



LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY FOR THE AUSTRALIAN CAPITAL TERRITORY

**STANDING COMMITTEE ON ECONOMY AND GENDER
AND ECONOMIC EQUALITY**

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

Members:

**MS L CASTLEY (Chair)
MS S ORR (Deputy Chair)
MR J DAVIS**

PROOF TRANSCRIPT OF EVIDENCE

CANBERRA

FRIDAY, 15 OCTOBER 2021

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**Secretary to the committee:
Dr D Monk (Ph: 620 50129)**

By authority of the Legislative Assembly for the Australian Capital Territory

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

WITNESSES

CAMPBELL, DR EMMA , Chief Executive Officer, ACT Council of Social Service.....	1
CATT, MR GRAHAM , Chief Executive Officer, Canberra Business Chamber	7
CRIMMINS, MS FRANCES , Chief Executive Officer, YWCA Canberra.....	16
DWYER, MS LEAH , Head of Policy, YWCA Canberra	16
KILLEN, DR GEMMA , Senior Policy Officer, ACT Council of Social Service.....	1
LUXFORD, DR YVONNE , Chief Executive Officer, Perinatal Wellbeing Centre	13
WALLACE, MR CRAIG , Head of Policy, ACT Council of Social Service.....	1

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Amended 20 May 2013

The committee met at 3.59 pm.

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

THE CHAIR: Good afternoon. Welcome to the first of six public hearings of the Standing Committee on Economy and Gender and Economic Equality inquiry into the ACT Budget 2021-22. Today we will speak with community and industry groups about the expenditure proposals and revenue estimates for the economy and gender sections of the budget. The committee will hear from ACTCOSS, Canberra Business Chamber, Perinatal Wellbeing Centre and YWCA Canberra. Before we begin, on behalf of the committee I would like to acknowledge that we meet today on the land of the Ngunnawal people. We respect their continuing culture and the contribution they make to the life of this city and this region.

This hearing is being recorded and the *Hansard* will be published. We are also broadcasting live. When taking a question on notice, it will be useful if the witnesses use the words, "I will take that on notice." That way, it is clear for everybody and the committee will confirm that it has been noted.

Let us kick off our first session. In this session we are hearing from ACTCOSS, so we welcome Emma Campbell, Craig Wallace and Gemma Killen. I remind the witnesses of the protections and obligations that are afforded by parliamentary privilege and draw your attention to the privilege statement. I will go to each one of you to confirm that you have read the statement. Emma Campbell, do you have the statement and are you happy to proceed?

Dr Campbell: I have read and understood it.

THE CHAIR: Thank you. Craig Wallace?

Mr Wallace: I have read it and I am happy to proceed.

THE CHAIR: Thank you. Gemma Killen?

Dr Killen: I have read it and I am happy to proceed.

THE CHAIR: Fantastic. I understand that we are not having opening statements and we will just go straight to questions. Is everybody happy with that?

Dr Campbell: Yes.

THE CHAIR: Perfect. I will kick off, and my question is for anyone who would like to answer. I note that in your submission to the committee you expressed some disappointment that the budget did not include funding for the ACT carers' strategy or the disability health strategy. I would like you to tell me a little bit more about that and what has been allocated in previous budgets.

Dr Campbell: I might defer to Mr Wallace to answer that question.

Mr Wallace: Thank you, Dr Campbell. I will answer that, if that is okay with you, Chair?

THE CHAIR: Yes, please.

Mr Wallace: In terms of the carers' strategy, firstly, the funding that had been sought by carers' peak bodies, including Carers ACT, had been funding to implement the second action plan under the carers' strategy. That included funding for carers' respite—in particular, to scope and potentially implement a mental health carers' respite facility—as well as to respond to a range of other actions that had been identified to change the attitudes towards carers and the responses across a range of service systems. They had sought around \$500,000 to implement the strategy.

ACTCOSS is also concerned that the budget did not include funding for the disability health strategy beyond initial scoping work and some work that is happening within ACT Health on the development of an action plan for the disability health strategy. The kinds of investments that came out of extensive consultations that ACTCOSS and other disability peak bodies did with patients with disabilities and with organisations in the sector were working to address physical, digital and sensory infrastructure to address the cost of accessing health services. Many people with disabilities told us that they were forced to access bulk billing services, which offered limited time for longer consultations which provided them with information about managing their chronic conditions and also a lack of diagnostic wraparound services for people with particular conditions.

To give an example, a condition like Down syndrome often presents with cognitive issues and issues around managing risk of heart disease and managing diet, and families and people with disabilities wanted wraparound services there. There are very practical things like ensuring that we have height-adjustable beds, communication boards and the infrastructure that we will need. As well, we need attitudes amongst staff that avoid things like what is called “diagnostic overshadowing”, where the person's underlying disability is treated rather than the condition that they are presenting with. We see this as urgent work, particularly given that COVID-19 becoming endemic sadly means that many more people with a range of underlying disabilities may be coming into contact with the health system over weeks, not months.

THE CHAIR: Great, thank you. Mr Davis?

MR DAVIS: I very simply want to know if you think the money allocated to the community sector to address the indexation rise is sufficient.

Dr Campbell: This year we know that we have a 2.5 per cent increase to wages, but we also have an increase to superannuation—the contribution is now 10 per cent—and there is also an ACT mandated increase to the contribution to the long service leave scheme. So the indexation, as we understand it, has increased. We are not quite sure of the exact percentage for each organisation, but we are assured that it is sufficient at least to cover the additional costs of the wages. But we have also seen significant increases in costs around rent, including ACT property rental, and the

purchase of items such as PPE. Any events cost significantly more because of COVID restrictions, and then there is a whole other discussion to be had about the increase in demand that we are facing as a result of COVID. So it goes some way to cover the additional costs we are facing, but we have concerns that it will not be adequate to match total increases in costs and to match demand.

I would say it was rather frustrating that we have had to advocate and fight for this. These were publicly announced increases to costs. We believe that the indexation rate should have automatically recognised that, but we would like to acknowledge that, in this budget, the ACT government has committed to reviewing the indexation formula, perhaps to ensure that we do not face similar problems that we saw this year. And you will be aware that there is ongoing research by ACTCOSS and CSD as part of the industry strategy subgroup to look at the true cost of service and any gaps that might exist between funding given to ACT community organisations by the ACT government and the actual cost of delivering those services.

THE CHAIR: Thank you.

MR DAVIS: I have a supplementary question. Can I just confirm, based on that review: has the government made a commitment to ACTCOSS that you will be consulted and engaged as part of that review? While I know that it is never a good idea to assume the outcome of a review prior to a review, would it be fair to say that a hope of ACTCOSS is that the indexation challenge in particular is prioritised and fixed as part of that review?

Dr Campbell: ACTCOSS is absolutely involved in that research work alongside CSD and other community sector organisations. It has been prepared by an independent organisation, UNSW Social Policy Research Centre, because its goal is to give advice not only to the community sector but also to the ACT government. That is why it is important, I think, to have independent analysis of this. But we are very grateful for the financial support from the ACT government and its engagement in work on this piece of work.

It is not just about indexation. It is looking at all sorts of costs and whether or not ACT government funding covers, for example, the costs of training; the costs of attending committee hearings and giving advice on policy; the costs of the increased levels of regulation that we see; the costs of changes to work health and safety; and the costs of facilities. All of these are additional costs. Part of that is, of course, indexation, but it is a lot broader than that.

Many of these issues have been around for a long time—they were identified in the 2010 Productivity Commission report by the federal government—but we hope that this will give a very ACT-specific analysis, which the ACT government can use and rely upon to help come up with a better formula for funding community sector organisations. I think that the ACT government is going into this with good faith.

THE CHAIR: Great. Thanks, Dr Campbell.

MR DAVIS: Great, thank you.

THE CHAIR: Ms Orr?

MS ORR: In your submission, you were talking about the community facilities which are managed by the Property Group—so firmly within this committee’s remit. I was wanting you to elaborate a little more on that, because it was just a short sentence in your submission. So please elaborate on what you see as some of the challenges around community facilities for the not-for-profit sector.

Dr Campbell: I may defer to Mr Wallace to respond to this question.

Mr Wallace: I am happy to elaborate. Our call on this has been two tiered. We have said that we need new community facilities to respond to demographic growth in Canberra. That includes areas like Wright, Coombs and Gungahlin. We did welcome the investments that the ACT government made there; however, there are a range of community hubs. We are specifically talking about the buildings—many of them are older renovated schools or unrenovated schools—where community organisations live and work and hold meetings. They are scattered around Canberra.

We do not think that enough is being done to pay attention to needs there. We do not have a good strategy to adequately plan for their refurbishment or upkeep. We have consistently called for there to be an audit and an evidence base which can inform an ongoing program of refurbishment works in those buildings. While there is some funding for community sector programs in the budget, and there is also funding for government buildings, the buildings in which community service workers deliver those government-funded programs are increasingly dilapidated and frayed.

So the issues, just quickly, are ventilation and distancing requirements, and room that would enable them to operate in a post endemic-COVID world—soundproofed, comfortable rooms where people can meet clients and clients can feel safe. There are literally community hubs where you go and there is water damage to ceilings; there are furnishings that need replacing; heating and cooling issues; poor disability access; and, lastly, we have community hubs that are under threat of sale and closure. So this is progressively becoming an urgent area to enable the community sector to operate safely and appropriately. It is not just money to deliver programs; we need somewhere to deliver them from.

MS ORR: It was the issue of those community hubs in particular—the ones that are managed by Property Group—that I was going to. Mr Wallace, you have done a good job of saying some of the issues that are there and the audit and evidence base. Can you just run me through the hubs that you are referring to. I have an understanding; I just want to check that we are on the same page.

Mr Wallace: Sure. I will do this with care because I do not want to label particular ones as being dilapidated or having problems; but I would note the older school hubs, such as The Pearce Community Centre. That would be an example of a school that was converted around 40 years ago, where the infrastructure is still substantially the same. Maitland House and the Hackett community hub is one example. That hub is actually currently under threat of sale to a commercial entity. There is also the Weston community hub; and there are older buildings on the north side. Some of the buildings that are operated by the regional community services are ageing as well, and they

serve as both office space and community meeting space.

MS ORR: Those would be buildings like the Belconnen Community Centre, for example?

Mr Wallace: Yes.

MS ORR: With those, is it mostly down to the maintenance of the buildings? Have I understood that correctly? Or is it more looking at making them a bit more fit for purpose? You mentioned disability access as well, which is something that has been continually updated for quite a while as we come to better understand what access actually looks like.

Mr Wallace: I think that it would be important to be guided by what the occupants of those hubs want. If you spoke to the occupants of some of them, they would be expressing a preference for new, updated, modern and fit-for-purpose premises to operate from. Others would be happy to continue in the premises they have, with some work to remediate them and make them appropriate and fit for purpose. Others, particularly as we enter into a very different environment with COVID, both in terms of ventilation and the space required, might be shifting between the two—between something that could work or be kept, probably, if you upgraded it, and something that needed an entirely new facility.

MS ORR: Great, thank you.

THE CHAIR: I am mindful of the time. Mr Davis, do you have another question before we finish?

MR DAVIS: I have a quick supplementary question on community hubs, if that is okay?

THE CHAIR: Okay.

MR DAVIS: I ask this wearing my local member hat, because I have been talking to a number of smaller community organisations, in Tuggeranong in particular, who are currently residing in ACT Property Group properties which I think it would be fair to say would not be, or could not be perhaps, used for any other purpose. They have come to me and said that they would actually like to collaborate and co-locate with their partners to help them with a fit-for-purpose facility, but they seem to have had some roadblocks when taking that approach to government. What do you understand those roadblocks to be, and how can we better help community organisations that want to co-locate in appropriate facilities make that case to government?

Dr Campbell: I might just start and then Craig can follow.

THE CHAIR: Bear in mind that we have two minutes left.

Dr Campbell: No problem. Obviously, funding is a big challenge, but this government has put a lot of importance around the development of infrastructure. That is important for a number of reasons—not least because it boosts our economy—

but we want to make sure that included in that commitment to infrastructure are community facilities. If there was that commitment, there would be opportunities for the organisations that you are talking about in Tuggeranong to engage with the government to see how this new infrastructure that is built could meet the needs of community. For example, in the budget, we have seen announcements around the development of shopping centres. Now, let us make sure that in those developments there are high-quality and fit-for-purpose community facilities.

THE CHAIR: Thank you, Dr Campbell. Mr Wallace, is there anything further?

Mr Wallace: Dr Campbell has well put the piece that I was going to around building it into existing precinct redevelopments. I would simply add that in transitions to a collaborative approach, it is more than just the new building; people are having to refresh their IT and there are a range of other expenses involved in those kinds of arrangements. So there needs to be funding for that piece, as well as the capital piece.

THE CHAIR: Great, thank you. On behalf of the committee, I thank ACTCOSS for appearing today. I do not think that there were any questions on notice. With that, we will call a brief adjournment. I thank you again for appearing.

Dr Campbell: Thank you.

Short suspension.

CATT, MR GRAHAM, Chief Executive Officer, Canberra Business Chamber

THE CHAIR: Welcome back to the second session. We will now hear from the Canberra Business Chamber and we welcome Graham Catt. Be aware that we are recording this hearing and that it will be transcribed and published. We are also broadcasting live. If there are any questions taken on notice, can you please clarify for us that you will take that on notice so that it can be clear on the transcript. Mr Catt, I would like to remind you about the protections and obligations afforded by parliamentary privilege. I draw your attention to the statement. Do you have that statement and understand the privilege implications?

Mr Catt: I do, Chair, and understand it. Yes.

THE CHAIR: Perfect. We are not going with opening statements; I believe we are happy to launch straight into questions. My first one is around the budget. I know that there is money allocated for the COVID response, but not much else, so I am just wondering if you could talk about that and what other funding you would have liked to see for Canberra businesses.

Mr Catt: I think that it is a fair statement from businesses' perspective, recognising that there was \$146 million in support payments with COVID-19. I guess that the perspective on those is that they are survival payments for businesses. They are payments that enabled the businesses to survive an environment where they were not able to open the doors. I think it is important to note that the businesses that we are talking about are small businesses, family businesses, microbusinesses. This is money that is helping people buy food, pay the rent, pay the mortgage. It is not money that is going to investors or to major corporations, in the most part. So that is really where funding for those companies went.

What we would like to have seen in the budget probably falls into a couple of different categories. I think that the first is a continuation of those COVID support payments. I recognise that today was our equivalent of freedom day in the territory, and I recognise that there is a lot of optimism and a lot of positivity out there and that people can go to a restaurant and do a range of things; but there are still a number of businesses, retailers, hospitality operators, tourism operators, who cannot open under restrictions—because, although technically they can, the health restrictions in place mean that the risk of doing so or the viability of doing so just is not there or they just do not have a market. Tourism would fall into that category.

There is may be no restriction on opening up a venue, but if you do not have the customers to come to it, it is just not a viable exercise. We would have liked to see, in addition to the support payments that have been made, a recognition that there was more to do in that area. In other forums, I have drawn the comparison, for example, to the payments that were made in New South Wales for the JobSaver wage subsidy scheme, which basically paid 40 per cent of the company's payroll. In sectors like hospitality and tourism, which were the most impacted by COVID, it was those sorts of payments that enabled people to keep their workforces connected. It had money going through to the business that would enable them to do the work they had to do in preparation for opening up. So that is the first category.

The second category is probably once we move from that short-term survival to the sorts of things that businesses' minds are already turning to or already grappling with; and the biggest among those is probably skills. We came into the lockdown from a period of relative growth in the March quarter of 2021. We moved into a pretty dismal quarter for retail, for those customer-facing businesses, in June 2021 and beyond. What we were hearing from every sector was about significant challenges in finding the people that they needed to grow, finding the skills that they needed to grow. Whether that was to scale the business, or to meet contract or meet demand, that was a major issue.

We recognise again that there was an investment in developing a workforce strategy or a workforce attraction strategy, but we would have liked to have seen a really significant investment in what is going to be a very significant economic problem. I talk to employers who, at one scale, say, "Look, we will have to find the people that we need. They do not have to be in Canberra. They can work remotely. They can be in regional Australia. They can be in Sydney. They can be in Melbourne. But we have to fill the job and get the work done. We can fly them to Canberra once a month when that becomes possible." But that is lost revenue. That is lost population growth. That is money that is not actually contributing, ultimately, to the Canberra economy through those people. The worst case of that scenario is that we increasingly talk to people who say, "You have to relocate the business in order to have access to the pool of skills and talent that we need."

We have got to the point where that crosses nearly every industry sector. So the people who work in the very sectors that we are trying to grow and that this budget seeks to invest in—certainly in the cybersecurity and defence spaces—struggle to find the people that they need. Without the sections of immigration that provide labour—such as international students, working holidaymakers—and without clarity about when they might return to the territory, our tourism operators and our hospitality operators that we are talking to say that they are struggling to find the people they need as well. So we saw that as an area where there really should have been, in our minds, a significant investment. I think attracting skills to Canberra is one part of the puzzle, but it is only one part of the puzzle. It really is that idea: it is a wicked problem, so how do we get the resources in place to do that?

Recognising that there was funding applied to specific areas around innovation and business development, the third area where we would have liked to have seen more support was in supporting SMEs, but particularly supporting SMEs to scale and to change. One of the things that we have raised in the past is that Canberra really punches above its weight when it comes to business creation, but also unfortunately has a very high rate of business closure. One of the things we hear from businesses is that it is a great city in which to create a start-up. We have a good ecosystem to support that and invest in that. It is a much more difficult place to actually scale up and/or to turn a business from one sector to another and to move into another thing. I think that there might be some investment in helping businesses to scale. That might be through digital support. It might be through training. It might be through workplace advisory services. A whole range of things would have been welcome.

Overarching that, the thing that we have urged government to consider is that we really are not telling the story of the private sector that we are trying to build. I think

that in this budget, as a recovery budget, there was really an opportunity, perhaps, to shape the vision—to start to say, “This is what the private sector will look like. These are the sectors we are building.” We know that the government does articulate the capability areas that it is trying to build. “These are the sorts of companies that we will have. These are the numbers of people that they will employ. These are the skills that we will need to drive that employment which takes us into that workforce development piece.”

I think that this or the next budget is an opportunity to start to craft that vision of what private sector Canberra looks like. That picks up very much on our university sector and our innovation ecosystem, which has so much potential in Canberra. That is something we would like to see, particularly as we are starting to think about driving recovery and growth, as well as survival.

THE CHAIR: Great. Thank you. Are there any supplementary questions?

MS ORR: Yes. Sorry, I am just going to keep my camera off because I am having some IT issues and it is just helping with the bandwidth. Mr Catt, my question was on that last comment you made. As we go through what will probably be a longer tail for the economic recovery, what are the sorts of longer-term things that you would be looking for? I know you have a lot of immediate needs. I heard from you in the COVID committee, and we have heard from a lot of other groups in lots of forums. There is lots of good advocacy going on. I guess my question is going less to those immediate supports but more to those longer-term opportunities for supports, and needs for supports, that you might see.

Mr Catt: Sure. I will go back to my last comment: it is having a clear plan to guide the different areas that we do invest in and the different areas that we focus on. I cannot understate the importance of the work that we do around skills and around workforce. When I think about programs, I think about programs where industry and government can engage around them. I know there are examples of that. We have seen that with the creation of The Cyber Security Hub, for example. Where the hub often takes the businesses involved, though, is identifying that there is a skills shortage; and it is that next step of how to address that and what can we do to address that.

Investment in our universities is another very critical part of that. How do we work with them to drive that innovation sector to create the sort of smart city that is the vision of Canberra, and how do we take that forward? A lot of that sounds not terribly substantive, but if we take the view that we need planning and we need research, that is probably the first step. It is that planning and that research, perhaps, that will start to produce some of the answers.

I mentioned before the high rate of business closure. I have had conversations with CMTEEDD about researching into what drives the high rate of closure, why it occurs and whether there is something that we could change. Is it something that does not matter because it is the nature of business formation in Canberra? There is a lot of speculation but not so much hard data. To some degree at this point, investment in our future and in those longer-term investments needs to be creating the plans and the supporting body of evidence we need to be able to take that into more specific areas.

MS ORR: Thank you.

THE CHAIR: Thank you.

MR DAVIS: Thank you, Mr Catt. I appreciate your remarks about the business support grants, in particular, which are the biggest single line item in the budget, but I am reflecting on our last lockdown, where small businesspeople across the city were pinched, just as they are now. Then, conversely, we saw this huge pent-up consumer demand from high income earners in Canberra, who, as soon as they were let out of their homes, spent up and spent big. I want to know if you share an optimism that that is around the corner as we reach vaccination rates that allow us to open up comfortably. What would you consider the single biggest challenge on government to make sure we are prepared for that inevitable reopening?

Mr Catt: I think the budget premises itself, to a degree, on demand driving economic recovery for the ACT in those consumer-facing, customer-facing sectors. Do I share the optimism? I am probably more cautious about it. What we hear consistently from every commentator is that this lockdown is different. The nature of the lockdown is different. The businesses that have been shut, and how they have been shut down, is different. The nature of the support—and we keep coming back to Job Keeper—is significantly different. And the position that businesses are left in at the end of that period, is going to be different as well.

I think there certainly will be a demand as people exit lockdown, and that coincides with entering the Christmas period. We will certainly see a demand for goods and services. The other thing to consider is that there is a nation around us out there that, to some extent, is competing for that demand. So there are businesses on the South Coast of New South Wales that are also banking on that same consumer pent-up demand over the last few months to drive their recovery, as well. I think it is fair to assume that it will happen.

The other thing that we did not see highlighted in the budget was a clear picture of what that stimulatory activity looks like. And that might be what is at the heart of your question. Support is one part of the puzzle, but if we want to see that growth driven by spending, we normally see something stimulating that kind of activity. And that, to an extent, is what is missing from this budget. It is very hard to see that stimulatory piece. It is relying on consumer behaviour and that consumer confidence coming “roaring back”—to use the terminology—but there was an opportunity there to invest in some stimulus activity to reduce the risk that confidence does not come roaring back, and perhaps to direct that activity to the areas where it is most needed.

I understand the sectors that have been most impacted, and those are going to be the slowest to recover and the slowest to reopen. There was an opportunity in this budget, in the short-term, to say how we can make sure that we can drive some consumer demand through to them, particularly as we start to reopen after November.

MR DAVIS: Can I ask a quick supplementary, Chair, on a question of consumer demand?

MS ORR: I have a supplementary question, as well, if that is all right.

THE CHAIR: Okay. We have four minutes left. We might not get time for your substantive question, Ms Orr.

MS ORR: Go, Mr Davis.

MR DAVIS: It may be a yes-or-no question. Mr Catt, this might come out of left field, but does the Canberra Business Chamber have a position on the national Raise the Rate campaign, conscious that more money in the pockets of people that are more inclined to spend it may contribute to our economic rebound?

Mr Catt: I do not have a position; I will make it a simple answer.

MR DAVIS: Thank you.

THE CHAIR: Ms Orr.

MS ORR: Mr Catt, just picking up on the last things that you were talking about—about stimulatory measures and how that is probably what you consider to be missing from this budget response, not necessarily future ones—what sorts of things would you suggest are stimulatory measures to improve consumer confidence?

Mr Catt: I am well aware of the last voucher scheme that was run in Canberra, but, at the same time, I do not think that we could shy away from the notion that we can use a similar program to drive consumer demand, and that we can innovate and look at what other jurisdictions have done in their areas. So that would be one possibility. We can actually invest in businesses being able to offer opportunities for consumers. I will go to Choose Canberra. I think the intention was right, which was to drive local consumption of local goods and services in order to help people get through the market. I think anything like that should be on the table and should be looked at.

I do not have a specific suggestion. I think we should be looking at things that actually help the local people invest their dollars in local businesses, but they should be very specific and more targeted than they have been in the past, making sure that the dollars are going to those that need it the most.

MS ORR: Great. Thank you.

THE CHAIR: Thank you so much. Ms Orr, do you have a substantive question, quickly, in the last two minutes?

MS ORR: Chair, if you want to fill in the last two minutes, far be it from me to stop you.

THE CHAIR: It was just a quick question. In the first budget question that I asked, you said, in point two, that people were going out of town because we have a skills shortage. I am just wondering if the Business Chamber has any data on the economic impact to the ACT that that will have if people are leaving town or we are only getting people from out of town to cover those roles.

PROOF

Mr Catt: No, we have not quantified it as yet, Chair. But it is something that we want to do some work on. As I said, the planning, vision, research, and some data, that we can base some of that future thinking and some investments on, is very much what we are looking for, perhaps in future budgets. So, yes, we are certainly looking to do some work and some more thinking in that area.

THE CHAIR: Excellent. On behalf of the committee, thanks for attending today, Mr Catt. There were no questions on notice, so we do not need to hold you to a five-day timeframe for getting back to us. We will just go to a short adjournment before the next session. Thank you.

Mr Catt: Thanks, Chair. Thanks very much, everybody.

Short suspension.

LUXFORD, DR YVONNE, Chief Executive Officer, Perinatal Wellbeing Centre

THE CHAIR: Welcome back to the third session. Welcome, Dr Yvonne Luxford. Please be aware that the proceedings are being recorded and will be transcribed and the proceedings are broadcasted live. If there are any questions on notice, we ask that you let us know so that we can take a note of that and follow up if required.

Dr Luxford, I remind you of the protections and obligations afforded by parliamentary privilege and draw your attention to the privilege statement. Can you please confirm for the record that you understand the privilege implications of the statement?

Dr Luxford: Yes, I do.

THE CHAIR: Fantastic. We are not taking opening statements today, so we will go straight to questions. I have one around funding. I noted in your submission to the committee that you have said it was disappointing to see no funding for perinatal mental health. Where does your funding come from and what would you have liked to have seen?

Dr Luxford: Our funding predominantly comes from the ACT government. My comment was not so much about funding for our organisation—although obviously the provision of community mental health is absolutely vital—but one of our real concerns is that there has not been any funding for mother-baby mental health units. That is lacking in the ACT. Within our organisation we are providing community-based mental health care, but we are seeing more complex and acute issues. We are seeing more mothers especially who would really benefit from residential care, and there are no public mental health facilities—beds—in the ACT where you can have your baby with you.

Just to run through what we have around us, there are: Queensland has four; New South Wales has funded 18 months ago and they are still building sufficient beds for 120 mothers per year; Victoria alone has 33 mother-baby units; and we do not have any public mother-baby units.

It was a strong recommendation that came out of the maternity services review. It was certainly mentioned in a couple of the election platforms, and it is a disappointment that we did not see something in this budget at least for a spoken study. That would have been really beneficial.

MR DAVIS: I would like to talk about people that have had their baby during lockdown. That is a finite group of people, but what a weird and complicated time to have a child. Do you believe we have provided adequate supports for people that have had a child during this lockdown? If not, what kind of supports would you have liked to have seen in place that we should invest in, going forward?

Dr Luxford: It is an excellent question. There certainly has been some immediate support that has been given to our organisation. We have received \$80,000 in COVID relief funds, which will certainly help. Although we have, of course, seen a massive spike in demand, as you can imagine. We saw the same thing last year during lockdown.

If I can speak to what happened last year and has continued, because we see the same things coming out of those who had children this year, you see a greater complexity in the counselling calls we are having. There is certainly more acute mental health issues. The level of anxiety for all of us is elevated in any case. It is not just people who have just had babies; all of us have an elevated anxiety level at the moment. But that is amplified, as you can imagine, in new parents.

We need to be focusing more on what we can do to help those new parents feel comfortable re-entering society. That is something that we need to be thinking about now. We need to be conscious of the fact that they have not had any supports around them; because the normal family supports you might have coming from interstate or even locally, you were not necessarily able to have those supports come in and give you a hand.

Other things we saw last year was this sense of isolation of the children, of them not being socialised. A number of the normal services that we would use, like playgroups and mother-baby groups that are run by the MACH nurses, they were not able to run. We were having clients come to us talking about iso babies—that is a really scary term to be using—that their babies just were not socialising, which can lead to a whole number of mental health issues in themselves. But the mothers were unable to set up those networks that are really important that often comes through your mother-baby group. That is often where you set up wonderful support networks.

We brought our face-to-face groups back as quickly as we could last time and we did not stop our online groups this lockdown, but we have brought back more online groups just this week to help to not only provide that cycle of educational assistance but also foster that sense of connection with others and reduction in that isolation. That makes such a difference. I do not know if I answered your question then, I am sorry.

MR DAVIS: I profess obvious naivety to the challenge of having a child, so I valued the context, particularly in relation to lockdown.

THE CHAIR: You say you help women from pregnancy through to when the child is two years old. How many clients do you see each year as part of your group?

Dr Luxford: We see over 450 clients a year, keeping in mind that we are not a crisis service. We do not just provide short-term care; we are providing long-term care for parents, predominantly mothers but we also care for dads and partners as well. We provide that care on generally a fortnightly but in some cases a weekly basis. At the moment our very small team are caring for 250 clients at this exact moment in time. So that is providing ongoing at least fortnightly care and counselling calls to that many clients.

To put that in perspective in terms of what is available out there and those spikes in need at the moment, to access a private or even a public psychologist or psychiatrist you are looking at least a five-month wait. So people have nowhere to go in between. We are seeing more people acutely in need and we do not have the services to meet that need.

Community-based mental health services like our own are really vital in supporting and caring for people in the meantime, but also alongside the clinical care that they might be receiving elsewhere. On top of that, as I say, we really need that acute residential care as well.

THE CHAIR: I imagine the cost per client is quite high. What are the barriers to expanding? Is it budget? Is it staff?

Dr Luxford: It is both, but it is predominantly budget. We could certainly grow; and in terms of our own service, we would love to service more of southern New South Wales et cetera as well. The service is unique in Australia; it is an amazing service. I have an incredible team who work very hard and really care about what they do. So it is a wonderful service to work in.

With a couple of our colleagues in other states, we had PricewaterhouseCoopers do a great economic analysis of the cost to the Australian economy of perinatal mental health issues. This was in 2019—so before the pandemic—and, as you can imagine, it has gone sky high. At that point, the cost to the Australian economy was \$877 million in the first year of baby’s life for every single baby that is affected and then over a lifetime, \$7.36 billion. That is an incredible amount of money.

THE CHAIR: On behalf of the committee, I thank you, Dr Luxford for coming along and all the work you do with the Perinatal Wellbeing Centre. We did not take any questions on notice, thank you for your time.

Short suspension.

CRIMMINS, MS FRANCES, Chief Executive Officer, YWCA Canberra
DWYER, MS LEAH, Head of Policy, YWCA Canberra

THE CHAIR: Welcome to our fourth session, and I welcome Frances Crimmins and Leah Dwyer. Proceedings are being recorded and transcribed by Hansard and they will be published. We are also broadcasting live via web stream.

I remind witnesses of the protections and obligations afforded by parliamentary privilege and draw your attention to the privilege statement. Can you please confirm that you understand the privilege implications of the statement?

Ms Dwyer: Yes, I do.

Ms Crimmins: Yes, I do.

THE CHAIR: Thank you. We are not taking opening statements and will go straight to questions. In your submission you recommended that the ACT government develop a robust 2021 women's budget statement in line with best-practice principles. How do you think the 2021 women's budget statement shaped up?

Ms Crimmins: We have consistently welcomed the ACT government's efforts to reinstate the Women's Budget Statement since the 2019-2020 ACT budget. We have previously given evidence about the best-practice analysis for women's budget statements. Despite this advice, as well as perceived improvements in the development of the women's budget statement at the commonwealth level, we remain disappointed at how the women's budget statements continue to categorise community-wide infrastructure or policy initiatives as measures that will uniquely target the lives of women.

I will give you some examples that were in the statement: improving lighting at sporting ovals and more buses to meet the needs of a growing population. While we agree they are no doubt necessary, they are not measures that should be included in a women's budget statement.

In part, we believe the absence of a comprehensive women's budget statement and the lack of progress in this regard over recent budget cycles can be tied to the peripheral status of the Office for Women in the Community Services Directorate. Without the clout of a centralised agency to collate, analyse, and respond to and report on progress against the government's own targets, the decentralised location of the Office for Women is impacting the government's capacity to be ambitious in regard to its own 2016-26 women's plan. We have given similar evidence before.

MS ORR: I have heard you make these observations in other committee hearings; but I think I got a better understanding of it that time than I ever have before. Previously, I thought it was just picking up the Office of Women and putting it into Treasury. I would like to get your view: is it a case of just picking up the Office for Women—which has a much broader remit than the budget analysis—and putting it into CMTEDD, or is it more a case of looking at how we can get Treasury to better understand women's budgeting and to develop that capability?

Ms Crimmins: There are two pathways that you could take. One is to have somebody who could do a gender budget analysis in Treasury. We have made recommendations that you could have somebody in each of the directorates to help with this; but we still think you need a centralised coordinating role for that. As I have said before, when it is supposed to be everybody's business, it becomes nobody's business.

Ms Dwyer: The model that Fran mentioned there with regards to a gender specialist in the Treasury, similar models were released as part of the Victorian state budget this year. They have actually set up a specialised gender budgeting unit within the Treasury to manage their women's portfolio and to be responsible for the analysis and retrieving information from the rest of the state government.

MS ORR: The Victorian example is a really good one to draw from. I know they had an inquiry into how to improve some of these gender budgeting initiatives and some of the actions are starting to come out. If there is anything else you could suggest, please feel free to draw to our attention anything you might know of in other jurisdictions. Everyone is grappling with how we get Treasury to appreciate this new and fantastic way of looking at budgeting.

Ms Dwyer: For the sake of clarity, I will reiterate what we presented to the estimates committee in 2019-20. We gave on notice an example of a best-practice budget and we referred the committee to the then Canadian budget, which has a gender budgeting annex to it. Every single line item, regardless of where it sits in the entire bureaucracy, is monitored or measured against where its delivery is with regards to women, young people, veterans, and Aboriginal Canadian people. So it is a simple line-by-line item analysis of the budget. The commonwealth budget that came out recently, to some extent, attempts to replicate that. But the ACT women's budget statement is very much a presentation of budget measures for the whole community and there is no analysis.

MS ORR: With that example you have referenced, how do you see that fitting with the wellbeing indicators?

Ms Crimmins: We need to understand how the wellbeing indicators are going to be applied. I have not had the chance to really understand how they are going to be applied and if gender is a standalone indicator.

MS LAWDER: You are saying that the women's budget statement does not meet the needs of what you are asking for? Is that what you are saying?

Ms Crimmins: It captures programs that target women; but we are saying that you should not put in broad infrastructure projects that benefit the whole community. Yes, women catch buses; and yes, we want women playing on sporting fields. If I take it to the commonwealth position when they did their own, there was a big thing about roads and the comment was, "Well, women drive on roads." Yes, we all need the infrastructure to be provided but it is not doing the gendered analysis on a policy.

To give an example of that, when we looked at the COVID responses in the budget, while I fully welcome them, if you look at it from a gendered lens, all the investment in infrastructure really goes to supporting sectors that are still male dominated, like

building and construction. I acknowledge that we have pathways to get more young women in there, but if you look at the economic impact of COVID and the industries such as hospitality and retail, which are more dominated by women in the workplace, a gendered analysis of that policy may have also put some investment into sectors where women have been impacted economically and actually participate in the workforce.

MS LAWDER: You mentioned some of the federal examples. I recall when the federal Office for Women went into PM&C and there was huge outcry because the Prime Minister at the time was a male. Would there be the same outcry in the ACT?

Ms Crimmins: No, because you can still have a Minister for Women that is a woman, like we have at the federal level. The office just happens to be in the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet. Under our first self-government the Office for Women was in the centralised agency under our first Chief Minister and it has been moved out subsequently. We would like to see that centralised move back into CMTEDD.

MS ORR: You want to see that move mostly because you feel that is the best place for it to influence the budget and at the end of the day influencing the budget is the main thing?

Ms Crimmins: But it is everybody's policies. It is all of the directorates' policies doing that gendered analysis over that, as well as Treasury needing to do that. So you could have people doing that in each of the directorates, feeding into Treasury.

MR DAVIS: What should a women's budget statement have in it as a minimum? What does a best-practice, world-leading women's budget statement look like? Who or what office of government do you see as being ultimately responsible for the quality of a women's budget statement?

Ms Crimmins: We gave the example of the Canadian budget and the annexure we presented last year. There are obviously ones we could draw from internationally, but from an Australian context the Victorian new process.

MR DAVIS: You have made the point well, and the mind boggles about a women's budget statement including things like road investments and bus stops. But I want to be clear about what should all of government be looking at as a minimum to be included in a good women's budget statement? Obviously you want to aspire to best practice; but it does not sound like, based on your criticisms, we are meeting even a modest goal now with the inclusion of some of those infrastructure investments you mentioned.

Ms Dwyer: I will give one example. If you look at the annex to the Canadian budget, it will have a measure that might be more bus stops. Then it is essentially like a ruler that will show where on the spectrum this measure meets a priority; and where it does not meet any specific cohort or demographic priority, it is a neutral measure. Where it might be something that is an investment in family violence resources, then clearly the pendulum swings towards there is an investment for women, there is an investment for Aboriginal women, for example.

It is a diagrammatic demonstration of every single line item. So regardless of whether it is a bus stop or it is something that the layperson on the street will immediately align with women's measures, every single measure is depicted. At the moment we do not have that at all because it is not an analysis; it is purely a presentation of government measures.

MS LAWDER: In your submission, you mention respectful relationships education, and I know we have spoken about it many times in the past. In April this year I asked the education minister about consent training in schools and the respectful relationships education program. The education minister is also the Minister for Women, and she responded to me by saying the concept of consent is included and taught in respectful relationships education—gender equality education—which is available in all ACT public schools. Can you outline for me the difference between the respectful relationships education program and where you see consent education?

Ms Crimmins: I am not aware of the details of what those programs are in schools. I am assuming it is modelling the school curriculum. In terms of programs that have been developed by YWCA Canberra and other organisations like SHFPACT, consent is a key that should be included in respectful relationships education from early learning all the way through. It needs to be embedded across.

Without seeing what is in those programs I could not really answer that except to say that our response is that we need a comprehensive investment in respectful relationships education that does include consent, all the way through the school curriculum—from early learning to year 12—and that it needs to follow the standards that have been established by Our Watch. That would be a gendered analysis of what respectful relationships looks like. So it does need to be through that lens.

Consent is a key part of that; it is a fundamental part of that learning. People go, “Well, how do you teach that in primary school?” You can teach it in those early relationships; it does not start by teaching it at intimate relationships. Consent is from when you enter your social demographic—when children enter school and preschool. They are seeking consent as to how they play with one another and how they negotiate. That is a comprehensive program all the way through your life at school.

MS LAWDER: So what you are saying is that the respectful relationships education and the positive behaviours for learning are quite different and should not be conflated?

Ms Crimmins: That would be our assessment, yes.

MS LAWDER: The Our Watch recommendations were that it should be in all schools across the board and not just implemented in some schools that may have somehow been identified as having problems.

Ms Crimmins: Yes, it should be.

MS LAWDER: Do you have any thought on how long before a respectful relationships education program would start to make any kind of a difference? Is it an immediate thing or short term, long term?

Ms Crimmins: Unfortunately we have not had respectful relationships embedded across our school curriculums in Australia to have any comprehensive study. The last study undertaken was by the University of Queensland. It showed that you could get an immediate change in behaviours, but not from a one-off talk. A one-off talk by a celebrity sporting star for targeting a really at-risk vulnerable group might be something of an intervention, but it does not last in that embedded learning. So it does need to be a comprehensive educational program.

MS LAWDER: Can you give us an update on your response and next plans—I know you are probably pretty disappointed, but I do not want to put words in your mouth—for the housing proposal at Ainslie? I am sure that you are still determined to make it work. Where are you up to and what are you doing?

Ms Crimmins: Yes, we will persevere. We will go back and look at what the tribunal has said and work to make sure that any new development application addresses the tribunal's issues and proceed from there.

From our perspective, it is really important that if commonwealth government is going to fund social housing in the ACT, this is a really important issue for the ACT to consider if it is that challenging to get social housing built in in-fill areas in particular. We do not want to lose that opportunity for commonwealth government funding, so there may need to be some special provisions. For example, is there a right for third parties to appeal social housing? We know that we need it, but we do need to see a shift in community attitudes to welcoming people from all demographics within their communities. To continually push these people out to greenfield sites I do not think is a good policy that we would want to adopt in the ACT.

MS LAWDER: Do you think the community would welcome a revised proposal or do you think it is a bit of nimbyism?

Ms Crimmins: The community has been overwhelming in their support for this proposal; it is a very small group of people who are not. We recognise that you will always get that in every community, but the overwhelming support has been incredibly heartening. I have to say that it has generated an outpouring of generosity, and more donations and contributions to build this have come flooding in. From a community perspective, I would say the community want this.

It is really important, as I said, that we do not make it hard to accept commonwealth government funding to build our bricks and mortar in the social housing area. It does not stack up without that because people are paying 25 per cent of their income. When you are on a single aged pension or from a refugee background and have no income, you really do need to have capital investment to deliver social housing, as we all know when we see how much it costs to develop public housing.

Ms Dwyer: I did not know that you were not taking opening statements and I did prepare a statement for Fran. I am wondering if it is possible to send that as an attachment to this evidence? It goes through other concerns we have with the budget proper that would perhaps have elicited more questions from the committee.

PROOF

THE CHAIR: Thank you, we would appreciate that. On behalf of the committee, we thank YWCA for coming today. With that we will adjourn our hearing.

The committee adjourned at 5.20 pm.