



LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY FOR THE AUSTRALIAN CAPITAL TERRITORY

**STANDING COMMITTEE ON HEALTH
AND COMMUNITY WELLBEING**

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

Members:

**MR J DAVIS (Chair)
MR J MILLIGAN (Deputy Chair)
MR M PETERSSON**

PROOF TRANSCRIPT OF EVIDENCE

CANBERRA

MONDAY, 25 OCTOBER 2021

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**Secretary to the committee:
Mr A Snedden (Ph: 620 50199)**

By authority of the Legislative Assembly for the Australian Capital Territory

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APPEARANCES

Community Services Directorate..... 125

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Amended 20 May 2013

The committee met at 4.16 pm.

Appearances:

Stephen-Smith, Ms Rachel, Minister for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs,
Minister for Families and Community Services and Minister for Health

Community Services Directorate

Rule, Ms Catherine, Director-General

Wood, Ms Jo, Deputy Director-General (COVID Response)

Sabellico, Ms Anne-Maree, Deputy Director-General

Saballa, Ms Melanie, Executive Branch Manager, Children, Youth and Families

Evans, Ms Jacinta, Executive Group Manager, Strategic Policy

THE CHAIR: Good afternoon, guys, gals and non-binary pals. I welcome you to the fourth virtual public hearing of the Standing Committee on Health and Community Wellbeing into budget estimates for 2021-2022. Today's proceedings will examine expenditure proposals and revenue estimates within the responsibility of the Minister for Families and Community Services within the Community Services Directorate in relation to budget statements C.

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 that they make to life in this city and in this region.

Should you take a question on notice, please use the words specifically that you will take the question on notice, as that helps our secretary audit those questions and ensure a timely response.

In this session, we will hear from the Minister of Family and Community Services and officials. With no opening statements necessary, we will go straight to questions.

Minister, I understand that the cost of a working with vulnerable people card registration has increased. Can you talk me through what the rationale is and the explanation for the increase in these costs?

Ms Stephen-Smith: Thank you very much, Chair. I acknowledge the privilege statement and that I understand it. I will hand to Jacinta Evans.

Ms Evans: Thank you, Minister. Thank you for the question. At this point in time, I would acknowledge that the working with vulnerable people cards and the checks are actually administered through Access Canberra rather than through Community Services Directorate, so I am not actually able to accurately give you the reason for why there has been a cost increase. So I will take that question on notice.

THE CHAIR: Thank you, Ms Evans. If it helps, perhaps, for the minister in terms of clarifying the question, I originally asked this question in estimates earlier to the Minister for Business and Better Regulation, who I understand manages Access Canberra. I was told that while Access Canberra manages the receipt of funds, they do not decide how much these things will be charged, and I was directed to this spot on

the estimates roster. Does anyone have a comment on that?

Ms Evans: I think it would have come to me, Chair, but unfortunately I do not have the information in front of me, I am sorry. I will take it on notice.

THE CHAIR: That is okay, thank you.

MR MILLIGAN: One of the three initiatives for the 2020-21 budget is the delivery of a defined model of external merits revenue. It was suggested earlier in the year to Mrs Kikkert by Dr Bassett that this would be completed later in the calendar year. I am wondering if this has been completed and, if not, when can we expect it to be delivered?

Ms Stephen-Smith: Thank you very much, Mr Milligan. No, it has not been. There were some delays in being able to identify an appropriate consultant, is my recollection. I will hand over to Jacinta again for an update.

Ms Evans: Thank you, Minister. On this occasion, I can answer the question. I should acknowledge first of all that I acknowledge the privilege statement. In terms of the reason for some delay for the external merits of child protection decisions, the government did go out and attempt to procure a new provider, a consultant, for this piece of work. Unfortunately, the provider that we selected who was chosen through that process lost a number of the consultants.

It was actually one of the universities who had put up the tender, but the people within the university who were going to deliver the piece of work resigned from the university, and there is a whole range of reasons why that happened which are not relevant here. However, that did mean that the tender was not able to be followed through. We have re-gone through the process, the procurement process, and we are now expecting a new set of consultants to start work in November, so within the next couple of weeks.

MR MILLIGAN: Who has been awarded that contract?

Ms Evans: It has not been finalised, so I am sorry, I am not able to say who has been awarded it.

MR MILLIGAN: But you suggested maybe mid-November?

Ms Evans: Yes. It will definitely be within the next few weeks.

MR MILLIGAN: What is the time frame for implementing external reviews typically for children with protection decisions?

Ms Evans: At this point we are just going through the process for developing a review mechanism. That piece of work will take us through till around mid next year for the consultants to give us back a finalised review mechanism, and then we will be able to focus on the actual processing of external merit reviews.

MRS KIKKERT: Ms Evans, the consultant group that has been awarded the contract,

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you cannot obviously talk about it at the moment, but they have been awarded to begin doing the merits review and how they will develop the model, is that correct?

Ms Evans: That is correct, Mrs Kikkert.

MRS KIKKERT: Are they Canberra based?

Ms Evans: I am not able to talk about the outcome of the tender process at this stage, I am sorry, because it is not finalised, Mrs Kikkert.

MRS KIKKERT: Okay. During this whole time of getting the external review processes done, why is it taking so long? I understand what happened with the professors—they had to resign or whatever—but why has it taken so long? We brought this forward five years ago and five years later we still have nothing to support people within our community looking for an external review process to challenge decisions made by CYPS. It is five years since this motion was brought forward to the government and still there is nothing to produce after five years.

Ms Evans: Mrs Kikkert, this funding for a review was awarded in the last budget, and that piece of work has progressed within that financial year.

MRS KIKKERT: A question on notice: how much is it costing to have this panel or the consultant group design a model of how the external merits review will be done? Or can you tell us that straight up?

Ms Stephen-Smith: We can probably find that information from the briefings from the last budget where it was funded, Mrs Kikkert, but we will take that on notice at this point in time and we might be able to come back by the end of the hour with that information.

MRS KIKKERT: But the funding has not changed since then?

Ms Stephen-Smith: Not as far as I am aware.

MR PETTERSSON: I was wondering what work is underway to develop the next iteration of A Step Up for Our Kids?

Ms Stephen-Smith: Thank you very much, Mr Pettersson. There is a lot of work underway at the moment in developing the next iteration of A Step Up for Our Kids. I might throw to Ms Saballa to talk about the process, or did you want to start, Anne-Maree?

Ms Sabellico: No, I am happy for Melanie to go first.

Ms Saballa: Thank you very much, minister, and good afternoon, everyone. My name is Melanie Saballa. I am the Executive Branch Manager of Out of Home Care Strategy and Governance, and I acknowledge and understand the privilege statement this afternoon.

Thank you very much for your question. As the minister indicated, there has been a

great deal of work that we have progressed, and that is to develop the next out of home care strategy. People would be familiar with the first strategy, and that was launched in 2015 under the name of A Step Up for Our Kids. That strategy has been in place for five-plus years now. In developing the next strategy we have taken time to really understand the evidence base to inform the next stage of reform. The team that I work with—I work across the Community Services Directorate, some internal governance groups, as well as with key partners across the ACT government—has had a really close look at the evidence base. For us, the evidence base comprises three important things. We have five-plus years now of data. We committed, in the launch of the strategy in 2015, to regularly update progress against the strategy. At the time, significant reform was proposed. So, we have progressed a series of snapshot reports that are publicly released, and they are available on the CSD website. So, we have really good data to understand what has happened over the last five-plus years.

The other thing that we have done is to look to contemporary reforms in other jurisdictions and also what is happening in terms of research and building an evidence base. The other thing that we have done is to build our own evidence base in terms of our own operations and the results we have seen. A very important part of the evidence base that we have been looking at is the voice of lived experience—what has been the experience of people that have been involved in the out of home care system over the last five years.

I will now go to your specific question. First of all, we have looked at those evidence bases and those important elements. We have had two stages of engagement this year. Before that, there was a whole lot of evidence collected from talking with people who are experienced in the system and what was happening with them. This year, we wanted to make sure that we had a concerted stakeholder engagement effort, and that comprised two stages.

In the first stage, we were really interested to speak with staff who worked within the system. We wanted to talk with funded providers, and we also engaged with young people to find out their experience of the system. We asked the same set of questions, and the questions were: what has gone well under the strategy? Where are the areas that you think we need to focus on, and what is your advice going forward? So, that was the first engagement, and we released a listening report, which is on the YourSay web platform.

Then we had a second stage of engagement activities. They are finalised now. We were really interested in intersectionality and looking at diverse communities, what out of home care means for people with diverse experiences, and how we can best support them. We have finished that engagement. We were still able to engage during COVID. We were able to put some quite innovative things in place to make sure that we kept engaging. That stage 2 listening report is now being finalised, and that will also be uploaded to the YourSay web platform.

That has been around engaging with key stakeholders. What we are doing now within government is bringing that together and looking at what that evidence tells us and what that stage of reform needs to comprise. We are also interested in a longer horizon that recognises a complex reform. Reform in out of home care and the systems around it and the multiple stakeholders does take time. Going back to our

question of what had worked well, we heard back that the strategy was on point in terms of the reform agenda, and that really good things had been achieved; there had been some notable differences in some key areas; and it was timely to be progressing the reform agenda now. Thank you.

MR PETTERSSON: So we are currently working towards the next iteration. This strategy is from 2022 to 2032. Are we expecting, in the life span of that strategy, any more check-ins with the community?

Ms Stephen-Smith: Yes, absolutely, Mr Pettersson. One of the things that we learned from the five-year strategy was that it takes quite some years for us to see real change in the way the system operates. We also learned that evidence evolves in this space quite quickly, and we have seen that, in any one year, there will be at least one, and often two, jurisdictions around Australia that are undergoing some kind of a review of their child protection systems. Also, the academic work in this space and the experience—the evidence base that is developed from practice, I guess—continues to evolve. So underneath this 10-year strategy we will certainly have a series of action plans that will reflect the evolution and the evidence as it goes through, but with an overarching set of principles that will not need to be revisited and a vision around what kind of child protection system we want to see and build over those 10 years. How we go about doing that, and the flexibility to adjust and respond to the evidence as it emerges over time and the lessons learned here and in other jurisdictions, will be a really important part of the whole strategy.

MR PETTERSSON: So when can we expect the draft framework to be released?

Ms Stephen-Smith: I am expecting that that will be released by the end of the year. I am hoping that it will be November, but we are just doing a bit more work on exactly what that is going to look like and how detailed it is going to be, whether we need to do some further check-ins with anybody before we release that. I am hoping that by the end of the year we will have that out, and then we will have that next level of detail early next year.

MR PETTERSSON: Wonderful. Thank you.

MRS KIKKERT: The Step Up for Our Kids scheme was from 2015 to 2020. I have heard a lot from foster parents and kinship carers that it is really not a step up for our kids; it is a step down for our kids. So, Minister, when you and your officials are telling me that you have seen change, the only change that people who are actually on the ground looking after kids in out of home care are seeing is that it is actually going backwards, it is not moving forward. For five years you have collected data; you have heard cries and pleas from kinship carers and from foster carers who are actually living the scheme that you have implemented, and nothing was working at the time. Why is it that, after the scheme has expired—in 2020, and now we are in 2021—you have all of a sudden had consultation with stakeholders instead of having consultation with them during the five years of this scheme. Now, eight months on, you are still doing stakeholder consultation, and now the scheme is not going to be available for many months. Knowing that the stakeholders are the ones who are actually implementing it, why could the consultation not have been done before, when you were collecting data?

Ms Stephen-Smith: Mrs Kikkert, I think you and others would recognise that you do tend to hear from people who do not have a good experience. That does tend to be the experience of opposition—people who are unhappy. It is also—

MRS KIKKERT: Well, it is also the—

THE CHAIR: Mrs Kikkert, we will let the minister answer the question. You had a very good run, Mrs Kikkert, in asking the question. You took much too long to ask the question, so I am going to let the minister answer rather than be interrupted 10 seconds in.

Ms Stephen-Smith: It is like question time! Mrs Kikkert, what I was going to say was that we do acknowledge—and I think Ms Saballa spoke to this—that some things have not worked as well as we would like, and other things have. We have seen really significant changes. One of the things that has very clearly occurred over the last five years is a stabilisation in the number of children and young people in care, and a reduction in the number of children and young people entering care, compared to that previous period, where we were seeing a really rapid increase. So we are seeing much more effective intensive supports and wraparound supports for families to keep their children safe at home. That is absolutely evidenced by the numbers and by the experience of the families.

We have carers who are telling us that they have had a better experience, and we have carers who are telling us that they have not had such a great experience. We have been speaking with those carers right throughout the five years. So, as part of our governance structure, we have had what used to be the Care and Wellbeing Working Group. I can never remember its new name but, as part of the governance structure, there is a carer group that is a formal group of the governance structure.

As you would be aware, Mrs Kikkert, we also speak regularly with children and young people themselves, often coordinated through CREATE. In roundtables, I speak regularly with CREATE young consultants about their experiences, and our team regularly interacts with the families as well. We get feedback from Red Cross, who provide the Birth Family Advocacy Support Service, and from Carers ACT about carers' experiences. I am going to be completely honest—as I have been throughout the time that we both held this portfolio, Mrs Kikkert—that I do hear quite distressing things sometimes from carers themselves and through Carers ACT. We really work hard to try to address those things that are systemic and systematic, as well as to address some of the individual issues that people raise with us, whether they are from carers, foster carers, kinship carers or birth families or whether they are from children and young people themselves.

So, we have been listening to our stakeholders—our non-government partners, our staff, and children and young people, carers and families—the whole way through. As Ms Saballa acknowledged, there have been some good things and there have been some things that have not worked so well, and that is why we are listening to all of those voices. That is reflected in our first listening report, and it will continue to be reflected in the material that we put forward. We certainly do not shy away from listening to the things that have not gone so well, either.

MRS KIKKERT: I think what the kids in out of home care really want is more than listening; they want action. You mentioned CREATE. CREATE did a survey of children in out of home care, and it showed that there were a lot more kids in out of home care who disclosed the fact that they were not being listened to—more than any other kids in Australia. That just goes to show: you may sit there and tell us that you are listening to them, but, really, you are being present but you are not really listening and doing the things that they are asking you to do.

Ms Stephen-Smith: Mrs Kikkert, that is your assertion. I do not really hear a question in there.

MRS KIKKERT: Just have a look at the survey. That is fact.

Ms Stephen-Smith: I absolutely read those surveys when they come across my desk, Mrs Kikkert, which they do on a regular basis. I also talk directly to CREATE and directly to children and young people in the system.

MRS KIKKERT: And they want you to do more than just listen.

THE CHAIR: Mrs Kikkert, that is two statements in a row without a question; I am going to move to a substantive question. Minister, I want to ask about advisory councils, if I may. We know that there is a lot of value for government in the existence of these community advisory councils for a range of different groups with different, competing challenges that need to be brought to the forefront of government's attention. I want to understand: has there been any specific budgeting to better remunerate the people that sit on these bodies? We know that the reason these bodies exist is, in large part, because these are groups of people that are usually under-represented in government decision-making and are a bit concerned that we are not looking after them when they give up their time and expertise to help us make better decisions.

Ms Stephen-Smith: Mr Davis, can I just clarify, because I suspect in this session we will move across a whole range of my responsibilities. Are you talking about the kinds of ministerial advisory councils like the Disability Reference Group and Multicultural Advisory Council, or are you talking specifically in the child and youth protection space, and the people that we speak to in that space?

THE CHAIR: More broadly across the areas where there are these advisory councils, particularly advisory councils that exist in the children and youth space. Essentially, do we have a whole-of-government approach that will remunerate these people for their time? Has that kind of money been allocated in the budget and, if so, how much?

Ms Stephen-Smith: We have specific approaches; we have a whole-of-government approach to this. It really depends on the type of advisory council that it is. I might hand to somebody else to speak in a bit more detail. It can range from the types of formally constituted groups which we are doing now with the Our Booris, Our Way oversight group, for example—where we might go to the Remuneration Tribunal to seek advice about what an appropriate remuneration for that is—to community engagement. There is a specific level of funding for community engagement.

Ms Sabellico: I acknowledge the privilege statement. I think that the minister in her response has potentially covered all of the aspects. The accountability on us is to give consideration to each and every advisory council, reform committee or initiative group that is being put in place to support the work that we are doing, to understand the level of involvement, input and decision-making to the minister, the DG or other significant stakeholders, and to make a determination based on publicly available information from the Remuneration Tribunal or other community participation payments so that we can consistently apply that set of rules to how the terms of reference are established and what they contain within them for each of the groups.

THE CHAIR: Just to clarify: is it always the Remuneration Tribunal that will decide the rate at which community stakeholders and individuals in the community who work on these advisory councils in any form are remunerated? Will it always be the Remuneration Tribunal that decides how much we remunerate them, or is the decision sometimes made within the directorate?

Ms Sabellico: It is a combination of both. Again, it goes to the breadth of the work that is going to be done, the establishment of the terms of reference and who they are reporting to. All of those things are quite clear. When it needs to go to the Remuneration Tribunal, then it does. There are also opportunities for review on an ongoing basis if things change. Otherwise, it is based on the community participation levels or other arrangements that are in place for other like committees. Those assessments are made on a case-by-case basis.

THE CHAIR: In terms of review, what work do we do to ask those who have given their time to us if the stipend or remuneration that we have provided is appropriate? Additionally, is any work done to identify those people who may have expertise but choose not to be a part of these advisory councils? My question is: do we ask why people with the expertise on occasion may not share with us?

Ms Sabellico: It is a good question. I can say that in the review that we undertake we do look at whether the remuneration or payment is commensurate to the work and the role. If there is an opportunity to understand whether it covers off the extent of the work that is happening and there needs to be a further review, then that is part of the discussion with the Remuneration Tribunal, as well as looking at our own policy positioning in terms of the community participation payments. We look at that on a group-by-group basis rather than an individual basis. It is a good question to actually start to embed into our thinking as well, so thank you.

THE CHAIR: Do we think that it may be a better process in future for the Remuneration Tribunal, in all instances, to determine how we remunerate people for their time when they help government out, or are we comfortable with the current structure where it is on a case-by-case basis? That may be a political question for the minister; I am not sure. But I am happy for anyone to take a stab at it.

Ms Stephen-Smith: It is one of those things that we are constantly thinking about around the policy. Is there equity between different groups? Are we sufficiently remunerating people? We ask this question often about people with lived experience, who often come to help us understand that lived experience. Often they are not

particularly well-remunerated for that; yet it is one of the most valuable things that we can hear from people. Can you repeat your question?

THE CHAIR: In a short summary it was: do we think it would be better for the Remuneration Tribunal to always make the decision on how someone is remunerated and at what rate? Or are we comfortable with the current situation where it seems to be case by case, whether that decision is made at directorate level or the Remuneration Tribunal is asked to reflect on it?

Ms Stephen-Smith: When you say that it is case by case, there is an overarching policy that committees are assessed against as to whether they meet the criteria for going to the Remuneration Tribunal; so it is not just random. It is probably worth having another look at. We will take the question on notice to provide a bit more structured advice to you about how that assessment is made and those decisions are made. Will that be helpful?

THE CHAIR: I would appreciate that. Thanks so much.

MR MILLIGAN: As I understand it, the government is revising the out of home care strategy. However, we have heard that at least two foster families have either threatened to or have quit; they do not want to continue fostering for the ACT. Minister, do you know how many other families are experiencing this type of anguish and are considering leaving the ACT fostering system?

Ms Stephen-Smith: As we have acknowledged, there are often challenges for carers in the system. What I have observed sometimes is that, for carers who have been in the system a really long time and have cared for a lot of children, it is quite exhausting and emotionally draining, and in some ways it becomes harder over a period of time. I think that that sometimes factors into people's considerations, as well about whether or not they are going to remain carers.

I take that sort of feedback very seriously. Foster carers and kinship carers are the absolute backbone of the out of home care system. The system would not function without them. Understanding their experiences is vital. There is often legitimate feedback that carers do not believe that they are sufficiently heard and listened to in a way that reflects their expertise with the child or children that they care for. Sometimes there are issues around expectations and a mismatch of a carer's expectations with the way that the system works from a legal perspective, or the decisions that are often very difficult that our caseworkers and senior managers need to make about what is going to be in the best interests of a child or young person long term which others involved in that child's life may not think are in their immediate interests. It is a very difficult balance.

Specifically to your question, we are obviously very conscious and aware whenever we hear these things, and we take all that feedback on board. One of the things that I am keen that we do in the next phase of A Step Up for Our Kids is to really understand. We talk about a trauma-informed system. An expression that was raised with me the other day was "trauma-competent". It is not enough to be trauma-informed; it is to be trauma-competent.

We often talk about that only in relation to children and young people, sometimes in relation to their birth families, understanding that, often, birth parents have experienced significant trauma in their own lives. I think we need to do better in understanding that carers also experience significant trauma and vicarious trauma in the system. So being trauma-competent is not just about understanding children and young people and working with carers to ensure that they can support children and young people who have experienced trauma. It is also about recognising both the direct and vicarious trauma that carers themselves have experienced. Particularly for kinship carers, it can be quite a different type of thing, because often there is quite a lot of trauma and conflict within the family, either as a result of children coming into care or as part of the background of children coming into care.

MR MILLIGAN: How are you going to address these areas of concern both for the carers and the children going into foster care through this new iteration of the out of home care strategy, and how are you addressing those concerns now?

Ms Stephen-Smith: We do a lot of work listening to carers. I do not know if someone else wants to add something here, but one of the things that I am really welcoming is the carer recognition legislation that was introduced by my colleague Ms Orr as a private members' bill. That reflects a longer term commitment that we made that is very explicit about what agencies need to do to acknowledge and support carers. Obviously, in the majority of cases, carers in that sense are friends and family who provide care to someone with a disability, frail aged or someone who is unwell with a chronic illness. But in our context, those principles about how we support and respect carers are equally valid, and our foster and kinship carers are covered by the bill as well

I think in the short term that really outlines a very clear set of principles that is probably something that we have been missing. You would be aware, Mrs Kikkert, that we have those for children and young people, but we do not necessarily have those for parents and families, which we are committed to doing to establish standards for parents and carers. We do not necessarily have those for carers, so that is one element. I will hand over to Ms Sabellico.

Ms Sabellico: I am happy to start and then maybe Melanie might want to add. In terms of having a look at better support for carers both now and into the future—and I will get Melanie to talk specifically about the next iteration of the strategy—looking at the way in which we actually recruit and support and train for carers upfront is a really good way to be able to get some agreements in place and understand what is needed for that carer family in that situation with the child; and having an opportunity then to look at putting in place plans that relate to that child in that care arrangement and making sure that we complete the ongoing training and support that is required to meet the individual needs of children in placements, rather than a child coming into a placement not receiving an individualised focus on their needs and then having to pick that up as you go and having ongoing meetings rather than upfront meetings. So there is a way to have a look at that.

There is also a need to continue to have a look at the ongoing development that carers need as well. Similar to staff in a system, carers in a system also need the ongoing support and development and access to training, particularly if they are having

different children coming and going through their home, and being able to then focus on other arrangements that might need to be put in place. A child with a disability will require a different set of training and support than, say, a child that has other trauma behaviours and things like that.

Having access to talk to people with specialisation in order to answer and address the questions is a way to do some of that, as well as then having carer support arrangements. There is nothing like talking to somebody else who is actually going through the carer experience as well in order to be able to just have an opportunity for a conversation and talk about any issues that might be arising. So they are a range of things.

Being able to fund the carers for the service that they are providing and making sure that they have access to funds to be able to support for individual needs as they arise and streamlining bureaucratic processes around how you gain access to some of that is also in recognition of the fact that carers have the day-to-day responsibility of children and there needs to be a higher level of recognition of their authority around looking at some of that as well.

Ms Stephen-Smith: I might just provide an example of one of the things that the team worked with ANU to deliver which has made a real difference to kinship carers—that is the Connect the Kinship Parents Program in partnership with ANU. That was a very successful initiative for kinship carers and had a really high rate of people staying through the whole program, despite their caring responsibilities.

I do want to acknowledge the ongoing work that the directorate does to understand emerging evidence and what is available with our academic partners and to reach out and create these new kinds of opportunities for carers as well. We will obviously continue to do that through the next phase of Step Up.

Ms Saballa: Minister, would you like me to add to some of the things that we have in place now?

Ms Stephen-Smith: That would be great. Thank you, Melanie.

Ms Saballa: Thank you, Minister. Thank you for your question, Deputy Chair. What I am going to do is quickly go through some of the supports that are in place currently, and then add a couple of extra examples to Ms Sabellico's list. In terms of supports that are in place already, some of the supports include trauma or trauma-informed care to vulnerable children and young people; therapeutic assessment to ensure that carers are provided with appropriate information and support as soon as possible following the placement of a child; support through dedicated carer support workers who are independent of the child and young person's caseworker, and that is provided by ACT Together; family and individual counselling to kinship carers, which is provided by ACT Together; and then we also have Carers ACT. Carers ACT delivers an independent kinship and foster care advocacy support service that provides independent support and advice to assist carers and assist to resolve issues.

As previously mentioned, there is a carer wellbeing joint committee, which was previously the carer wellbeing subcommittee. That is a really important forum to hear

the voice of carers and issues that they bring forward and an opportunity for ACT Together, other agencies and CYPS to look at those issues. CYPS has, of course, looked very closely at supporting carers during the COVID context, and the carers are able to reach out for supports as they need them.

The other thing we have in place is a *Carer Connect* newsletter that outlines supports for carers. Examples are vaccination information for young people and services available for emotional support. CYPS has established a virtual monthly morning tea, as well, for carers, which they are able to link into.

If I could quickly add to some of the points Ms Sabellico made, we did have a carers survey a couple of years ago where carers were able to raise issues of concern and things that they were interested in to support their role—timely decision-making; information sharing and whether we can look at some ICT solutions to facilitate that; a real interest in participation in decision making; and flexibility in support. As the minister has explained, often contexts have complexity and you are dealing with multiple relationships around supporting that child. Carers did raise that they feel that they want to be able to ask for additional support when they need it.

MRS KIKKERT: Minister, you said at the beginning the reason why some of the foster parents, or foster mom in this case, might be quitting foster care is due to it being too hard. Let me state it for the record that she went online and said that experienced foster carers have said that the current system treats them disrespectfully and, worse, regularly retraumatizes children by poorly managing transitions.

So it is not because it is too hard; it is too hard because they are being disrespected and the kids being placed in their care are retraumatized by poorly managing transitions. How do you fix that problem of making sure that kids who are transitioning from one foster carer to another are not being retraumatized but being rehabilitated?

Ms Stephen-Smith: Thank you, Mrs Kikkert. There are absolutely very difficult circumstances and transition, particularly when a carer does not agree with the decision to transition a child or young person from one placement to another is one of the most—

MRS KIKKERT: Do they have a valid reason not to agree with the transition?

Ms Stephen-Smith: In my experience, Mrs Kikkert, everyone in the system believes that they are working in the best interests of the child or young person, but people often have different views about what is in the child's best interest. As I spoke to previously just a bit earlier, sometimes that can be a difference of view about a long-term interest versus a short-term traumatic experience. There is no-one in this system who would not understand that sometimes a placement change can create additional trauma. That is why there will be the involvement of the Australian Childhood Foundation, for example, in supporting those transitions to ensure that the trauma impact of a transition from one care placement to another or, indeed, to return to their biological family, is managed as best it can be with the least trauma possible.

I think we all recognise that it can and it would be a traumatic experience for young

people, for children and young people. But there is sometimes a view that it is also then in the child's or young person's long-term best interest for that transition to occur. What people then seek to do is to have all of the adults involved to the greatest extent possible to support that child or young person to transition in a way that is going to result in the least trauma.

It is a very, very difficult thing to manage and to do. So I absolutely understand that some carers feel that way and have had an experience that raises concerns for them about these decisions. We absolutely understand that.

MRS KIKKERT: How many transitions have happened in the last two years that have been a slow process of transitioning to make sure that all parties involved understand what the circumstances are and understand the long-term goal rather than just a quick, abrupt incident overnight or over 24 hours or 48 hours? Because that is very traumatising to all parties involved, whereas if you have a transition that is a slow pace over a certain time where all parties agree—the biological parents, the foster carers, CYPS and the child involved in it—that could be a smooth transition and much more beneficial for the child involved.

Ms Stephen-Smith: I think we are probably segueing a fair way from the initial question, Chair.

MRS KIKKERT: It was a follow-up question from what you have just said. You can take it on notice if you cannot answer it now.

Ms Stephen-Smith: Mrs Kikkert, I think it is sometimes not possible to transition over a long period of time where one party does not support the transition in the first place. That is a very, very difficult thing to ask somebody to do—to spend a long period of time supporting a transition that they do not agree with. That is where that work with the Australian Childhood Foundation, our own trauma specialists and childhood trauma specialists will assess the situation.

Every individual circumstance is going to be different around whether a short transition period, difficult though it is for everybody, is actually going to be, ultimately, the better outcome. These are very, very difficult decisions to make, Mrs Kikkert. There is no simple answer in these circumstances.

MRS KIKKERT: That is quite contrary to what I have been hearing from the carers—

THE CHAIR: Mrs Kikkert, you have given a few speeches in the form of questions today. I am going to move to Mr Pettersson for a substantive question.

Ms Stephen-Smith: Sorry, Chair, just before we move on, we have got a couple of answers to questions on notice that have been taken. If we went to Ms Evans, she can provide an answer both on the cost of the external merits review tender, or the allocation of funding for that, and also the working with vulnerable people check.

Ms Evans: Thank you, Chair. I apologise that I did not have these available to me at the time. The cost of the tender was \$100,000, and that is consistent with the amount

that was available in the budget; nothing has changed with that amount. With the other question, which was your original question about the working with vulnerable people check, if I understood your question correctly, you noted that there was a slight increase in the fee and asked what it was for. It has increased to \$137 for five years, so it has gone up by \$2. The fee does slightly offset the administrative costs of administering the working with vulnerable people check and card or electronic document.

MR PETTERSSON: This does not neatly fit into one of the output classes but I do not necessarily have a better place to ask it. The community services sector suffers from job insecurity as a broad issue but I have seen in recent times in CSD itself a range of positions going out that are temporary. I was wondering what CSD is doing to reduce job insecurity in its own workforce?

Ms Rule: I have read and acknowledge the privilege statement. I think temporary staffing measures have been used particularly over the last period during COVID, as we have had to move staff around to meet changing priorities. For example, we have a number of staff who are currently working in the Department of Health around the public health response to COVID. We have seconded people to various places, and we have had to take people off their normal jobs to do things like bolster our resources in things like food relief, for example. That has meant we have had to do some temporary staffing measures across the board to make sure that we have still got people to fill those jobs. That is one aspect of it.

The other aspect is that from time to time we will have pieces of work that are time limited and, therefore, it is responsible management of our budget to just have people on board to do those pieces of work for the amount of time that we need them.

Having said that, my view is that we should be looking to give our people as much job security as we can. I think I am in week eight now in this job—I am not quite counting anymore—and one of the things that I have asked for is to look at our structure and the way in which positions have been staffed, to see where we have got opportunities to give people more certainty into the future.

Ms Wood: Can I just add one thing? The only thing I would add is that CSD also works under the whole-of-government secure work policy. That is kind of a prompt for us to review where we have had temporary arrangements for an extended period. We work through that process and, for certain people who are eligible under that policy, we have converted those to ongoing roles.

MR PETTERSSON: Is CSD more susceptible than other directorates to positions being funded through a business case or potentially having time-limited funding through budgets?

Ms Stephen-Smith: I do not know. Having sat through a few budgets now, I am not sure that we are more susceptible to this. I think we do tend to get project funding on the policy side that is susceptible to that. A lot of the other funding around things like for CYPS, for example, it is not so much that we are subject to ongoing business cases. When we get an increase in staffing for that area, it tends to be ongoing funding.

In that space we then also have quite a lot of staff turn, turnover, and acting. That has historically meant that we have then had short-term positions to backfill. That is one of the things, I think, as Ms Wood was saying, that we are now trying to address in line with the secure work policy, recognising that we will always have that turn, and creating more permanency in those positions.

Ms Rule: Just to give you a little bit of data, we have got roughly 1,000 staff in the directorate at any point in time, and more than 850 of those are permanent employees. The vast majority of our staff are permanent employees. The big operational areas have reasonably stable staffing profiles.

THE CHAIR: I have got a couple of supplementaries on that. They may be on notice but, just to clarify, I am interested in knowing how many positions are currently advertised as available within CSD and, of those positions, how many are advertised as permanent, ongoing positions and how many of those would be contract positions.

Ms Rule: We can take that on notice. I do not have that data with me.

MR DAVIS: The figure I would be interested in a breakdown on is: of the positions across the directorate more broadly, how many are positions that, for lack of a better way of putting it, work in the office versus out in the community delivering a service to people—your policy officers and people in the directorate as opposed to service delivery? Is that a breakdown you have available?

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

MRS KIKKERT: I do not mind this being taken on notice but, if you can answer it, that would be fantastic. The budget priority 2020-21 is to deliver A Step Up for Our Kids. I joined the kinship carers at ACT Together earlier this year. They raised numerous concerns, including lack of help accessing services when a placement is first established; lack of communication between CYPS and the Education Directorate on kids' schools; inappropriate home visits; inconsistent advice regarding financial supports; and lack of consultation with kinship carers and timeliness in decision-making. Can the minister assure this committee, first, that these issues are fully understood and, more importantly, that they will be addressed by the new strategy?

Ms Stephen-Smith: I think those are all issues that we have also heard from carers from time to time. They are well understood. A lot of those issues go to the quality of communication and decision-making, which is something that we are aware of and constantly working to improve. That is the priority.

MRS KIKKERT: That is the key there, Minister. From time to time you have heard this, and no action has been taken.

Ms Stephen-Smith: That is not true.

MRS KIKKERT: You would—

THE CHAIR: Mrs Kikkert, this is—

MRS KIKKERT: The committee—

THE CHAIR: Mrs Kikkert, this is disorderly in the highest form. You have an opportunity in the chamber to present speeches. That is not something you have the privilege of doing in a standing committee, particularly one of which you are not a member. Can I bring you to the question rather than interrupting the minister?

MRS KIKKERT: Will the minister and her officials guarantee that the kinship carers have voiced their opinions and their concerns to ACT Together about what needs to be changed and would that be included in the new strategy?

Ms Stephen-Smith: Yes, those voices have been part of the consultation that Mr Barr spoke about earlier—

MRS KIKKERT: Will it be included?

Ms Stephen-Smith: and have been across all sectors—

MRS KIKKERT: Will it be included in the new strategy? That is the question.

Ms Stephen-Smith: I do not know what specifically you are asking to be included. The feedback is absolutely informing the strategy. Communication and decision-making processes are absolutely part of the response in the strategy, but actually this is about practice.

MRS KIKKERT: I just listed—

Ms Stephen-Smith: This is not about private policy; this is about practice. And it is something that we know there is ongoing work around—

THE CHAIR: Minister, if you do not mind, I will have to draw you to a close, the time being 5.15. I am not going to allow us to continue on if it is only to be argumentative. The time being 5.15, I am going to draw time for questions to a close. I would like to thank Minister Rachel Stephen-Smith and all officials who have appeared before the committee today.

Can I remind any witnesses that have taken questions on notice to please provide answers to those questions to the committee's secretary within five working days of the receipt of the uncorrected proof transcript? Members of the Assembly who wish to lodge questions on notice, please provide them to the committee secretary within five days of today, which is close of business Tuesday, 2 November.

The committee will meet again on Friday, 29 October, at 4 pm. Today's hearing is now adjourned.

The committee adjourned at 5.16 pm.