



**LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY FOR THE AUSTRALIAN CAPITAL TERRITORY**

**STANDING COMMITTEE ON EDUCATION  
AND COMMUNITY INCLUSION**

(Reference: [Inquiry into annual and financial reports 2020-2021](#))

**Members:**

**MR M PETTERSSON (Chair)**

**MR J DAVIS (Deputy Chair)**

**MS N LAWDER**

**TRANSCRIPT OF EVIDENCE**

**CANBERRA**

**FRIDAY, 25 FEBRUARY 2022**

**Secretary to the committee:**

**Mr J McAdam (Ph: 620 70524)**

**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.

## APPEARANCES

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## **Privilege statement**

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*Amended 20 May 2013*

## **The committee met at 12.51 pm.**

### Appearances:

Berry, Ms Yvette, Deputy Chief Minister, Minister for Early Childhood Development, Minister for Education and Youth Affairs, Minister for Housing and Suburban Development, Minister for the Prevention of Domestic and Family Violence, Minister for Sport and Recreation and Minister for Women

### Education Directorate

Haire, Ms Katy, Director-General

Matthews, Mr David, Executive Group Manager; Business Services Group

McMahon, Ms Kate, Executive Group Manager; Service Design and Delivery

Gotts, Mr Robert, Executive Branch Manager; Analytics and Evaluation

Watson, Mr Martin, Executive Director, Office of Board of Senior Secondary Studies

**THE CHAIR:** Welcome to the second public hearing of the Standing Committee on Education and Community Inclusion inquiry into annual reports for 2020-21. The committee wishes to acknowledge the traditional custodians of the land we are meeting on, the Ngunnawal people. The committee wishes to acknowledge and respect their continuing culture and the contribution they make to the life of this city and this region. We would also like to acknowledge and welcome other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who may be attending or watching today's event.

In the proceedings today we will examine the annual reports for the Education Directorate in relation to schools and the Community Services directorate in relation to youth and multicultural affairs.

Please be aware that the proceedings today are being recorded, broadcast and web streamed live. When taking a question on notice, it would be useful if witnesses could use the words, "I will take that as a question taken on notice."

As there are no opening statements, I will lead in to questions. Minister, I was hoping that the committee could get an update on the progress of the government's plan to build new and improved schools in Gungahlin.

**Ms Berry:** Thanks very much, Chair. Gungahlin has the fastest population growth in the country, so we need to continue to grow our schools—not only grow our existing schools, but also grow new schools. The new primary school at Throsby opened for the first time from day 1, term 1, this year, which was very exciting for that community. We are also making expansions at Margaret Hendry and will build a new high school at Margaret Hendry later on as well. I can get actual dates and time frames from Mr Matthews, which might assist in that area, and particularly around some of the upgrades and improvements to our existing schools in Gungahlin. I will ask Mr Matthews to provide a little more detail for the committee.

**Mr Matthews:** The minister outlined some of the key projects that we are embarking on in the Gungahlin region. We continue to build new schools, as well as expanding

and improving the infrastructure in existing schools. I had the pleasure, with this committee, of visiting Amaroo School this week, for example, where we—*Interruption in sound recording*—in the high school setting, which was a range of classroom and specialist facilities. That was opened for the beginning—*Interruption in sound recording*—school year. That was an example of some modern high school infrastructure which is available in the Gungahlin community.

The committee also visited the Margaret Hendry School, and a new area of that school that had been completed for this year, which was a multipurpose and learning space that—*Interruption in sound recording*—students in that community.

In addition to the 90th school, which opened up at Throsby this year for 2022, there are a couple of other major construction projects that have been funded by the government and are in various stages of redevelopment, whether it be the procurement process contracting phase or in the construction phase. The minister has referred to a new high school in the suburb of Taylor, which will be adjacent to the current Margaret Hendry School—another 600 places at Margaret Hendry School in terms of additional primary school capacity. The government has also funded a new high school at Kenny in east Gungahlin to meet the growing needs of that part of the city.

We have focused on the Gungahlin region as part of this answer, but the government continues to invest in infrastructure across the city and will be opening up a new high school in Molonglo, the Evelyn Scott high school, from next year, and continuing to introduce both temporary and fixed infrastructure improvements over coming years.

**THE CHAIR:** I was hoping for a little more detail on some of those projects. Could you give me a project update on Taylor high school? How is that project progressing?

**Mr Matthews:** That is progressing to the point where we have just completed contract negotiations with the successful tenderer. The successful tenderer will be responsible for delivering both the Taylor high school program and the primary school expansion at Margaret Hendry. The Margaret Hendry expansion is due for completion at the beginning of the 2023 school year, and the high school component for the 2024 school year. Soon we will be making an announcement around that successful tenderer and commencing those works, which, of course, have already been subject to some design work through the master planning of that site.

When the government originally built the Margaret Hendry School, it invested in nearby sporting infrastructure as well, to provide important community infrastructure in the suburb of Taylor, as well as some recreation and outdoor sporting space for those particular schools. We are very well placed to deliver those projects once the contractual arrangements have been finalised and the successful contractor begins their program of work.

**THE CHAIR:** Could I have a project update on Kenny high school?

**Mr Matthews:** The update on the Kenny high school is that, again, we have taken possession of that site and initial works have commenced on that site. It is on Old Well Station Road. It will be, again, a new high school for the region. The works include not only the construction of the high school itself but also some related road

work. We are also engaging with some conservation work associated with the neighbouring nature reserve. There is also some work with the EPA regarding the nearby Mitchell Resource Management Centre.

There are a number of particular elements to that project. That project has already experienced some delays, associated primarily with weather. A large portion of our projects have been very impacted by a delay of more than 100 days, due to weather, given the very wet summer that we have all experienced, and that you will all know about. That project was initially due for completion prior to the commencement of the 2023 school year. We can confirm that we will not be able to meet that particular date. We are currently looking at the program options for that, to bring that project online as soon as possible.

**THE CHAIR:** The expansion of the Franklin School: is that finished yet?

**Mr Matthews:** I will just check my notes, and add to it if I need to; essentially, yes. The infrastructure, of course, with Franklin is an expansion of that school community. It is providing additional learning space capacity, and it is being supported through relocatable learning units during that particular construction phase. My understanding is that the 450-place refurbishment has been handed over to the school for use early in 2022.

**MS LAWDER:** This week we have heard reports in the press about the Auditor-General's report on procurement processes for Campbell Primary School. I raise this as a supplementary because we have just been speaking about various procurement processes. Minister, as the minister responsible for this directorate, when were you first made aware of these probity issues, and why—

**THE CHAIR:** Ms Lawder, this is not a supplementary to the line of questioning.

**MS LAWDER:** We are speaking about procurement processes.

**THE CHAIR:** Ms Lawder, I am the chair, and I do not think it is in line. Are there any supplementaries on this one?

**MS LEE:** I have one, Chair. You talked about the new Kenny high school. Do you have a determination of the priority enrolment area for that school?

**Mr Matthews:** We have not yet finalised the priority enrolment area for Kenny because enrolments have not yet opened for that high school. We have been reviewing all of the neighbouring priority enrolment implications for neighbouring schools, such as Harrison School, which is nearby. We would be expecting, for example, a large portion of the children at the Throsby School to be going to east Gungahlin high. In short, we are doing that work, but we have not finalised that yet because enrolments have not opened for that high school.

**MR DAVIS:** I want to talk about the Safe and Supportive Schools policy. It is particularly relevant, given what we have seen out of federal parliament in the last few weeks. Thank you, Minister, for getting on the front foot and promoting that so actively in recent days. It has been appreciated by a lot of people. I understand that

each school is required to have at least two Safe and Supportive School contact officers. Can you clarify whether these roles are voluntary, extracurricular work for existing staff or if they are stand-alone, separate roles in schools?

**Ms Berry:** Thank you very much, Mr Davis, for that question. Of course, it is about making sure that our schools are as inclusive as possible for all young people, and particularly LGBTIQ+ young people, to ensure that they feel welcomed and safe within their school communities. That is why the ACT continued to work with Sexual Health and Family Planning ACT to make sure that we had the right tools in place, not only for young people but for parents and teachers as well, to support each other.

When we introduced or continued the program here in the ACT, it was at a really challenging time for young people, and we wanted to make sure that they felt safe and loved within our school communities. We committed to the Safe and Supportive Schools program, which is a program of tools which are available to be accessed by each school community, including non-government schools, and it is available online. We also have a really strong relationship with SHFPACT to make sure that, when opportunities arise or when that is required in schools, we can bring in extra resources to support young people, teachers and parents that might need that extra support or tools to understand what is going on in their school communities.

You are right; it is a very challenging time for LGBTIQ+ young people, particularly with the conversations that are happening nationally, and the impact that it has on them. I am particularly concerned about our trans young people, and the impact that the conversations around access to sport might be having on those young people.

I will ask Ms McMahon to respond specifically to those questions that Mr Davis asked around capacity within schools to deliver on those programs.

**Ms McMahon:** I have read and acknowledge the privilege statement. The contact officers that you were asking about are available in every school. We have two contact officers, one male identified and one female identified officer in each of our schools, and they provide a service to our students. They are a connection point for kids to come and talk through any issues that they may be having and provide links to resources for not only students but also our teaching staff. They are voluntary positions. They receive training from our central office and a range of supports, one of which is the Safe and Inclusive Schools supports program.

With all of our teachers, not only do they have their teaching responsibilities, but also they have whole-school responsibilities that they take on. The Safe and Inclusive officer, the SASSCO officer, is a position that teachers would volunteer to be a part of, because they would be passionate about providing that service to our students. A number of our larger schools will have more than two officers, especially our schools that have a primary and a secondary setting. They would have potentially four officers in those settings.

**MR DAVIS:** Just to clarify, every single school right now has two officers?

**Ms McMahon:** That is correct. That is what they should have; one male identified and one female identified officer in each of our settings.

**MR DAVIS:** Importantly, if you were a young person in a school community questioning or challenged by sexuality and gender identity questions, how would you know which teachers they are, and where and when it is appropriate to connect with them?

**Ms McMahon:** From my experience in leading schools, we would always, at the beginning of a school year, identify who those officers are for our students. You do that in a range of different ways. It might be through notifications to school communities, depending on how they organise those, either online or verbally at an assembly. Lists of staff and what their responsibilities are would be published in a newsletter or published within their school setting. Schools also make available school psychologists. Psychologists would also know who the SASSCO officers are.

**MR DAVIS:** How are these officers trained? Specifically, is that training, which I assume they are offered in some form, in any way relevant to the ongoing professional development of teachers?

**Ms McMahon:** Yes, certainly. The training used to be done in person over a number of days, and teachers would be released from their duties to attend central training for that service. Because we have not been able to do as much in-person training, we have shifted a lot of that training to an online platform, and teachers need to engage in that training to be able to become those officers. That training can be recognised through the Teacher Quality Institute and is part of their record of professional learning that they need to fulfill on a yearly basis for their TQI qualifications or certification.

**MR DAVIS:** I appreciate that this question may need to be taken on notice: could we get the exact number of teachers across our system that have done that training and what percentage that makes of teachers in our system?

**Ms McMahon:** Certainly; I will take that one on notice.

**Ms Berry:** Mr Davis, that might be a point-in-time group of data; obviously, that will change and grow as teachers access training. I remind the committee that many of our schools also celebrate Wear It Purple Day and IDAHOBIT. That is a really great opportunity for young people and teachers to see within their school communities where those supports might lie or where those different little community groups have popped up in our school communities. I know that you have visited Caroline Chisholm high school, which has a particularly strong and active group of young people who support not only each other but also others who might need additional support, or just a group to hang out with. Those kinds of activities are really important for our schools in the ACT, to make sure that we are not just talking about these things or having supports online or whatever, but that we actually show, by being very present in the school communities, that those supports are there.

**MR DAVIS:** It was Calwell that I had the privilege of visiting, but they are south side schools, so they are all good.

**Ms Berry:** Calwell; you are absolutely right.

**MS LAWDER:** As the minister responsible for the Education Directorate, when were you first made aware that the procurement process for the Campbell Primary School modernisation project lacked probity, and why weren't tenderers dealt with fairly, impartially or consistently?

**Ms Berry:** I think it would be around the time that the Auditor-General's report came out. The government will respond to the Auditor-General's report. As far as I am aware, there was nothing wrong that was done, and the procurement processes were followed. However, the Auditor-General has recommended that those processes can be tightened up. The government will consider those processes. I understand that Minister Steel, who is responsible for that area of work, will be taking that particular recommendation by the Auditor-General into account. The government, as I said, will respond to that report in due course.

**MS LAWDER:** In terms of ensuring that tenders were fair, impartial and consistent, what processes were in place, and why wasn't a red flag raised when the top two or so tenders were assessed over and over again? It seemed a bit like you were trying to get a specific result.

**Ms Berry:** Ms Lawder, as you would know, and as all committee members would know, ministers are very much at arm's length on procurement processes. With respect to whatever was occurring in that space, that is not something that ministers in the ACT government, as appropriate, would involve themselves in. I will ask Ms Katy Haire to provide you with a bit more detail on the process for procurement for school upgrades and school builds in the ACT, so that you can understand clearly the processes that are involved when procuring that work on behalf of the Education Directorate and on behalf of government.

**MS LAWDER:** That would be great, although do not forget that you are the minister responsible overall.

**Ms Berry:** It would be entirely inappropriate, Ms Lawder, for a minister to interfere in any procurement process.

**MS LAWDER:** I am not suggesting that you interfere; I am merely saying that the buck stops with you, eventually.

**Ms Berry:** Yes, and the Auditor-General has provided a report, and the government will respond to that report on procurement processes in the ACT government, as appropriate.

**Ms Haire:** Just to follow on from the minister's comments about the Auditor-General's report, the protocol with Auditor-General's reports is that the minister is informed of the process but has no visibility of the content until it is tabled in the Legislative Assembly. I am just confirming that that is the process. In terms of the processes for tenders for major infrastructure projects, I will ask Mr Matthews to take you through that, Ms Lawder.

**Mr Matthews:** Chair, I should also acknowledge that I have read and understood the privilege statement. I did not do that earlier.

Your questions go to the conduct of the actual procurement process. The Auditor-General's report fully documents the conduct of the Campbell Primary School procurement. It also describes that what occurs is that a tender evaluation team is constructed to undertake an assessment of tenderers against an evaluation plan. All public servants are responsible for making sure that their decisions are fair and free, and are covered by the Public Sector Management Act in terms of their obligations as public servants to act with probity and fairness.

The way that the tender processes work in a construction environment is that, as part of the assessment, a range of technical reports are produced, including advice on the designs, the sustainability and the finances of individual projects. All of those contribute to being inputs into the decision that the tender evaluation team makes by way of a recommendation to a delegate. The delegate is then responsible for taking the decision under the Financial Management Act and satisfying themselves of the outcome and the overall value for money and best interests of the territory being supported with the preferred outcome.

Those processes in relation to this were documented, and the Auditor-General has, obviously, made a number of recommendations around how those processes can be strengthened to support confidence in the procurement being undertaken by the government, and the government will respond.

**MS LAWDER:** Mr Matthews, you said that was well documented; but the Auditor-General's report said that those processes were characterised by "informal, uncontrolled and poorly documented" communication. That seems quite at odds with your statement that that was well documented. We are talking about large amounts of public money here, and there appears to be quite a breakdown in roles and responsibilities, and their definitions.

**Ms Berry:** As I said, the government will respond to the Auditor-General's report in due course. I have asked Mr Matthews to provide information on the process, generally around procurement for schools and upgrades for schools in the ACT. I think he has done that. If there is something in more detail that you would like to know about how that occurs, then that might be useful for the committee. The government will respond to the Auditor-General's report in due course, and that responsibility will lie with Minister Chris Steel.

**MS LAWDER:** Absolutely; we would expect nothing different, but are you refusing to answer further questions on this topic from a committee of the Assembly at this time?

**Ms Berry:** Ms Lawder, I did not say that I was refusing or that any of us were refusing; I was merely pointing out that Mr Matthews was responding to your questions.

**MS LAWDER:** Sure; that is why I asked them.

**MR HANSON:** Minister, have you read the Auditor-General's report?

**Ms Berry:** Yes, I have read the Auditor-General's report. I do not have it with me at the moment and I cannot respond to each page in detail.

**MR HANSON:** I am not going to ask you to but, having read that report, can you tell me what actions you have taken and the directorate has taken to make sure that this will not happen again and, indeed, is not happening across the board with other procurements?

**Ms Berry:** Yes. As I said, the government will respond to the report in due course. Of course the ACT government and every directorate of the government want to ensure that there is appropriate probity and transparency around all the work that we do, and we take very seriously the recommendations of the Auditor-General in reports such as this one. We will continue to ensure, as a government, that—

**MR HANSON:** But what are you doing? You are not actually giving me specific actions. What are you actually doing? You have read this report, you are aware of the problems, therefore, within this procurement. What are you doing to make sure that this is not systemic within the directorate and will not happen again?

**Ms Berry:** Thank you very much again for your question. The Education Directorate, specifically, is always ensuring that it has appropriate probity, transparency and governance around all the work that it does and will continue to do that.

**MR HANSON:** But that is not what the Auditor-General said and that is not what the Integrity Commissioner is saying. You are saying one thing—that we always make sure that this is happening—but what is very clear from what the Auditor-General said is that there was a breakdown here. I want to know what you are doing to make sure that this does not happen again. It is a reasonable question.

**THE CHAIR:** Minister, before you respond—Mr Hanson, this is an online hearing. It would be helpful to everyone if you could let the minister finish her answer before interjecting. Ms Berry.

**Ms Berry:** Thank you, Chair. As I said, the Education Directorate is always wanting to ensure that it has appropriate governance and transparency around all the work that it does. I will ask Ms Haire to talk through some of the work that has been happening in that space.

**Ms Haire:** I should have said earlier that I have read and noted the privilege statement too. Apologies for that.

As the minister said, the government will provide its formal response to the Legislative Assembly. What I am about to speak about does not pre-empt the government's decisions in any way. The Education Directorate takes all reports from the Auditor-General very seriously and, in particular, as a learning organisation, where a report identifies where there could be improvements in the process, we are determined to learn from those and to take action.

The report was received in December 2021, as you are aware. We have commenced a process, alongside our colleagues in Major Projects Canberra, to look at a range of

process improvements, which I will list for you: firstly, looking at how we can improve communication protocols, the role of probity advisers and change management processes; secondly, looking at improving protocols and practices for record-keeping; thirdly, reviewing protocols for communication tenderers and stakeholders; and lastly, identifying areas for training and professional development. We are also looking at the role of probity advisers in all major projects since we received the report. They are immediate actions which do not pre-empt the government's response to the six recommendations that are in the Auditor-General's report.

**MS LEE:** Minister, can I take you back to a statement that you mentioned in your previous answer to Ms Lawder's question, because I think it is extraordinary that you have stated that there is nothing wrong with the procurement process except that the Auditor-General has made some recommendations to tighten the process. It is just extraordinary that you are able to portray it in that way when it is a scathing report by the Auditor-General. It was serious enough that the Integrity Commissioner has sought broad, public input on reasonable, suspected corruption in the ACT government procurement processes.

Do you think that, despite the fact that you are standing by "the government will respond", your words just now in that answer are, indeed, despite what you say, pre-empting the government's response?

**Ms Berry:** I do not really appreciate being verballed in the committee in such a way. What I suggested was that the process that was—

**MS LEE:** Is that not what you said?

**Ms Berry:** The process that was followed was the procurement process in place. However, the Auditor-General has identified that there are issues with that process around probity and has suggested that that process needs to be checked. I have not said that those are the exact words in the Auditor-General's report, but in the recommendation that is generally what the Auditor-General is suggesting.

The ACT government is taking that recommendation seriously and will respond in due course. The Education Directorate has already, as Ms Haire has pointed out, put a number of additional processes in place which do not pre-empt the ACT government's response but, as you know with Auditor-General's reports, the ACT government responds in due course.

**MS LEE:** And when will that be, minister?

**Ms Berry:** Not before a committee hearing but when it is required to, which I believe is a four-month period from the time that the report was tabled. I can say that that will definitely be the case and, if you have more questions around procurement generally, those are the kinds of things that you might need to ask of Minister Steel through his responsibilities in Major Projects Canberra. As Ms Haire has pointed out, the Education Directorate has already put in a number of additional measures to ensure that we are responding in a way for the Education Directorate to ensure that there is improved governance and transparency around the work that they do around procurement.

**MS LEE:** In relation to this specific Auditor-General's report that was tabled in December, did the Education Directorate refer the matter—it was a pretty serious matter—to the Integrity Commission?

**Ms Haire:** No, we did not.

**MS LEE:** Why was that? What was the reason for that decision?

**Ms Haire:** We did not consider that it was a requirement. We did not consider it met the requirements for a referral to the Integrity Commission.

**MS LEE:** The Auditor-General's report which found that the procurement process lacked probity, that tenderers were not dealt with fairly, impartially and consistently, and raised alarm about the lack of note-keeping even—you did not consider that to meet the bar to even just refer it to the Integrity Commission?

**Ms Haire:** No, we did not at that time.

**MS LEE:** What is the bar?

**Ms Haire:** I do not have the Integrity Commission information in front of me, I am afraid. I would have to check the exact words for you but I think it relates to “serious misconduct and corruption”. I think they are the words but I would have to come back and check that for you. Apologies.

**MS LEE:** What is the process that is in place within the Education Directorate to make sure that it is assessed appropriately so that any delegate is able to look at issues that come up like this and is able to make a judgement call about whether it is to be referred to the Integrity Commission?

**Ms Haire:** I might ask Mr Matthews to speak to that, because there is a whole-of-government process that relates to that, that every directorate follows, which is called the disclosure process. I will ask Mr Matthews to describe that to you.

**THE CHAIR:** Mr Matthews, before you begin—members, we have been on this line of questioning for a substantial period of time at this point. I will give you a few more minutes and then we will need to move on. Mr Matthews.

**Mr Matthews:** One further bit of context I would like to add is that we were certainly aware that the way this Auditor-General's audit was initiated was through a disclosure to the Auditor-General. Through the course of the audit and subsequently, we did understand that the Integrity Commission had line of sight of this particular matter. Obviously our role as public servants was to engage with and fully cooperate with the Auditor-General, which we did, and we made available all relevant documentation that was requested and made available all relevant staff to participate and give sworn evidence. Everybody that was requested to do so by the Auditor-General willingly participated and all documents that were requested were willingly provided.

Ultimately, the conduct of the Integrity Commission and the requirements for referral

are a judgement call for individuals to determine whether they understand the threshold to be met regarding corruption and serious misconduct, as Ms Haire has outlined.

I am in no way downplaying the seriousness of the Auditor-General's report and the issues that were raised. The report highlights a range of process failings and improvements and there are six recommendations that are directed at Major Projects Canberra, as the minister has mentioned, which provide a whole-of-government focus to process improvement regarding the conduct of procurement activities. We have also initiated the steps that Ms Haire talked about

Just very briefly, I can advise that, in the recent procurement that I have already referred to today for the Margaret Hendry school expansion and the high school, I am the delegate for that process and I commissioned independent probity advice for that tender evaluation panel, which involved that panel being briefed about probity issues and the independent probity adviser actually being involved with or sitting in and observing the conduct of that tender evaluation team's deliberations and providing advice to me as a delegate on the integrity or probity of that process—to give you a real-time example of the measures that have been introduced with the latest major procurement process that the directorate has undertaken.

Ultimately, after the committee's report has been tabled and the government response occurs, the directorate is fully aware that other entities, including the Integrity Commission, are likely to want to undertake their own reviews of or investigation into this matter—and of course they are free to do so. As is the case with the Auditor-General's reports, the directorate and individuals will fully cooperate with those.

**MR HANSON:** Minister, the Integrity Commissioner has put out a press release and made comments about concerns that this may be endemic. What steps have you taken to make sure that what has happened here in this instance has not happened previously? Have you commenced an audit of previous procurement processes to make sure that this is not something that has happened on a regular basis within the directorate? If it has happened once, has it happened before and, if so, how many times, and what steps are you taking now to review that?

**Ms Berry:** I will ask Ms Haire to respond to that because these kinds of procurement processes are within the Education Directorate's remit. I will ask Ms Haire to respond to that.

**MR HANSON:** Before you do, minister, if something has gone wrong within your directorate, you are the minister, have you not then said, "Hang on, do we make sure that we are squeaky-clean on all the other procurements.?" Would not you issue a directive or something like that or not?

**Ms Berry:** We have definitely, as Ms Haire has noted, made some adjustments to the way those processes work within the Education Directorate. I think that is a fair question that you have asked. I understand the Integrity Commissioner has suggested that he is considering an investigation around procurement across the ACT government. As Mr Matthews said, if that is the case, then of course we will comply

with it. That would be the Integrity Commissioner doing the job that they are supposed to do. We welcome that.

It is the same with Auditor-General's reports and suggestions that they make. We always appreciate recommendations where directorates, including the Education Directorate can do things better and improve on the work that it does. I will ask Ms Haire to respond to the specifics of your question.

**Ms Haire:** I will just note that the statement from the Integrity Commission was released, I believe, on Wednesday morning; so we have only, like everybody else, just become aware of that. We will take the necessary steps to consider the implications for us and of course, as Mr Matthews has said, cooperate fully with any requests for information. More importantly, as I have already outlined, what we have done already is identify the steps to improve our internal processes immediately without pre-empting the government's response to the Auditor-General's report.

We are also working closely with our colleagues across government, not just with Major Projects Canberra but also with Procurement ACT who are undertaking a process of continuous improvement in procurement practice, which includes professional learning, with learning modules including probity and procurement; training sessions; and the development of a procurement capability framework. A probity and procurement guide was published in January 2021 and further advice on procurement was released in January.

**MR HANSON:** That is good work and I am glad to hear that is happening. My question specifically then is: looking at previous procurements, the Education Directorate has spent a lot of money on refurbishments and on new schools. I am looking back retrospectively over a period of time, be it three years, five years or however long it is, to make sure that there are no other incidents of this. Surely you are not going to wait until the Integrity Commissioner comes knocking on the door? You have been alerted to a breakdown within your own directorate. Are you not now going to look at whether this has happened in other procurements or are you going to sort of wait for that knock on the door?

**Ms Berry:** No. As Ms Haire has pointed out, there have been a number of changes made within the Education Directorate, which she has described in a lot of detail to you. The ACT government, through Major Projects Canberra, will respond to the Auditor-General's report as well, and the Education Directorate will be making sure that previous procurement processes do meet with the ACT government's general direction around procurement, as it occurs, in its response to the Auditor-General's report.

Following the Auditor-General's report I think we have already done a lot of work in improving those for future projects. But I do not think there is any issue with the Education Directorate looking at previous procurement to ensure that they meet with the current procurement guidelines and then seeking to make improvements if there are more, following the ACT government's response in April.

**MR HANSON:** So you are going to be conducting some form of audit of previous procurements then; is that what you are saying?

**Ms Berry:** Definitely. I think it is appropriate for the Education Directorate to have a look at that. I do not think there is any issue with that. As Ms Haire said, the Education Directorate is a learning organisation and is always there for continuous improvement in all its work, not just within our schools in teaching, but also in how the Education Directorate conducts—

**MR HANSON:** And in consideration of those previous procurements, have you considered then what time frame you are going to look back over and the procurements over what amount? What is the dollar amount for a procurement to be looked at, and retrospectively over what period?

**Ms Berry:** I think I will take those suggestions of yours on notice. There has been no kind of detailed decision-making around time frames and the like that you have described in those suggestions. I think I might just take your suggestions on board and the Education Directorate will consider a way forward.

**MS LEE:** Minister, will you commit to getting an independent—

**THE CHAIR:** Ms Lee, members, it has been 10 minutes since I interjected about this line of questioning and the length. I must insist that we move down the line of members. Mr Hanson with a substantive question.

**MR HANSON:** Still on Campbell Primary School, looking at the impact on the students of what has happened, a number of parents have come forward and raised significant concerns about the impact on students there, their wellbeing, their ability to learn, cramped classrooms, the library being used as a classroom, outside playtime being reduced—and if I can quote from one of the parents, “I think students and teachers at Campbell deserve better”—and the treatment that they are getting from the ACT government. There are complaints about the directorate not getting back to parents who have made a complaint. How do you respond to that? There is a real problem with the way this procurement was done, but then it seems that this is dragging on and is disrupting and disadvantaging kids. What are you doing to mitigate that?

**Ms Berry:** Any school upgrade does provide disruption to the school community, absolutely, and I completely understand the concerns that parents and young people and teachers may be experiencing at Campbell Primary School. I remember when my children were in primary school during an upgrade—an expansion of MacGregor Primary School actually—we went through similar kinds of processes. I do understand and completely empathise with that school community about the disruption that these kinds of construction projects can cause.

They are also opportunities for young people and teachers to use the experience as a learning experience as well. But I do know that it has been quite a stressful period and quite frustrating for that parent community.

**MR HANSON:** But what are you doing to mitigate the effect? What you just said there is, “Other kids have been through this: so they have got to suck it up and use it as a learning experience.”

**Ms Berry:** If you had not interrupted I could have completed my answer to your question. I actually met with the parents from the school yesterday to hear from them directly about their concerns and have committed to go and visit the school to better understand some of the issues that they have raised. I was able to visit the school during the project's construction period, but I am going to go back to the school and visit with the school and then directly respond to the parent community and the school community about the concerns that they have raised. That is our plan going forward.

Thank you very much for your question. I have appreciated very much having the opportunity to hear directly from some of the parents from the school about the impact that the construction has had and have committed to meet back with them and talk about a way forward. Perhaps I could get Mr Matthews to talk through some of the time frames that we are talking about here, moving forward.

**Mr Matthews:** I did make a visit to the school yesterday and spoke with the principal, and the principal took me around to all parts of the school—both the new areas that are currently being constructed and the current school—and showed me how it was being used, and was able to show me the amazing efforts of the school staff to maximise the learning experience for their students during these construction works.

We really do understand that the school community wants the work to be finished and they want their school back. They want the completed result. We are working towards a timetable that the new construction and the landscaping work will be finished for the beginning of term 2 this year so that, after the school holidays, the school community will be able to occupy their new learning communities and also additional outdoor space.

Then we will work with the community around the other parts of the school site, including the removal of the relocatable learning units that were put on site during the construction phase, and also looking at what other enhancements we can make, particularly to the outdoor facilities that the school has requested us to look at.

**MR HANSON:** Parents have been raising these issues for months and then it takes an article in the *Canberra Times* before you go out to the school and the minister meets with the parents. Why is the Education Directorate so unresponsive to parents? They have been complaining and I quote, "The directorate has not responded to many of our emails, so it is really disappointing." All of a sudden, once it is in the media, there is this flurry of activity. Why have you and the directorate and the minister taken so long to respond to the parents?

**Mr Matthews:** With respect, there has been ongoing communication with the school and with the principal. Of course we are responsive to concerns that are expressed. If the school community are saying that they need more information or they do not know what is going on, of course we will redouble our efforts to make sure that we can address those concerns. We very much are in the last phase of a very difficult and prolonged project, and we do appreciate the frustration that comes with that.

It might be worthwhile to briefly mention that one of the reasons why this project has been extended is that the project was initiated when the government acted very

quickly to demolish the junior school building which had friable asbestos in it, and made a very quick decision to take action to provide temporary learning space for the school community and to act quickly to demolish that building and to relocate students.

It was then always going to have a time lag associated with the next phase of getting the resources and undertaking the construction project to essentially replace that school infrastructure, and that is really what has occurred since the beginning of 2021 when the contractors have been on site. We are very confident that overall, at the end of this project, the school community will have much-improved school infrastructure.

We do appreciate the impact on the school community during the construction phase, certainly exacerbated by COVID. That is actually more than a general statement. We have had periods where there were confirmed COVID cases on site on this particular project that resulted in it having to stop and, as I have mentioned, more than 100 days of rain delay. We very much appreciate that, given the combined impact of all that stuff, the community is really looking for a very clear exit and a very clear understanding of what the end outcome will look like for them. That is how we are engaging with them.

**MS LAWDER:** You mentioned, Mr Matthews, that there had been some COVID in the school and that had impacted on the construction a bit, but we also read in the article yesterday that children have had their outside playtime limited, I think to 30 minutes, with half the school using the playground at one time and the other half the other time because the construction is taking up a significant amount of space. In terms of the mental and physical health of children and the fact that you would presume that playing outside may be even more COVID safe than being inside the classroom, have you done any thinking about or any work on the impact on children of having that outside time shortened to 30 minutes?

**Mr Matthews:** Ms Lawder, I can confirm that I spoke about the break times with the principal when I was at the school yesterday. What the principal confirmed was that her decision was based on the overall management of the school. Campbell Primary School previously had longer breaks than other equivalent primary schools, so the decision to shorten the breaks was a school decision. In terms of the phasing of break times for different cohorts, that is a very normal practice across all of our schools, so it is not, in fact, very common that all parts of the school community have their breaks at the same time. It is very regular that that can be phased. We definitely appreciate, though, that the reduction in outdoor space has affected this school community.

It does have a nearby oval, a very large oval, as well as some neighbouring tennis courts and some other outdoor play space. In saying that, I am absolutely acknowledging that the school have lost some of their outdoor spaces during this construction and they will be very happy to get them back at the end of the project, but there have been outdoor facilities and the ability for children to play outside.

**MS LAWDER:** Just finally, if I may, one last question. It was also, I think, discussed in that article that some classes moved into the library. The library went to the staffroom. At a time when teachers have absolutely stepped up and done a heroic job under difficult circumstances, where is the staffroom now for the teachers at Campbell Primary School?

**Mr Matthews:** It is true that the year 5/6 cohort is using what was the former library and the library has relocated to what was the staffroom. That space is currently being shared by staff and the library facilities. I would emphasise as well, Ms Lawder, and for the committee, that the way that libraries are operating during COVID is quite different because of the cohorting arrangements that exist within schools. In order to manage COVID, we are keeping cohorts separated. In fact, many schools are adopting a takeaway service, if you like, in the way that they are using their library, where books are going into the learning areas and classroom areas. So the traditional use of the library has also been affected by the cohorting arrangements. The advice that I got from the principal was certainly that it is not ideal for that to occur but that it was satisfactory for the current circumstances.

**MS LAWDER:** Thank you.

**THE CHAIR:** A new line of questioning, Ms Lee?

**MS LEE:** Thank you, Chair.

**Ms Berry:** Sorry, Chair, before Ms Lee goes to her question—

**THE CHAIR:** Yes, Minister.

**Ms Berry:** I just wanted to clarify: Mr Hanson suggested that we had met with the parents only after the *Canberra Times* article, but that was actually not the case. The meeting had been arranged prior to the *Canberra Times* article, after receiving correspondence from the parents from the school.

**THE CHAIR:** Thank you. Ms Lee.

**MS LEE:** Thank you, Chair. Minister, I welcome your commitment to undertaking an audit in relation to whether any other procurements within your directorate have had issues. Will you commit to ensuring that it is an independent auditor that undertakes this audit?

**Ms Berry:** Ms Lee, I will take that on notice because the suggestions from Mr Hanson around what the Education Directorate might look at have not been confirmed yet. We will just look into that, and then I can provide some more information about what the audit might look like.

**MS LEE:** Okay. If that is the case, will you commit to publishing the terms of reference or the ambit of the audit publicly?

**Ms Berry:** Ms Lee, it might be appropriate to wait until after the government has responded to the Auditor-General's report before the Education Directorate firms up a position on considering previous procurement processes, because in the ACT government response there might be other suggestions or other actions that would include more broad responses, rather than just the Education Directorate. If you could just bear with us for the time being, then I can provide some more information.

**MS LEE:** Okay. Just so that I understand, and for the benefit of the committee, when you said previously that you thought it was an appropriate step for the Education Directorate to undertake an audit, you are now clarifying that answer to say “subject to the government’s response to the Auditor-General’s report”?

**Ms Berry:** Only in the case that there might be something else that we do not want to add on later and attach to an audit process—that it might be broader than just the Education Directorate. I think it might be appropriate to wait. We have said we are going to do an audit process. As to what that will look like, we will wait for the government to respond to the Auditor-General’s report more fully, because it is really an all-of-government Auditor-General’s report, although it was focusing on this particular procurement process at Campbell. So if you could just bear with us for a little bit longer on that one, then we can provide some more detail.

**MS LEE:** All right. Thank you, Minister. Given the findings of the Auditor-General’s report about the decisions that were made by the delegate in this case, what has happened to that delegate in terms of either disciplinary action or referral of that delegate to the Integrity Commission?

**Ms Berry:** Mr Matthews, can I ask you to provide some information there, if we have any?

**Mr Matthews:** Minister and Ms Lee, it would be inappropriate to canvass what action or otherwise would be taken in relation to an individual associated with a finding—

**MS LEE:** With all due respect, Mr Matthews, we are talking about a scathing Auditor-General’s report. It has been tabled; it is public. It is serious enough that the Integrity Commission has commented. I am not asking you to name the individual; I am not asking you to go into specifics; I am specifically asking what is happening. I think the public have every right to know, when a scathing report like this comes out, what is going to happen to the delegate who has made that decision.

**Mr Matthews:** Obviously, we would not want to pre-empt the outcome either, Ms Lee, in terms of any subsequent process, but I can advise that we have engaged with relevant agencies on the implications of the audit report. I am not in a position to be any more specific around the outcomes for any individual public servant.

**MS LEE:** So, from the directorate perspective, you have not taken any disciplinary action against the delegate; is that right?

**Mr Matthews:** Ms Lee, in terms of disciplinary action, I am happy to explain to the committee what is involved with that, according to the EBA, and how that process would work. Of course, that is fundamentally based on the principle of natural justice and procedural fairness. That would involve a properly constituted process; the ability for all parties to be afforded that natural justice, to give any evidence or supporting information; and, again, for that matter to be provided, through the appropriate HR processes, for final decision. So it is pre-emptive and would be pre-emptive to foreshadow the outcome of any process.

**MS LEE:** I am not asking you to foreshadow the outcome; I am asking what action

has been taken. You have just given a very good outline of the generic process that is involved under the EBA. I am asking where it is up to in this instance.

**Mr Matthews:** I refer to my earlier answer, Ms Lee: that we have engaged with the appropriate external agencies on that. I am not in a position to talk about that any further.

**MS LAWDER:** Could I just make the point, Mr Matthews, that surely the tenderers in that procurement process thought they would have natural justice and procedural fairness as well?

**Mr Matthews:** Absolutely, Ms Lawder, and that is, in part, what the Auditor-General report itself provided them; it provided them with the opportunity to have the process fully examined and also to participate in that process, and they did. The tenderer that you are referring to had the opportunity to contribute to that process and make comment in the final report, and they did so.

**MS LEE:** Yes, but they missed out on the tender, didn't they? Mr Matthews, can I just confirm that you are now refusing to answer any further questions about the process and what action has been or is being taken?

**Mr Matthews:** In relation to an individual—

**MS LEE:** I have never asked you to name the individual; I have asked whether there has been any disciplinary action taken or whether any is being taken.

**MR DAVIS:** Chair, I am just noting the time. We have spent over an hour on this subject. Ms Lee has now asked the same question three times and I think Mr Matthews answered. I have a number of questions that—

**MS LEE:** I just wanted to confirm that he is now refusing to take any more questions. Is that right? You are just refusing to answer them?

**THE CHAIR:** Mr Davis, I share your concern as well. We have been on this topic for about 50 minutes now.

**MS LEE:** And I am happy to wrap up, Chair. I am just confirming that he is now refusing to answer those questions. Is that right?

**THE CHAIR:** Ms Lee, you are a visitor in this committee. You are here by leave. I am the chair. I am running this meeting. It is time for a new line of questioning.

Minister, the annual report noted that, due to NAPLAN testing not occurring in 2020, there are no performance data or other measures of success available to parents, students or teachers for that year. Are there any plans to address this issue if NAPLAN is disrupted in the future?

**Ms Berry:** Thank you, Mr Pettersson. Yes, NAPLAN was obviously interrupted by COVID. It was a decision by education ministers nationally that NAPLAN not go ahead at that time. That is something that would be considered again by education

ministers if it was the case that having a national standardised test like NAPLAN occur would create inequality of outcomes. That will be considered closer to a time when we know where each state and territory is sitting as far as its response to COVID goes. Perhaps I can ask Mr Gotts to provide some more information about that plan more generally.

**Ms Haire:** Thank you, Minister. Sorry, Mr Gotts. I just wanted to note, Mr Pettersson, that NAPLAN is not the only way in which we understand students' learning; nor is it the prime way in which we assess the growth and learning of our students. In the ACT we have continuous formative assessment, which is a significant element of the teaching and learning approach that we take on board. We have professional learning communities of teachers who share their information, discuss learning data and plan together to ensure that children are learning.

While NAPLAN, as the minister often says, is a point-in-time indicator, it is certainly not the prime source of information for teaching and learning. However, as Mr Gotts will set out, NAPLAN did take place last year. Discussions are going on, with the expectation that NAPLAN will occur this year, subject to the pandemic of course. However, we do not rely solely on the NAPLAN data in order to understand how our children are learning. In fact, I am very proud of the approaches that our teachers take every day to personalise their learning. When Mr Gotts has finished, you might like to hear from Ms Kate McMahan in more detail about the way we support teachers to work together to assess and personalise the learning for children in the ACT.

**Mr Gotts:** Thank you, Ms Haire. Before going on, I will just note that I have read the privilege statement and understand it.

I will confine my comments to your questions in relation to the conduct of NAPLAN. As Ms Haire said, it did go ahead last year. The ACT is wholly online for the conduct of NAPLAN and has been since the start of NAPLAN online. We are currently quite deep in consultations and preparations for the conduct of NAPLAN in 2022. That process kicked off before the end of last calendar year. We have a committee that involves the non-government sector, as well as us, that meets regularly to prepare for the conduct of NAPLAN.

Naturally, as part of that, we take account of things that might disrupt NAPLAN, be they low-level disruptions all the way up to a very significant disruption. That is, again, part of the planning this year. So far we are not seeing anything that suggests that NAPLAN will not go ahead this year, but we have one eye on the future and we cannot be absolutely certain, so we are preparing for anything. Thank you.

**Ms Haire:** Ms McMahan, did you want to speak a bit more about the other ways in which we assess children's learning outside of the NAPLAN process?

**Ms McMahan:** Certainly, Ms Haire. There are a range of different strategies that our teachers will employ on a regular basis to understand students' growth and learning, and their next steps in learning. Formative assessment is the strongest tool that we use when we look at how a child is developing and what they need for their learning. We do lots of whole class formative assessment and we do individualised formative assessment for students so that we are able to determine what they need to learn, to

take that next step in learning.

Teachers plan together in their teaching teams, whether that is in a faculty or whether it is in a year level teaching team, to understand the strategies that they are using and their success with students so that students are making the significant progress that they need to be making. That can be with teacher-designed assessment tools. It can be also with some commercially available assessment tools, some of which our schools use through ACER. The Australian Council for Educational Research develops a whole lot of resources, performance assessment tests, and also lots of reading assessments and mathematics assessments. It really does depend on the program that the schools are putting in place at the time.

All of our assessment is so that we can monitor and gauge how students are learning and what we need to do, as teachers, to improve that learning and take those next steps. All of that learning is then reported through to parents, utilising the achievement standards of the Australian curriculum. We report to parents formally, twice a year, in a written format, using those achievement standards and an A to E scale, and we provide written commentary to parents about students' progress. Schools will also have a range of other ways of communicating students' learning, whether that is on a daily basis, through applications like Seesaw to share learning, or whether it is through parent-teacher or three-way conferences that our schools hold on a regular basis.

**THE CHAIR:** Wonderful. In the annual report, your strategic objectives are outlined for measuring student growth. None of those forms of measurement have made their way into the annual report. The strategic objectives have just kind of been written off for the year, saying, "Without NAPLAN we do not have a good answer." Is there a way that other forms of assessment or measurement could have made it into the annual report?

**Ms Haire:** Thank you, Mr Pettersson. As Mr Gotts said, we do not have results for a number of the measures because of NAPLAN not going ahead in 2020. But it did go ahead in 2021, so those measures will be reported against in 2021. However, I think what you are saying may well have struck a note with Minister Berry, who has championed, through the education ministers' meeting, developing a national formative assessment tool where we might ultimately have a different approach to having nationally comparable assessment of students. That is a project that has been underway for a number of years. I do not know if you want to speak about that briefly, Mr Gotts?

The other point is that, in terms of the annual report, the measures were already in place and our report reflects the published measures. In the future we may well look to broaden those measures to include other tools such as a national online formative assessment system, when it is developed.

**Mr Gotts:** Thank you, Ms Haire. Just to provide some additional detail, one of the strategic indicators was not affected by COVID, in the sense that it did go ahead. That was the indicator on student identification. It is in there as a lead indicator on the basis of improvements in the strength of a student's identification with their school, a sense of belonging, as it were. It is a lead indicator for better engagement in school et cetera.

So that indicator did go ahead. The headline figure shifted from 60 per cent of students reporting a very strong identification with their school up to 66 per cent.

That was a very large increase. Given that the survey was conducted very shortly after students went back from a period of remote learning in 2020, it is possible that what we were seeing was a reflection of students understanding the value that being physically at school had in their lives. It was a burst of joyfulness, as it were, at being back at school, if I can use that non-technical term. So that is the indicator that did go ahead.

**THE CHAIR:** All right.

**MR DAVIS:** There has been a lot of conversation nationally and locally about the value of NAPLAN. What is standing in the way of the ACT, should we choose to, scrapping NAPLAN altogether and using some of these other testing and performance measures that Ms McMahon has explained?

**Ms Berry:** Thank you, Mr Davis. It is part of our funding agreement with the federal government that NAPLAN is conducted annually. Believe me, I have asked that question a number of times—how that could possibly occur and whether we could develop our own formative assessment tool which would give us the information that we need that supports children in their learning, gives teachers the data that they need and advises parents about how their children are performing, beyond the narrow margins that NAPLAN considers.

However, as Ms Haire said, there is work continuing on the development of a formative assessment tool that goes more broadly beyond maths and numeracy and English and literacy, which would make a difference to young people's learning and teachers being able to have that really important informative data. As Ms McMahon said, teachers know their students best and they are continually assessing in a range of different ways. The best way to understand a child's learning within a school is for the parent to engage with the teacher, and to understand that the young person can broaden their horizon in a range of different ways, beyond just the point-in-time test that NAPLAN is.

**MR DAVIS:** Thank you, Minister. I have another quick supplementary on that, probably from the directorate level. Do our teachers value NAPLAN? I guess I am interested in getting some feedback from the staff directly on whether there are teachers across our system that actually do value this as one of their many ways to measure student performance, or whether, on the whole, teachers are not huge fans? I am curious about what feedback you have received from the educators.

**Ms Haire:** Thank you, Mr Davis. There are certainly different views in the teaching profession. The one thing we could say for certain is that I have not ever met a teacher who thinks that NAPLAN is the be-all and end-all of assessment. In fact, more would perhaps think otherwise.

In addition to being part of a project to develop a national online formative assessment tool, the ACT has been part of a project, alongside our colleagues in New South Wales, Victoria and Queensland, to look at how the existing NAPLAN could be

improved. That involved consultation with the workforce to get their views about how it could be made more effective and more meaningful.

We certainly know that there are strong views from some industrial representatives that techniques such as formative assessment are much more effective than a point-in-time, one day of the year assessment. I might ask Ms McMahon if she has any other reflections on that, or if that has pretty much summarised the case.

**Ms McMahon:** Ms Haire, that has probably summarised it. I think NAPLAN can be used as one piece of information alongside a range of other tools and pieces of information that schools and teachers use, and that parents use as well. I think you have probably summed it up really well, Ms Haire.

**Ms Berry:** Mr Davis, I can supplement that. The perspective from teachers and from some parents who have provided feedback to me is that the data is one useful tool, as Ms McMahon said, for teachers to use. The most disagreeable thing that I have feedback from school communities about is the whole kind of circus and palaver around NAPLAN results and the pitting of schools against each other, based on that very, very narrow assessment tool.

For me, that has been the most important part of my work in trying to evolve NAPLAN into a more modern tool that actually goes beyond that narrow margin and provides some good, positive feedback, rather than the whole reporting circus around it, which leads to some inequality within our school communities because of the way that they are reported on. For me, that has been the main issue, really. That is what I hear from the community, teachers and parents as well—that that is probably their main concern with how NAPLAN is reported on online.

**MR HANSON:** Regarding the Auditor-General's report into performance information in ACT public schools, I think page 88 of that report had a survey of principals, and only 10 per cent of principals did not agree with the statement that NAPLAN data is useful in supporting their decision-making. So I assume that it is useful, if that is what the principals are saying.

**Ms Berry:** That is right. One of many, Mr Hanson.

**MR HANSON:** Sure. On "one of many", there are other measures. The annual report goes to ATAR results, students getting ATARs of 60 or above and 90 or above. I notice that when you compare 2019-20 and 2020-21, there has been a decline in both of those. ATARs seem to be sliding backwards. Then there is a big disparity, and that blows out for boys, when you break it down on gender lines. Could you explain why ATAR results are seemingly getting worse in this annual report, compared to previously, and why the gender gap?

**Ms Berry:** Thank you, Mr Hanson. I will ask Mr Watson to provide some advice on that question. Thank you, Mr Watson.

**Mr Watson:** I have read and acknowledge the privilege statement. Thank you for the question. There are a range of annual variations in data in senior secondary that occur over time. At the moment it would be very difficult to ascertain specifically why those

annual variations have occurred. Our role here is, for the most part, to track and report on the data that comes from schools. I can say, though, that in the context of the last two years, overall, the maintenance of outcomes in years 11 and 12 in schools around ATARs has actually been outstanding, the way the schools have responded in engaging students and keeping them on.

It is interesting that, when you look at the whole picture of the ATAR distribution, there are slight variations from a gender perspective at different levels, but overall, in fact, there is a reversal of that difference in terms of girls and boys. There are a range of factors, I presume, that go into that. At this stage, it has not been our role to analyse that in depth, but it is something that we and the directorate are vigilant about in looking at that. For instance, in the other percentage bands there is a higher degree of females who are working across that.

The other thing that I would say is that, overall, for the entire cohort of students in the context of ATAR nationally, the outcomes are outstanding, and we know that—

**MR HANSON:** There has been a decline; right? There has been a decline between the previous reporting period and this reporting period. Is there anything beyond COVID to explain that, or do you put it down to COVID?

**Mr Watson:** I would reserve judgement on whether it is COVID or not. I do not think it would be prudent for me to lay everything in the way of COVID.

**MR HANSON:** Who is looking at what the causal factors are, then? If it is not all down to COVID and there has been a decline, is there someone in the directorate that is saying, “Let’s look at what the other causes may be”? Is anyone doing that?

**Mr Watson:** That is not within my auspice or the auspice of the board.

**MR HANSON:** Whose auspice is it, then?

**Mr Watson:** The education sectors within the whole jurisdiction have responsibility for the educational programs within their own schools. Our role is to support them in that in any way that we can, obviously through the curriculum and assessments.

**MR HANSON:** Yes. I will go back to the minister or someone else, then. If it is not you, Mr Watson, who is it that is looking at that data to say, “Okay; there has been a slip. It is not all down to COVID; there is an issue here”? Is anyone looking at the cause of that issue?

**Ms Haire:** Mr Hanson, I will pass to Mr Gotts to make some comments about the approach that we take to measuring performance in the ACT and the indicators that we look at. I think the results that you are referring to at this point do not constitute a trend. The indicators that we do look at, which generally go to learning gain and equity in particular, are the focuses that we take in our evaluation work. Mr Gotts?

**Mr Gotts:** Thanks, Ms Haire. I will not go to the specifics of one year after another with regard to ATAR, because there are a lot of different factors that can make a difference between one year and the next. As Ms Haire said, it does not represent a

trend, so one needs to step back a little when looking at it. With regard to doing just that, stepping back, we look at what are the different causal factors that can have an influence on educational outcomes. There are many of these. A large number of them sit within the school gate and the classroom. They relate to teachers and how teachers carry out their roles. They relate to leadership in schools. They relate to the climate, if you like, of a school. There are also factors that contribute to educational outcomes that are associated with the students themselves.

It is generally and commonly understood that a student's background can have a significant influence on their educational outcome. So we look at that and take that into account. That also includes questions like student wellbeing. The extent to which a student's wellbeing varies over their educational journey or at any one time can have an influence on outcomes as well.

**MR HANSON:** I actually was not after a generic explanation. I was after an explanation about that gap in that particular year. If you do not have one, that is great. The other question I have is: specifically, when you look at NAPLAN, when you look at ATAR, across the board, in pretty much every year level and in almost every subject, boys are not doing as well as girls academically in ACT schools. That could be more broadly as well, I guess, not looking at the data nationally. Has anyone looked at that as an issue, examined what that gender gap is and what is being done about it?

**Mr Gotts:** My area certainly looks at all of the data in relation to, say, NAPLAN, and we disaggregate it by different groups, including by boys and girls. We look to see where those differences are. The causal factors behind them can be a bit more complex, so I have not got a ready-made answer on those. They can include things like the extent to which students treat a test as high stakes. For example, the minister—

**MR HANSON:** Yes, but why is there a gender difference in that? Why would boys see it differently? If you have looked at that data, you would see what I have seen, which is that when it comes to ATAR, when it comes to NAPLAN, boys seem to be falling behind, and certainly in the data on ATAR it is getting worse. Have you noticed that, and have you got any specific responses that are about closing the academic gender gap?

**Mr Gotts:** The closing the gap elements of it belong elsewhere. I look at the gap and try to determine from the data what might be the causal factors that contribute to any gap in any area, whether it is between boys or girls or any other combination.

**MR DAVIS:** Minister, in response to the very first question I asked you in this term of the Assembly, you committed to keeping the Tharwa Preschool open. Could you please talk me through the work that the directorate is doing to ensure that this commitment is sustainable into the long term?

**Ms Berry:** Thank you, Mr Davis. I think Mr Matthews might be able to provide some information there or, Mr Matthews, do you know who else in the directorate can provide that information?

**Mr Matthews:** Minister and Mr Davis, I might pass to my colleagues in the early childhood area. In general, the way that preschool enrolments work is that they are demand driven. What we look for is the enrolments that are being requested from parents and where their preferences are—where they would like to go to preschool. There is no doubt that with Tharwa there is always a question of: “How do we get a sustainable preschool group operating?” That is really very much the driver of how we can support that community and how we can offer that preschool service in Tharwa.

It is not so much a question, for example, about the asset or even whether we are trying to rationalise those programs, as such. It is really a question of: do we have enough children year on year to make viable preschool programs? And we want parents to feel comfortable and to access the programs that they would like to access. Tharwa does have a relationship with Charles Conder School. Of course, we want to support families to have a very clear pathway to a local priority enrolment area school. In short, Mr Davis, I want to assure you that that option of Tharwa Preschool is still on the table. It will be included in the upcoming enrolment period. Essentially, the formation of those groups is determined very much on a demand basis.

**MR DAVIS:** Okay. Could I just ask some clarifying questions on that, then? The Tharwa Preschool is in the priority enrolment area of the Charles Conder Primary School; is that right?

**Mr Matthews:** That is my understanding. My colleagues will correct me if I am wrong. But, yes, that is my clear understanding.

**MR DAVIS:** In terms of workshopping how to ensure that the preschool service at Tharwa remains viable, is there any relationship between the Tharwa Preschool and the Gordon Primary School?

**Mr Matthews:** There is a pretty close relationship with all of the primary schools in your electorate and in that part of the city, Mr Davis. We definitely want to make sure that families feel connected to their local schools and we certainly encourage collaboration between those different primary schools. I am not aware of the number of preschool programs that we have operating in Gordon. We could either take that on notice or perhaps one of my colleagues might be able to answer that. Again, it really comes down to a child-by-child placement situation when we are talking about these relatively small numbers. But we would encourage partnerships between those schools and finding the right outcome for each individual family.

**MR DAVIS:** Has there been any instance over the course of the last year where a student has been denied enrolment to a preschool program at either Charles Conder Primary or Gordon Primary that you are aware of?

**Mr Matthews:** I think we would have to take that on notice. My only other bit to that answer, Mr Davis, is that obviously it is a question of the numbers of those individual programs. They do have a maximum number of children that can participate. If there were any instances where children were unable to be enrolled, that would be the most likely factor.

**MR DAVIS:** I suppose what I am getting at, Mr Matthews, is that, in instances where families are making an effort to enrol preschool age children at either Charles Conder or Gordon Primary School, I would like to know, to the question of the viability of the Tharwa Preschool program long term: are those schools actively introducing the Tharwa Preschool program to those parents as an option?

**Mr Matthews:** We can provide some further information on that, Mr Davis. Essentially, the preschool enrolment process is managed at a directorate level. Obviously the parents indicate their interest in having their children enrolled in preschool and their preferences around where they would like that to occur, and that is where there can be some engagement and dialogue with those families. It is not the role of those schools per se to be recommending Tharwa, although, again, we do appreciate that those schools have a close relationship. I am sure that, when they are meeting with individual families, each of those schools would be trying to find the best outcome for that individual child.

**MR DAVIS:** My last question goes to the viability of that program. Is the directorate doing any work with the broader Tharwa community to reimagine, I suppose, how that asset could be utilised by the community, particularly outside of preschool hours?

**Mr Matthews:** I would have to take any community engagement on notice as well, Mr Davis. There are some particular challenges with that asset, as you are aware, in terms of its location. It is one of the assets where we have some planning in place regarding bushfires and extreme weather, for example. We have plans regarding how we can safely manage students and staff that are working at that site. From our perspective, though, it remains an important facility in that community. If there are ideas from that community about how to optimise its use, then we will be always happy to engage with them. But obviously its primary purpose is to provide preschool programs, where that is required by the local community.

**MR DAVIS:** Great. Thank you.

**MS LAWDER:** Mr Matthews, to summarise, did you say you cannot guarantee the ongoing viability of Tharwa Preschool because it is dependent on enrolments?

**Mr Matthews:** I believe I did not say that, but to clarify—

**MS LAWDER:** What did you say?

**Mr Matthews:** What I did say was that obviously a viable preschool program is dependent on a minimum number of students and this is a year-by-year assessment that occurs around enrolment. For example, if one family wanted to enrol in Tharwa Preschool and that would have difficulties in running an appropriate program for that child, that would be where we would normally be wanting to engage with that family to look at what options are available for them. Year by year, the number of preschool programs that are in operation depends on parental enrolments and parental preferences and that, in any given year, there may be a demand issue with the actual Tharwa program that, as I have said, we would address through individual engagement with families.

**MS LAWDER:** What is an optimal number for running the Tharwa Preschool? At what point might you decide not to keep it open because of the number of enrolments?

**Mr Matthews:** Some of my colleagues may have an answer to that but my experience with that is if we are looking at enrolments of fewer than six, for example, we have to look at making sure that we can consider can we meet the needs of each of those individual children and can we staff that program appropriately. But there is no hard rule on that question. It comes down to providing a quality offering and the needs of the individual children.

**MS LAWDER:** Just work with me. For example, if there was a very low number one year but you knew there were some other younger children coming through, would you try to keep the school open for that really difficult year in order to accommodate an upcoming cohort?

**Mr Matthews:** Just to be very clear, the school is always open. It is always available for preschool programs. To use your example, there could be a situation where a program does not operate one year but can operate the next year, based on cohort demands. That is how that would occur, and that is a good example of how the demand on those places may fluctuate on a year-by-year basis. But I would want to emphasise that the school remains open and the offering remains as part of our overall preschool program.

**MS LAWDER:** I want to ask about the current state of COVID cases in our ACT government schools, both for teachers and among students.

**Ms Berry:** The information that you are asking for around COVID cases in schools is publicly available. I have the latest numbers here. For the week ending Sunday, 20 February 2022, there were 1,001 cases of COVID-19 reported in 120 ACT schools, and that data includes both public and non-government schools from years K to 12.

**MS LAWDER:** Continuing on, we hear from time to time about teacher numbers in schools being below their full complement, even before COVID cases are taken into consideration. Can you update us on how many teachers have contracted COVID so far this school year and the impact that that has had on scheduling, especially where it may have caused split classes, and the impact on children's learning?

**Ms Berry:** I think what we can start with is providing advice on how the Education Directorate and schools are managing school communities where there are shortages of staff. There are different scenarios in place that are responded to, based on those different scenarios. I can ask Ms Haire to provide a bit more advice on that.

**Ms Haire:** Just as an opening kind of contextual comment, at the start of school going back we probably had some fears that due to the Omicron outbreak we may be in a situation where we would have so many teachers away that we may not be able to staff some of our schools. I am really happy to say that that has not been the case at any point so far in term 1 of 2022. And that is, we believe, a result of the really strong public health social measures that we have got in place within our schools, which includes very, very clear advice about nobody coming to school or work if they are exhibiting any symptoms whatsoever.

We have got the cohorting that was mentioned earlier, to ensure that there is not mixing between different groups of children, and we also have physical distancing and cohorting among the staff. In addition, we have got mask-wearing by teachers and also by secondary-age students. We have got the mandatory vaccination of all primary teachers and early childhood teachers. That is just part of the suite of measures that we have put in place to ensure that we kept our staff and students safe so that people could teach and learn in our ACT schools.

But we did also put in place, as the minister said, a range of scenarios should we reach the situation where there were more teachers unavailable because of illness. The first level is where there was only the average rate of absenteeism. However, we believed that there could be some instances where we had a higher rate of absenteeism and, to prepare for that, we established a central casual staffing pool, which we have on occasion drawn on over the last two weeks in particular. I will ask Mr Matthews to speak about that a little more in a moment.

What we have been able to do, due to the planning that we put in place, is support schools where they have had instances of teachers being away due to COVID, or for other reasons, so that we have not had what has happened in a couple of cases interstate where they have had to close a school or a class because they have not had any teachers. Mr Matthews, did you want to speak a little more about the arrangements for the centralised pool that we use in certain circumstances to support schools?

**Mr Matthews:** Yes. As part of an engagement with our school principals, the advice that they gave us was that they needed to be able to have some staffing support on fairly short notice due to any instances where staff members were required to isolate due to either having COVID or being a household contact. We have engaged with our casual relief pool and engaged with them to identify whether they would make themselves available to the schools that needed them. In exchange, what we have done is offered them secure work for a period so that they are available and can be deployed to where they are needed. There are currently 32 staff that are in that pool, and each of those staff works in a particular sector of schooling—primary, high school or college—and can work in a particular part of the ACT.

We are really happy to report that that has been a very useful buffer for our schools. On the occasions where they have had some additional staff absences, we have been able to deploy those staff to those schools and assist them to continue to operate as normally as possible. We have not, as Ms Haire was stating, had any situations where we have had to significantly alter the school operations since the beginning of term 1 due to staff shortages. Of course schools have been affected at different times by having positive cases reported to the school and people having to stay away from the school.

We really want to pay credit to our principals and to our school communities for how they have managed to work their way through some of the ups and downs of managing COVID in term 1. The directorate will continue to engage with our principals and also with our unions to make sure that we can continue to appropriately staff our schools.

**MR HANSON:** On the issue of COVID and masks, I note that the ACT is going to continue on with masks in high school. New South Wales is getting rid of masks in all years and then Victoria is just going to keep them for years 1 to 3, I understand. Who has made the decision to keep masks in schools, particularly in high school where the majority of students are vaccinated and I think it is mandatory for all teachers?

**Ms Berry:** Those decisions are made on advice by the Chief Health Officer. But I can ask Ms Haire to explain some of the reasoning behind that.

**Ms Haire:** Attachment 1, parts 1 and 2 of the current health directions, which are the public health restricted activities emergency directions 2022 No 2, sets out that all early childhood education care settings and schools must operate in accordance with the health guidelines for schools and early childhood education and care. Within those guidelines the parent authority is the direction from the CHO. She has mandated that early childhood and schools must comply with the schools and early childhood guidelines and she has considered that masks should continue as they currently are.

As I said earlier—and I might ask Ms Simmons to provide some examples of this—what the health guidelines for schools and early childhood set up is a suite of measures which, taken together, create a safe environment. Masks are not the only part of it. As you said, Mr Hanson, the mandatory vaccination of primary teachers and the availability of vaccination for children now from the age of five is another part of it, and the cohorting that we have talked about. In particular, our colleagues in Health would emphasise that the most important thing is people not coming to school or work if they have shown any symptoms and also the enhanced ventilation and outdoor learning. It is that suite of measures that provides the safe environment that has so far seen us through.

**MR HANSON:** I am happy not to go to the suite of measures. We have discussed that previously in committee, and I understand them and certainly support them. I suppose what I am trying to get my head across is why our neighbouring states are saying that it is not required but we are saying it is required. I accept that it is the Chief Health Officer who is going to make the health directions but I assume that, as you watch school students and teachers in Queanbeyan take their masks off and we keep ours on, there have been some questions on that. Do you anticipate how long that is going to go on for, or is that indefinite?

**Ms Haire:** I believe, in an interview on Wednesday, the Chief Health Officer said that she was going to look again at the guidelines I referred to for term 2, and I think she also indicated that she meets regularly with the chief health officers from Victoria and New South Wales. But those are really questions for her, not for us. As I have set out, this comes from the health directions.

**MS LAWDER:** The minister said earlier that the information on the number of COVID cases in ACT schools was publicly available. Could you help me out about where I would find that?

**Ms Berry:** Yes, it is on the Education ACT website.

**MR HANSON:** We have heard significant reports of teacher shortages, including the union's document that was put out last year that led to the task force being established. But in questioning in the Assembly the minister said, "I think there is only one vacancy."

**Ms Berry:** There was, that is true, yes.

**MR HANSON:** I am trying to get my head across how, on the one side, people are saying there is this chronic shortage of teachers but, on the other side, you are saying there is only one vacancy. Are there not enough positions for teachers, or what is the issue? I am not talking about the shorter term COVID issues, I am talking about the longer term concerns that have been raised by the union.

**Ms Berry:** I think your question was, "At the start of term 1 how many vacancies were there?" There was one permanent position vacant at the start of term 1, day 1 of this year. I think the Australian Education Union is identifying an issue that is confronting the rest of the country as well as the ACT, around new teachers entering and staying within the sector and what we can do to ensure that we have the appropriate number of relief teachers and appropriate number of teachers beginning as career teachers within our school community.

I think those were the issues that the Australian Education Union was alluding to, and that is why the Education Directorate has set up the task force, alongside the Education Union, to understand better what will the future be for ensuring that we have an appropriate number of teachers to ensure that we have schools staffed all the time, but also ensuring that we have the number of relief staff within our schools on any one day or week as well. I think there is a bit of a nuance around the response to the question that you asked, and I will get Ms Haire to respond to some of that as at today.

**Ms Haire:** The data from Tuesday, 22 February is still that there is one permanent vacancy in the ACT teaching force and there are 35 temporary vacancies. However, as the minister has said, we are working very closely in the task force with the AEU on a range of issues which go to ensuring that we have capacity to cover unplanned vacancies. In the time that the task force has been in place, we have completed 14 separate actions, from looking at the new educator program and how we might improve that to looking at a survey of our new educators. We have been working closely on how we convert current casual staff into ongoing positions and so on.

As the minister said, the task force is probably less focused on the specific issue of the vacancies and is looking at a range of issues around how we ensure that we have a secure, ongoing workforce in the context of a national teacher shortage and looking ahead in particular to ensure that we have the workforce that we need for growing Canberra in the future. It is looking both at some immediate solutions and also at medium- and long-term approaches.

**MR HANSON:** Have you looked at the issue of funding? When I look at the ROGS report, table 4A.14, Australian, state and territory government recurrent expenditure per student, over the decade the ACT is the only jurisdiction that has cut funding. All the other jurisdictions have increased funding. Is that a contributing factor here?

**Ms Berry:** There is quite a bit of detail in that question to respond to. It relates to the student resourcing standard. In the ACT our public schools have always been funded and continue to be funded above the student resourcing standard. Other states and territories are moving up towards the student resourcing standard where it had not previously been the case. There has been a program of ensuring equality of funding on that student resourcing standard across the country. I can ask Mr Matthews again to provide a little more detail about the student resourcing standard in the ACT and how that is being applied.

**Mr Matthews:** The minister has correctly identified that there is a national requirement and, in fact, a set of national agreements which outline how school funding occurs and what the contribution is of the commonwealth and the state governments for both public and private schools.

**MR HANSON:** Can you just confirm then for me, while you go on, that we, the ACT government, in real terms cut funding by 3.3 per cent over the decade and the federal government increased funding to public schools by 43 per cent? Can you just confirm that?

**Mr Matthews:** I do not have the ROGS report in front of me but I just want to, I guess, illustrate my point that the funding mix is changing, as you have described. Under the national agreements the commonwealth is increasing their funding contribution for public schools and the ACT is required to meet that 80-20 split by 80 per cent funding for public schools and 20 per cent funding for the non-government schools

The ACT government, as is evidenced in the budget papers and in our financial reports, continues to increase its actual investment in education year on year. That is reflective of our growing system, and the growing system is also one of the key drivers of the staffing issues.

**MR HANSON:** But in real terms it is a reduction in 3.3 per cent. Why did the ACT sign up to an agreement that would result in a reduction in real-term funding?

**Mr Matthews:** What I can comment is that it is a national agreement that all states and territories have entered into.

**MR HANSON:** Yes, but the ACT was the first jurisdiction to sign up to that and signed up to a deal that sees a reduction from the ACT government in real-term funding. Why did we decide to, in real terms, cut ACT funding to schools?

**Mr Matthews:** As the minister said, the ACT government actually exceeds the SRS requirements for funding of both government and non-government schools. The ACT schools, apart from those in the Northern Territory, which has got very specific circumstances, are the best funded in the country. So there is an acknowledgement about the value in investing in education in the ACT that is reflected in the allocations in the ACT budget. There is a national funding set of arrangements which the territory participates in to make sure that each level of government is making their appropriate contribution.

**MR HANSON:** In your view, Mr Matthews, there is no correlation between the ACT government cutting funding in real terms over the last decade and the chronic teacher shortages that have been identified by the union? There is no correlation between those two?

**THE CHAIR:** If I could interrupt, you have got one more supplementary, Mr Hanson. I would like to get through another line of intended questioning before we close.

**MR HANSON:** I am happy to move on. I am not sure I will get an answer to that.

**THE CHAIR:** Minister, the affiliated schools partnership facilitates ACT teachers to undertake a masters of education degree. I understand that part of this program asks teachers to run a research project. Could you give us some examples of these projects and how they have been implemented in schools?

**Ms Berry:** Thanks for that question. I should just say that the affiliated schools program is pretty much the only kind in the country. Other state and territory systems are quite envious of our relationship with the University of Canberra and the ability to be able to provide opportunities to do those research projects through our affiliated schools work and the work that we can do across our schools to support beginning teachers in starting their careers and supporting them with a chance to start working in the classroom in front of young students, and to really try out the craft and try out the things that they have learned at university in a practical way, in delivering the how, not just the what, for delivery in our schools as far as the profession is concerned. I can ask Ms McMahon to provide some examples of some of the research projects that have been conducted in our school communities.

**Ms McMahon:** The affiliated schools program has a range of different research elements to it, one of which is the research that is conducted by our masters of education students undertaking the capital region masters program. We also have school-based masters programs. A small team in schools will undertake a project called teachers as researchers. They will be matched with a university researcher and they will undertake some professional learning about how to conduct research and then do individualised research projects as a small team in their schools.

There is a range of projects that they have undertaken in the last year or so, those schools in the affiliated schools program, an example of which would be looking at personalised learning and how they document student learning. That was a project undertaken at Ainslie. Bonython Primary looked at personalised learning and growing student capacity to judge their own learning. Dickson College looked at personalised learning and moving from summative school reports to a formative model. It sort of links back to some of the conversations that we were having earlier.

The other element of research that can be undertaken through the affiliated schools is commissioned research that we ask the university lecturers to undertake, and that is much more substantial research. That program aligns to the future of education goals and also the strategic planning for the directorate.

Those research projects can be a small project, a medium- or a longer-term project,

anything from six months to three years. They are undertaken in collaboration with our schools but really are led by academic researchers from the University of Canberra and quite often from other universities across Australia.

Examples of some of those research programs would be implementing personalised wellbeing learning at a particular primary school and looking at a wellbeing pedagogy and how that professional learning helps drive action research; looking at the impact of digital pedagogy, how we teach using computers as a tool, and what that looked like in a number of schools before, during and after the first lockdown that we had. Another one is to build cultural integrity using Country as teacher and assessing the impacts of teacher engagement with new pedagogies of Indigenous knowledge and being. Another one that we have been doing—and it is just about finished—is looking at transition programs for young children, moving from early childhood services into schools and how we can co-design, with families and early childhood educators, practices of inclusive, play-based learning.

We have a range of different programs that spread over different levels, a top-down and a bottom-up approach to our research, so that we are really looking at how we can influence not only the professional learning of our teachers but also the school-improvement practices that we have. It is a very rich program that articulates into our schools' individual plans for their school improvement journey, but it also helps our professionals in gaining much better understanding of what they are doing and their practices within our own settings.

**THE CHAIR:** It sounds like wonderful work. Unfortunately, we have run out of time for this session. Minister, thank you for being here, as well as your Education officials. I suspect we will need to adjourn while you switch your officials over.

**Ms Berry:** Do you want us to adjourn and dial back in?

**THE CHAIR:** Yes, let us do that. The committee will suspend briefly and we will come back as soon as we can.

**Short suspension.**

Appearances:

Berry, Ms Yvette, Deputy Chief Minister, Minister for Early Childhood Development, Minister for Education and Youth Affairs, Minister for Housing and Suburban Development, Minister for the Prevention of Domestic and Family Violence, Minister for Sport and Recreation and Minister for Women

Community Services Directorate

Rule, Ms Catherine, Director-General

Murray, Ms Christine, Executive Group Manager; Inclusion and Participation

Summerrell, Mrs Jessica, Executive Branch Manager; Social and Community Inclusion

**THE CHAIR:** Welcome back, everybody. The committee will now begin questioning relating to youth affairs and the Community Services Directorate. I will hand over to Mr Davis for the first question.

**MR DAVIS:** I want to ask about young people and COVID, unsurprisingly. We know that young people have been disproportionately impacted by the social aspects of COVID-19. They have missed school formals; also, a lot of young people have been working in the retail and hospitality sector, which has been dropping off all of our meals while we have been sitting comfortably at home. What is our plan to support children and young people to come back from some of these disruptions during their more formative years and mitigate the risk that they might be missing some real, defining elements of their youth during these lockdowns and this public health emergency?

**Ms Berry:** That might be more of a question for Ms Davidson, the Minister for Mental Health. However, if you are interested, I can talk about the discussions we have had within the Youth Advisory Council about how young people have been impacted, if that is of assistance? Or you can wait and ask Ms Davidson a question later on.

**MR DAVIS:** I would appreciate knowing the conversations that have happened in the Youth Advisory Council, and I would also like to know, from those conversations, what tangible actions we are taking as a government to make sure young people, who I think we can acknowledge have faced these disproportionate impacts, are going to be supported.

**Ms Berry:** I will ask Mrs Summerrell to provide you with some information in that space. I would suggest that you ask those questions of Ms Davidson as well, because a lot of it might sit in her portfolio of mental health.

**MR DAVIS:** Of course; thank you.

**Mrs Summerrell:** I have read and acknowledge the privilege statement. Thanks very much for the question. Certainly, we do know that our young people have been heavily and disproportionately impacted by COVID. That has been something that our Youth Advisory Council has been speaking about a lot. Other reports that have

occurred recently have talked about the impacts on young people. In particular, the change to the online environment has had large impacts for young people.

One of the things that we have been doing through our grants process is looking at how we can use our youth grants to support people with activities that have a specific focus on COVID. For example, the Youth InterACT Scholarship Program has an annual budget allocation of \$25,000. That is a program that can be used to support young individuals to run activities to assist with those things. The other thing is the Youth Week grants, and looking, during Youth Week, at how we have a focus on bringing young people together and giving them the opportunity for that physical ability to actually connect in person. Through the Youth Week grants we are seeing activities that are enabling young people to connect at the movies, at the zoo and in a range of other areas to try to further facilitate that interaction and that connection.

**Ms Murray:** I would like to underline that point. We have specifically focused on those individuals who the reports have told us are at greater risk within the younger cohorts of not stepping back as comfortably into school. We do know that there are people that we need to prioritise our response towards. With some of those activities, in working with the community groups who support individuals to reconnect with a broader cohort, that is something that we have really focused on this year.

Mrs Summerrell spoke about the zoo et cetera. During Youth Week we have partnered with a variety of entertainment and recreational businesses across the ACT, and we have given priority for these free events, so they are absolutely free. We are supporting people to get there—people who might be more marginalised or more vulnerable, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, LGBTIQ+, young carers, young people in the out-of-home care sector, and young people from refugee backgrounds. We are trying to focus on pulling in from those reports and then deep diving into what real, tangible supports we can actually put in place to reconnect for those individuals.

In addition to that, as the minister said, there is a lot that we are working on consistently in the mental health space. We are getting a lot of advice from the Youth Advisory Council, as well as broader groups, on how we can partner to make sure that the youth responses are supporting a youth outcome. I think I said last time that I used to be young, and I hear everyone talk about not having “older, white public servants sitting there telling us what to do”; that is what we keep hearing. Working with the youth sector is really important, and working with young people themselves, to try to get them to reconnect, as well as providing opportunities for that across Canberra and in place—working through our youth grants within schools and with locations that they are already accessing.

I hope that is helpful, Mr Davis, in terms of how we are trying to really target a response and a bounce back.

**Ms Berry:** Mr Davis, the Community Services website identifies some of the grant recipients and their programs for 2021-22. It goes exactly to what you were asking about, in making sure that young people reconnect or continue to connect with their communities. There are a couple of grant recipients there—A Gender Agenda is one of them—that bring local LGBTIQ+ young people together to support participants to

navigate their gender identities and sexualities, and strengthen their connection to community. There are a number of other programs there as well. The Boomerangs Softball Club is a team project to support the refresh of junior uniforms to improve functionality, sun protection and relevancy for young people. Another one is the Beseda Czechoslovak Australian Association of Canberra, which offers workshops with meditation and a table tennis tournament to allow young people to connect to their local community and build social networks. I think that describes where young people have been going with their grants as well.

**MR DAVIS:** Thanks, Minister. I will double-check the website a bit later. I will pick up the grants question, if you do not mind. I would like to know how many grants were issued in this round, how many grant applications were received and what was the difference?

**Ms Berry:** Mrs Summerrell, do you have that detail; otherwise we might have to take it on notice.

**Mrs Summerrell:** Yes. For the Youth InterACT Grant Program, as I said, funding of \$25,000 is available. Those grants run over a 12-month period. In 2020-21 there was funding of \$8,500, which supported five grants to young people for a range of community projects and events. We did see a significantly lower uptake of those grants, most likely due to the impacts of COVID.

The Youth Week grant program has funding of \$20,000. That supports initiatives for new projects for that week. Applications for that opened on 30 November 2020 and closed on 18 January 2021. Within that grant round 20 applications were received, seeking funding for a total of \$37,503. Of those applications, 11 applicants received funding, to the total amount of \$20,000.

**MR DAVIS:** If there was \$25,000 allocated for the Youth InterACT grants, but we only spent \$8,500, there is a difference then. But in the Youth Week grants that you have articulated, we allocated \$20,000, and \$37,503 was requested. What capacity is there to roll over the money that was not used from the Youth InterACT grants to fund most, if not all, of the applications as part of the Youth Week grants?

**Mrs Summerrell:** With the underspend from the Youth InterACT Grant Program, that was rolled into other initiatives.

**MR DAVIS:** Could you talk me through what those initiatives are?

**Mrs Summerrell:** I might have to take that on notice, and get that detail for you.

**MR DAVIS:** Okay. If it is on notice, I would specifically like to know what the exact difference was spent on and where. Additionally—I am happy for you to take it as a question on notice because I am asking for government policy in some way—it would be interesting to see what capacity we have, given what we have spoken about, regarding COVID et cetera, to fund the \$17,503 difference in those Youth Week grants, assuming that they are all great grant applications. I would be interested in getting a bit more advice on that, on notice, if you would not mind.

**Mrs Summerrell:** Sure.

**THE CHAIR:** You mentioned ACT Youth Week. It is fast approaching. Could you give us a preview of what we can expect?

**Ms Berry:** There are a number of free ACT government events that will be in place for Youth Week this year. Youth Week is from 4 to 14 April. As part of Youth Week celebrations we will be able to provide free events for young people, focusing particularly on marginalised young people who might not ordinarily get the chance to attend these kinds of activities—Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people, LGBTIQ+ young people, young carers, and young people who are in out-of-home care, as well as young people who have refugee backgrounds. We want to make sure that those people who would not ordinarily get the chance to attend these kinds of activities will be able to participate in those as part of Youth Week, for free.

Those free events will be at the National Zoo & Aquarium, which will be available from 11 to 14 April. Movie tickets will be available at Limelight and Dendy. Other free events will be at Zone Bowling in Belconnen, and ice skating. There are some other events for that week, but those are some of the things that are occurring during that week, and young people can participate in those activities.

**THE CHAIR:** It sounds exciting. Ms Lawder has a question.

**MS LAWDER:** Minister, as reported in the annual report, the 2021 ACT Youth Assembly discussed youth unemployment and that the pandemic has disproportionately affected young people and their employment. While the figures are improving, the latest ABS detailed labour force tables clearly show that in the ACT the spike in unemployment during COVID has been much higher amongst those not attending full-time education. Minister, can you talk us through what the ACT government does to help young people stay in and/or re-engage with learning?

**Ms Berry:** Ms Lawder, that might be an education question, probably for the previous session. However, for young people who are on different visa arrangements and who are working in the ACT, the federal government changed their visa status so that they could increase the number of hours that they could work. That has provided opportunities for young people to work additional hours. Particularly within our school community, our school cleaners, who would normally be restricted to 20 hours, have had those hours increased. That is one of the things that has changed in the last little while as a result of COVID. I would be keen to see a little more of that, so that we are able to increase the number of hours for young people, particularly under those visa arrangements, so that they can increase their hours of work and live above the poverty line while they are studying here, or whatever other visa arrangements they are under.

With respect to engaging children and young people in maintaining their education, that is probably something that should have been asked of the Education Directorate. Is that where you were going with it?

**MS LAWDER:** Yes. I am interested in the difference between unemployment of those who are attending some form of education versus those who are not attending

some form of education. Generally, it is about what we are doing in the ACT to help unemployed young people.

**Ms Berry:** Ms Lawder, I am not sure that there is much more of a response that we can provide in this space, unless anybody else from the directorate can jump in. It is probably more of a commonwealth question, or in their remit, in any case. As I said, that change is one thing that I can identify that has made a difference for those people who are particularly affected by their visa arrangements.

**Ms Rule:** I have read and acknowledge the privilege statement. The minister is right; there are a large number of supports that are provided by the commonwealth in relation to unemployment benefits and programs to get young people back into work. There are some examples in the ACT. I refer, for example, to the work we do with young people who are in the child protection system or in the youth justice system, to help make sure that they have some of the basic things that they need to engage in employment—things like road-ready courses, basic skills and qualifications, and ongoing engagement with the education system. I do not have any officials here today who can talk about either youth justice or child protection, because that is for another hearing. There are things that we do within our other programs to help young people maintain their engagement with employment.

**MRS KIKKERT:** Minister, is any of the scholarship program funding directed to supporting young people in their endeavours to begin an apprenticeship course?

**Ms Berry:** Mrs Kikkert, could you ask your question; then I will see if we have somebody here who can respond to it.

**MRS KIKKERT:** We were talking about unemployment. With the scholarship funding that you were speaking about earlier, is any of that funding available to help youth who are endeavouring to begin an apprenticeship course—for instance, by purchasing tools that they might need to begin an apprenticeship?

**Ms Rule:** Yes, Mrs Kikkert. Under the Youth InterACT Scholarship Program, some money is provided for some applicants for things like the purchase of tools, workwear and equipment that they may need to help them study, and things like attendance at conferences and other events. Yes, there is some money within that scholarship program provided for that purpose.

**THE CHAIR:** I have heard that there is consultation fatigue setting in with young people at the moment. Is this something you are witnessing as well? If so, what are some of the ways that we can manage that?

**Ms Berry:** That was definitely something we heard from the Youth Advisory Council, on the number of consultations that the ACT government was conducting with the Youth Advisory Council. Our work with the Youth Advisory Council is to understand what their priorities are, in line with the government, about how we can make their experience on the Youth Advisory Council more than just a group of consultation stakeholders.

With respect to some of the projects that they have been involved in, in the past, the

consent project was something that they did themselves, prior to COVID. They were able to develop and provide information on consent for young people in the community in a way that makes sense to young people and connects to young people, because it was developed by young people.

Those are the kinds of projects that we have been working through with the Youth Advisory Council so that they are engaged in a way that makes a difference for them in making contributions to decision-making processes of government. I will ask Ms Murray if she has some more information about how the Youth Advisory Council are identifying their priorities for this term or this year.

**Ms Murray:** I acknowledge the privilege statement; I failed to do that last time. We are working really closely with the Youth Advisory Council, having heard the feedback about the consultation fatigue. Whilst they are very pleased to be engaged on a number and a variety of different things that pique their interest, they have also clearly articulated, as you would have seen through the major forum that we held with the Youth Advisory Council and broader youth across Canberra more recently, some high-level priorities regarding what they want to achieve. They are very proud, and rightfully so, of the work that they have done in relation to consent.

To support people, not only the Youth Advisory Council but more broadly, regarding the multiple seeking of consultation with younger people and surveying et cetera, we are working with the council to consider the existing mechanisms, prior to starting a new consultation—existing mechanisms that we can utilise rather than starting a new consultation with the Advisory Council. We are seeking to help manage staggering the conversations and the consultations so that they are not all hitting at once.

We are also working out and working with the council on whether the consultation is relevant to young people or whether it is just a matter of ticking a box to say we have consulted with the Youth Advisory Council—confirming that the council has contributed to the topic before, to see whether they do not need to go through the full process of consultation and provide that advice if it is still relevant.

**THE CHAIR:** We are running short of time, and I want to make sure that Mrs Kikkert can ask a question.

**MRS KIKKERT:** I have a supplementary question, which I will put on notice. Can I draw your attention to the Youth Interchange Program? Has the government spoken to Minister Davidson about potentially working together when kids exit Bimberi? I understand that they do not have any case management to help them to resettle into the community. Has the government had any conversations with Minister Davidson about working together to make sure that kids exiting Bimberi are actually part of the Youth Interchange Program?

**Ms Rule:** Mrs Kikkert, that is not really a question for this committee, because Bimberi is in the youth justice portfolio. Depending on the individual circumstances of young people exiting Bimberi, there are services wrapped around them. I cannot answer your specific question. We can either take it on notice or defer it to a hearing where—

**MRS KIKKERT:** I completely understand that, but you do look over the Youth Interchange Program; is that correct?

**Ms Rule:** I am not aware. I do not know whether any officials on this—

**MRS KIKKERT:** It is on page 6 of the annual report. Are you aware that there is a Youth Interchange Program?

**Ms Rule:** I do not think that we have the right officials here for that program, Mrs Kikkert. I am happy to take that question on notice or refer it to the hearing when the children, youth and families officials who can answer your question will be here.

**MRS KIKKERT:** Okay. Does Minister Davidson actually take carriage of the Youth Interchange Program, not Minister Berry?

**Ms Rule:** I think that is right, yes.

**THE CHAIR:** Thank you, Minister Berry, and all of your officials, for making time to be with us today. We will now take a 10 minute break.

**Hearing suspended from 3.22 to 3.32 pm.**

Appearances:

Cheyne, Ms Tara, Assistant Minister for Economic Development, Minister for the Arts, Minister for Business and Better Regulation, Minister for Human Rights and Minister for Multicultural Affairs

Community Services Directorate

Rule, Ms Catherine, Director-General

Summerrell, Mrs Jessica, Executive Branch Manager; Social and Community Inclusion

Murray, Ms Christine, Executive Group Manager; Inclusion and Participation

**THE CHAIR:** Welcome, Minister Cheyne and your officials. I am sorry, there will be no opening statements; I will just jump straight into it with questions. Canberra became a Welcoming City in 2019. Could you explain the steps that we have to take in order to get the next level of accreditation as a Welcoming City?

**Ms Cheyne:** I confirm that I have read and understood the privilege statement. The Welcoming Cities Network is an initiative of Welcoming Australia, and it sets out a lot of benchmarks and aspirations for cities and councils across Australia. As you rightly noted, in 2019 the ACT government chose to become a member of the Welcoming Cities Network and that was on, fittingly, Harmony Day.

When we joined, we started off at what would be described as the committed level. There are, I believe, six standards that you can work to achieve. Pleasingly, towards the end of last year, we submitted where we had got to to achieve the established standard, which is the next level above committed. We are, I believe, one of just four cities in Australia to have achieved the established standard. We are also firmly committed to working towards achieving the advanced level standard.

It is a pretty powerful mechanism for demonstrating our commitment to multiculturalism, inclusion and social cohesion. It helps us to not only leverage new partnerships but identify new partnerships. It identifies our strengths, but it is also a process that helps us identify areas for improvement. To talk through what it looks like on the ground, I will just hand to officials. I think it is Mrs Summerrell again who will be able to detail that for you, Chair.

**Mrs Summerrell:** I have read and acknowledge the privilege statement. As the minister has detailed, we continue to be a proud, welcoming city, where our diversity is embraced by everyone, and everyone has a sense of belonging.

In order to reach the next standard level—to work our way to the advanced level—there are a range of pieces of work that we will do. We will also need to provide the evidence of those steps. That will be independently assessed to determine whether or not we meet the criteria. For example, we will do some further promotion of the Welcoming Cities standard across government, and that will include mapping of where there are good practice examples across the accreditation standards and where they have commenced. That will include evidence-gathering from across a range of organisations.

I am also pleased to say that in May of this year, the ACT will be hosting the 2022 Welcoming Cities Symposium on 10 and 11 May at the National Gallery of Australia. That symposium will bring together our international—hopefully, international—national and local people and policymakers, researchers and business innovators to share and discuss the challenges, benefits and opportunities of migration, as well as settlement, cultural diversity and inclusion.

Then we will go on to submit further evidence from information that is gathered across government. Once that has been completed, we submit that evidence to Welcoming Australia for assessment through their independent assessment process. They then review that evidence and provide us with notice on whether or not we have achieved the advanced level we are seeking.

**THE CHAIR:** I have a quick follow-up. You keep mentioning the evidence and data you need to provide. Could you just expand for us what type of evidence you need to provide to get that next level of accreditation?

**Mrs Summerrell:** Sure. To reach the advanced level we need to demonstrate evidence that the city is celebrating success in initiatives and policies that foster economic, social and cultural inclusion. We need to demonstrate, through evidence, that we are projecting our reputation as a leader of the sector and that we are prominent members of the Welcoming Cities Network. The criteria and indicators that we need to meet are leadership, social and cultural inclusion, and economic development.

**THE CHAIR:** All right, wonderful. Any supplementary questions? No. Mr Davis has a substantive question.

**MR DAVIS:** Minister, on pages 165 and 166 of the annual report there is a description of the grants that are given to community language schools. Can I get an update on how the grants program is administered and how you evaluate whether the program is meeting these aims or if they need more resources?

**Ms Cheyne:** Just give me one moment, Mr Davis. As you might be aware, and I note your interest across multiple hearings about this, we support our community language schools by providing funding to the ACT Community Languages Schools Association. There is also an annual budget allocation that goes to the language schools for their programs, which provides \$90 per student to assist with the community language school fees. We also provide supplementary funding to playgroups and to small language schools, to assist with administration and the running costs.

You will be aware, I believe, that last time we spoke in hearings we talked about the community language schools review, which was a very helpful review and has come out with a range of recommendations, not just for the schools and the association itself, but also for the ACT government. Some of those recommendations are shared—particularly those recommendations of developing clear program goals, objectives and outcomes, and strengthening the accountability of the association by linking funding with program performance. Those were recommendations contained within that review which we have agreed to, and the Community Services Directorate has linked

the ongoing funding with program performance in the current contracting arrangements with the association. We are also working with the association on those goals, objectives and outcomes. I will just see if Mrs Summerrell has anything further to add about how that assessment works.

**Mrs Summerrell:** One of the great things about this is the recognition of the importance of language in our community and that we are able to have a situation where we can really work with community language schools to continue to deliver and infiltrate that essential component into language. I think the minister has covered off in terms of the way that allocation occurs and what that looks like. I do not have anything further to add to that.

**MR DAVIS:** Thank you, Chair. Thanks, Minister.

**MS LAWDER:** Minister, I would like to ask about the delivery of ACT government-created information packs for GPs, surgeries and schools about health issues for ACT CALD women and their families. It was under the first action plan for the ACT Women's Plan but has not been delivered. Are you across this project? Can you give an update of where that is up to?

**Ms Cheyne:** I do not have that information in front of me. I will have to confirm whether this lies with the Office for Women or with the Office for Multicultural Affairs. I think it is widely recognised that the ACT government has responsibility across all directorates for considering inclusion and how to make sure that we have materials that are accessible for CALD communities. I will just have to double-check about the responsibility for that one, particularly because it was contained in the Women's Plan. I will just check if anyone here—

**Ms Rule:** I have read and acknowledge the privilege statement. Yes, I believe that is the responsibility of the Office for Women, Ms Lawder. We do not have those officials here to answer those questions right now.

**MS LAWDER:** Would you expect the Office for Women to consult with the multicultural area in the development of these materials? Would you be more aware of any specific multicultural or CALD requirements that may be included?

**Ms Rule:** I would expect in a program like that that we would want to work with the Office for Women, working with the Office for Multicultural Affairs and also the Health Directorate, to make sure that the materials that have been produced are fit for purpose.

**Ms Cheyne:** Ms Lawder, that has certainly been the case over the last two years. ACT Health has worked quite closely with the Office of Multicultural Affairs to get feedback from communities, as well, about materials, including translated materials. You might have also seen recently that ACT Health has been developing easy English materials—things that are quite straightforward to read—during the pandemic. So that relationship has been quite strong.

**MS LAWDER:** Certainly I am sure I have read somewhere recently that, at least nationally, people from CALD backgrounds were more likely to be victims of, or die

from, COVID, for example. So it is obvious that, for many reasons, CALD women and their families need a lot of attention paid to their medical and health needs. Are you able to take that on notice, get an indication of when the information packs might become available in GP surgeries and schools, in a CALD sense, and make sure that it is what was originally promised in the first Action Plan for Women?

**Ms Rule:** Yes, we can take that on notice.

**MS LAWDER:** Thank you.

**THE CHAIR:** Minister, as you are well aware, the National Multicultural Festival has experienced problems in recent times; unfortunately, it has been cancelled. I was wondering what support has been provided to multicultural groups in light of the opportunity to fundraise at the festival, and what opportunities you foresee for multicultural groups in the coming months and year?

**Ms Cheyne:** The Multicultural Festival not being able to go ahead in 2021 and 2022 has been among the hardest decisions that I have had to make as minister across any of my portfolios, but that was certainly taken following consultation with ACT Health and with the community. I will take the opportunity to thank the community for their understanding and their commitment to continuing to work with us on the festival. We are very much looking forward to 2023 and delivering a celebration that is fitting of the 25th anniversary.

Pleasingly, however, we have been able to support our multicultural organisations in a range of ways this year. First of all, we had a grant funding round for the National Multicultural Festival that was bigger than previous years, and groups have applied for that. It is \$177,560, to be exact. We were able to secure agreement from the Treasurer to repurpose those grants, not so much for the festival, but to work with the community groups who had applied for those grants to support them with their own events that they might wish to hold throughout the year, or through the opportunities that we have been able to create with Australia Day and with the Canberra Day events.

Australia Day obviously occurred just under a month ago and we were very pleased. While there was a short time frame, we were able to support nine multicultural organisations with stalls. There were over 20 performances at the Australia Day event. It was a spread-out event, a very COVID-safe event, but we did receive good feedback from the community that it had been a very good opportunity. Indeed, this was the first time that we have really done anything quite like this. I think the general feedback that we had across the event was that there was a very good feel, and the respectfulness and inclusion of the event was well received.

For Canberra Day, we have a little bit more lead time and planning. We have \$400,000 that has been repurposed from the festival to support Canberra Day, which means that all the infrastructure and participation costs for our multicultural community organisations are being waived. We have received a very large number of performer applications—just shy of 50—as well as a pretty solid number of community groups and commercial operators with, perhaps, commercial food stands. We are working through those applications now and assessing those opportunities, but we are looking forward to a very strong multicultural flavour at our Canberra Day

celebrations in early March.

**MS LAWDER:** Given the cancellation of the Multicultural Festival this year, have you had any feedback from any multicultural groups about their ongoing viability, given the unavailability of this for many organisations as a fundraising activity?

**Ms Cheyne:** That was absolutely front of mind for us and really drove us in making the decision that we did. I think your colleague Mrs Jones raised, this time last year, the issue of the opportunities for multicultural community groups to fundraise. That is exactly why giving opportunities through Australia Day and Canberra Day to those that held stalls was a great fundraising opportunity. Crowds were steady and you can imagine that for some groups that were able to get a larger number of stalls, it will potentially give them a much bigger crowd that they can service, which will assist them with that.

But, equally, some groups are choosing to do things instead or in addition. Perhaps they are doing Canberra Day as well as their own events. We are supporting them to do that throughout the year as well. I think it was Chin Wong—who I think is known to all of us very well—who said at an event recently that she thinks that this year we are going to have more multicultural community events than we have ever had. So we are really pleased that we have been able to repurpose that grant funding to support those multicultural community organisations to continue with their own funding, if they wish. Again, plenty of organisations are more performance based, and that is assisting them as well.

**MS LAWDER:** Thank you.

**MR DAVIS:** Minister, the annual report details that there were 1,622 conferees who received Australian citizenship this last year. How does that figure compare with previous years and do we still have a backlog due to the public health measures?

**Ms Cheyne:** I will get officials to tell me how that compares to previous years, but I can certainly address the question of the backlog. You might recall from your and Mr Braddock's questioning during question time late last year that I undertook to discuss this with Minister Hawke, and I did. At the same time, we have been very pleased that the directorate has been able to adapt to both the backlog and the COVID situation that we found ourselves in at the start of the year.

So you are right; we did have a backlog to work through. This, regrettably, has been commonplace across all jurisdictions, but it has been a mammoth effort from the team, taking advantage over these past few months of daylight savings, to hold an extra citizenship ceremony. We also did it in a COVID-safe way. Unfortunately, the trade-off has been that we have not necessarily been able to have guests at those ceremonies, but we have been able to have as many people as we can receive their citizenship and have citizenship conferred upon them in those ceremonies.

Normally, it is about 80 citizens per ceremony and three ceremonies a month—so, 240—but in January we did just shy of 500. It was 640 in February. Earlier this month we received advice from the Department of Home Affairs, which obviously does the processing of the citizenship. That advice was that with our scheduled March

citizenship ceremonies as well, we could go back to the citizenship ceremonies that we are more used to—with 80 citizens and their guests—and that, most likely, we will have tackled most of the backlog. I believe it has taken us down to the tens rather than the high hundreds, where we were. It was an incredible effort, can I just say, from the CSD team, who have had a lot on their plate. Those were huge days for a very small team, so I just want to put on the record my thanks.

**MR DAVIS:** Is there someone from the directorate who wants to expand on the beginning of your answer?

**Ms Cheyne:** How that compares to previous years?

**MR DAVIS:** That is right.

**Ms Cheyne:** I will see if we have that data and, if not, we will take that on notice, Mr Davis.

**Ms Murray:** I am Christine Murray, Executive Group Manager of Inclusion and Participation. Thank you very much for the question. A year-on-year answer is a little bit tricky, Mr Davis, because of the impacts of COVID over the last few years. However, about 2,800 is a regular year for us; so, having 500 in the first part of the year is actually quite remarkable. Having the extra ceremonies and making the arrangements in a COVID-safe way has been, as the minister said, a really big push. I was lucky enough to be at one of the ceremonies myself. They were very grateful that people have been able to go through the process, because it is such an important ceremony, and we were still able to do critical things like have an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander performance and welcome and explanation. Those were some of the really key pieces of feedback.

**THE CHAIR:** I have a quick supplementary question. What are the citizenship ceremonies going to look like, moving forward? I did one just recently that was unlike ones I had done previously. Is the format that I had, with no shaking of hands and no posed pictures, going to continue for some time or are we going to rapidly move towards the traditional setting?

**Ms Cheyne:** That is a good question, Mr Pettersson. Officials will be able to expand on it. I am not sure if you presided over a ceremony towards the end of last year, but we did adjust, depending on what the health advice was at the time. I recall that there was one month where there was no handshaking, but we did not wear masks. Then there was another month where we wore masks and did pose for photos. Regrettably, doing so many ceremonies, as you rightly noted, and having to proactively work through that backlog, meant we did not have that posing for photos. Also, taking into account the health advice, we did not have guests.

But we are looking to return to as normal as possible—what you would expect, with guests and with posed photos. The handshaking and mask-wearing might depend on some people's comfort levels, particularly among our citizens. In terms of the format, I think that it will return to what members have come to know.

**Ms Murray:** The main thing is that we will continue to work with the Office of the

Chief Health Officer to reflect what is contemporary thinking, depending on where cases are up to and what is happening in terms of the pandemic and the health settings more broadly.

**MS LAWDER:** I have another question with a bit of intersectionality, just like the previous one about women. I am interested in any work that you may be doing and planning for about older people from multicultural backgrounds who may, for example, have little to no English skills and what later life options will there be with perhaps aged care or retirement villages. Who will look after those in their older age? They may be isolated in a village with no one else who speaks their language, for example.

**Ms Cheyne:** I think that is a really important point, Ms Lawder. It is something that not just this office and this directorate is very alive to but the government overall is alive to, particularly ACT Health—how we can make sure that we are supporting older Canberrans and particularly older culturally and linguistically diverse Canberrans in an inclusive way and a way that works for them.

As I said, it touches a little bit on some of the work that is being led by other directorates and their engagement with us. Something that stands out to me repeatedly is the use of radio. That is something that is very familiar to people; it is something where language is able to be conveyed in a very accessible way. The Human Rights Commission, for example, has been doing quite a lot of advertising about how to make complaints in different languages. Also, there has been an incredible amount of support provided over a very long period of time for our community radio stations, and CTVS just recently had its 25th anniversary. I suspect it will be going for a long time. I think that is a way of getting a message to a lot of people in a way that is very accessible to them.

I think it is about maintaining those community connections. Something that ACT Health did remarkably well during the lockdown was working with community leaders on the vaccination program—and on getting tested, but particularly the vaccination program. ACT Health worked with those leaders who have links into the community to sit down and explain, sometimes for several hours—just doing a bit of a Q and A, having questions translated and not being in any rush—to get people to a level of comfort during a time that was quite distressing.

That is potentially a model, going forward, to maintain those connections across government. There has also been some funding directed to the CMCF, who have been undertaking some engagement work. I am very happy to take any more feedback that you might have in that space, Ms Lawder, particularly given your very strong connections across the seniors portfolio, but we are alive to it and, yes, very happy to work with you.

**MS LAWDER:** Thank you.

**THE CHAIR:** There are no supplementary questions. And with that, we are done for the day. These hearings for today are now adjourned. On behalf of the committee, I would like to thank you, Minister Cheyne, as well as Minister Berry and all officials who appeared today. The secretary will provide you with a copy of the proof

transcript of today's hearing when it is available.

If witnesses have taken any questions on notice today, could you please get those answers to the committee secretary within five working days of the receipt of the uncorrected proof transcript of today's hearing. If members wish to lodge questions on notice, please get those to the committee secretary within five working days of today's hearing. Thank you, everybody.

**Ms Cheyne:** Thank you, Chair. Thank you, committee.

**The committee adjourned at 4.01 pm.**