



**LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY FOR THE AUSTRALIAN CAPITAL
TERRITORY**

**STANDING COMMITTEE ON EDUCATION
AND COMMUNITY INCLUSION**

(Reference: [Inquiry into ACT Budget 2021-22](#))

Members:

**MR M PETERSSON (Chair)
MR J DAVIS (Deputy Chair)
MR P CAIN**

TRANSCRIPT OF EVIDENCE

CANBERRA

FRIDAY, 15 OCTOBER 2021

**Acting secretary to the committee:
Dr C Regan (Ph: 620 50142)**

By authority of the Legislative Assembly for the Australian Capital Territory

Submissions, answers to questions on notice and other documents, including requests for clarification of the transcript of evidence, relevant to this inquiry that have been authorised for publication by the committee may be obtained from the Legislative Assembly website.

WITNESSES

BARKER, DR JUSTIN, Executive Director, Youth Coalition of the ACT **8**
CAMPBELL, DR EMMA, Chief Executive Officer, ACT Council
of Social Service **1**
KILLEN, DR GEMMA, Senior Policy Officer, ACT Council of Social Service..... **1**
WALLACE, MR CRAIG, Head of Policy, ACT Council of Social Service **1**

Privilege statement

The Assembly has authorised the recording, broadcasting and re-broadcasting of these proceedings.

All witnesses making submissions or giving evidence to committees of the Legislative Assembly for the ACT are protected by parliamentary privilege.

“Parliamentary privilege” means the special rights and immunities which belong to the Assembly, its committees and its members. These rights and immunities enable committees to operate effectively, and enable those involved in committee processes to do so without obstruction, or fear of prosecution.

Witnesses must tell the truth: giving false or misleading evidence will be treated as a serious matter, and may be considered a contempt of the Assembly.

While the committee prefers to hear all evidence in public, it may take evidence in-camera if requested. Confidential evidence will be recorded and kept securely. It is within the power of the committee at a later date to publish or present all or part of that evidence to the Assembly; but any decision to publish or present in-camera evidence will not be taken without consulting with the person who gave the evidence.

Amended 20 May 2013

The committee met at 10.16 am.

CAMPBELL, DR EMMA, Chief Executive Officer, ACT Council of Social Service
WALLACE, MR CRAIG, Head of Policy, ACT Council of Social Service
KILLEN, DR GEMMA, Senior Policy Officer, ACT Council of Social Service

THE CHAIR: Good morning, everybody, and welcome to the first of six public hearings of the Standing Committee on Education and Community Inclusion's inquiry into the ACT budget 2021-22. Today we will speak with community groups about the expenditure proposals and revenue estimates for the education and community inclusion sections of the budget. The committee will hear from the ACT Council of Social Service and the Youth Coalition of the ACT.

Before we go further, the committee acknowledges the traditional custodians of the land we are meeting on, the Ngunnawal people, their continuing culture and their contribution to the life of the city and the region. The committee welcomes witnesses from the ACT Council of Social Service. We have got Dr Emma Campbell, Mr Craig Wallace and Dr Gemma Killen.

Before we get underway, there are a few housekeeping matters that I should bring to your attention. Please be aware that proceedings today are being recorded and transcribed by Hansard and will be published. The proceedings are also being broadcast and webstreamed live. When taking a question on notice, it would be helpful if you could just confirm that you have taken that question on notice.

I remind witnesses of the protections and obligations afforded by parliamentary privilege and draw your attention to the privilege statement that was sent to you. Could you confirm for the record that you understand the privilege implications of the statement. We will just mark that off now, if we could go around the room?

Dr Campbell: I have read it and understand it.

Mr Wallace: I have also read it and understand it.

Dr Killen: I have.

THE CHAIR: With that, over to you, ACTCOSS, for a two-minute opening statement.

Dr Campbell: I also begin by acknowledging that I think all of us are meeting on the lands of the Ngunnawal people and I pay my respects to elders past, present and emerging. ACTCOSS thanks the committee for the opportunity to appear before the Standing Committee on Education and Community Inclusion. Given that this is our first appearance before a number of committee sessions today, I would just make some general remarks about the process.

These community hearings are an important part of democracy and transparency, particularly for groups that represent vulnerable members of our community, and we are very pleased that they have once again resumed in response, I think in part, to

feedback from ACTCOSS and our members. We also note that situations in the ACT as a result of COVID are altered and may well be for some time. We hope that the budget process remains open and consultative, as it has been this time, but that should also include timely access to budget papers.

Lastly, I guess we at ACTCOSS are very keen for committees to interrogate us to understand more how the wellbeing indicators have been and will be embedded in the budget design and how they will influence the budget, including the design of and transparency around wellbeing indicators and the tools used by government, linking budget to wellbeing indicators for community organisations when making input into the budget process. That is where my opening statement ends.

THE CHAIR: I will lead off with questions and then we will make our way around the committee. Dr Campbell, I was wondering if you could tell the committee what effect this budget will have on lower income Canberrans.

Dr Campbell: I might pass to Mr Wallace to talk about the elements of the budget that we think will make an important contribution, particularly those elements that are relevant to this committee.

Mr Wallace: Like Dr Campbell, I also acknowledge that we are meeting on the lands of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and respect elders past, present and emerging. ACTCOSS, in our broad budget commentary, had positive things to say about the investments in the community sector funding itself—some funding towards indexation which meets some of the underlying stressors and structural pressures that have faced our sector for some time, although we know that that is going to be a continuing story, particularly as we come out of COVID and services continue to face issues and challenges in some of the usual ways that they have managed to work around historic underfunding; for instance, by getting private sources of funding.

We note that this budget contains some important investments in what we think is the major, underpinning driver of poverty and disadvantage in this city, which is the lack of affordable rental housing that is available to people in the bottom two income deciles without experiencing significant housing stress. There is some money for investment in new public housing, in the refurbishment and maintenance of existing public housing. That has been a theme that has come through our advocacy for some time.

We are concerned, as you would have seen from our budget bulletin, that we still need to chart a clear pathway forward towards delivering the affordable housing commitments across the life of the parliamentary agreement. We hope that that continues to be an area of priority for the ACT government and that the committee will interrogate it.

In terms of some of the areas focused on by this committee, we point out the funding for the Safe and Connected Youth program to provide responses and respite accommodation for young people aged eight to 15 years. We welcome the additional funding for frontline domestic and family violence services through the extension of the family safety levy. We hope that goes to frontline services and not just responses planned within government.

Funding for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, including the establishment of a healing and reconciliation fund and support for community-controlled organisations, was welcomed. We are keen to hear more detail from government about the fund and how that will operate.

Finally, there is funding to support transgender and intersex Canberrans through A Gender Agenda. I am sure that my colleagues, Dr Killen or Dr Campbell, can add anything I might have missed in that analysis. I think you have got it all

THE CHAIR: You spoke a lot about things that this budget addresses. I was wondering if you could tell the committee about things that you think this budget might not have addressed that are priorities for ACTCOSS.

Mr Wallace: If you like, I am happy to lead off on that, but my colleagues may also want to chip in. We note the lack of the promised \$100,000 over four years for the Pride Hub for LGBTIQ+ Canberrans. We are concerned that there is no funding to deliver rapid HIV testing and broader sexual health support. We note that there are some concerns—and they follow on from my previous comments—about studies about delivery capacity. There is funding for the LGBTIQ+ health scoping study, which we understand equates to resources for the health department to write an implementation plan rather than resources for the community.

We have a general set of comments that we have made across budget investments that there is money directed towards reviews, plans and strategies but sometimes minimal investment for the implementation of them. For instance, there is a lack of forward investment for the disability health strategy beyond initial scoping work and design work around the Disability Action and Inclusion Plan within the ACT health department.

Similarly, we have commissioned yet another disability education review on top of the line of education reviews that we have done in this space, starting with the Shaddock report, which made over 70 recommendations a number of years ago and which we are still wanting to see followed through on. I think we know what some of the solutions are there. We need implementation. We also note the lack of investment in early childhood education and preschools to support early intervention strategies for children with developmental delays.

One of the big areas of omission both in budget and in some of the COVID response measures has been in relation to measures to support senior Canberrans. These include mental health support to respond to the stressors put on people to lock down, as well as additional digital adaptation capacity for people who are having to adjust to altered circumstances. We looked quite extensively in the papers to identify those investments but were not able to locate them.

We do appreciate and welcome the extra funding that the ACT government has dedicated towards COVID recovery for vulnerable populations, including additional funding for domestic violence, for Winnunga, and for refugee, asylum seeker and humanitarian support. Some of that is a single year of increased funding, but we are likely to see a long tail, particularly in terms of domestic and family violence, over

several years. That is probably the overview of it, but I am happy to yield to colleagues if they have additional comments.

Dr Killen: I would add that we have also expressed concerns about a lack of investment in community hubs and community facilities around the ACT, which are full hubs for vulnerable people, and about the work that the community sector does. We have also noted a lack of funding for carers and a carers strategy in the ACT and an increase in core funding for the community sector, especially as our core work increases through COVID and what I imagine will be a long tail as we exit lockdown.

Dr Campbell: Just adding to what Gemma said about core funding for our community services, we welcome the increase in indexation, but, frankly, that should have been announced when our indexation increase was announced at the beginning. The ACT government knew that wages had increased for frontline workers by 2.5 per cent following a determination by the Fair Work Commission and yet the indexation increase was well behind that—I think about 1.5 per cent. Whilst we welcome it, that is not an addition; that is just keeping up with the increase in wages. That is why I think there is this big chunk missing, which is proper funding for the community sector to enable us to be sustainable over the next five to 10 years.

THE CHAIR: What happens when there is a gap between the indexation given in the budget and the indexation experienced on cost of labour by a community organisation?

Dr Campbell: A range of things happen. We look for cheaper options to deliver services, which might mean, for example, temporary workers instead of secure local jobs. It means that we have to cut services. It means that when someone is off work there is no-one to fill that role. It means that we have to rely on volunteers rather than trained professionals. The list goes on. It means that we have to dip into reserves or not invest in work, health and safety, or in training, or in support for our workforce.

I think that the implication of this gap—and this is not the first year there has been a gap—are being seen in the sector. People are leaving the sector. We are struggling to attract people to work in the ACT community sector. We know that there is money for things such as new mental health programs but we cannot get workers. Partly it is because of the poor wages and the challenging working conditions that are created by chronic underfunding.

Mr Wallace: If I may, I would make a comment on those strategies and what they mean during COVID. The strategies that Dr Campbell has listed include standing up volunteers. Another one is potentially limiting people taking overtime, supplementing funding through fundraising. This stock of activities that we have done to cope with historic underfunding has progressively become less available to community organisations because of the current conditions in which we find ourselves. So in a sense what COVID has done is rip the bandaid off a very bad set of conditions that were already there and that need to be addressed in recovery.

MR CAIN: Thank you ACTCOSS for the really important work that you do. Just thinking of local government policies, which obviously drive funding decisions, which policy changes do you believe would have the biggest impact on relieving

poverty in Canberra?

Dr Campbell: I think there are a range of activities that can take place or interventions that can be done by the ACT government. I think we must acknowledge that one of the main drivers of poverty in the ACT is the low level of income support as a result of JobSeeker placing families and individuals well below the poverty line. But we understand, obviously, that the ACT government is not necessarily in a position to change commonwealth income support measures. So the role, then, of the ACT government is to, I guess, support those families who are left in precarious situations because their income level is insufficient by ensuring that there is a decent level of social housing, that there are community services and community supports to help them when they fall through the gaps or they are unable to pay their rent or keep food on the table.

I think we need to encourage the ACT government to focus on early intervention where possible and identify challenges for families and children so that we can deal with some of these crises or issues before they turn into much more acute and embedded issues. That may be, for example, for someone to engage with the justice system or for someone who develops chronic illness and disease, which we know is driven by social determinants of health. So early intervention, I think, is very important. My colleagues may want to add something.

Mr Wallace: On point, as always. I also note that while the ACT does not provide income support it does have measures that it can use to ameliorate some of the cost pressures facing very low-income families. There is a vulnerable household energy support scheme, and we would like to see a faster rollout of that. We also note that there are some measures that include considering rent relief for households that are experiencing mental stress.

In the past, budgets have included a taxation and social economic analysis that has enabled us to understand the impact of tax and concessions policies on low-income people. It would be good to see more of a focus there.

Returning to earlier comments, the underpinning issue is housing, the lack of affordable private rental for people. ACTCOSS have also gone on the record calling for measures like considering making public transport free in Canberra to liberate capacity and enable really low-income people who wish to connect with specialist services to do so without incurring a cost.

MR DAVIS: Thank you, everybody, for the answers to the questions so far. You have touched on almost all the questions I intended asking you today, in particular bringing up the funding challenge for the Pride Hub and rapid HIV testing. I really appreciate you bringing that up.

I am going to pivot and ask about young people with a disability in the ACT. The budget has \$450,000 allocated over two years to work with young people with a disability to review how public schools deliver inclusive education. My first question is: how does ACTCOSS define inclusive education? And my second would be: what would be ACTCOSS's key goals they would like to see from this funding and from this consultation and review?

Dr Campbell: I am going to defer to my colleagues, who are experts in this field, Dr Killen and Mr Wallace.

Mr Wallace: I am happy to start and then I will yield to Dr Killen on this one. Just to break the question down in terms of inclusive education, we would define it as ensuring that students and families have all the opportunities and supports needed to have a parallel education experience, both in terms of being able to reach the curriculum and the career goals and the socialisation goals that other students experience in the ACT education system.

There is a well-rounded body of research that shows that students with a disability and students without disabilities actually gain from being included in the mainstream education system. This was also clearly the goal of the human rights compliant education response that students be included. If we are going to have a review into inclusive education, and that is a lot of money to be allocating for another review rather than to practical measures to include students with disabilities, then it needs to look at the fairly high rates of segregated and specialist education that we have in the ACT.

We have a very high proportion of special schools in the ACT. We have also got specialist units. We have well-known issues in terms of the lack of appropriate physical infrastructure for students in mainstream schools here. As Dr Killen and I have previously briefed on the inquiry into school infrastructure, you only have to actually look at the data that is available on schools as polling places to know that we have got many schools that simply lack the kind of physical, digital or other access to enable students with disabilities to participate.

There is also a set of work that needs to be done to ensure that people have got appropriate support assistance and individual learning plans and that the interface between the NDIS and the education system is sorted out. But I am happy to yield to my colleague on this one as well.

Dr Killen: In terms of a definition of inclusive education, just as Craig said, we believe in all those things, but we also draw from Imagine More's definition, which has been articulated through consultation with inclusive education groups across Australia, that basically says that all students should have the opportunity and the right to participate in the same setting at the same time as their peers. That would mean in the same classrooms at the same time, in the same playgrounds at the same time as their peers.

Also on the \$450,000 for the disability education review, what we have heard from the education minister is that the importance of this review is to hear from children with disabilities. But, as Craig mentioned, the Shaddock review, which was only a few years ago, did speak to young people with disabilities in the ACT about their experiences of school. I think we and other parts of the community sector are still confused about why we need to allocate more funding to do another review and not have any future funding earmarked to actually implement findings from the Shaddock review and from any other subsequent review.

MR DAVIS: Can I just ask, then, if I understand completely the answer to your question: ACTCOSS's position is that this review is not necessary as reviews have been conducted and recommendations have been made. Could I deduce from that that ACTCOSS would prefer to see this \$450,000 rolled into the schools infrastructure spend and particularly directed towards improving accessibility in schools?

Mr Wallace: If I may? My colleagues may again wish to add to this. I think you can conclude that we would want a much more robust set of information about what it is that this review is going to achieve, why it is costing nearly half a million dollars to do it and whether it puts us on a decent trajectory to include the kinds of outcomes that Imagine More has articulated. If it does not then we are talking about the opportunity costs that come with this money and whether there is a case for using it better. Sorry, that is probably a vague answer, but it is the best that I can give. If we are going to have a review we need to know that it is actually going to be robust, achieve change, and we need to weigh it against the opportunities that we have got to use that money in a better way to implement practical change.

MR CAIN: Regarding the community sector costing project, do you know when this will be released and are you able to share any interim findings?

Dr Campbell: It should be released in a month to six weeks time. I am able to say that the information that we have so far is that it substantiates ACTCOSS's position and comments that we have given in response to the budget around chronic underfunding and the challenges that we face as a result. I also note that, from the results I have seen so far, perceptions of underfunding in the sector are worse than they were around five years ago.

THE CHAIR: With that, we are out of time. On behalf of the committee, I thank Dr Campbell, Mr Wallace and Dr Killen as witnesses today. The secretary will provide you with a copy of the proof transcript of today's hearing when it is available to check for accuracy. The hearing is now suspended. Thanks, everyone.

Short suspension.

BARKER, DR JUSTIN, Executive Director, Youth Coalition of the ACT

THE CHAIR: Good morning and welcome back, everybody. The committee welcomes our next witness, Dr Justin Barker from the Youth Coalition of the ACT. There are a few housekeeping matters that I wish to draw to your attention. Please be aware that proceedings today are being recorded and transcribed by Hansard and will be published. The proceedings are also being broadcast and webstreamed live.

When taking a question on notice it would be useful if witnesses used these words and confirmed: “I will take that as a question taken on notice.” This will help both of us. I remind witnesses of the protections and obligations afforded by parliamentary privilege and draw your attention to the privilege statement that has been sent to you. Could you just confirm for the record that you have read and acknowledge the privilege statement?

Dr Barker: I have read and acknowledge the privilege statement.

THE CHAIR: Dr Barker, you have a two-minute opening statement. Take it away.

Dr Barker: Youth and young adulthood is always a challenging time, navigating transitions and changes, and these challenges have been exacerbated during the pandemic. COVID has highlighted and pressure-tested our supports. Gaps and challenges have been increased, and now is the time that we really need to focus attention on the support needs of young people. They are disproportionately at risk.

In this budget we really welcome the funding for the Safe and Connected Youth program. Programs like Safe and Connected Youth provide the foundations and the beginnings of a sector that will enable us to raise the minimum age of criminal responsibility. The government’s commitment to raising the age has shown the leadership that this issue has needed across Australia. It is fantastic, and we really look forward to working with the government and the community sector to strengthen our capability to meet the needs of the community through this.

In education we saw a range of funding. We saw some increase in funding for youth workers and social workers. In particular, we welcome the central team that will be established to help support these positions. It is really important that youth workers have a clear role and that they are supported by the community sector so that they are not siloed in education, and so that we can work together to improve outcomes for young people. We think that youth workers can be used very effectively in that context.

In the mental health sector, the funding for the Orygen MOST platform will strengthen existing mental health responses for young people to improve mental health outcomes, and the funding for the Youth and Wellbeing Program similarly is very welcome. However, some of the greatest challenges we are going to have, moving forward, are going to be in the youth mental health space.

I note that we really need to make sure that we are doing three things as we move forward—and more. We need to make sure that we are addressing the missing middle,

those young people who are not accessing and benefitting from the existing mental health system. We need to make sure that we are addressing their needs. We also need to support emerging adults, young people aged 16 to 25, who are really struggling in the transition through education, training and employment and the movement into independence. This is always difficult and had become increasingly difficult across the globe, even prior to the pandemic, but, again, it is exacerbated by the economic and social impact of the pandemic.

We also need to improve parenting and family supports. We know that if we improve family functioning and parents' capacity it improves outcomes in mental health for children and young people.

This budget has really shown a commitment to young people, but it also acknowledges that we need to continue to do further work. It will be vital that we continue to focus on the needs of young people to help them to thrive in our community as we recover from the impact of the pandemic.

THE CHAIR: I will lead off with questions and then we will make our way through the committee. Just touching on youth mental health and wellbeing, you flagged three areas of concern: the missing middle, supporting emerging adults and improving family supports. I was wondering if you could touch on each of those and expand on what it is that you would like to see the ACT government do to address each of those issues.

Dr Barker: There are three things that need to happen across the mental health sector. In some ways there are already existing mental health services that are meeting the needs of their cohort, of their target group. They are fantastic services. Programs like the WOKE Program at UC and Stepping Stones at CatholicCare are meeting very important needs but they are under-resourced. They have long waitlists or even have to close waitlists at times because the demand on them is so high. We have existing programs like that that need to have their capability and capacities improved.

We also have some service gaps. We know that we do not have enough services who are addressing particular cohorts' needs. So there will be some new services that need to be introduced. We also need to make sure that—and this goes across the service sector more broadly—we have a coordinated and integrated service system so that we are making the most of the services that already exist in both the clinical and acute mental health therapeutic sense but also in those subacute services as well.

We have a range of young people across that age spectrum who really struggle to access the existing services because referral pathways are hard to navigate, because waitlists are hard to navigate, because they do not know where to go or because of the difficulty in merely accessing them. A lot of the supports really rely on family support. If you do not have transport, financial support and the wherewithal to be able to optimise and make the most of those services, you really do not benefit from them.

This is not about reinventing new services; this is about putting clear mechanisms in place that make people work well together and make sure we improve the outcomes for these people who are missing out on these services. But we have put together a series of recommendations with the missing middle working group, in collaboration

with the Office for Mental Health and Wellbeing, based on some research we have done about what it is that we will need to do in a very targeted way because we cannot just commit to coordinating and working together. We need to have mechanisms put in place that ensure that we do, because we all want to work together, but we need to be able to do that with very clear processes that actually facilitate and ensure that that happens sustainably.

MR DAVIS: Thank you, Dr Barker. As you know, I have got a particular interest in youth engagement in democracy and in political processes. I am interested in your perspective. I think one of the things the pandemic has shown us is that young people are engaging more with government and the decision-making role of government. What do you think government should do to further encourage that and facilitate that, and what investments do you think are required in order to make that so and to engage more young people in politics and decision-making?

Dr Barker: I know that, earlier in the year, the idea of lowering the voting age was floated again, and I need to state quite clearly that we are a strong supporter of lowering the voting age. I think that the evidence is actually quite clear that that is the most sensible thing to do and that they have the capacity to do it. The questions in the public domain about whether it is the right thing to do or not are not guided by the evidence. So I want to put it out there that I am—as is every youth advocate and youth studies academic—really in support of lowering the voting age to 16. We think that that would actually be a clear way to improve the engagement of young people in political processes. But, as you have mentioned, a lot of young people are stepping into the foray to be politically active, despite not having that mechanism.

I think that another step in the right direction is enabling young people to have a voice through different mechanisms. I think that embedding the voice of young people in political processes is essential. I think that happens through mechanisms like the Youth Advisory Committee and other advisory committees and youth services. But I think we need to make sure that we also allow young people to have their voices heard throughout the political process and throughout the election cycle, and some of the best ways to do that are to create more formal forums or fora for them. I think that merely participating in a survey is not enough, because their voices cannot be heard and they do not necessarily think that is the most potent way of doing it. We have seen young people increasingly protest on issues that they see as really important because there are no other mechanisms to show their voices and to be heard.

Like I said right at the beginning, I think we should be making sure that there are formal mechanisms. I would still put back on the table the idea of lowering the voting age. I think it is really important for us to make sure we continue to address that issue. I think that there is a lot of misunderstanding about the value of that and the concerns that people have about it.

MR DAVIS: Given your very clear position on this issue, what kinds of investments do you think the government needs to make to, I suppose, satisfy naysayers in our community who might say that young people do not have the necessary tools to engage appropriately in decision-making in politics and policy development? To placate or satisfy those concerns, where can the government spend money, invest, to make sure that young people have those appropriate skills and tools?

Dr Barker: I think investing money in awareness raising is really important, because what we have here is a lack of awareness and knowledge of what this would entail for young people and also how it would happen and the value of it. I think that one of the concerns young people have is that not everyone would necessarily want to participate at the age of 16. I think that that is also true for people over the age of 18 and it increases the salience of our democracy by making them engage. We know that when you give people the option to vote they actually improve their political literacy. In jurisdictions where you have increased that or even told them that it is on the table they actually start taking part in political debate more, and that happens for any age group or any population group.

I think that we really need to do some work with young people to help them take part in this conversation and make sure we can hear what they want out of this and address any concerns that they have. But we also need to make sure that we—the naysayers, as you have described them—are aware of the research and evidence that suggests that they are more than capable of taking part in this process. Again, I would like to think that rationality prevails and the evidence has an impact. I think once we can make sure that people are aware of that evidence they might change their mind.

MR CAIN: Thank you, Justin, for giving us some of your valuable time. Regarding youth unemployment, you have mentioned in your submission “challenges and limitations in boosting employment opportunities at a jurisdictional level”. Can you elaborate on what you see those challenges and limitations being and how you think they need to be tackled?

Dr Barker: Yes; I would love to. Youth unemployment, and unemployment more generally, is primarily driven by the economy and the labour market. The stronger the economy is and the stronger the labour market is, the lower unemployment rates are for adults and for young people. There is a strong correlation between youth unemployment and the health of the economy.

If an economy is thriving, the unemployment rates go down. Young people are normally the last to benefit from that and, when there is an economic downturn, the first to fall off the perch. So any mechanisms that improve the health of the economy will also improve unemployment rates. However, that is not enough. You need to also have targeted initiatives that improve the likelihood of young people participating in the economy.

We know that the big factors that improve youth unemployment and their transitions to the labour market and their productivity as adults are things like access to employment training, apprenticeships and vocational education. We know that those things can be improved even when the economy is not doing well. So we need to make sure that we continue to improve access to education, training and employment.

We also know that wage theft and exploitation within certain industries is a problem for young people and that they disproportionately are affected by exploitation, bullying, in different workplaces. So we need to make sure that workforces actually treat young people well, which is also really important.

I point out that, as we have mentioned in our response, the youth unemployment rate in the ACT is the lowest in Australia. But the unemployment rate is a bad measure for the health of our employment. The story of youth unemployment and employment issues in the ACT is a mixed story between underemployment, where people need more employment to be able to meet the cost of living in the ACT, which is really expensive, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, over-engagement: young people who have to have lots of jobs and are also studying to try and keep their head above water, and the social and emotional impacts of that. Both those groups are included in the employed group but are actually having adverse outcomes because the labour market is not allowing them to meet the costs of living in the ACT. Is that a good start for you?

MR CAIN: Thank you. You also mentioned the burden of high rents on unemployed and, as you said, underemployed, young people. What practical policy changes do you think are needed to address this?

Dr Barker: I think it is quite clear that the marketplace is not going to solve the housing issue and that the housing issue needs to be addressed by government. Increasing the supply of community and social housing so that those people under housing stress, which is a large proportion of the young people because of their lack of accumulated capital and work experience, will help to address that issue. Improving the social and community housing issues—that is what they are there for. They are there to be able to provide housing to people who cannot participate in the housing market, the rental market, because of the housing stress that it would place on them. It can allow them, especially young people.

We do not have many youth-specific community and social housing initiatives, whereas we know that across the globe they are very productive. It allows people to then take part in education, training and employment, and then move out of it. We know that adults who participate in social and community housing are less likely to transition through it and into the rental market. So having very targeted social housing initiatives for young people that allow them to not have to work three jobs while they study full time allows them to actually transition to participate in the economy, contribute to the economy, more effectively and enter the rental market. That is something that is missing across Australia, those very youth-focused social housing initiatives. But, again, it really is a government responsibility to make sure that we address that housing issue.

MR DAVIS: Just on the issue of youth employment, the Assembly has heard a lot of evidence over recent days about businesses that have suffered through the pandemic. A lot of those businesses are businesses that disproportionately employ a younger workforce—retail, hospitality and the tourism sector—and the government has to make a lot of allowances to accommodate for the situation those businesses are in.

I would like your opinion on what the government needs to do to protect that vulnerable workforce as they start to transition back to the workplace. There still are a number of economic challenges presented to their employers. What are some of the risks for that youthful workforce and what can government do to protect them?

Dr Barker: To cycle back to the question previously about youth employment, one of

the things that are suggested is that by supporting and targeting those industries that employ young people—arts, tourism, hospitality, recreation—you are likely to improve the employment level of young people at a broader level, which is exactly what you are getting at.

How can we better make sure that they safely transition back into that? Supporting those industries with any kind of economic stimulus to those industries will increase the likelihood of them keeping young people on and transitioning them back into employment safely. I think that, if they are forced to take measures to survive economically, that will put their employees at risk because they are not adequately supported or they are being rushed to do it. Again, for an economic survival reason, if not for anything else, that is where we will see risks happening.

In recent discussions we have been talking about clear directives to industry, about what they are expecting from their employees. That is really, really good. Giving them fewer options about how and when and what that transition to employment looks like actually increases the likelihood of it being safe. If we are being clear about whether there are mandated double vaccines, if we are being clear about protection in regard to COVID-19—the feel of those directives means that it is more likely that people will have to comply with them—the safer not only are those employees but the safer is the community. But any ambiguous directives make that very hard.

In the end, that economic support for those industries is really going to be the tipping point that determines how safe that transition back into the workforce is. Again, there is a kind of urgency that will probably create a bit of a rush. We need to make sure that we make good decisions and that those decisions are continuing to be informed as we figure out on the fly what that transition map is going to look like safely.

THE CHAIR: Following on a little from Mr Cain’s question, one of the centrepieces of the budget was the Safe and Connected Youth program getting funded. I was wondering if you could tell the committee what that project is seeking to address in the community. I was also hoping you could tell the committee what other gaps are yet to be addressed in terms of youth housing and homelessness.

Dr Barker: The Safe and Connected Youth program has been a really excellent example of collaboration across government and community sectors to respond to a glaring gap in the community. I have to say that Labor, the Greens and the Liberals have all been very supportive of this project. I commend everyone for being supportive of it.

What happened and what we have seen more broadly is that, for those under the age of 16, there is a lack of supports for young people at risk of or experiencing homelessness. This really ties into that missing middle conversation and the raising of the minimum age of criminal responsibility conversation. What we do not have at the moment is a sector that is rich in supporting kids in the middle years, between eight and 16 or 14. The middle years are normally considered up to 12, but we know that the gap is actually up to about 14 to 16.

The Safe and Connected Youth program really provides the foundations in the beginning of building a sector that can work with kids and their families in this age

range. It is billed as preventing homelessness and preventing youth homelessness, but it will actually do much more than that. It will help young people stay engaged in education, access mental health supports but, more importantly, improve family safety and functioning, which has a huge range of benefits. The housing, the accommodation unit, that will be funded will provide a safe place for the kids to go and stay, which has been a glaring gap in the service sector across Australia. So that is going to be a huge benefit.

The outreach service will continue to support young people so that they do not need a place to go to. Also, the postvention will make sure that, once they transition out of the service, those families keep together and keep functioning well. The Safe and Connected Youth program is going to have a huge impact on the lives of young people who are at risk of experiencing homelessness. It would be a key platform for us to raise the minimum age of criminal responsibility.

We have seen in the report that was released on Monday by Morag McArthur and colleagues that the police and other people will need a place to take young people at 2 am—the 2 am test. They need a place to take them. The police know that this is not a justice issue; they know that it is a community issue, and they need youth workers and the community sector to be able to support them. That report that Morag put out aligns with a lot of the findings of the missing middle project. We really need to make sure that we have really good responses that work with children, parents and families.

In Dr McArthur's report they talk about the need for embedded youth workers with the police. This follows the success of the PACER model, which has also got continued funding. The embedded youth worker model will mean that a youth worker can go out with police and the police can go about policing and not be youth workers. The youth worker can go out with them and actually look after the young people in the community and find out how we can best meet their needs. The police can continue to deal with the criminal issues, rather than having to do youth work issues.

However, we also know that what we are going to need to have is a group, a committee, an independent committee, that oversees and takes responsibility for young people in this age range so that we can make sure that the services are responding to them adequately, so that we can increase the need and support needs on a case-by-case basis to get the existing services to participate and so that we can continue to highlight any service gaps.

There are a few services that are identified in that report that will need to be implemented. They are really doable and we are really quite close to being able to do them right now. But I think in the next couple of years we are going to need to make sure that these services are up and running so that we can safely raise the minimum age of criminal responsibility.

MR DAVIS: To be entirely honest, you have answered most of my questions. I could talk to you all day about the earlier subject, but you have touched pretty well on mental health and homelessness, which I was keen to talk to you about. I might defer to Mr Cain.

MR CAIN: Thank you, Mr Davis. Something that I do not think has been discussed

but which you mentioned is the relationship in your budget review between academic stress and youth mental health. From your perspective, what has been the impact of at-home schooling on children and young people? What has been the most difficult aspect or aspects of that and what could have been done differently?

Dr Barker: It is a good question. We are continuing to see now a profound impact on young people from the move to remote learning. It has affected young people and families differently. Some young people have thrived and performed really well and have done well during lockdown. Others have really struggled.

There are two main cohorts that have really struggled. One is those who lack the family supports and the environment to be supported to participate in school. Some of those young people would have been on the radar of Education before lockdown because they already may have had some concerns about them. We can make sure that the education system can engage them, which is a limitation because the education system is not able to go out into the community the way the community sector does. This is something we need to continue to improve, and this gets back to my point about that centralised role with the youth workers.

At the moment Education and the community sector are still quite siloed, and we have seen that during the pandemic. The community sector have got outreach workers and a range of supports who need to work hand-in-glove better with Education, and ideally through those social workers and youth workers. But there are not structures in place to allow that collaboration to happen systematically that would have helped to address those kids who were already at risk.

There are another group of kids that we continue to hear about who still do not have access to the internet. Sometimes that is because their parents lack the information technology literacy to be able to support their kids to participate, and sometimes it really is that lack of access. We know that the Education Directorate has Chromebooks and is extending access to data, which already existed and is in the budget, but we know that it is not getting to some people. Our greatest bet is those people who do not feel safe approaching Education and saying, “Can I have that?” They are the ones who are missing out. Again, it may be those ones whose families do not have a great experience with Education who are now falling off the perch. We are going to have to do a lot of catching up and targeted support for those kids who have struggled when we transition back to face-to-face education.

THE CHAIR: I have one last very quick question, which is a follow-up from Mr Davis’s question earlier. When you talked about youth engagement in the democratic process you mentioned that, potentially, some new forums could be required to engage young people. I was wondering if you could give us some specific requests or recommendations.

Dr Barker: That is a question I would like to take on notice, to come back with some specific mechanisms, because I know that different states and territories and jurisdictions have created different initiatives that can be done. Because I do not have them in front of me, I would like to make a more concerted and informed recommendation.

MR DAVIS: Dr Barker, you touched on the government's plan to roll out Chromebooks to kids who need it, but I was interested in your suggestion that there might be a challenge reaching some of those kids whose families have a challenging relationship with the directorate. Do you think that there would be scope for organisations like yours and the youth workers that you support to engage with the directorate to make sure that those Chromebooks are getting to the kids that need them?

Dr Barker: I think so. I think there are a range of existing services out there that have relationships with these families and young people and if we could find a way to give those Chromebooks and data through those organisations and get around having to access it through the Education Directorate it may actually speed up that. We also know that the sooner they get access and the sooner they are linked up with supports the better. Any barrier to them doing that, even if it is a formal process that we might think is not huge, might overwhelm some people who do not have a great education experience.

I think you are right. I think, through optimising existing services, places like the Multicultural Hub are fantastic places to make sure that culturally and linguistically diverse families, whose parents might not also be able to provide the same type of support that other families can, are enabled, to give them access to those things without any further barrier. I think that is a fantastic suggestion.

THE CHAIR: We are out of time. On behalf of the committee, I thank you for being here today. The secretary will provide you with a copy of the proof transcript of today's hearing, when it is available, to check the accuracy. You have taken a question on notice, so the committee secretary will be in touch to sort out that answer. The committee's hearing for today is now adjourned. The Standing Committee on Education and Community Inclusion will reconvene on Tuesday, 19 October, at 12.45 pm. Thanks, everyone.

The committee adjourned at 11.16 am.