helps cover the costs of facilities hire, equipment, participation programs and volunteer costs.

We should acknowledge the significant contribution that licensed clubs have made over many decades to grassroots sport and to many other community organisations. At the same time, it is clear there are questions about transparency, accountability and compliance within the current scheme. If reporting requirements are not being met, we need a better understanding of how much money is reaching community organisations and how effectively those funds are being distributed.

Importantly, as gambling reforms continue and gaming machine revenue declines, we must have an honest conversation about how community sport will be funded into the future. Sporting clubs should not be left carrying the burden of that transition. Community organisations need certainty and sustainable funding arrangements so they can plan ahead and invest in their club to continue supporting participation.

For those reasons, I support this motion and the amendments. A review of the community contribution scheme is sensible, and I particularly welcome the proposal to establish a peak body for community sport. Community sport deserves a strong voice at the table as these reforms are considered, ensuring that the long-term interests of clubs, volunteers and participants are protected. This debate is not just about gambling policy; it is also about ensuring that community sports remain strong, sustainable and accessible for generations of Canberrans to come. I am really pleased that we are finally having this conversation.

MISS NUTTALL (Brindabella) (4.56): I rise today in support of Ms Vassarotti's motion and thank her for bringing it forward to the Assembly. I will speak to the parts of the motion relating to community contributions from gambling revenue and the future sustainability of sporting and community organisations.

Local sporting organisations, volunteer-led organisations and community groups all receive a small portion of funding from gambling revenue. There is of course a challenging moral question for these groups. No-one wants to be reliant on revenue associated with gambling harm, but, given the level of funding otherwise available from the ACT and federal governments and philanthropic projects, there is also a challenging practical question for community sports and recreation organisations that might not currently be able to operate at all without contributions from clubs. Importantly, these organisations are doing some of the most important work for our community: they are supporting vulnerable people, they are bringing like-minded people together to foster connection, and they are facilitating local sport across all ages and postcodes. We know that revenue is finite, and, as this Assembly works with clubs to address the moral question of gambling harm reduction, that revenue will dwindle. As clubs move away from gambling related revenue in the ACT, it is absolutely critical that we ensure important community organisations are not left worse off as a result.

My colleague Ms Vassarotti has already spoken to the lack of transparency around the clubs community contribution scheme—it is enclosed in the motion—and I am pleased

that the government has also indicated their support for reviewing the scheme. We should be able to clearly see how the community is benefiting from a community contribution scheme, yet, as it stands, there is little transparency around the money that actually reaches community and what the long-term viability of this funding looks like while we also seek a critical reduction of gambling harm in our community.

I want to make clear that we understand how valuable and important the contributions to current beneficiaries are. Reviewing this system is not about taking this away; rather, it is about rethinking a reliance on an opaque and outdated system and moving—in partnership with these community organisations—towards a more sustainable and long-term system. We have heard from community sporting groups that any review of the community contribution scheme must meaningfully consider how any changes could potentially impact them and that any subsequent reform must heed these considerations and ensure community sport is not worse off for the changes.

I am really grateful to the groups that have engaged with us on this and that we have had the chance to discuss how this review could actually be a really exciting opportunity to advance calls from community sports groups—namely and most centrally, the call for a funded peak body to represent community sport. This is so important in the context of this review and the government commitment to undertake it, because, in order to ensure that the views and interests of community sport are properly represented in this review, community sport needs a proper seat at the table.

Sports and recreation organisations provide incredible value to our community, and that value is often not properly quantified or accounted for. These organisations do not just support our physical fitness; they also support preventative health, mental health, pro-social behaviours and community connection at a time when we desperately need it. As brilliant as community sports and recreation organisations are, volunteer expertise and elbow grease can only get them so far without long-term and sustainable funding. The closure of Tuggeranong Zone Bowling and the proposed ice sports facility that never got off the ground are evidence that leaving much-needed sports facilities up to private for-profit interests is unsustainable and unreliable. You could say the same about Big Splash, a number of our aquatic facilities, and the wonderful Canberra indoor rock climbing gym, which was the last top-rope gym in the ACT.

From a Tuggeranong perspective and speaking to the breadth of community organisations that stand to benefit from a community contribution fund of any kind, it is clear to us that community organisations do a significant amount of heavy lifting. Dedicated volunteers and organisers pour their time and energy into work that supports vulnerable people, all for the love of the game. We have so many great community organisations that have received community contributions, like HelpingACT, Advocacy for Inclusion, and Little Luxton. Heck, the Tuggeranong Community Council meets monthly at the Canberra Southern Cross Club in Greenway.

We want to make sure our community has the best possible investment model and that they are supported and sustained, irrespective of clubs' gambling revenue. It is incumbent on all of us to reckon with both the practical and, really importantly, the moral questions of our policymaking in this place. At its core, this motion recognises that tension and strikes a really strong balance. It does not rush into reform, calling for a feasibility study with careful considerations around impact and community interests,

and it ensures a long-term lens is used for examining any potential funding model alternatives. All the while, it seeks to push this government on progress that is long overdue for gambling harm reduction, and this is absolutely critical. I commend Ms Vassarotti's motion to the Assembly.

DR PATERSON (Murrumbidgee—Minister for Health, Minister for Mental Health, Minister for Police, Fire and Emergency Services, and Minister for Gaming Reform) (5.01): I rise today to support this motion and thank Ms Vassarotti for bringing it before the Assembly. The motion raises important questions about what the future of the community contributions scheme may look like and how community funding arrangements can continue to support sporting organisations, charities and community groups into the future. The motion provides an opportunity to consider these issues in the broader context of the ACT's gambling reform agenda and work already underway through the independent inquiry into the future of the ACT clubs industry. These asks of government are very aligned with the work the government intends to progress to understand how community contributions can best operate, with a particular focus on ensuring transparency.

The community contributions scheme reflects a longstanding expectation that clubs benefiting from gambling machine revenue should also contribute to the broader community. In 2019 significant reforms were introduced to strengthen the scheme. These reforms increased minimum contribution requirements, broadened the distribution of community contributions and introduced measures aimed at improving transparency, accountability and reporting. Importantly, these reforms recognised that community expectations have changed over time. The community rightly expects transparency regarding the contributions being made, confidence that those contributions deliver genuine public benefit and assurance that gambling-related revenue is contributing to positive outcomes for the broader community.

The ACT government remains strongly committed to reducing gambling harm. The evidence is clear that poker machines continue to be associated with significant gambling-related harm and remain a key focus of the government's reform agenda. Over the September and October sitting weeks I have introduced legislation that delivers ACT Labor's comprehensive gambling reform agenda. In September I introduced legislation to reform the territory's self-exclusion scheme. This is intended to make it easier for individuals who experience gambling harm to exclude from gambling, while increasing obligations on licensees to recognise signs of harm in their venues.

Last week I introduced significant, nation-leading reform to reduce the harm from poker machines in the ACT. These reforms included introducing mandatory account-based gaming, complete with a range of harm-minimisation measures; limiting access to cash in venues by banning EFTPOS and ATM withdrawals in club venues with EGMs; and continuing the government's progress on reducing machine authorisations so that there are no more than 1,000 machines by 2045.

As noted in Ms Vassarotti's motion, the government's reform agenda in this space will potentially impact gambling revenue over time, which will in turn affect the amount of money available for distribution via the community contributions scheme. Ultimately there is very much a recognition by government that the cost of the harm caused by

poker machines in our community is significant and is not outweighed by the benefit of community contributions.

The government reforms are guided by the principle that gambling policy should be informed by evidence, focused on harm prevention and designed to support stronger and healthier communities. Recognising the need to support clubs through this transition, the government established the independent inquiry. The inquiry was tasked with developing independent recommendations to support clubs to diversify their revenue streams, reduce their reliance on poker machine revenue and establish a staged pathway for transition. The inquiry handed down its findings in June this year and delivered a set of recommendations directed at both government and the clubs sector.

Importantly, the inquiry recognised that supporting club diversification is important in achieving a sustainable transition away from a reliance on gambling revenue. The government is committed to working with clubs in the ACT to ensure they are supported through this transition. This month the government will establish the Joint Clubs Transition Governance Group—a key recommendation of the inquiry. The governance group will provide a formal mechanism for government, clubs and community stakeholders to work together on implementation of the inquiry's recommendations and help guide the sector's transition over coming years.

The government has also established the clubs concierge service, providing clubs with a dedicated point of contact and support in relation to planning, development and diversification opportunities. In addition, we have commenced work examining planning and land use opportunities that may assist clubs to diversify their activities and revenue streams, while maintaining important community facilities for the benefit of Canberrans. The government recognises that implementation of the inquiry's recommendations will require ongoing collaboration with clubs, the community sector and other stakeholders. The establishment of this governance group will provide an important forum to support that work and help shape future actions arising from the inquiry.

The ACT government also recognises the important role played by the ACT Gambling and Racing Commission as the independent statutory authority responsible for monitoring licensees' compliance with the community contributions scheme. The commission plays a critical role in maintaining accountability and public confidence in the scheme's operation. An additional measure, introduced in the 2019 reforms, was the introduction of the independent audit of licensees' claims. This provides further assurance that claims are accurate and legitimate in their claims.

Recent work undertaken by the commission throughout its 24-25 and 25-26 community contributions program identified opportunities for strengthening reporting, improving consistency and enhancing public confidence in the scheme. The program found that all club licensees reviewed had aspects of their reporting that did not fully comply with the scheme's reporting requirements. The issues identified related primarily to reporting practices and administrative processes rather than the objectives of the scheme itself.

The commission remains committed to engaging with licensees to support compliance with reporting obligations. Ultimately, maintaining community confidence in the scheme is as important as ensuring that the contributions are made to the scheme. The

community rightly expects clear reporting, appropriate oversight and confidence that contributions under the scheme are genuine benefits to the ACT community.

This motion provides an opportunity to ensure that the community contributions scheme remains transparent and effective in supporting community organisations in the future. Given the last significant reforms to the scheme occurred in 2019, I consider it timely to review the scheme and explore options open to government to ensure long-term funding is available for community purposes.

I do have one piece of feedback of this motion and Mr Emerson's amendment, which he will move soon, but I think it speaks entirely to sporting groups and facilities. I think what is neglected in this is that not every club is a sports-based club, and obviously not every community contribution goes to sport. So many of ACT's clubs are cultural or specific interest groups. The government views and response to this motion will hold that firmly in its consideration of what the future of the community contributions scheme may be, which will include community groups, much broader than the sporting organisations.

Mr Parton's amendment agreed to.

MR EMERSON (Kurrajong) (5.10): I would like to start by thanking Ms Vassarotti for this motion and for her eagerness to tackle gambling harm in our community. It is clearly problematic that the viability of many sports organisations in Canberra—I do want to focus on the sporting organisations—is so contingent on gambling revenue. I have heard from some that this relationship creates for them an incredibly uncomfortable conflict of values. They desperately need funding to continue to deliver a vital service for our community and ensure Canberrans can enjoy the many benefits of participating in sport, but they are also conscious that their sports are funded by the proceeds of gambling harm. At the same time, they feel unable to speak openly about this because they are so reliant on the funding and are not keen to do anything that may put that at risk. Likewise, this makes it incredibly hard for those sports organisations to participate in political debate about gambling harm reduction measures that may result in reduced income for clubs.

I thank Mr Parton for his amendment to this motion, which rightly outlines the need for a clear plan from the government to ensure gambling harm reforms, which I strongly support, do not signal the demise of both community sport and other community activities in Canberra, as the minister has reflected on.

I think herein lies the exact problem that needs to be solved. These two sectors should not be so inextricably linked that one cannot survive without the other. On the face of it, it makes no sense whatsoever that they are. It is ironic in many ways. Gambling and alcohol consumption cause significant public health and community harm, but community sports is the antithesis to such harm. These two should not go together like Tweedledum and Tweedledee, but this is so often the case. It should not be the case that community organisations and sports clubs, which make such a prosocial contribution to the life of our city, are unable to contribute to the public debate about reducing gambling harm in the ACT for fear of a reprisal that may sound their death knell.

It also makes zero sense, if we were coming at this from first principles, that community

sport in the ACT is so heavily reliant on the gambling losses of Canberrans. Is this actually the most appropriate way to distribute resources? If we were coming at this with clear eyes and if it were up to us as a community to determine how community clubs and community sports operate, would we really decide to have a whole bunch of little minicasinos scattered across our suburbs and set up a system where the only way for many people to play community sport was for some people to lose significant sums of money in those minicasinos, causing significant harm to them and their families? I do not think we would.

I acknowledge that this whole setup has emerged organically over time and been cobbled together along the way. But is this really what we want? The thing is ultimately it is up to us as a community to decide how we want this to work. What I hear from Canberrans is that ensuring community support is sufficiently funded over the long term should be the government's job, not the job of pokies venues. People do not want sport and gambling to be inextricably linked anymore. My sense is that everyone in this place believes sufficient funding for community organisations, including sports clubs, is absolutely necessary.

I also want to be clear that I am not anti club. I acknowledge the many important contributions clubs make to our community. This cannot be said without also acknowledging the immense harm caused in our community borders by what is currently their number one revenue source. That is why I am strongly supportive of the clubs diversifying away from gambling. I want to see clubs thriving in a prosocial way, with no caveats, and also contributing to delivering much-needed housing stock for the ACT, which is obviously a potential diversification option.

Currently our planning system just does not seem to be facilitating that diversification, certainly not with any kind of speed. We need to get these two things working together in parallel: diversification away from something and at the same speed towards something else. This will take time, but if we are not diversifying quickly enough towards something else, let's not make the response to avoid tackling gambling harm; instead let's speed up the move away, alongside the move towards something. This will take time nonetheless.

In the absence of immediate divestment away from gambling, it is appropriate to have a look at whether the funding of community organisations through community contributions should be outsourced through a vehicle like an independently managed community contributions fund. I acknowledge the minister's remarks. Obviously this is not just about community sport, but given the nature of my amendment, that is what I wanted to focus on in my remarks.

An independent fund could be dually beneficial. It would sever these concerning ties between community sports and gambling harm, which is, as we know, a broader connection that is in place, not just in the case of pokies venues but more broadly in gambling advertising and so on. It would sever those ties while also ensuring that the community contributions scheme delivers on its aims, with a strong system of independent management and distribution.

I welcome Ms Vassarotti's proposal, I welcome her motion and I look forward to seeing the results of the government's feasibility study into such a mechanism.

As mentioned, I have circulated an amendment to make clear to community sports that I and all members take their viability very seriously and that we will hold the government to their commitment to ensuring community sports and, as the minister has remarked, all community organisations that are involved in these schemes will not be any worse off if any such changes, as those proposed by the motion, are implemented.

I am very supportive of Mr Parton's amendment, which we have already passed. I thank all members for their contributions to this debate and again thank Ms Vassarotti for bringing it forward. I move the amendment circulated in my name.

MR SPEAKER: Mr Emerson, because standing order 142 says that an amendment may not be moved to any part of a question after a later part has been amended or after a question has been proposed on an amendment to a later part I will require that you seek leave to move your amendment.

MR EMERSON: I seek leave to move the amendment circulated in my name.

Leave granted.

MR EMERSON: I move:

> After paragraph (2)(c), insert:
>
> "(d) ensure sufficient investment in community sport, and that community sports organisations are no worse off under any new community contributions model;".

Mr Emerson's amendment agreed to.

MS VASSAROTTI (Kurrajong) (5.16): I would really like to thank all members for their contributions to the debate. There has been quite a lot of conversation around issues around gambling reform in the chamber over the last few months. It is really positive that we have had a conversation and we will be able to move this motion unanimously. I thank both Mr Parton and Mr Emerson for the amendments that you have brought to strengthen the motion. I think it is really positive.

I also thank the minister for her comments. I think it is really important to recognise that the contributions do go beyond community sport. It is true that there is a significant proportion, certainly for community sports in particular, for which this remains such a significant part of their opportunities to seek funding. It is an issue that impacts other community organisations. It is really important that we continue to make sure that they are covered as well. That certainly was not the intention of the motion. I think people would be well aware of my commitment to the community sector and the amazing work that they do.

I am a little bit disappointed in terms of some of the contributions of the Leader of the Opposition, particularly in not engaging with the issue in terms of the revenue that is generated through this activity that does cause significant harm. I think it is also really important to reflect on the issues around safeguards that are within the clubs. I do really want to be very clear on the record and say in the strongest terms that we do really

support significant reform to improve safeguards for these products that do cause significant harm. It is really, really important.

I also just make a note in terms of one of the contributions that talked about that we needed to ensure that the community contributions scheme remains transparent. I think one of the things that was really clear that came out of the inquiry report was that there is a lack of transparency. We could not even determine really how much money is provided through community contributions. It is really important, and I really welcome the fact that we will do the review of the current scheme.

There is a real opportunity in terms of looking at what the options are in terms of the future, where we recognise the reality that revenues will reduce. We certainly have a bit of a vision in terms of an independent fund, as I noted. We do think that government will need to provide some support and some funding, but there is actually an opportunity to create a system that is sustainable in the long term. I have put forward the idea of a feasibility study, because there are real issues that clubs have raised, particularly in terms of their core purpose, that do need to be looked at. I am really looking forward to the fact that the work is getting started, and we will be actually looking significantly at what we do in terms of the future.

What we want to see is a future for Canberra where we have a thriving community sector, we have well-resourced charities and sporting clubs and community clubs that are continuing to provide a really significant contribution to the community. We want to see that as functioning free from the shackles of poker machines, which we know cause the community so much damage. We need to actually move away from the language of diversifying community clubs to pivoting away from gambling revenues. I think this is really where our future lies.

Once again, I wanted just to really thank people for the really positive ways in which our members across the chamber have engaged with this motion and are supporting the motion. I am really grateful about that actually. Thank you very much, everybody.

Original question, as amended, resolved in the affirmative.

Legislative Assembly—standing order 118AA
Speaker's ruling

MR SPEAKER: Before we go to 90-second statements, at question time today Mr Emerson raised a point of order under standing order 118AA, and I committed to providing a ruling. I have reviewed the video of Mr Emerson's question today asking why the partnership agreement with the Our Booris, Our Way committee has not been reviewed and why a new agreement has not been signed. The minister responded that there was a dispute as to whether a review had taken place or was taking place. That answered the first part. Mr Pettersson's additional information in matters arising from question time that the government considers the partnership agreement to be ongoing and not time limited answers the second. In my view, the minister has been responsive.

Statements by members
Multicultural events—Diwali

MR BARR (Kurrajong—Chief Minister, Minister for Trade, Investment and the Knowledge Economy, Minister for Tourism and Events, and Minister for Major Projects) (5.22): I rise this afternoon to acknowledge the Festival of Lights, Diwali, which will be celebrated by thousands of Canberrans in the weeks ahead. Diwali is an important part of life for thousands of Canberrans and a wonderful opportunity to celebrate the diversity that makes our city such a welcoming place. As families and communities come together for the Festival of Lights, we are reminded of the values at the heart of Diwali: hope, kindness and the triumph of light over darkness.

Canberra is home for people from every corner of the world, and our city is stronger when different cultures, traditions and faiths are shared and celebrated. Diwali is one of the many occasions that bring people together, strengthen community connections and remind us of the richness of our multicultural city. So to everyone celebrating across Canberra: I wish you and your families a very happy Diwali and hope that you enjoy this special time with family and friends and that the year ahead brings happiness, good health and every success.

Illicit drug deaths—31st Annual Remembrance Ceremony

MR CAIN (Ginninderra) (5.23): On Monday, around lunchtime, I joined my colleagues from the chamber here, Ms Vassarotti and ministers Pettersson and Paterson in a most beautiful setting—on a beautiful day, by the way—for a very sombre gathering, the 31st Annual Remembrance Ceremony for those who have lost their lives to illicit drugs. It was very sobering indeed to hear the names read of those who, over many years, have lost their lives to illicit drugs in the company of affected families and friends.

Policy differences aside, I think every member in this place ought to show compassion and seek to make sure those who have been affected by such a loss continue to have support so that they can deal with that loss, move forward with their lives and contribute to how such things can be minimised. I thank the various advocacy groups who are on the Remembrance Working Committee—from CAHMA, Directions Health Services, ATODA, Social Justice Lead, Uniting NSW—and especially Bill Bush and Marion McConnell, formerly from the Families and Friends for Drug Law Reform. Thank you.

Discussion concluded.

Sport and recreation—Tuggeranong ice sports facility—order to table documents—documents tabled

Pursuant to standing order 213A and the resolution of the Assembly of 24 September 2026, the Clerk tabled a revised document:

> Tuggeranong Ice Sports Facility—Documents—Order to table—Agreement to final lodge Cabinet Submission: Ice Sports Facility—Outcome of EOI Process and Next Steps, dated 21 July 2020 (Revised copy of CMTEDD.A.059).

Adjournment

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

That the Assembly do now adjourn.

Ms Jane Faulder—tribute

MS CLAY (Ginninderra) (5.25): I rise today to pay tribute to Jane Faulder, a much-loved member of our Canberra community, whose tragic death has touched so many people across the ACT and surrounding districts. I would like to take a moment to acknowledge that her family and friends are here with us in the chamber today.

Jane's passing was heartbreaking not only because of the circumstances in which it occurred but also because it reflected so completely the kind of person that she was. Reports indicate that Jane lost her life while attempting to help an injured kangaroo on the Monaro Highway in what many have described as a final act of compassion and selflessness.

At times like this, we are reminded that someone's legacy is not measured by titles or achievements but by the lives that they touch. By that measure, Jane's legacy is extraordinary. Jane was, above all, a devoted family member. She cherished her family, and she was a loving daughter to her late mother Ruth, her father Ken, a treasured sister to Anne, a proud aunt and aunt-in-law to Jacqueline and Daniel, Nicholas and Aman and Matthew and an adoring great-aunt to Violet-Ruth. Family meant everything to Jane, and the love, laughter and countless memories they shared together are a comfort to those mourning her loss today.

Those who knew Jane speak of her warmth, generosity, humour and unwavering kindness. Friends have described her as someone who lifted others up, welcomed newcomers and brought joy into every room she entered. She is remembered as everyone's champion, a person whose instinct was always to encourage, support and care for those around her. Her bright smile, positive outlook and caring spirit made people feel welcome, valued and loved.

Her passion for life shone through her extraordinary involvement in calisthenics. She devoted more than 50 years to that sport, becoming a cherished figure in the ACT calisthenics community. Just a week before her passing, she celebrated the remarkable milestone of five decades in the sport, an achievement of which she was immensely proud. Throughout those years, Jane was a valued member of Joyelle, Karilee and Deanne calisthenics clubs. She became a life member of Karilee Calisthenics, and she proudly represented the ACT on many occasions. Beyond performing, she gave generously of her time as an adjudicator's writer, club treasurer, fundraiser and team manager. Her contribution helped shape generations of participants and strengthened the calisthenics community that she loved so dearly.

Jane's love of performance naturally extended to the stage. She was deeply involved in community theatre, performing with the Queanbeyan Players in productions including *Guys and Dolls*, *South Pacific* and *The Sound of Music*. She also appeared in *Cats* with the Canberra Philharmonic Society and she performed with SUPA Productions in *The Wall*, *Spamalot* and *Eurobeat*. Being on stage brought Jane enormous joy, and she embraced every opportunity to entertain, connect with audiences and share her vibrant

spirit with others.

Jane was also one of the original Raiderettes, proudly performing as a Canberra Raiders cheerleader in the club's early years. A lifelong supporter of the St George Dragons, who she followed long before the Raiders existed, she nonetheless became a committed Raiders member and supporter, considering them to be her second team. She also played women's cricket in Canberra and she was often seen enjoying Sydney Thunder matches. Whether supporting a team from the sidelines or taking part herself, sport was another way Jane built friendships and community.

Jane will also be remembered for her love of animals. She was a passionate advocate for animal welfare who dedicated countless hours to fostering, rescuing and caring for animals in need. Through that work, she gave many animals a second chance and she demonstrated a compassion that extended far beyond words. Helping animals was not simply something Jane did; it was part of who she was.

Jane was a former public servant, a contributor to the cultural life of our region and a deeply engaged member of the wider Canberra community. Her life reminds us that communities are built not by institutions but by individuals who quietly and consistently give of themselves for others. For many Canberrans, Jane represented the very best of our community: generosity without expectation, kindness without condition and a willingness to step forward when help was needed. In reflecting on her life, there is a powerful lesson about compassion and civic spirit. Her final act was so consistent with the way that she lived. The extraordinary outpouring of love and support following her passing is a true reflection of the extraordinary person that she was.

To Jane's family, friends, colleagues, teammates and the many communities that she was a part of, we extend our deepest condolences. We acknowledge the profound loss you are experiencing, thank you for sharing Jane with our community for so many years and we trust that her memory will continue to inspire kindness, generosity and care for others.

Mental health—A Betta Fella Day

MR PARTON (Brindabella—Leader of the Opposition) (5.31): I rise as shadow minister for men and men's health to recognise today being A Betta Fella Day and to congratulate young Brayden Fowler, the exemplary young leader and student behind the Betta Fella initiative that was launched today at St Edmund's College here in Canberra. I acknowledge the initiative and the leadership that it represents. It is important that we encourage young people to take an active role in shaping the conversations that matter to them and their communities.

Men's health and wellbeing is an issue that deserves greater attention. Too often boys and young men can feel pressure to deal with their problems alone, to hide their struggles or to believe that asking for help is a sign of weakness. We know that changing those attitudes requires more than simply telling men to speak up; it requires creating environments where they feel safe to do so, where looking out for a mate is encouraged and where seeking support is seen as a strength rather than a weakness. That is why initiatives that are led by young people themselves are so important. Young men can have a powerful influence on their peers, and conversations that begin in a school

community can help shape attitudes well beyond the school gates.

As the shadow minister for men and men's health, I am particularly interested in supporting efforts that encourage those conversations that strengthen connections between young men and their communities and help ensure that people know where to turn when they need support. I also want to acknowledge St Edmund's College for providing an environment in which students can take the lead on issues that matter to them.

We often talk about the importance of investing in the health and wellbeing of the next generation. We should also recognise and support young people who already are taking action to improve the lives around them. Brayden appeared on ABC Radio this morning and was exceptionally good and moved so many people when he spoke to Ross Solly this morning. But I do want to quote from Brayden's address at St Edmund's College today. These are his words:

> It is hard to be a boy, looking at his mother, and realising that the world has not always treated her with the respect she deserves.
> It is hard to be a father, looking at his daughter, and knowing that no matter how much he loves her, he cannot always be there to protect her.
> It is hard to be a brother, looking at his sister, and wondering whether the world she grows up in will be the one where she is free to live without fear.
> It is hard to be a young woman learning to navigate the world where her safety is not always something that she can take for granted.
> It is hard to be a good man knowing that the world we want for the women we love is not yet the world that every woman experiences.

How good is that? That is Brayden Fowler. They are very powerful words from a young man wise beyond his years. I would call on all members to reflect on them in the context of the responsibility that we as elected members have.

I would note that on the radio this morning I think one of the final questions that Ross asked Brayden was about what he wanted to do with his life. He said that was the hardest question that he got today, because he does not know. But I reckon whatever it is, it is going to make a splash. He is going to do great things. Congratulations. To Brayden: I look forward to learning more about the initiative, its ambitions, and how we can work together to support healthier, more-connected young men across Canberra.

Youth—entertainment options

MR WERNER-GIBBINGS (Brindabella) (5.34): A couple of months ago, actually in early August, Lucija, from Kambah, who is 16—she might be 17 now—who is going to Lake Tuggeranong next year, did a wonderful week's work experience and left me with this speech that I read for her to the Assembly.

> The issue I raise is the lack of entertainment for youth in the ACT. Although Canberra is Australia's capital, many teenagers and young adults, including myself, feel there are limited activities available for them outside of school, sport or shopping centres. Compared to larger cities, such as Sydney or Melbourne, the ACT still has room for improvement. As a result, many young people often say they become bored, and have difficulty finding affordable and enjoyable ways to spend their free time. This can cause increased screen time and social isolation.

> For young people who are not interested in sport, the options can be even more limited.
>
> Just about two years ago, the best place to go during summer shut down. Big Splash was one of the few places to go for fun. I have so many happy memories from that place, and when I heard that it was not reopening like the owners suggested, I was disappointed and I know a lot of others were too. The ACT has made efforts to support young people through festivals, parks and recreational spaces. While these are valuable, Canberra already has many of them.
>
> Every year, large amounts of funding is invested in upgrading existing buildings and maintaining infrastructure such as footpaths. While this work is important and essential services should always come first, some investment could also be directed towards new entertainment venues for young people. Creating attractions such as a year-round water park or delivering the ice sports facility announced in 2020 would help make Canberra a more exciting place for youth. Young people are an important part of the community. By investing in more entertainment and recreational opportunities, the ACT can create a city where youth feel engaged, connected and valued.

Thank you, Mr Speaker.

Social media—misinformation

MR CAIN (Ginninderra) (5.37): I rise today on behalf of Ms Stacey Cui, a year 10 student at Canberra Girls Grammar School who joined my office for work experience from 12 to 16 October, not very long ago. Her speech reads:

> I ask this Assembly to consider an issue that is increasingly affecting Australians in their everyday lives. This issue is the spread of fake news and misinformation, particularly through social media and the impact this has on young people.
>
> As a young Australian, I have grown up in a world where information is only a few taps away. Platforms such as TikTok, Instagram and YouTube allow us to stay connected, learn about current events and engage with issues happening across the world. Social media has created valuable opportunities for young people to learn and participate in our community. However, alongside these benefits it is important to remember not everything we see online is true.
>
> Fake news and misinformation can take many forms. They may include misleading headlines, edited videos, false claims presented as facts, or images generated by artificial intelligence. Sometimes, this content is deliberately created to manipulate people. At other times, it spreads because people share information without checking whether it is accurate. Regardless of the intention, the consequences can still be significant.
>
> Young people are particularly exposed to this issue because social media plays such a central role in how we communicate and understand the world. Many of us encounter news through short videos, posts and content recommended by algorithms, rather than through traditional news sources. These platforms prioritise content that attracts attention and encourages engagement. This can allow sensational or emotionally charged claims to spread quickly, even when the information is misleading or untrue.

Mr Speaker, consider how easily a misleading video or an unverified claim can circulate through a school community. Online, a rumour can be shared between friends, reposted across multiple accounts and accepted as fact within minutes. Even after the information is corrected, the damage to someone's reputation or relationships may already have been done. This demonstrates that misinformation is not simply an online problem. It can affect people's real lives, their friendships, their wellbeing and their trust in others.

The consequences extend beyond young people as well. Misinformation about health can lead Australians to make decisions based on false claims rather than reliable medical advice. Misleading political content can distort public debate and influence how people understand government policies and public issues. False information during emergencies can also create confusion when Australians need accurate instructions to keep themselves and their families safe.

Over time, the constant exposure to conflicting claims can make it difficult for people to know who to trust. When Australians lose confidence in reliable information, it becomes harder for communities to have informed discussions and make decisions based on evidence. However, I do not believe the answer is to simply tell young people to stop using social media. These platforms are an important part of modern life, and they can be powerful tools for education and connection. Instead, we must equip young Australians with the knowledge and skills to use them responsibly.

Firstly, media literacy education should be strengthened in our schools. Students should learn how to identify reliable sources, recognise manipulated images and videos, distinguish fact from opinion, and verify claims at school. These skills are just as important as the ability to read and write in today's digital world.

Secondly, social media companies should be encouraged to take greater responsibility for the content distributed on their platforms. This includes improving the reporting of misleading information, providing greater transparency around how content is recommended, and taking appropriate action against harmful misinformation.

Finally, governments, schools, families and community organisations must work together to promote a culture of critical thinking. Young people should feel empowered to question what they see online, seek out different reliable sources and admit when information they have shared turns out to be incorrect. Developing these habits is important for learning to trust information for the right reasons.

(Extension of time granted.)

Mr Speaker, as a Year 10 student, I believe young Australians deserve more than unrestricted access to information. We deserve the skills to understand it, question it and use it responsibly.

The digital world will continue to evolve, and misinformation will remain a challenge. But we should not underestimate the ability of young people to respond to that challenge when they are given the right education, support and tools.

Ultimately, addressing misinformation is not just about ensuring Australians have access to accurate information. It is also about protecting public trust and supporting informed decision making.

> By investing in media literacy, encouraging responsible technology platforms and empowering young people to think critically, we can build a community that is better equipped to recognise misinformation rather than unknowingly spread it.
>
> Mr Speaker, the question is not whether young Australians will encounter misinformation online. It is whether we will give them the tools to recognise it before it causes harm.
>
> Thank you.

Those were the words of Stacy Cui, a year 10 student from Canberra Girls Grammar School who joined my office just a few weeks ago for work experience.

Youth—Raise Our Voice in Parliament

MS CARRICK (Murrumbidgee) (5.43): I am going to read a speech by a young person in my electorate as part of the excellent Raise Our Voice in Parliament campaign. The speech reads:

> Hi my name is Hunter and I'm 12 years old, I am from the Bean electorate, and today I'm trying to tackle the Transport industry.
>
> As a 12 year old I'm really passionate about the transport industry, specifically, in how it relates to global warming and how we can improve this in the future.
>
> I take the bus to school as much as possible, by doing this I hope to help encourage catching public transport.
>
> By taking Public transport you will be helping the environment so if you're passionate about the turtles and Pandas you should really start catching public transport.
>
> Public transport benefits the environment by significantly lowering your personal carbon footprint, decreasing air pollution, and reducing traffic congestion (Plus It's quicker).
>
> I want the Government to take action by putting in more public transport into Canberra.
>
> Also by adding more bus lanes throughout the city.
>
> I would also strongly encourage Lowering Prices and if anything, making public transport free.
>
> Thank you for listening to my speech. If my speech helps, I imagine Canberra with a public transport Friendly city.

Thank you, Hunter. I agree we need more public transport and bus lanes.

Question resolved in the affirmative.

The Assembly adjourned at 5.44 pm.