



**LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY FOR THE AUSTRALIAN CAPITAL
TERRITORY**

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

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

Members:

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

TRANSCRIPT OF EVIDENCE

CANBERRA

TUESDAY, 22 FEBRUARY 2022

**Secretary to the committee:
Dr L Kerr (Ph: 620 50136)**

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

Chief Minister, Treasury and Economic Development Directorate	13
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Amended 20 May 2013

The committee met at 9.21 am.

Appearances:

Barr, Mr Andrew, Chief Minister, Treasurer, Minister for Climate Action, Minister for Economic Development and Minister for Tourism

Chief Minister, Treasury and Economic Development Directorate

Leigh, Ms Kathy, Head of Service, Director-General

Croke, Ms Leesa, Deputy Director General, Policy and Cabinet

Blount, Ms Wilhelmina, Executive Group Manager, Policy and Cabinet

Johnston, Ms Trish, Executive Group Manager, Communications and Engagement

West, Dr Damian, Deputy Director-General, Workforce Capability and Governance and Registrar Secure Local Jobs Code

Smyth, Mr Brendan, Commissioner for International Engagement, Office of International Engagement

THE CHAIR: Welcome to the second public hearing of the Standing Committee on Economy and Gender and Economic Equality on annual reports 2020-2021. Before we begin, on behalf of the committee I would like to acknowledge we meet today on the land of the Ngunnawal people. We respect their continuing culture and contribution they make to the life of this city and the region.

The proceedings are being recorded and transcribed by Hansard. They will be published. We are being broadcast and webstreamed live. Please note when you are taking a question on notice; this will help the committee and witnesses confirm for the transcript.

In this second hearing, we welcome the Chief Minister and officials from CMTEDD today. Can I remind witnesses of the protections and obligations afforded by parliamentary privilege and draw your attention to the privilege statement. Could you please confirm for the record that you understand the privilege implications of this statement?

There are no opening statements today. I will kick off with the first question. My question is about the Chief Minister's Charitable Fund and philanthropy encouragement. Have we got everybody in the room that needs to be here?

Mr Barr: Yes, thank you.

THE CHAIR: Just looking over the information about the charitable fund, I could not see much reporting on it, nor any mention in the CMTEDD annual report or the recent budget. There is only one page on it in the *Hands Across Canberra annual impact report* and the obligatory information about Hands Across Canberra on the Australian Charities and Not-for-profits Commission website. According to that website, about 40 per cent of the Hands Across Canberra expenses for 2021 are, approximately, \$820,000, and this is on staff expenses and other line items, not on grants. In contrast, the expenses recorded by the GreaterGood registered funds were 14 per cent and eight per cent over that same time frame.

I am just wondering if you could talk me through the expenditure of those public funds, just noting that ACTCOSS's report commissioned by the government found the ACT government funding for community organisations is low, forcing many to cut corners. If you could just talk me through that, please?

Mr Barr: You will find reporting information in relation to the fund is on a separate webpage that includes information on the constitution, grants and other elements of the Chief Minister's Charitable Fund. It is obviously one of many funds. It is managed by Hands Across Canberra. The data you refer to may, indeed, be out of date and may reflect the start-up costs associated with that fund, but I will see if any financial officer in the room may be able to provide further detail. Otherwise I will get information from Hands Across Canberra for the committee.

Ms Leigh: I would just add that the funding agreement does set down the parameters for the proportion of funding that can be used for administrative expenses—and that is all quite clear in the deed of grant—and it is in line with industry norms. It was all carefully established and calibrated as part of setting up that fund.

THE CHAIR: Chief Minister, the figures I have got here are from the 2021 report. Could you point me to the website that you are referring to?

Mr Barr: I will get the web link sent through to you.

THE CHAIR: Thank you so much. I am just wondering did you consider GreaterGood as an option to manage the Chief Minister's Charitable Fund and can you just explain to me why Hands Across Canberra was ultimately chosen?

Mr Barr: Yes. There was a process. This question has been asked in previous hearings; so we will get the relevant *Hansard* and answers to the committee.

THE CHAIR: Okay. What are the administration fees that Hands Across Canberra are charging?

Mr Barr: That is set out in the deed of agreement, which we can provide to the committee.

THE CHAIR: Thank you. So you are taking those ones on notice?

Mr Barr: That is correct.

THE CHAIR: Thank you so much.

MS LEE: Chief Minister, just in relation to the stats that the Chair quoted, about 40 per cent of the expenses being admin, is that a concern to you in terms of the way that is compared to some of the other ways that travel funds are administered?

Mr Barr: I will not accept that figure on face value. I would need to understand some further detail in relation to it and what it entails; so I am not offering any comment on speculative questions that I cannot check the veracity of at this moment. I will check the veracity of it and then provide information to the committee on those.

MS LEE: I just want you to confirm that. In terms of the beneficiaries of the Community Support Fund listed on pages 166 to 167 of the CMTEEDD report, are the recipients of the Chief Minister's Charitable Fund the ones from that Chief Minister's Charitable Fund or is there another list somewhere?

Mr Barr: I think you may be conflating the Community Support Fund with the Chief Minister's Charitable Fund. I will check that detail and confirm for you the list of beneficiaries from the Chief Minister's Charitable Fund as distinct from the Community Support Fund, which is a different fund.

MS LEE: So they are separate. In terms of your involvement with the recipients of the funds, how does that work? Who sets the criteria and who ultimately makes that decision?

Mr Barr: In relation to the Chief Minister's Charitable Fund?

MS LEE: Yes.

Mr Barr: It sets an overarching set of priorities for areas of the community that would need support. That is an annual statement and direction or letter that I provide under the deed of agreement. It sets out broad area. For example, in the past it has included LGBTI, it has included Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, it has included migrant communities, the homeless et cetera, because I have set a broad range of criteria. The independent board then assesses applications. Obviously they allocate funding across a number of different funds, not just the Chief Minister's Charitable Fund, and that is an independent arm's length decision-making process by that board.

In relation to the Community Support Fund, that is a fund that I, as Chief Minister, allocate funding for. Examples include the Red Cross Annual Charity Shield Appeal, the Smith Family Appeal, Lifeline—\$25,000 in recent times. They are examples of the sorts of project that are supported, and obviously that list is published. We can provide those details.

MS LEE: Thank you for that.

THE CHAIR: I have a follow-up. Chief Minister. I am just wondering why this fund is not reported on in the annual reports. Why is it on a separate website?

Mr Barr: Sorry, the Charitable Fund?

THE CHAIR: Yes.

Mr Barr: Because it is independent from government. It does not have government involvement. We made one endowment to start the fund, and then there is an allocation of funding into the Charitable Fund associated with a proportion of gaming machine revenue, but we do not make the decisions. If it is helpful that there is just a screenshot taken from the annual report of Hands Across Canberra and the sub-funds as it relates to putting them in the Chief Minister's annual report, that is fine; I will get the directorate to do that.

MS ORR: Chief Minister, the flexible working arrangements have been talked about a lot throughout the reports, with public servants in the ACT working between home and the workplace quite easily since the onset of the pandemic, and continuing. I note that, in my electorate, we do not have many commonwealth public service agencies in Gungahlin, which makes it a little bit harder for people to utilise our area, if they are in the federal public service. What, if anything, is the ACT government doing to try and get some more federal public servants working out in Gungahlin?

Mr Barr: We would hope that election promises that were made ahead of the 2019 election would be honoured in relation to public service employment in Gungahlin. We have also put forward a prospectus to the commonwealth finance minister, pointing out the cost savings and advantages for the commonwealth in locating more of their staff within the Gungahlin town centre. They are two actions on which we will continue to lobby, ahead of the 2022 federal election, for further commitments from the commonwealth in relation to the location of their public servants.

We are also taking action ourselves, having located a large ACT government office building within the town centre, and undertaking further work to support the diversification of employment locations and flexibility within the ACT public service. I will invite Kathy Leigh to talk further about that.

Ms Leigh: Yes, throughout the pandemic, our public servants have shown their flexibility and their ability to respond to a whole range of circumstances. For the relatively small proportion of our staff who work in offices, that has included the option of working from home. That has provided a lot of flexibility for those staff. Of course, we have appreciated the commitment of our staff in being willing to do that. It has also provided options for our staff in managing their broader life and family commitments. That flexibility has been welcomed by our staff. As we go forward in the pandemic, we do not intend to throw away the benefits that we have identified during the pandemic. We intend to allow our staff to continue to have the advantage of that hybrid working.

More than that, we are looking at other ways that we can also provide benefits to our staff. One of the things that we are looking at is creating hubs across Canberra so that staff who want to go into an office but do not need to travel across Canberra to the particular office that might be their home office can go into an office closer to their home. We are looking at the moment at establishing hubs in Tuggeranong and Belconnen that will supplement the offices we already have in Gungahlin, Belconnen, Woden and Civic, to enable staff to have that choice. I think that will be a further strengthening of our public service. It will make our public service even more attractive, and we will continue to be an employer of choice and attract the best public servants to our service.

MS ORR: Chief Minister, you mentioned the 2019 election promises. Can I clarify which ones those were, for the record?

Mr Barr: I understand that Senator Seselja committed, on behalf of the government, to relocate a major, or at least a submajor, commonwealth agency into the Gungahlin town centre.

MS ORR: With the prospectus that the ACT government has put together, can you run us through that? You mentioned the benefits of locating in Gungahlin. Can you run us through what some of those were?

Mr Barr: Obviously, access to a skilled workforce, available land for either a new build or buildings that have vacancy, good transport connection, NBN connection in the town centre—good technology—the fact that it is a growth area, and it is cheaper.

MS ORR: Has the prospectus been given to the federal government, and has there been any response to it?

Mr Barr: Yes, to the federal finance minister and the department, I understand, and I have not had a response at this point.

MS ORR: Ms Leigh, following up on the public service, you started to touch on the benefits from having all of these new ways of working. What are you looking at as more permanent solutions that have come from the experience of COVID and the changed working conditions?

Ms Leigh: Yes, as I have indicated, we are going to take hold of those positives that we have identified during the pandemic and continue to offer those opportunities to our staff. We will be offering working from home as an option; we will be offering using an office closer to a location that is convenient to you. People will also be coming in to their home offices to meet in person with their teams. Of course, every workplace is different. Every workplace will have the flexibility to identify the ways that are most effective for them as a workplace and suit the people who work in that workplace best.

It is one of the great advantages of our very diverse public service that we are able to be very flexible and allow each area to be innovative and come up with the solution that will give the best services to the people of Canberra and provide the best environment for our public servants.

MS ORR: Ms Leigh, we have heard in many annual reports prior to this about the work that the ACT public service has been doing in moving to different work models—activity-based work and having remote access through laptops. How critical a factor has that been in being able to now adapt to what we are finding ourselves in?

Ms Leigh: It has been absolutely core. Before the pandemic we were already setting ourselves up to be able to operate on an activity-based working basis. We have equipped the public service with technology that is able to move with them. We have wayfinding, so that people are able to identify where particular staff are that they need to contact.

We have this fabulous building that we are sitting in today, where we are able to bring a number of directorates together, so that when staff work across directorates, many of them are already physically in the same place and it is easy for them to come together in the meeting rooms here, to book those rooms and to, very seamlessly, move across different groupings, according to the particular project that they are working on.

I am sure that you have heard me speak many times about the value of one service, and an aspect of one service is that we do not work in silos. We come together according to our subject area, understanding the particular skills. We do not need to duplicate skills across the service, because we are able to move so flexibly to bring the people together that have the particular skills, that have the particular experience, and that have the particular knowledge of the area of the stakeholders' needs. We bring them together to get a whole-of-government outcome. That, of course, is what we are here for—to serve the whole Canberra community and to make sure that, with anything we do, we are taking into account all of the aspects of the issue.

Activity-based work has been our focus for a long time. Being able to come together in a building like this—we also have a wonderful new building in Dickson, similarly bringing a number of areas together—is one more tool that we have to really embed that one service approach.

When we had to move to COVID-safe practices, we were already well prepared to work flexibly and to come together in teams to use our technology, as we are today, to work together in teams, without people feeling that they needed to be in a particular building, because a building does not equate with your responsibilities. A building is a convenient way of bringing people together. We had already put a lot of time into changing that mindset, and it has really played out very positively.

We moved so seamlessly into remote working, and with people moving across directorates. When the pandemic started, lots of staff moved seamlessly to other directorates where the need was, particularly in the early days, when some things were not viable to be done. Those staff simply moved across, for example, to the Health Directorate, to support the increased demands there. Because we were very much established as one service, everyone understood that immediately and they were able to pick up and act on it. It literally happened overnight.

As you say, that activity-based working approach, which stands behind the broader one-service approach, has been critical. I think we can be really proud of how well the public service has stepped up to support the government in managing this pandemic.

MS LEE: I note the very comprehensive answer that you provided, Ms Leigh, in relation to some of the changes as a result of COVID and the work practices. What impact, difference or changes are going to be made in light of the announcement that was made last Friday by the Chief Minister about some of the lifting of restrictions? Included in that was the flexibility given to employers in terms of people who wished to return to work. Will there be a change in respect of that?

Mr Barr: Before Ms Leigh answers that, I think it is important to give the committee a statistical understanding of the implications. We have 23,000 FTE. Of those, nearly 7,000 are in Canberra Health Services, and they have been working in large part from their place of work. There are nearly 7,000 Education Directorate staff. They have also been in their place of work. There are a thousand bus drivers. They have been in their place of work. Across other agencies we are talking about nearly 80 per cent of all ACT public servants having worked from their workplace, in large part, with the exception of certain lockdown periods, throughout the pandemic.

I do not want there to be any suggestion that there is a massive impact in relation to additional people coming back into the office. The overwhelming majority of ACT public servants have been working from their workplace throughout; so the implications of the announcement last Friday are in the high hundreds of staff, in terms of coming back into the workplace.

Having set that context, Ms Leigh has provided guidance and advice as Head of Service across the balance of the white-collar policy areas of the ACTPS, which will impact in the high hundreds, if not just a little over a thousand, people.

Ms Leigh: The point that the Chief Minister has made is precisely why, at the beginning of my response, I said I was talking about a relatively small proportion of staff. Yes, Ms Lee, on Friday, when that announcement was made, I put out an all-staff email, explaining to staff that this change had now been made and what the significance of that was. Again, on the Chief Minister's point, that email acknowledged that throughout the pandemic the vast majority of ACT public servants had been in their workplace delivering services to the people of Canberra. That includes staff in CMTEDD and many examples that the Chief Minister has just given.

In terms of those staff who do the sort of work that can be done from home, there is now the possibility of a return to the workplace. Of course, we need to manage that in a careful way to ensure that we meet our work health and safety obligations. In that email that I sent out to all staff on Friday, I said that we would now be putting in place arrangements to consult with our staff and their representatives about how we have a managed and safe gradual return to the workplace. Whereas, under the Chief Health Officer's previous guidance, people were strongly encouraged to work from home, if it was possible to do their work there, that has now been lifted, so that we are able to allow people more choice to come back into the office.

Of course, even for our office staff who have been in the office through the pandemic because of the particular nature of their work, we will now be able to have more people coming back in, in accordance with that direction. But we will be doing that in a managed way to ensure the safety of our staff and that our staff are comfortable with that arrangement. Of course, we will not be throwing out the hybrid working arrangements which I have just been speaking about, which have many productivity benefits as well as benefits in being an employer of choice.

THE CHAIR: Chief Minister, I have just done the figures. My understanding is that there are 8,000 ACT public servants that would be going in to offices. We know that the building across the road from us here has less than 10 per cent occupancy. Of the 2,000 people that are working there, only 200 are coming in. What is the cost of keeping these buildings running, and what is your plan? You said in the chamber in December:

So we will never go back to nine to five, Monday to Friday ... it is done.

You said, "The world has changed." Can you talk me through the cost of having these empty buildings?

Mr Barr: In the periods when the advisory was to work from home, when buildings were not at full occupancy, they are not designed to have one desk for each person, so the activity-based working has fewer desks than the number of staff, in theory. There is an expectation of hybrid working that is built into these. Each of these leases is, in fact, cheaper than the ones that they replace, so the government has saved money on office accommodation across the board. Our costs are known and lower than they were previously. It is not the government's intent to force people back into the office. We will have a hybrid working arrangement that suits the business needs of different areas of government.

Public servants are people. They are not robots; they are not units of consumption in order to drive some other economic outcome. Our public servants are there to do a job for this community, and they will do so in the safest possible environment, while meeting the flexibility in individual needs that are necessary for the business units to conduct their work and for us to be able to attract and retain quality staff. That is the priority. Everything else becomes a disconcept.

THE CHAIR: Have you met with the business community in those areas and helped them out with a plan, or have you discussed the impact of this policy on those members of our community?

Mr Barr: Yes, I have been speaking with the property owners who are, obviously, the landlords of a number of the tenants, particularly in relation to the building across the road. We have had that conversation on multiple occasions. Obviously, there are a range of other factors that determine the total level of aggregate demand in the economy and spend in the CBD. We do have to imagine our CBD beyond just nine to five, Monday to Friday. That is the government's intent. Again, there are about 50,000 jobs in the CBD, and you are talking about a several hundred difference between what would be that building at full occupancy versus that building under hybrid working arrangements. The difference, in the grand scheme of things, is meaningless.

THE CHAIR: What about the small business community? Have you been chatting to the local cafes and things around town?

Mr Barr: Yes. I am a regular visitor and a regular consumer of products around the CBD. Clearly, there are a number of factors that impact on aggregate demand in terms of the total level of economic activity in the CBD. The ACT government is not a major driver of it.

MR DAVIS: I have a quick clarifying question for Mr Smyth, in his role as Commissioner for International Engagement. Mr Smyth, have you gone back to regular duties in that role or are you still providing small business supports and whatnot at the moment?

Mr Barr: Mr Smyth has performed both roles. I think he is tailing out of one and moving into the other, but I will get him to talk a little bit further about that transition.

Mr Smyth: The role of Commissioner for International Engagement did not stop during the COVID period. Clearly, we were not able to conduct trade missions or

assist in-bound delegations, as the borders were shut. That gave me the opportunity to assist by becoming the COVID-19 Local Business Commissioner. In that role, I regularly meet with the local business community across all sectors and across all geographic areas in the ACT.

MR DAVIS: Mr Smyth, in your role as the local business commissioner, would it be fair to say that you have met with local business groups and businesses on behalf of the government?

Mr Smyth: Yes, it would. Over the last two years, almost, it would be in the order of thousands of individual meetings. In the first period—call it COVID 1—from April 2020 to July last year, we conducted 241 mediations. There are two people on both sides, often with lawyers and real estate agents, and people who are helping them. The number involved there was probably up to 600 businesses.

COVID 2 started in August last year and comes through to now. We have currently provided assistance in 201 different cases. A large amount of that initially was explaining and helping people to access the assistance that Economic Development has delivered. Remember that it is the largest single assistance program that the government has ever put in place. Since then we have been working with tenants and landlords. The total number of cases to date in the second phase of the local business commissioner is about 201 cases. Again, in some cases, there are two, three or four parties involved. The number of businesses that we have dealt with there is close to 500.

The Chief Minister had a number of round tables that have actively participated throughout that period. Minister Cheyne has also had her task force and round tables working through that period. There were lots of representative groups, whether it be the tourism forum, under David Marshall, or the AHA, represented by Anthony Brierley. Selectively through that period there was often a local group. The Braddon Traders, the people from Manuka or the Mitchell Traders were all invited.

There has been an enormous amount of openness on behalf of the government and a willingness to listen. Probably just about every business group asked has been involved. At the peak of the pandemic we were meeting in some cases weekly, and talking to people in some cases daily. All of that information flows back through either me or through the head of economic development to the Head of Service and, of course, directly to the ministers.

MR DAVIS: Mr Smyth, just to clarify what you said, there has not been a business or business group that has requested a meeting with you that has not got one; is that correct?

Mr Smyth: My understanding is that I have answered every call and met with everybody that has required assistance. If I have missed anybody, I would be pleased to know, and I will make up for that error. We split the office into a smaller portion of the staff that continued to work directly on international engagement. That was important, to keep some businesses functioning. They simply do export; so their model had to change from travelling overseas, going to markets, going to conferences and going to trade fairs, to doing it all online.

Certainly, in the initial period, we helped, oddly enough, to get PPE into America. We got nurses out of Cuba. We were asked for assistance to set up a warehouse in Ethiopia. I was asked to source brandy from Azerbaijan. We assisted in the whole gamut of whatever you could do. We particularly helped a lot of people. Some countries do not recognise electronic signatures, so if you were signing contracts or you wanted to float your company, or whatever the activity was, some countries still demand a written signature on a piece of paper. A lot of the time we were also helping people to get their visas to get out of the country so that they could continue their business.

MR DAVIS: Are you aware, Mr Smyth, of any other subnational government that throughout the course of the pandemic has stood up an office like yours, resourced like yours, to provide these local business supports?

Mr Smyth: No, I am not aware of any other office such as mine. What it grew out of was the national code of conduct for commercial tenancies for small and medium enterprises that national cabinet agreed on in the first week of April 2020. It asked that there be someone that people could go to, to assist them to navigate this path. This was all uncharted territory for everyone, so the Chief Minister asked whether I would take on this role, and I took on the role.

MR DAVIS: You have outlined two of the biggest parts of your role, which have been negotiating those tenancies and helping people to navigate the business support package. In the course of these thousands of meetings that you have had with businesses on behalf of the government, I am assuming organic conversations happen where people provide advice or even criticisms of government policy or approach. “My business would be supported with X; I could use more money to do Y. I need this certain policy change et cetera.” How does your office feed that kind of feedback back through to policymakers in government?

Mr Smyth: The conversation, oddly enough, was probably the most important thing that we did, in many ways. Particularly in the first phase of COVID, there were a lot of people that were very nervous and had no idea how to cope. I would estimate that probably 30 to 40 per cent of what we did in the first phase was what you would call pastoral care. We had concerns about people, people were suffering, they were mentally stressed, financially stressed and physically stressed. Everything they had worked for was either disappearing out the back door or being recapitalised in their loans back to their banks. They were worried about their future and they were worried about their family. Quite simply, they were worried about COVID and what it really meant. A lot of the job early on was just sitting and listening. I would do summaries. I would provide those summaries through Economic Development, the Chief Minister’s office or through the various arms of government, as required.

The second phase of COVID has been quite different, in that there is a lot of angst out there. It was far more emotional and far more troubling for a lot of people. The first phase we did mainly on the phone and in face-to-face meetings in the old Nara building. In the second phase, I had people knock on my door at home. When I was out in the garden weeding on a Saturday, people would come and talk. They would say, “You’re the commissioner; how do we do this?” People were reaching out far

more strongly in the second phase, simply because, for them, it was so uncertain, and after 12 or 18 months, they were at the end of their tether.

Again, in the second phase, a lot of what we are doing is still just listening. I would like to thank my staff, particularly, for what they have done. The staff of the Economic Development business line have done a great job in giving out the funds or directing people to the various services, and the same is the case with people in Treasury who are helping the landlords.

The people in Access Canberra received so many calls as the first point of contact. They then directed them to Treasury, the business line or to us. The amount of personal care that people have shown and done willingly has been enormous. If you are on the phone and some guy is yelling at you for 45 minutes, he is just venting and you have to wear it. But there is a lot of angst out there, and phase 2 has been significantly different from phase 1.

MR DAVIS: I have got one last supplementary. It is a quick one that I am sure Mr Smyth could answer in one go. Mr Smyth, what is the yearly operating budget of your office, the total cost of running your unit?

Mr Smyth: The budget for this year is about \$2 million. Previous to that it was funded out of Economic Development and it was on an as-needs basis. Other areas within economic development had been funded for various parts of the operations that I came to conduct; so it has been a little unclear in terms of exact numbers. But as of this budget, it is just over \$2 million.

THE CHAIR: Just quickly, Mr Smyth, do you have any idea yet how many businesses have closed during the two phases of COVID you were talking about?

Mr Smyth: I do not have the up-to-date statistics. That is not something that we keep.

THE CHAIR: Anecdotally?

Mr Smyth: We know of several that have chosen, but the number has been quite small, I suspect. My personal view is that the coming six months will be the critical time.

In the first phase of COVID the commonwealth, of course, had JobKeeper in place and there was a lot of commonwealth money that flowed directly through the businesses to start. A lot of the businesses that we spoke with liked that model.

In the second phase they are very grateful for the assistance that the ACT government has put in place—and everybody would like more if there were more—but we all live within our budgets. Certainly the change in the style of assistance—from the commonwealth dominating, to it being largely through the states and territories, which of course was done in cooperation with the commonwealth—is different phases, different techniques for offering assistance.

THE CHAIR: We will wait for those figures over the next six months.

MS ORR: Mr Smyth, just on the international engagement side of your responsibilities, are you hoping to resume international travel to some of our target markets in the coming year?

Mr Smyth: We were lucky enough, when New Zealand opened their bubble, the Chief Minister led a delegation to New Zealand last May. We travelled to Wellington to renew the sister-city relationship and continue to look at economic activity, cultural activity, social activity.

We then, in agreement with the strategy outlined in the international engagement strategy, went to Auckland. Auckland is the hub for the Pacific and we have a good relationship with the Office of the Pacific in DFAT. The head of that office was the Australian High Commissioner to New Zealand. He approached the Chief Minister and asked what could Canberra do for the Pacific. We conduct a regular roundtable now with the heads of mission here in Canberra. The Chief Minister has appointed one of my officers as the Pacific liaison officer. Auckland is very important because a lot of the activity and the flights come through Auckland. We met with the trade commissioner there and others, and we have started that relationship.

We have had one delegation in the last 20 months. Last week we were actually meant to be in Singapore, but Omicron and the threat of spread during the Chinese New Year made us wary; so we did not go. We are now planning to do that later in the year. This calendar year there will be, hopefully, a trade mission to Singapore and, hopefully, a trade mission to New Zealand, COVID permitting.

MS ORR: What sorts of development opportunities do you see coming out of the Singapore mission and what will you be focusing on as part of that trade mission?

Mr Smyth: We have been doing online activities. Recently, for instance—space is big in the ACT, it is a big industry for us—so some months ago we did a space bridge with the United Kingdom and, as a consequence, the ANU has now picked up a contract in conjunction with a UK firm. We then replicated that and had an online function where we introduced Canberra's space industry to the Singapore space community, and then vice versa.

Part of the trade mission, had it gone ahead last week, would have been to take space firms, firms in the space industry, in the universities in particular, to Singapore. That is something we will look at in the trade mission later in the year.

I think the key areas into Singapore would be, for instance, food security. Singapore has a strategy to become more self-sufficient in terms of food. Australia can help that. Canberra, through the efforts of something like CEAT, the Centre for Entrepreneurial Agri-Technology, which the Chief Minister was instrumental in setting up, allows places like Singapore, with limited resources, to get better productivity. But it also then produce out of the region. It is oysters from the South Coast, milk from the dairies, getting fresh produce daily into Singapore.

The issue there is the renewal of the direct flights and that, again, will be a focus when we travel to Singapore later this year. One of the things we always do is work with our friends at Singapore Airlines and visit the Singapore Tourism Board to grow the

flights, to bolster the flights by having more passengers and particularly bolster the flights by having cargo in the hold. About 80 per cent of air freight in the world pre-COVID used to travel in the cargo hulls of passenger aircraft, which is often why you can only get one bag on the plane because it is full of other goodies.

MS LEE: My question goes to support to cabinet and open government. Chief Minister, cabinet or cabinet committee decisions are to be published on the CMTEDD website. Can you please explain why the last summary of cabinet decisions that is published on that website is August 2021, more than six months ago?

Mr Barr: That is a very good question. I do not put them on the website. I will ask the officials in the room who do why they are not up there.

Ms Leigh: We will take that on notice, please.

MS LEE: In terms of the last six months obviously, would you say that arguably it is really, really important, given everything that has been happening in our community for there to be openness and transparency for the public with these websites, the publications?

Mr Barr: It would be helpful if the legislative requirements are met, and I apologise that they have not. I do not know why. As I say, I am not personally responsible for uploading the cabinet summaries but they should be on the website. We will get them up there as soon as possible.

MS LEE: What are the consequences or the impacts of not meeting these legislative requirements?

Mr Barr: Consequences in what sense?

MS LEE: That they have, obviously, been a breach of the FOI Act?

Mr Barr: I think the legislation would outline any penalties, if there are any.

MS LEE: Would you undertake, as Chief Minister, to ensure that those penalties are implemented in that sense?

Mr Barr: If there are any penalties—I do not believe there are, but if there are—I will ensure that they are enacted. The most important thing, obviously, is that the summaries go on the website.

MS LEE: What will you do to ensure that this does not happen again?

Ms Leigh: I would personally follow up on that straight after this hearing.

Mr Barr: We will follow-up immediately.

MS LEE: Thank you very much for that.

THE CHAIR: My question is about intergovernmental relations and engagement

with large cities in the Canberra region. It is my understanding that the ACT government-Canberra region joint organisation MOU was due to be reviewed late last year. I am just wondering if that has been done.

Mr Barr: I think there have been some delays in relation to finalising that because of the delays in the New South Wales local government elections that were delayed because of COVID. Obviously those elections have now taken place and there are, as I understand, entirely new councils, memberships and mayors associated with the Canberra region joint organisation. I understand they are meeting for the first time this week, or early next. I think there will be a process then to be able to finalise those agreements once those councils and the joint organisation have an opportunity to form and meet.

THE CHAIR: Since it has not met, what effect has this had on our priorities for the Canberra region?

Mr Barr: Absolutely none because the existing agreements will continue.

THE CHAIR: Has the Canberra regional economic development strategy been finalised and, if not, can you please provide to the committee when we can expect to see that information?

Mr Barr: Sorry, which strategy area are you referring to?

THE CHAIR: The Canberra regional economic development strategy?

Mr Barr: The requirement would involve New South Wales and those local government councils and would need, obviously, their agreement in relation to its finalisation. I will make it available as soon as I am in a position to do so.

MS LEE: Chief Minister, just in relation to intergovernmental relations generally, obviously on Friday, when the announcement was made to ease restrictions, it seemed that you had been sort of left out of the bubble of New South Wales and Victoria. What is your relationship like with the leaders in those states and how does that impact, obviously, your decision or your government's decision when it comes to making announcements in relation to COVID response?

Mr Barr: New South Wales and Victoria are acting in unison and they are often not telling the other states or territories until they are publicly announced. This issue has been raised with them, not just by me but by premiers. It is, of course, their prerogative in relation to the timing of their own announcements.

In relation to last Friday, there was a meeting of chief health officers of the east coast jurisdictions. We were briefed on the direction that they were heading, in a cabinet meeting on Wednesday morning, and had an expectation, given the timing of announcements was going to be the following week—New South Wales made a decision to bring it forward; that is their prerogative—about the direction they were heading in. We understood that. But the exact fine detail and the exact dates and times and what was in and what was out in the New South Wales context are obviously a decision for them—and they are able to make that—but it is clearly a decision that is

relevant in our decision-making. It does not make all of the decisions for us but it does obviously have an impact.

As I have been saying for the last two years, there has to be a pretty good reason—and at times over the last two years there has been—for the ACT to have a different position from New South Wales. They have done things that have clearly been at the higher end of the risk profile and they have had to backtrack within a week, famously just before Christmas in relation to Omicron. We take into account what New South Wales do; it is relevant to the ACT, but we do need to make our own decisions and have our own processes to follow in relation to our own local decisions.

MS LEE: In terms of that experience of not being told by your counterpart in New South Wales particularly, will that impact the review of the MOU between the ACT government and the Canberra region joint organisation?

Mr Barr: No, because that is local government. It is not state government so much; so no, it will not impact on that. The broader issues around New South Wales have been driven by federal politics, by New South Wales by-elections and by the particular world view of the New South Wales Premier. I will say he is easier to get in contact with than his predecessor, and I have a stronger relationship with him than I did with his predecessor. But he is a busy man; he has got various things and political imperatives.

There is a war within the New South Wales Liberal Party at the moment over pre-selections. It is heading off to court. There is a dynamic there that is all about politics and forthcoming elections and by-elections. It is what it is. That is life. We just have to get on with it.

MS LEE: Do you actually have regular, scheduled catchups with your New South Wales counterpart or is it more of an ad hoc reach-out when you need to sort of thing?

Mr Barr: Obviously we meet in National Cabinet. We have had 66 meetings of National Cabinet in the last two years. New South Wales has attended 65 of those. When Premier Berejiklian resigned, they did not attend that meeting. Otherwise, they have been present at all those meetings. Otherwise, I have taken the opportunity to have various telephone calls and other conversations with the New South Wales Premier but it is not a quarterly meeting per se. It is more ad hoc. It needs to be. Things move quickly.

MS LEE: Just going back to the relationship between the ACT government and the Canberra region joint organisation, has the ACT government been approached or has it got any role in or made a decision at all in relation to Veolia's proposed development for the waste to energy incinerator at its existing Woodlawn bioreactor site near Goulburn?

Mr Barr: I do not believe so, not directly to me, I do not think, but I will check across the entirety of government as to whether there has been any engagement there. It is a fair way away from the ACT. I would expect, if it were just across the border and had a very immediate impact, then it may have that level of engagement. But Goulburn is 90 kilometres away; so I suspect it is unlikely. But I will check.

MS LEE: I will just confirm that you will take that on notice?

Mr Barr: That is correct.

MS ORR: Chief Minister, just in regard to general territory relations, we recently had the religious discrimination bill before the federal parliament. I am not looking to discuss that but probably just to note that it was quite damaging to parts of our community. I did write to you—and I am going to be a little cheeky because I have not got the response yet—last week. I just ask if there is any follow-up to that response.

Mr Barr: You did, in your letter, highlight that that was a particularly unedifying debate and had implications in terms of the wellbeing of a large section of our community and you indicated in that letter if there would be some possibility that we would consider providing some further support to organisations who are on the ground providing that sort of wellbeing support for the community. We have spoken to Meridian and they will be able to utilise those funds to provide further support for the community.

MS ORR: I note Mr Davis's approval and support for that initiative. Thank you, Chief Minister, for indulging me in getting my answer a little bit faster than letter-writing allows for. I assume there is a response coming to me as well.

Mr Barr: It will all, of course, be confirmed in writing. It has been with Meridian in terms of their ability to provide the services that are needed.

MS ORR: While we are talking about wellbeing, the wellbeing dashboard is noted throughout the annual report, and it is one of the key achievements, I think it is fair to say, within the ACT government and the public service throughout Australia. Can you give us a bit of an update on how people can access the dashboard and also are there any materials to explain to the community how this dashboard is being used by the government to look at Canberrans wellbeing?

Mr Barr: Certainly. I will ask the relevant official in the room to provide you with some further detail on that.

Ms Croke: I acknowledge the privilege statement. In terms of how we are using wellbeing, in the last budget we developed a tool for all directorates to consider wellbeing—the impact of their business cases on wellbeing. That is the wellbeing impact statement. Our team within Policy Cabinet Division, our wellbeing team, had over, I think, 200 meetings, or met with 200 people I think it was, across directorates to really develop that understanding of wellbeing and the impact of thinking about wellbeing as they are developing business cases and trying to really elicit why would government make decisions to invest in different programs or policy directions. We need to be really clear about what the impact we are trying to make is in terms of wellbeing.

On your specific question about impact, what I might do is just make sure that our dashboard website is accessible and up to date. I am pretty certain it is, but I will take

that on notice to make sure that we can find it readily through our websites.

MS ORR: That answers my question.

THE CHAIR: I have a couple of questions on the wellbeing framework and the indicators. Did you engage any consultants or external expertise when developing the wellbeing framework, and for those ongoing updates?

Ms Croke: Certainly, in the development of the wellbeing framework, if I think about the 12 domains first, we conducted significant consultation over many months. I am happy to take on notice the amount of meetings and forums that we had. We had workshops.

In terms of consultants, the consultant that we engaged had more of a facilitation role. However, we did work really closely with the University of Canberra, who had their own wellbeing survey, and we leveraged off their understanding of wellbeing. We also spent time with our counterparts in New Zealand, who have their own wellbeing framework, as well as the United Kingdom. We did not invest so much in consultants; it was more a case of using the relationships that we had across other states and territories. I should add New South Wales; we had conversations with New South Wales about how they were thinking about outcomes-based funding and the priorities that they had set as a government. We tried to leverage off our relationships to really build our knowledge.

The consultation that we undertook within the directorate showed that it was very expensive to develop the wellbeing domains. They are not dissimilar to other wellbeing domains across the world. We were very clear, and the Chief Minister was very clear, that he wanted Canberra citizens to own the wellbeing framework, and it was developed from the bottom up.

MR DAVIS: Chief Minister, as you would be aware, the Standing Committee on Education and Community Inclusion is launching an inquiry into racial vilification. I understand that some of your departments are already one step ahead on some of that work, including a series of surveys that you have conducted about experiences of racism within the public sector by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff and unconscious bias training, which I understand staff are encouraged to do through the e-learning system. Would you be able to talk me through what some of the preliminary findings of those two research tasks have been and whether we have any preliminary recommendations on how we can improve in that space?

Mr Barr: I will ask an official to assist on that one. I do not have that detail in my head at the moment. I am sure someone in the room will be able to talk about it.

Dr West: I, too, acknowledge the privilege statement. In relation to the first question around the nature and extent of systemic racism in ACT public service workplace settings, there have been a number of bodies of work commenced and that are underway, and further analysis is underway into this subject.

The first part of that work was a short survey of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employees, which really aimed to understand their experiences of racism, if they had

actually experienced it in ACT public service workplace settings. The second part involved a larger ACT public service employees survey that was conducted late last year, the analysis of which we are currently undertaking, with the first reports back due to be presented early next month.

In regard to the first survey—this was a very short pilot poll survey—employees stated that they had experienced, seen or witnessed racism in workplace settings. It is important to note that could have been between two members of the community, it could have been between a member of the community and staff, or it could have been staff to staff. What they reflected to us was that they felt empowered to take action in the moment. What was also reflected in the early findings was that there was some hesitancy in formally reporting that incident through our formal systems. Therefore I think we have some work to do in that space. That work will continue this year, and we have a range of activities in the cultural transformation space that will be underway.

The deeper dive involved the ACT public service employees survey, as I mentioned. Some 6,000 employees completed that survey. We had a higher representative rate of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders reported, or who identified, complete that survey. It has given us a rich insight into their experiences in the workplace. I have flagged areas for further exploration. That is the deep analysis that is underway at the moment. We will be presenting those findings to the Strategic Board in early March, as I mentioned, with a view to taking further action where we believe action can be taken.

MR DAVIS: I want to follow up specifically on that survey you have conducted with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff. Have you given yourself a deadline or at least an optimistic date by which you would have all of that data collated and some idea about the next steps forward?

Dr West: We have that data from the first survey, so that process is fed into the second whole-of-service survey, the employees survey. It was a small pilot survey, in that we only approached Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff. We had a small pool of people who we surveyed every two months, for the course of, effectively, a 12-month period, to get a sense of what they were experiencing in the workplace.

We have that data and we are interrogating that. Effectively, the survey is very short, to enable it to be done in a very timely manner and also to grab those key insights. That informed the design of the ACT public service employees survey, which was a much deeper survey. It had 144 questions that we asked the staff, some of which went to issues around systemic racism and such, and gave the opportunity for people to give comments about the experience they have had. We are interrogating that data, given the size of that now; as I mentioned, we will be preparing that and presenting it back in early March.

MR DAVIS: On the unconscious bias training, are you able to tell me how many staff have done that through e-learn?

Dr West: I may be able to, if you give me a moment; otherwise we might need someone from CMTEDD corporate to provide that. Give me a minute and I will check

for you.

MR DAVIS: I am happy for it to be taken on notice. The figures that I would like are: how many people are eligible to do the training, how many of them have actually done the training, what is our strategy to target the difference, and do we have a time frame in which we want to make sure that all eligible staff have conducted the unconscious bias training?

Dr West: We will take that on notice, but I can say that, through the suite of training materials, all staff have access to the training around unconscious bias. We will take on notice the numbers that have completed it and the time frame for following up.

THE CHAIR: In light of the time, we will call the hearing to a close. On behalf of the committee, I would like to thank the Chief Minister and all of the officials from CMTEDD for your attendance today. There have been quite a few questions taken on notice, so please provide them to the committee secretary within five working days.

Ms Croke: Chair, would you mind if I just answered the question about the wellbeing framework being available online? It is readily available through act.gov.au. If you search “wellbeing”, the ACT wellbeing framework will come up. It talks about the domains and it steps through how government are using the framework to embed decision-making.

THE CHAIR: That is excellent. We will adjourn for today.

The committee adjourned at 10.29 am.