



**LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY FOR THE AUSTRALIAN CAPITAL
TERRITORY**

**STANDING COMMITTEE ON HEALTH
AND COMMUNITY WELLBEING**

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

Members:

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

TRANSCRIPT OF EVIDENCE

CANBERRA

FRIDAY, 4 MARCH 2022

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

By authority of the Legislative Assembly for the Australian Capital Territory

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

APPEARANCES

Community Services Directorate.....108, 123, 131

Privilege statement

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Amended 20 May 2013

The committee met at 8.52 am.

Appearances:

Vassarotti, Ms Rebecca, Minister for the Environment, Minister for Heritage, Minister for Homelessness and Housing Services and Minister for Sustainable Building and Construction

Community Services Directorate

Rule, Ms Catherine, Director-General

Nielsen, Mr Shane, Executive Branch Manager, Policy and Business Transformation, Housing ACT

Aigner, Mr Geoff, Executive Branch Manager, Client Services, Housing ACT

Gilding, Ms Louise, Executive Group Manager, Housing ACT

THE CHAIR: Good morning, guys, gals and non-binary pals. Welcome to the Standing Committee on Health and Community Wellbeing Committee's third hearing into the ACT government's annual reports for the financial year 2020-21. This morning we will be hearing from Minister Rebecca Vassarotti, Minister Yvette Berry and officials. First, Minister Rebecca Vassarotti will be appearing in her capacity as the Minister for Homelessness and Housing Services. Minister Yvette Berry will then be appearing in her capacity as the Minister for Housing and Suburban Development and Minister for the Prevention of Domestic and Family Violence.

The committee wishes to acknowledge the traditional custodians of the land that we are meeting on, the Ngunnawal people. The committee wishes to acknowledge and respect their continuing culture and the contribution they make to life in our city and across our region. We would also like to acknowledge and welcome any Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who are attending today's hearing.

On the first occasion that you speak today, could you please confirm that you have read and understood the privilege statement which has been sent to you by the committee secretary. If anybody appearing today takes a question on notice, please state clearly, "I will take that question on notice." This helps the committee secretary to follow up with you after the hearing and record it accurately for Hansard. Please note that today's proceedings are being recorded; they will be transcribed by our friends in Hansard and we are also being broadcast and webstreamed live.

We will kick off the hearing with Minister Rebecca Vassarotti, in her capacity as Minister for Homelessness and Housing Services. Welcome Minister.

Ms Vassarotti: Thank you.

THE CHAIR: I remind all witnesses of the protections and obligations that are afforded by parliamentary privilege, and that form part of that privilege statement. We will not have opening statements; we will start straightaway with questions. Minister, on page 22 of the Ombudsman's annual report, they speak about the lack of a dedicated complaints handling system within Housing ACT. I understand that, as the minister responsible for the tenant experience, you are probably where complaints

might go to. A key recommendation of that report was for an update to software to help to manage documents and complaints which remain outstanding. Can you provide an update against this recommendation?

Ms Vassarotti: Thank you, Mr Davis, for the question. I have read and understood the privilege statement. I will ask officials to speak about the complaints process and the response to the Auditor-General's report. Complaints around tenants' experience are managed consistent with the CSD complaints process. Mr Nielsen, as part of our team, has been working closely around the complaints process in responding to the Auditor-General's report, and he is happy to provide some detail on that process.

Mr Nielsen: I have read and accept the statement as provided. Thank you for the question. In relation to the complaints handling system, that was one of the recommendations that came through. At the time Housing ACT was going through an upgrade of their base platform system called Homenet. Part of that also involved increasing capability and functionality. We were able to increase the processing and management of those complaints within the system. It is a process that we have continued to evolve. We work with the broader Community Services Directorate, as part of their complaints handling process.

Systems have been upgraded to better manage and track those, and provide further analytics as to the types of complaints coming through, so that further improvements can be made in that regard as well. It is an ongoing process. It is not something on which we are just standing still. We have made progress and we continue to keep the Ombudsman abreast of those developments.

THE CHAIR: On the subject of complaints, what was the total number of complaints from Housing ACT tenants in this reporting period?

Mr Nielsen: The total for the 2020-21 period was 3,266. That was broken down into various areas, including disruptive behaviour through tenants, maintenance, tenant-responsible, potential allegations and the like there. That was the total there.

THE CHAIR: Of that 3,266 what was the main source of the complaints? What was number one?

Mr Nielsen: Number one was disruptive behaviour or neighbourhood issues.

THE CHAIR: So the main source of complaint was not necessarily related to the service provided by Housing?

Mr Nielsen: Chair, if I could clarify, the breakdown does occur in different areas. One of those is tenant-responsible maintenance; there is also general maintenance managed by Total Facilities. If they were aggregated, that would be the total. But in terms of the total breakdown, disruptive behaviour was number one in that regard.

THE CHAIR: Do you have on hand the figure for the previous reporting period, the previous financial year? It would be interesting to see whether we are doing better or worse.

Mr Nielsen: Yes. For the previous period, 2019-20, the total for complaints was 2,687. In that period disruptive behaviour was again the top one. It is also fair to note that, for the first six months of this period, complaints have come down to 1,040. We have seen improvements in both disruptive behaviour and those maintenance aspects from the facilities provider.

MR PARTON: We had a lot of contact from constituents about the complaint mechanism. One constituent stated that they rang the switchboard, got put through to the Housing ACT line, and spent 19 minutes on hold to reach a voicemail. They called again, asked to be put through to the complaints line, and again it was 19 minutes before the voicemail kicked in. This process was repeated, and a number have come up with that. Can you confirm how many staff are currently working in Housing answering phones, and why is it that constituents are often just reaching a voicemail system?

Mr Nielsen: I will defer to Geoff Aigner, who looks after that specific area.

Mr Aigner: I have read and understood the privilege statement. With respect to the people who are dedicated to answering phones, our client services officers, there are 12 across Housing, in addition to people who are just handling complaints, and as well as the client's housing manager, of course.

MR PARTON: Mr Aigner, are they working remotely or in a—

Mr Aigner: At the moment the majority are working remotely, and have been since, roughly, the middle of last year.

MR PARTON: This is probably directed more to the minister: how do constituents, for urgent matters, reach a staff member if phone calls are not being answered after multiple attempts and are going to voicemail? Minister, given the \$226 million funding given to Housing, why are phones not being answered?

Ms Vassarotti: Thank you, Mr Parton, for the question. As Mr Aigner outlined, we do have a large number of staff that are on a range of duties, including answering phones. A significant number of Housing tenants are provided with a range of numbers to deal with particular issues. There is a range of mechanisms to contact staff at Housing ACT.

MR PARTON: Minister, clearly, those mechanisms are not working.

Ms Vassarotti: I am not quite sure that I would agree with that situation. It is quite standard practice. There will be times when there might be a volume of calls which means that people are required to leave a message on an answering machine. Housing ACT staff are very responsive and understand that clients do need a response, and will get back to them as quickly as possible. At times, if people do not leave numbers or contact details, it is difficult to answer them. Certainly, as you have indicated, at times constituents get in contact with our office, and we make sure that we connect them with Housing ACT staff.

I am not sure whether officials have additional information that they would like to

provide in relation to the process around answering messages where people have been required to leave a message. There is an absolute commitment to strong customer service. There will be times, as with any business, when there is a need for a call-back system, but that system is in place.

MR PARTON: That answer is sufficient for me. I know time is short in this session. If you want to move on, Chair, I am more than happy to.

THE CHAIR: I have one final supplementary on this line of questioning; it reverts back to the original theme of the question around software management. Do we have a date that you are working towards to have that project complete, when you will have a modern, sophisticated software and case management system?

Ms Vassarotti: Thanks, Mr Davis, for the question. I will ask officials to answer some of the detail of that question. What I will say as an opening statement is that Housing ACT is doing some significant work around business improvement. That will include IT upgrades across all business processes. This is a rolling program that is being managed on a sequential basis. Mr Nielsen can probably provide a bit more information around time frames.

Mr Nielsen: As mentioned, we have made upgrades to our system and improvements on a process into how complaints are made within the system. Those aspects are currently being tested. There is broader work within the Community Services Directorate to look at a single handling system across the whole of Community Services. That work is currently being planned. There is no current date at the moment, as I understand it.

THE CHAIR: I will go to Mr Milligan for a substantive question. Mr Milligan, it appears that we are having technical issues. You can hear us; we cannot hear you. Could I suggest that the best way for you to have your question answered is to send it to your colleague, since he seems to have a better internet connection. I will allow Mr Parton to ask your substantive question in your place. While we do that, I will move on to Mr Pettersson.

MR PARTON: I have that question in front of me, as it happens, Mr Davis.

MR PETTERSSON: What are the chances, Mr Parton?

THE CHAIR: What are the chances? I will go to Mr Parton then.

MR PARTON: Thank you, Chair; and thanks for your commentary, Mr Pettersson. Minister, you claim to house those in greatest need in three months to a 100 per cent rate. However, your calculation of this rate is conflicting, when it is calculated out of all those new households allocated within three months who are in the greatest need category, with one per cent of allocations not coming from that category, if you follow. With 477 being assessed and on the waiting list during 2021, and with 267 waiting more than 90 days, how many of these people received an allocation?

Ms Vassarotti: Thank you for the question, Mr Parton. I would reflect that we have had some significant toing and froing on this question with your office in relation to

questions on notice. There is, obviously, a clear misunderstanding of what this performance indicator is talking about. This indicator shows that, of the people housed, 99 per cent of those fall within the highest need category. It is not that we house 99 per cent of the people that are assessed over that period.

Again, I might look to officials to provide the detail about how that process works. I would suggest that there is a clear misunderstanding in terms of what this performance indicator is talking about. We have provided that advice in writing, in terms of what the indicator is actually reporting to. I am not quite sure how we can be clearer in relation to this, but I will look to Mr Aigner to provide some further detail.

MR PARTON: As we bring Mr Aigner in, I would note that it is not just us that you are engaging with on this; we have community partners questioning this calculation and rhetoric.

Ms Vassarotti: I would encourage you to provide the written information to the partners who are asking this question; it provides clarity around what this performance indicator is actually measuring.

Mr Aigner: The 100 per cent figure on three months is reflecting us checking the people we are allocating fastest. For those who are getting a house within three months, on average, 100 per cent of those are coming from the priority waitlist.

MR PARTON: What is the point of even communicating that figure? You are saying that 100 per cent of the people who were assisted needed the assistance; that is really what we are saying with that figure, isn't it?

Mr Aigner: I think there is a point in communicating it, Mr Parton, in that we have to be responsive to those who are in the greatest need—they come off a priority and high needs list—and who are facing significant risks in their lives. I, being responsible for that area, would want to know that those who we are reacting to fastest are indeed those clients. I would be worried if that figure was less than 100 per cent. If it was 80 or 70, I would be asking why we are responding quickest to those who don't need urgent attention.

MR PETTERSSON: I have had some constituents get in touch with me about hoarding occurring in public housing. Could someone walk me through the support services that are available if a tenant does display these behaviours?

Ms Vassarotti: Thanks very much for the question, Mr Pettersson. We are increasingly aware of some of the significant mental health challenges that are facing some members of our community where issues of squalor and hoarding are made manifest. Absolutely, across the community, there are instances of it. Certainly, it is an issue that some of our tenants face. Absolutely, there is a range of support services. Housing ACT works with a range of partners in responding to this issue. Again I will look to Mr Aigner to provide some details regarding the process in Housing ACT.

Ms Rule: Before we throw to Mr Aigner, I might make some general comments. I have read and acknowledge the privilege statement. We are doing significant work across government on this issue. There is a working group led by Health because this

is not only an issue in public housing; it is an issue across the community. Joining up with Health, particularly our colleagues in mental health, on this issue is important. Clearly, there are impacts that are broader than just the bricks and mortar of a house.

We are working closely on a range of options for government to consider about how we can provide the best possible support for people who are in public housing. I will say that this is absolutely not a problem limited to public housing tenants. That very joined-up approach across government with those mental health supports is really important. I will ask Mr Aigner to talk about some of the specific things we do in relation to public housing tenants.

Mr Aigner: Related to that cross-government work, Housing is a part of that working group, and is informing that work. Related to Housing's operational processes, there are a number of escalations in how we deal with clients. When that kind of issue is identified, or when any high and complex need for a client is identified, a housing manager will, at first instance, reach out to a TSCO, a tenancy support and connections officer, who may refer to supports. Woden Community Service, for example, is one of the supports that we draw on, funded by Housing, in that space.

If this is an ongoing and sustained issue, the tenant is taken into a portfolio run by practitioners who have a smaller case load. As everyone understands about this issue, it is a long-term issue; it takes a lot of dedicated and joined-up work. That is our own escalation process.

MR PETTERSSON: Does Housing ACT have a number of tenancies displaying these behaviours?

Mr Aigner: We could probably find that number, Mr Pettersson, I do not have that at hand.

MR PETTERSSON: If you could take that on notice, I would be very curious.

Mr Aigner: I can take that on notice.

Ms Rule: Mr Pettersson, we will talk to our colleagues in Health who have done some analysis of this. From memory, I recall that the analysis that they have done suggests that there are more people living in the private housing market than there are in public housing where this is an issue. There is some underlying analysis. It is a difficult one; there is no central data source on this. But there is work being led by Health about collating some of that data, to help inform us in making decisions about how to respond to the scope of the problem. We are happy to take that on notice and get some additional data for you.

THE CHAIR: Are you with us, Mr Milligan?

MR MILLIGAN: Yes, I am. Hopefully, the volume is working.

THE CHAIR: You are coming in loud and clear. Take it away.

MR MILLIGAN: My question is in relation to complaints. Obviously, in your annual

report, you have a table there that shows the different categories of complaints, which is very useful. What is the current policy around disruptive tenants who have made multiple complaints?

Ms Vassarotti: Thank you, Mr Milligan, for the question. I will ask officials to go through the process with you. Like any landlord, Housing ACT is subject to the Residential Tenancies Act and it needs to act in compliance with that act. There is a very clear process in terms of engaging with tenants to ensure that they are meeting their obligations under the Residential Tenancies Act. There are often cases in which issues that are being identified actually sit outside the Residential Tenancies Act and are issues that are potentially criminal matters and other matters in which there is a need for other processes to be put in place. I will ask officials to go through the process in terms of managing a complaint, particularly around disruptive behaviour.

Mr Aigner: Similar to my previous answer, a tenant will go through a number of escalations processes if we are seeing more complex and sustained behaviour over time. We investigate all complaints received and, where a breach is identified under the act, we may issue a notice to remedy, which outlines the breach and provides a tenant with time to rectify the concerns raised. We track all of those within the client services branch to make sure that they are completed within an agreed time frame. If the breach continues, we may issue a notice to vacate or seek general orders from ACAT to address the concerns. All of that process is generally supported by the higher level supports that I talked about earlier.

MR MILLIGAN: In total, how many warnings are typically given? You have these different processes that you go through, but a lot of complaints that we receive are that constituents make a lot of complaints, yet nothing seems to be done. Is that due to the lengthy processes and stages that you have to go through? How many warnings are given?

Mr Aigner: We try and work as fast as possible, Mr Milligan, but we are not onsite all the time. We try not to have a very dogmatic approach in terms of one, two, three and you're out, for example, as they do in New South Wales. We work with the tenant on where they are at. Often we will work with a tenant and behaviours may improve; then things happen in the person's life and there is a regression. Often it is not a very linear process. Sometimes complaints are not registered where they need to be registered for us to be able to follow them up, either. We are always encouraging neighbours and the community to use our processes so that we can follow them up.

MR PARTON: Mr Aigner—and we may have to bring the minister in on this as well—given that, in answer to an earlier question about the number of complaints, the suggestion was that the highest category of complaints is around antisocial behaviour, and given that you have just outlined a scenario which, after a number of interventions, leads potentially to issuing a notice to vacate, how many times did we arrive at that conclusion in the reporting period? I think it is important to get a grasp of that.

Ms Vassarotti: I will look to officials in terms of providing the details. The comment I would make, in terms of the visibility that sometimes people may have around the process, is that, as with any landlord, Housing ACT is subject to the requirements of the Residential Tenancies Act. There might be processes going on that are not

particularly visible to neighbours, if we do need to engage in a legal process. Certainly, a lot of work is done in terms of engaging with neighbours to the extent possible, in terms of giving visibility to actions that have been taken. Obviously, we need to manage privacy issues. Often there is a higher level of complexity in terms of cases that we are managing. There will be times when disruption will not be due to the tenants; tenants might be subject to the behaviour that neighbours are identifying is being generated by the tenants themselves.

In terms of going through that process, Mr Parton, are you asking about the number of notices to vacate or the number of—

MR PARTON: Mr Aigner suggested that, at its furthest point, the engagement here could involve a notice to vacate being issued because of antisocial behaviour. I am trying to ascertain how many times that has actually occurred in the reporting period, given that, with respect to the high number of complaints, we heard earlier that this was the dominant reason for complaints on the complaint line. I am assuming that there must have been a number of notices to vacate that had been issued because of this reason. If that is not the case, I wonder why not.

Ms Vassarotti: I will look to officials to provide that information. All I would say is that there are other orders that might be issued in order to manage disruptive behaviour—general orders and notices to remedy. This is one of the tools in the toolbox, and it is really the tool of last resort.

There is another thing that I need to clarify with officials. There have been periods over the last couple of years when, either legislatively or by way of policy, there has been a decision not to issue these notices due to the lockdown requirements. We need to understand whether or not that might have impacted on those numbers through this reporting period.

Mr Aigner: Mr Parton, I would like to point out, before I answer the question, that the fact that we are having this conversation talks about the level of scrutiny that public housing tenants have that no other tenant in the territory has. That is something for us to think about. We do not monitor complaints about tenancy in this way or talk about it in a public setting like this for any other tenant. That is worth bearing in mind.

That said, the number of NTVs we have issued is a number we can get, Mr Parton, and I am happy to take that on notice. I will say, before we give it, that it may not be indicative of much, given what the minister has said about the lockdown in the last year. We have not been able to be onsite that much, tenants have been in their homes and we have not taken as many things to ACAT as we normally would.

MR PARTON: Are you saying that the notice to vacate is there to be used but is not used?

Mr Aigner: No, it is definitely used, Mr Parton; it just may not be the indicator that you may be looking for. I am sorry to guess about your intentions.

Ms Vassarotti: I would also put on the record that a notice to vacate may not be used as a tool to resolve an issue around disruptive behaviour. There are a number of

grounds; often there are issues such as failure to pay rent and things like that. There are other reasons. Again, it is one of the tools in the toolbox. It is absolutely used, and it might be used for a variety of reasons.

MR PARTON: Just to close this off, if this is being taken on notice, what I am specifically looking for is: how many notices to vacate were given on the basis of antisocial behaviour? I am not talking about not paying rent or any of that other stuff.

THE CHAIR: Minister, on Tuesday you announced an additional \$2.5 million for specialist homelessness services. I did have it put to me by a constituent who I am working with who is looking for a suitable Housing ACT property: why not just use that money to buy homes in the private market? CoreLogic tells us the average apartment price in Canberra is just shy of \$600,000 at the moment, so that money could buy, say, four apartments. Could you explain to us why the decision was made to invest in these services and what the benefits are of investing in these services as opposed to buying \$2.5 million worth of real estate?

Ms Vassarotti: Thank you very much for the question. It is a really useful reflection about why we invest our resources at different points in the system. Certainly, over the last 12 or 13 months, we have invested significantly in the homelessness services sector, which is really at the pointy end, where people are in significant crisis and do not have anywhere to turn. The announcement this week comes off the back of a number of additional announcements, including from the last two budgets. It takes the investment over that period up to about \$12 million, so it is a significant amount of investment.

That does not mean we are not investing in bricks and mortar for public housing, which has been the subject of other announcements. There has been investment of over \$1 billion in that area. It is vitally important that we do provide that support to people who are at that point of crisis.

In relation to the funding that was announced this week, this was particularly building on the very important connections and knowledge that we have built up, particularly through the last lockdown. This funding is specifically targeted at providing support for rough sleepers, in terms of providing some emergency accommodation. One of the announcements looked at a service that we stood up in the first lockdown, the Winter Lodge, and at making that an all-year service. Ainslie Lodge is the name of it now, and that will be open for 12 months of the year rather than just in the winter period.

The bulk of these funds are really focused on providing support for people who have experienced chronic homelessness and chronic rough sleepers that have struggled to engage with the service system. One of the interesting things that came through this last lockdown is that we were able to engage with people that had struggled to engage with the service system, particularly through being able to provide emergency accommodation through hotels. We know that a lot of these people have a range of very complex needs and need ongoing support.

This support is enabling specialist homelessness services to access specialist community mental health support. We know that mental health issues are often a barrier to accessing services. It is also providing the ability for services to work with

this group of clients for a longer period of time, for a 12-month period, to transition them into longer term accommodation, so that we do not see that revolving door, with people accessing emergency accommodation for a little while, dropping out of the system and then coming back. This is around putting the supports in place to ensure that we can support people to have longer term housing.

It is really exciting. It is something that has come out of a strong engagement with our community partners. We have a rough sleepers working group that has been working for the last two years to get an understanding of the systemic and underlying issues that are driving homelessness for some of our most vulnerable community members. We believe that this investment will be part of how we eliminate homelessness in the community.

We absolutely need to invest in bricks and mortar, and I am sure you will speak with Minister Berry about some of the work that she is doing in that area. Providing our specialist support services with adequate support to enable them to help people who are at a crisis point is a really important investment.

THE CHAIR: For those who have put it to me that the money should be invested in bricks and mortar, I think your answer has sufficiently covered this. As the Minister for Homelessness and Housing Services, at any point in the process, if you chose to, could you expend money for the purpose of buying and managing properties? Am I right in understanding that that sits within Minister Berry's responsibilities?

Ms Vassarotti: That sits within Minister Berry's responsibilities.

THE CHAIR: Even if you wanted to go out with the government chequebook and start buying houses, that would not fall in your ministerial responsibilities?

Ms Vassarotti: No, it does not, but I can assure you that there are very strong discussions between the two ministerial offices in terms of what the needs are. We absolutely work very closely with Minister Berry in terms of reflecting the issues. She is very aware of the issues around our waiting list and needs. It is something on which we work very closely with Minister Berry.

MR MILLIGAN: In the annual report at page 96, table 22 states the reasons why tenants ended their tenancies. Of the 459 tenancies that have ended, were any of these ended due to no longer meeting the requirements for public housing and being reassessed by Housing?

Ms Vassarotti: Thank you, Mr Milligan, for the question. There is a process that Housing ACT goes through on a periodic basis in relation to the assessment process. I will look to officials in terms of the last time that review was undertaken and the specifics of the question in terms of this reporting period.

Mr Aigner: Yes, the minister is correct in saying that we do go through our waiting list to check eligibility for public housing. In terms of tenancies ending, people do not move out of tenancies because they are no longer eligible for public housing, if that is the question you are asking.

MR MILLIGAN: Do tenants have their needs assessed on a yearly basis to ensure that they do qualify for public housing?

Mr Aigner: On a regular basis we assess income, which then determines the rent that people pay. There is also a sustainable income review, and Shane might want to comment on that. The income is the thing that we check regularly, Mr Milligan, which is the determinant of rent.

Ms Vassarotti: Mr Nielsen, are you able to provide some information about whether or not there has been a review within the reporting period? I am not sure whether that has happened in the reporting period.

Mr Nielsen: We will need to take that on notice, Minister. My understanding is that we have not completed that in this period. I will need to check that with Mr Aigner's team.

MR MILLIGAN: With the 133 that ended up going into the private market, was that due to reassessment? Were they given support to enter the private market by the government?

Ms Vassarotti: My understanding is that those review processes did not happen this year. That would not have been the reason why they have exited public housing and gone into private rental.

MR MILLIGAN: No; of the 133 that went into the private market, was any support given to them by the government to enter into the private market?

Ms Gilding: I acknowledge the privilege statement. The sustainable income review happens on a periodic basis. It has been difficult to do during COVID. People's circumstances have changed, and we have seen quite significant shifts in our economy and our job market. The sustainable income review is an exercise that we take where we work with our market renters. The market renters are those people who, when their income is reviewed every 12 months for the rebate, no longer qualify. They then pay market rent.

From there we have a process where we identify those people; we contact them and say, "Your income is high, you're in a very small percentage of public housing tenants who have a high income, and we'd like to talk to you about what your options might be either to move into the private market or to look at your housing options. Potentially, you could enter into the shared equity scheme that we have here in Housing ACT, or even buy your house."

The sustainable income review worked with a smaller number. We would look to find the 300 to 500 top income earners within Housing ACT, and we would work with them around their financial circumstances, because sometimes that income is a secure source and sometimes it is not. Now that we find ourselves settling down a little bit from the pandemic, it is something that we will be looking to do in terms of that sustainable review. I note that the percentage of market renters within the Housing ACT portfolio has certainly diminished over the years.

MR PARTON: In relation to that series of numbers in terms of the tenancies that ended, with the 118 that passed away, for how long on average did those properties sit empty before a new tenant was allocated to the properties? Is anyone able to give me an answer on that?

Ms Vassarotti: I will look to officials, but that piece of information will be very difficult to pull out of the general information regarding turnaround times. There is a range of reasons why a property would be vacant. The very sad situation of a tenant passing away is one of those. There is often some complexity in family arrangements as well. Even in those circumstances there might be other tenants who are residents of a property, so we need to work through those issues as well. I will look to Ms Gilding to see whether we do have details around this particular circumstance and providing that detail.

Ms Gilding: I would simply look to our ROGS data for the reporting period, for the financial year, in terms of the average turnaround time for vacant properties, which was approximately 50 days—49.9—and which was actually a 39 per cent reduction from the previous financial year. We have had tumultuous years in terms of shutdowns and that whole market context. We have paid constant attention in terms of our turnaround times for vacants. Mr Parton, as we have spoken about before in these hearings, there are multiple reasons why a property is vacant and how long it takes, and those averages do swing.

In terms of finding the number for those specific 118, it would take a significant number of resources to find that number. I would respectfully say I do not think I can tell you exactly, for those 118, what the turnaround time was.

MR PARTON: Finally, with regard to the tenancies ending numbers, when a tenant is evicted from public housing, are they allocated another property or are they no longer allowed to apply for social housing?

Ms Vassarotti: Mr Aigner might be able to provide a little bit of detail in relation to that process. We do not wish to evict our tenants, but there are some circumstances in which there are very few options. Mr Aigner, could you provide a bit of detail in terms of what happens if we do get to that point with a tenant?

Mr Aigner: I should point out that it is a very rare occurrence. We are not talking about a lot of people. In the financial year in question we evicted one person. Generally, when we get to that stage, post notice to vacate and eviction onwards, we are making an assessment of whether the person can sustain a tenancy and whether we believe they can sustain a public housing tenancy. They may be eligible to come back into housing, and there are tenants who have come back. It will not be into the same property, generally speaking. We may look to manage the tenancy in a slightly different way, in a more high-needs portfolio, with stricter terms. They are not excluded from public housing, although they may go to community housing, be part of our HAAP portfolio or go into the homelessness sector. Remember that we are talking about a very small number, Mr Parton.

MR PETTERSSON: Minister, can you talk us through the process that is currently underway to relocate 337 public housing tenants, and what is being done to minimise

the disruption that relocation causes to tenants?

Ms Vassarotti: Thank you, Mr Pettersson, for the question. Because this is all related to the growth and renewal program, it is a process that sits with Minister Berry. However, we do have the officials in the room, and you will have noted that, due to the fact that Minister Berry was unable to comment publicly a couple of days ago, it was something on which I provided some information. We are happy to answer the question; I just wanted to clarify that.

We acknowledge that this process is really difficult. It can be a very challenging situation to move. Particularly for tenants that have complex needs or have been in their home for a long period of time, this is a really difficult process. The Housing ACT team have been working for many months with community partners in terms of the process to ensure that it is a process that is managed in a sensitive way and that a range of supports are provided. I will ask Mr Aigner to walk you through the process of what has happened to date.

We also note that this is a step in the process, and much more work will be done. Again, we will be working very closely with our community partners. We are currently assessing the needs of the tenants that might have received this communication now. That will change over the period, depending on their personal circumstances. Mr Aigner, if you are able to provide some detail, that would be great.

MR PETTERSSON: Just to clarify, I understand that Minister Berry is responsible for the growth and renewal program, but would the services that Housing ACT provides be considered separate to the support currently being provided to the tenants going through this program?

Ms Vassarotti: The ACT housing support process sits within a team that specifically works around growth and renewal, which is why it is Minister Berry's responsibility. I may not have answered your question properly.

MR PETTERSSON: That does make sense. If that is the case, it is all right; I will take it up with Minister Berry in the next session.

MR PARTON: Minister, the final number of client service visits for 2021 is 8,349—I am reading from page 93 of the public housing overview—with a target of 11,000. In estimates, when questioned, it was stated that the reason there is less than one client service visit per property per year is due to it being an invasion of people's personal lives and not wanting to overservice or be intrusive. As a landlord, surely, there are responsibilities which do not seem to be occurring, such as checking property condition. Can you explain how a private landlord must have inspections twice a year to inspect the property, yet Housing, as a social landlord, cannot even complete at least one per property per year?

Ms Vassarotti: Thanks, Mr Parton, for the question. I am unable to comment on the obligations of private landlords. I am not privy to those obligations or, indeed, what they—

MR PARTON: I think they are well known, though, Minister.

Ms Vassarotti: I actually do not know. I would assume there are limitations on some of the requirements around private landlords, but that is not something that I can comment on.

I can comment on client service visits. I make the point that this was a period when we have lived through COVID and lockdown periods. The number of visits that have been provided over this reporting period have been significantly impacted by this. When it was safe to recommence client service visits, after a period of time when no visits were undertaken because of the rules around the health directions, they were commenced after an assessment was made in terms of the higher needs; then it got back to normal servicing.

In terms of the general criteria for undertaking a client services visit, I will ask Mr Aigner to provide some details in relation to that. But in terms of the numbers for this reporting period—indeed, if this is the case for the next reporting period—it has been significantly impacted by the health directions and the ability to conduct these visits safely both for our tenants and for our staff.

Mr Aigner: Thank you for the question, Mr Parton. I note that you asked a similar question at the last hearing. It is an area which has been of great interest to me and my team as well. We are interested in being in the field as much as possible, and we will look to do more of that in this coming financial year.

In terms of the numbers, I may be wrong, but I am pretty sure, Mr Parton, that you said private landlords must inspect twice a year. I think it is a maximum of two rather than an obligation for there to be two. That said, the client service visits that we conduct as Housing are only one interaction with clients. Our rough estimates of how many engagements we have with clients over the course of the year stretch to over 100,000 engagements. That is over the phone, in CAP; we may do house visits, we talk about rebates and we engage around complaints. So there are many interaction points with a client.

A client service visit is a very defined visit. Really, it is looking at the property and making sure the property is in order, and having formality about a check-in with the client. As the minister said, this number was significantly impacted by COVID, and particularly in the first half of the year, following the moratorium, we were only going out to houses where we thought there was an urgent need. In the second half of the year we prioritised clients who we thought had high needs or had not had a visit for a while, and we are doing that again in this financial year. Our aim is to increase that number beyond one per year.

If we talk about all of the business process re-engineering work that we are doing, the aim is to get our frontline staff out in the field and engaging with clients more—doing more client work and less office work. We are very happy to talk about these ongoing engagements.

MR PARTON: As always, Mr Aigner, you have been most helpful.

THE CHAIR: One of the commitments that we made in appendix 4 of our parliamentary and governing agreement was to consider the role of a dedicated

support worker in housing for sexuality and gender-diverse people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness. Is there any update on that commitment that you might be able to give us today?

Ms Vassarotti: In terms of the need, particularly for people that are experiencing homelessness or at risk of experiencing homelessness, we are looking at that identified need as well as other needs, as part of a commissioning process that we are doing with the homelessness sector right now. This is part of a co-design process on which we are working with the sector. There is a whole series of workshops occurring right now. We have finished the first rounds of those workshops with people that are working in the sector.

A key element of that is identifying where we have gaps and where there are needs. Some work has happened internally in relation to the data that we have in terms of what we are seeing with emerging needs, in particular, which is relevant for the particular needs of LGBTIQ+ people. That is absolutely one of the issues that we are looking at.

As part of this process, as one of the linchpins to our sector response, we are doing an evaluation of OneLink as well. We have asked a range of people, in both the sector and organisations that engage with the sector, to contribute to that piece of work. As we move through this process, we will identify where there are gaps in our system. We know that there are particular groups within the community that are not being well serviced. We will then be in a position to look at what we might need to do in terms of potentially looking at the services that we have already engaged and whether they are able to respond to these needs or whether we stand up new services or specific identified workers through that process.

It is being progressed as part of that broader system review. Again, it is one of the key pieces of work that we are doing in order to meet our absolute desire to ensure that we have a decent home for everyone in the community.

THE CHAIR: Thank you, Minister. On behalf of the committee, I would like to thank Minister Rebecca Vassarotti and officials for their attendance today. The secretary will provide your office and officials with a copy of the transcript of today's hearing, when it is available. Please take some time to check that for accuracy. If you have taken any questions on notice, please liaise with our committee secretary to provide those answers. The committee will now suspend. When we resume, we will hear from Minister Yvette Berry, in her capacity as Minister for Housing and Suburban Development.

Hearing suspended from 9.52 to 10.01 am.

Appearances:

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

Community Services Directorate

Loft, Ms Catherine, Executive Branch Manager, Infrastructure and Contracts, Housing ACT

Nielsen, Mr Shane, Executive Branch Manager, Policy and Business Transformation

Aigner, Mr Geoff, Executive Branch Manager, Client Services Branch, Housing ACT

THE CHAIR: Welcome back, friends, to the Standing Committee on Health and Community Wellbeing's inquiry into the annual reports for the ACT Government for the financial year 2020-21. We will have Minister Yvette Berry with us for the next half an hour in her capacity as the Minister for Housing and Suburban Development. I remind all witnesses of the protections and obligations afforded under parliamentary privilege and draw your attention to the privilege statement.

On the first instance that you speak today please give us your full name and the capacity in which you appear at today's hearings, and acknowledge that you have read and understood the privilege statement. In the interests of time we will forgo opening statements and we will go straight to questions.

Minister, the governing and parliamentary agreement between our two parties commits the government to build or buy 400 new public housing dwellings by the year 2025. Can you give me an update on how we are going reaching that target?

Ms Berry: I might just ask if we have some up-to-date numbers today. Ms Loft might be able to provide some detail there.

Ms Loft: Good morning. I acknowledge that I have read and understood the privilege statement. The growth and renewal process to date over the first 2½ years of the program has seen 143 dwellings be demolished for redevelopment. We have sold 242 end-of-use public housing properties, generating \$195.3 million to help fund this program. We have purchased 101 land sites for \$58.4 million from the SLA and the Asbestos Response Taskforce for redevelopment. The completed constructions are the 157 dwellings for \$96.2 million—all class C or gold adaptable. We have also purchased from the private market 76 dwellings for \$52.1 million.

This year alone you will see an investment from the government of \$171 million. This is going to assist 156 public housing households to relocate to allow us to sell or redevelop properties. Importantly, we have a very strong pipeline of work in progress, with over 800 dwellings in design, planning and construction phases of the program this year, and 91 properties will be demolished to allow for redevelopment on these sites. A further 22 land sites will be purchased from the SLA. We will deliver 116 new constructions and 69 dwellings are to be purchased through the private

market. Some of those will not be settled until future years.

THE CHAIR: That was very comprehensive, Ms Loft. Thank you very much. I have a few supplementary questions based on that good information, if you would not mind. You said that 800 dwellings were at some stage of the process between design, construction—and what was the third thing?

Ms Loft: Design, construction, planning stages, DA, and work in progress.

THE CHAIR: Wonderful. I am happy for you to take it on notice; could I get a breakdown of how many of those 800 properties are within each one of those three stages of that process? How many are in design and how many are currently being built?

Ms Loft: I will have to take that on notice, Chair.

THE CHAIR: That makes sense.

Ms Berry: That would be point-in-time data. Of course, that would change each day as the program is rolled out. So on this particular day or this week, that will be the information, but next week that will change.

THE CHAIR: I am sure that it will be clear, when the question is given on notice, that that will be the figure as of that date. We will be able to anticipate that. Thank you. Given those pretty big figures and the generous amounts of funding, Ms Loft, it sounds as if—I do not want to put words in your mouth—we are on target to meet our or exceed our 400 homes by 2025. Would that be correct?

Ms Loft: Absolutely, Chair, that is our aim. We have put lots of mitigation strategies in place, considering some of the delays in delivery we have had, particularly around construction. We have obviously had a number of risks in the last couple of years. I can take you through a few of those, particularly wet weather, and material and labour shortages. Contractors have been reporting lead times, for example, on timber roof trusses, in excess of five months. Normally this is mitigated by placing orders well in advance, but we have not seen these delays ever in the construction industry. Also, the COVID safety restrictions and quarantine requirements due to both positive cases and close contacts have impacted the number of trades which can attend on site. Despite all of those external uncontrollable factors, it was a deliberate effort by us to increase that work in progress, which was bringing forward that pipeline for this year and next year to ensure that the overall program targets can be met. So those 800 dwellings that we have in design, planning or construction and delivery will ensure we do that. Part of that work to bring them forward was to extend a typical build from the nine-month period to 15 months to account for those risks that I just talked about.

Also, to ensure that we are meeting the target, Housing has deliberately acquired a lot of know-how for this program. Over the past two or three years we have appointed a large number of qualified and experienced staff in the continuing evolution of processes. We have implemented a really sophisticated reporting tool and that allows our construction team to report on this very large-scale work-in-progress pipeline which is made up of hundreds of individual projects to get those 800 dwellings. We

have also developed better risk management practices, and that will ensure the successful delivery of this program.

Ms Berry: Chair, I can just add to that. One of the risks that Ms Loft has not identified is some of the issues that Housing ACT faces within our community in replacing and renewing or building new homes for people who desperately need a place to call their home. This is something that has been a bit of a challenge through both this growth and renewal program and the previous growth and renewal program. Of course, everybody agrees that we need to build more houses and more public housing that meets the needs of people within our community; however, often we get the case of, “Yes, build more public housing, but just do not build it near me.” That is a risk, and it creates the potential for delays. It has in the past, and it will probably in the future create that risk of delay in the development and building of more homes for people who need it most. However, I can say that Housing ACT goes above and beyond to make sure it consults and talks with communities prior to, and during, the build, and the developers of those homes are expected to have pretty good partnerships with the existing community so that there is as little disruption as possible through the development of a new home. However, Ms Loft, it might be useful just to talk through those consultation processes that Housing ACT does prior to and during the development application process for public housing in the ACT.

THE CHAIR: As useful as that would be, I am conscious that we have four members and 20 minutes left, and I still have a quick supplementary question. I will just go to my supplementary question, Minister. I want to put to you a similar proposition to what I put to the Minister Vassarotti in the last hearing. In the instances that you just spoke about—the challenge of building new public housing properties where there might be a bit of pushback in the community—some might say, “Well, why don’t we just go out and buy from the private market homes that are already built?” They do not have to go through the development process, they are not distinguished as public housing properties and we might be able to meet some immediate need. Can you talk me through what some of the opportunities or challenges might be to what appears to be a pretty simple solution?

Ms Berry: Yes, Mr Davis. Ms Loft, in her previous response, talked about some of the home purchases that we have made in the private market for public housing. Sometimes that will be to meet the specific needs of an individual whose needs might be more complex. But sometimes in purchasing off the private market those homes will not be accessible, and they will not be class C or gold-rated housing dwellings. So we need to make sure that we are building homes that are sustainable now and into the future and that are able to be modified, should that be indicated, for people to age in place or as their circumstances change.

I might ask Ms Loft to provide a little more detail about some of those purchases that we make off the private market. Mr Davis, you are right; the government does not want to place public housing tenants in a situation where they are stigmatised or identified as different from anybody else, and that is why we build homes for public housing tenants that fit in with the neighbourhood and are not easily identifiable. Certainly, through the last housing growth and renewal program, where we relocated people from all of those large high-density BAC flats, Owen Flats and others, into homes that actually were outstandingly beautiful, it changed those people’s lives. We

had so many positive stories from those people about how much their lives were changed as a result of moving into a home that best or better suited their needs—a beautiful new home or another home that was purchased off the market.

Ms Loft: First and foremost, we are looking at a scale of 1,400—renewing a thousand sites and adding 400. It would be extremely difficult for us to be competitive in purchasing that from the market with the market conditions the way they are. With our renewal sites, one of the major benefits is the yield uplift, so we can actually grow the portfolio and provide more homes.

As the Minister said, one of the reasons that we construct as a preferred method is the sustainability of our newly built homes. We have a design brief and some of our design features on the new builds include a minimum six-star energy rating to reduce the running costs for our tenants. Designs take advantage of natural sunlight and ventilation, they have private open space for balconies, and liveable or adaptable housing designs to ensure that our homes are accessible to people of all ages and abilities.

Security and privacy features are there for the wellbeing of our tenants and they are designed to reduce ongoing maintenance and to increase the convenience for the tenants. So all our new public housing dwellings are designed to that six-star energy efficiency. It is really important for us to deliver comfort by investing in technology; using robust materials that reduce maintenance and running costs; having environmentally sustainable features such as water tanks, double-glazed windows and light-coloured roofs; and maximising the northern orientation whenever possible. Also, there are no gas connections. That alone provides tenants a saving of \$300 a year. We have been able to do that for 66 tenants this year alone through our energy efficiency program. We are partnering with ActewAGL to make sure that we deliver energy efficiency to reduce those power bills as well.

These are some of the benefits we get from constructing. Through our acquisitions we absolutely have a robust process in place to allow for bespoke purchases for specific tenant needs and also to ensure we get the diversity across the suburbs, where we are unable to have renewal in certain sites. We released last year the new mechanism for the EOI process—and we have received some interest in that—from which we will be able to yield a benefit in the next couple of years.

THE CHAIR: Great. Thank you, Ms Loft. We will go to Mr Milligan now for his substantive question.

MR MILLIGAN: Due to time, I am happy to handball that across to Mr Parton.

MR PARTON: Minister, I want to ask about one of the hot topics of the week, and that is the growth and renewal program. The Chief Minister angrily responded to questions about public servants working from home and returning to the office. He said that he would not be shoehorning public servants out of their homes back into the office. He said that these Canberrans were not a commodity and that he would be treating them as people. How is it that in the same week as he made those statements, you informed 300 plus tenants, most of them long-term tenants, that you would be shoehorning them out of their homes. As many of those homes will be put up for sale,

those tenants are really being treated like a commodity. Why isn't the same respect being given to public housing tenants as is the case the public servants?

Ms Berry: Thanks very much, Mr Parton. I, obviously, do not agree with your characterisation there of Housing ACT or that we consider public housing tenants any less equally than we would anyone else in the ACT. That is why the ACT government and Housing ACT has consulted at length across a number of years with community support organisations—including ACTCOSS, ACT Shelter and Canberra Community Law—to ensure that the supports are in place for public housing tenants as part of this growth and renewal program.

As did the same during the growth and the renewal program in previous years, where we renewed 1,288 households, we will make sure that those tenants have the supports that they need before, during and after their relocation. At a number of times, and during the delivery of letters to public housing tenants about the relocation options for them, they were individually contacted where possible. I understand the majority of people have been spoken to or have received correspondence from Housing ACT on a number of occasions. What you might have read or heard in the media has not been the feedback that I have been getting from community support organisations who have been part of this renewal program.

MR PARTON: Minister, what I am hearing I am not getting from the media. I am getting it from people that are contacting me. There have been quite a number of them. Indeed, what you are saying regarding those services and the consultation with those community groups is absolutely being refuted by those community groups. I am staggered that you could stand here and give me a summary of this process, when very clearly what is going on out there in the suburbs is completely different to what you are saying.

Ms Berry: Well, that is simply not the case, Mr Parton, because I have been hearing completely different feedback to what you are receiving. I understand that there are tenants who are nervous about moving out of their existing homes into new homes. Of course, I understand that. Change after a number of years—decades for many of these individuals—is incredibly difficult, particularly if you are a public housing tenant. That is why we have been working with all of these community support organisations to make sure that tenants are supported before, during and after the relocation when we get to that stage.

Nobody will be left homeless out of this process. It will be about finding the best suitable outcome for public housing tenants. Mr Parton, you would agree that we need to make sure that we have homes for everybody—the single parents, the single mums with a number of children who are living in overcrowded situations or are homeless. We need to find them homes that best suit their needs. We need to encourage individuals that are in homes that are being underutilised, that have more rooms available, to move to a home that better suits their needs. It will be a home for them that is more sustainable and more affordable and that will be able to be modified as they age or need other modifications in the future, as Ms Loft described earlier.

I might ask Mr Aigner, who has been part of these conversations and processes with community support organisations and with the individuals, about that process of how

we will support them before, during and after their move to a new home that best suits their needs. We can then free up homes, where we can put other people who need them.

Mr Aigner: There are a number of streams to this work. As the Minister has indicated, the engagement with community partners has been extensive. It goes back to May last year. We have engaged around communications, collateral, the processes we are working on, the risks, supports and eligibility. We have talked about everything that we are doing with our community partners, we have taken their feedback on board, and we are continuing to work with them. We will increase our engagement with community partners over the next month as we look at specific clients and their needs.

When it comes to the clients and how we are supporting them, it is probably worth bearing in mind that for the last few years we have had dedicated staff, our tenant relocation officers, who sit outside of normal operations with tenants and whose sole job is to understand where the tenant is at right now, what their needs are in the future, what they may need in terms of aging in place supports and community supports, and try to find a place for them to go which meets those needs. Not everything will be met, but we are trying to get as many needs met as possible. That support will continue in the future.

As we look at the process and where we are at today, the tenants will have an opportunity to look at multiple properties over the course of their engagement with tenant relocation officers over the next few months. They will be given at least two properties to look at, and all the way through this process the tenant relocation officers will not only be supporting them but will be directing them to supports within the community. That is what we have been engaging with the growth and renewal inclusive partnerships team on.

MR PARTON: Chair, I have a thousand questions I could ask on this, but we are out of time. I will get out of here and put them on notice, but can I just suggest that half an hour for this particular part of government is an absurdly small amount of time. I just want to raise that here within the context of the hearing. I think that this particular session should be longer. Thank you.

Ms Berry: Chair, if I can offer Mr Parton a briefing on the growth and renewal program, I would be very happy to do that.

MR PARTON: We have one lined up with your office, Minister.

Ms Berry: Excellent. You will be able to ask all of those questions, Mr Parton. I suggest that if you have individuals contacting your office who are concerned about the correspondence that they have received, please support them in this relocation program and put them in touch with my office so that I can get Housing ACT relocation officers to talk with them about their specific needs.

MR PARTON: Thank you, Minister.

THE CHAIR: We will go to Mr Pettersson for a substantive question.

MR PETTERSSON: I was hoping to get an update on the provision of housing for older Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. How many projects have we completed and is there any further work underway to provide culturally appropriate housing options in the ACT?

Ms Berry: Thanks very much, Mr Pettersson, for that question. We are really proud of the Aboriginal older persons projects that we have been able to engage in, particularly with the support and recommendations from the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Elected Body. Their support and feedback on the program of dwellings has been really helpful in making sure that those homes are sustainable and fit for purpose, but also that they culturally meet the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. We have just opened up and are about to have tenants move into a new project at Dickson. That is another five homes, which gives us a total of 15. We will continue to work with the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Elected Body about how we can best meet the needs of individuals within that community, but I might ask Ms Loft to talk through the program of those three developments.

Ms Loft: Thank you, Minister. Just in February, as the Minister said, we delivered the last five for the initiative. So it is a total of 15. We had the five in Kambah, the five in Lyons and now the five that we have just handed over to the allocations process in Dickson. They have all been appropriately and culturally designed with the elected body, and there have been plenty of media events around them. They have been an absolute success. We have been receiving really great feedback and look forward to allocating those now.

MR PETTERSSON: Wonderful. If you will indulge me, Chair, whilst we are talking about housing in Dickson, can I get a quick update on Common Ground Dickson?

THE CHAIR: That is a stretch, Mr Pettersson, but that is fine.

Ms Loft: The construction of Common Ground commenced in October 2020. It is progressing really well. We had the structure completed on 6 August 2021 and work is now progressing on the internal fit-out with metal framing and service roughing. It is anticipated that the construction will be complete in Q4.

MR PETTERSSON: Thank you.

THE CHAIR: Tremendous. With four minutes to go, I do not have any further questions. Mr Parton, if you have a question on that long list that you think could be covered in four minutes, I would be happy to let you go.

MR PARTON: Yes, okay. I think this will be short. On page 95, table 19 CSD shows the number of complaints made in the last year and breaks it down by category, which is very helpful. There were over 100 more complaints made about maintenance managed by program compared to 2019-20. Why is that number growing, Minister?

Ms Berry: Thanks, Mr Parton. I can ask Mr Aigner to provide some information about the data that you are talking about, but I should also mention the \$80 million that has been committed by the ACT government as part of our maintenance program over the next three years. That will make a significant difference to people's lives and

their homes. Mr Aigner, did you have some more information on the data that Mr Parton is referring to?

Mr Nielsen: I am happy to take it on. I am Shane Nielsen, Executive Branch Manager of Policy, Business and Transformation, and I do accept the statement as provided. Mr Parton, the complaints did go up in the last year. I cannot speak to the specifics, but I imagine a lot of those instances would be around some of the things that occurred with lockdown and some of the timing of materials that came through. There would have been some concerns from clients arising from that. In relation to your question to Minister Berry in terms of the increase in maintenance, what we have seen in the first half of the year is a significant reduction in complaints that have come through in regard to the program in that context, Mr Parton. So I expect some of those aspects have driven some of that agenda as well.

MR PARTON: That is succinct. I think, Chair, I can bail out and you can get out on time, if you wish.

THE CHAIR: Great. Thank you, Mr Parton. It has just gone 10.30. It looks as if we will. I would like to thank Minister Berry, as the Minister for Housing and Suburban Development, and officials for appearing today. The secretary will provide your office and officials with a copy of the proof transcript of today's hearing when it is available. Please take some time to check it for accuracy. For those questions that you have taken on notice, please liaise with the committee secretary to get those answers through as soon as possible.

The committee will now suspend until 11.30, when we will be back with Minister Yvette Berry in her capacity as the Minister for the Prevention of Family and Domestic Violence.

Short suspension.

Appearances:

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

Community Services Directorate

Windeyer, Ms Kirsty, Coordinator-General, Family Safety

THE CHAIR: Welcome back, everybody, to the Legislative Assembly's Standing Committee on Health and Community Wellbeing's inquiry into the ACT Government's annual reports of financial year 2020-21. This morning, we will hear from Minister Yvette Berry, the Minister for the Prevention of Domestic and Family Violence. I remind everybody of the protections and obligations afforded under parliamentary privilege and draw your attention to the privilege statement. On the first instance that you speak today, please give us your full name, the capacity in which you appear at today's hearing and acknowledge that you have read and understood that statement.

In the interest of time, we are going to forgo opening statements and we will go straight to questions. As Chair, I will kick us off. Minister, I refer you to page 73 of the CSD annual report, which speaks about the Room4Change program. I note that there was to be an evaluation provided by the end of 2021. Has that evaluation occurred?

Ms Berry: Yes. I can ask Kirsty Windeyer, the Coordinator-General for Family Safety to provide a bit of detail on where that is up to.

THE CHAIR: That would be great, thank you.

Ms Windeyer: I acknowledge that I have read and understood the privilege statement. The Room4Change evaluation was completed, and it is published on the Domestic Violence Crisis Service website. The evaluation found that the service was a well implemented and widely praised program, and that, if sustained in the longer-term by participants, would likely result in fewer and less severe incidences of domestic abuse. The publication was in October 2021.

THE CHAIR: Wonderful. I guess, one of the tricky questions for a program such as Room4Change is: how do you best evaluate whether or not the program is effective? Is it completion rate? I guess I am just getting to the core question: how do you measure changed behaviour or changed attitudes of the participants?

Ms Berry: Thanks. That is a really good question, Mr Davis. It is a complex area, and the program is quite intensive. It not only supports the individual who might be perpetrating the violence, but the family as well, because some of that work is about maintaining a safe relationship but some of it is also about removing the perpetrator and making sure that the family can still stay at home without fear of violence or controlling behaviour.

It is a really complex area, and it is difficult to measure. It is measured in a different way to just numbers off a checklist, although that is one of the measures—you could count the number of people who have participated in the program. But Ms Windeyer, do you have some more information about how we measure the success?

Ms Windeyer: Yes. It is not just about numbers. In terms of the numbers of participants, 39 perpetrators were engaged in the program in July to December 2021. Seven men were supported through the residential program and 32 men were engaged in the Room4Change program as participants and supported by outreach. Fifty-four women were accepted or continued to engage in partner support through Room4Change and there were 119 children. In terms of evaluation of the effectiveness of the program, it is similar to many programs where we look at not just the numbers but at whether there are increases in women's and children's safety. So in terms of the safety of those women and children who were victims-survivors of domestic abuse, the evaluators look at that and safety is measured in a number of different ways.

It is a difficult thing to evaluate, and the evaluation of the program needs to be ongoing to ensure that it is best practice, because in the field of domestic and family violence any response needs to ensure that it takes into account any new developments in learning and understanding, particularly in relation to perpetrator responses. One of the reasons this office—and, through the minister, the government—has published the men's behaviour change program standards is so that the programs that work with perpetrators actually work to certain standards. Those standards are being adopted by the men's behaviour change program and Room4Change. They were developed with the perpetrator working group that we have here in the ACT but also, looking at best practice across other jurisdictions to ensure that we continue to work in the safest manner that we can.

THE CHAIR: Great, thank you so much. I will move onto a supplementary question from Mrs Kikkert.

MRS KIKKERT: Given the positive feedback from victims during this evaluation, are there plans to extend the Room4Change program? If so, what sorts of programs would that be involved in?

Ms Berry: The program is relatively new, as you know, in the ACT but also in Australia. It is a one of a kind. It is really a nation-leading project here in the ACT. The evaluation was about informing how the project was providing safe environments for women and their children but also supporting perpetrators to change their behaviour.

We have gone through the early work of the program. We will continue to revise it and to take advice from experts in the perpetrator space across the country to continue to make sure that it is working the best possible way, giving those best possible outcomes to everybody involved. But I think, at this stage, it is quite a new program, so we still want to make sure that it actually does do what we have asked it to do. Is there anything else you want to add?

Ms Windeyer: Yes. Mrs Kikkert, the Room4Change program is currently funded

until 30 June 2023, and so the contract with DVCS will be extended for that additional year. During this period of time, we will, with DVCS, continue to look at that program and at other things that might be needed so that we can work out whether an expansion is needed—either within that program or perhaps elsewhere—and what is needed post 2023.

MRS KIKKERT: Okay. Are there any outstanding concerns about the Room4Change program that would hinder any future funding commitments?

Ms Berry: No.

MRS KIKKERT: Okay, great.

THE CHAIR: Mr Milligan, do you have a substantive question?

MR MILLIGAN: A report was made back in 2009—the *We don't shoot our wounded* report. There were 12 recommendations from that report, and there were four key recommendations which the government classed, and treated, as a matter of priority action. Can the government update the committee on where those four key recommendations are up to?

Ms Berry: Thanks, Mr Milligan. I will ask Ms Windeyer to provide some more advice for the committee.

Ms Windeyer: My office has been working very intensively with the Domestic Violence Prevention Council's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander reference group in order to work out what the response will be in relation to the *We don't shoot our wounded* report. We are being guided by them and are working in partnership with them, so we are making sure that any response by government is something that is led by the community. In 2021, that reference group informed government that they would like government to focus on four priority recommendations in the *We don't shoot our wounded* report.

Those priority recommendations were recommendations 4, 8, 9 and 10. In relation to that work we have, together with the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander reference group, begun by looking particularly at recommendation 4. Recommendation 4 is to establish a specific service for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women, where a range of legal, advocacy, practical and healing activities can be delivered. We are in the process of working with that reference group. In fact, they met just yesterday and invited me to attend that meeting, where they indicated what they would like to do in relation to the commencement and start-up of that particular service. That is exciting news, and I think that the members of that reference group, following significant consultation that they did in 2020 with their community, are feeling pleased that we will commence to have some action in relation to that particular recommendation.

It has been agreed with them that we will continue to look at the other three priority recommendations, which are recommendations 8, 9 and 10. We will continue to do that and to start to prioritise those now that we have a plan for recommendation 4.

MR MILLIGAN: I take it from that, that the remaining eight recommendations have

not been actioned yet, considering the four that were a matter of priority, have not been completed as yet. Is that correct?

Ms Windeyer: In terms of looking at them specifically, and responding to them with that reference group, we are following what they have asked us to do, which is to look at those four first, and specifically, recommendation 4, and then the other three.

MR MILLIGAN: The report was from 2009. I am just wondering; it is 2022 now; why has it taken so long for the government to work on any of these recommendations?

Ms Berry: It was before I was elected to this place, Mr Milligan, as well. Part of the reason for that, generally, was that the report was developed outside the government, so it was not a report that the government was required to respond to in the way that they would respond to a committee recommendation or an audit report, for example. That could be one of the reasons why, at the time, it was not responded to immediately.

However, now, with the Office of the Coordinator-General, our domestic and family violence levy and a minister specifically created for the prevention of domestic and family violence, we have been able to work with the reference group, as Ms Windeyer has identified, to lay out a plan on a way forward. That reference group, as part of its consultation with the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community, has asked us to focus on those specific areas to start with. As is the case with a lot of work in government and our community, the last two years have created some issues around continuing that work or speeding that work up. But we are definitely continuing to work with that reference group on a way forward. I can definitely say that since 2009, and more recently, the government has changed its approach, and that is why we are now working with the community.

MRS KIKKERT: I have a supplementary question. Who paid the group to do the *We don't shoot our wounded* report?

Ms Windeyer: Could you just repeat the question, sorry?

MRS KIKKERT: I do not know who did the *We don't shoot our wounded* report. I was just wondering who paid them or was it a self-funded report?

Ms Windeyer: The report was done by the then Victims of Crime Commissioner—I am not sure; the name might have been different then—in consultation with the community. That is the high-level answer.

Ms Berry: Mrs Kikkert, it is just that you are going back a fair way in time and some of that stuff you are asking for is historic—well before our time. But what I can say is that we are absolutely committed to responding to it and we have been doing that work with the reference group and being guided by them.

MRS KIKKERT: You have been quite silent for the first 10 years, though. You mentioned that you are only focusing on one of the priority recommendations at the moment, and that you are continuing discussions with the other three. Is that based on

funding purposes, that you can only focus on one recommendation in the financial year and then in each of the next financial years the second, third or fourth priority recommendations can be funded? I understand that *We don't shoot our wounded* was an ACT government report. Was it funded by the ACT government? Sorry, two questions there.

Ms Berry: Yes. On the first one, no. We are absolutely being guided by the reference group and the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community about where the focus is, in the government's response to this particular report. On the second question, I am guessing. As I said, I am not exactly sure of the reasons, but it could be that it was not an official report like a committee report or an Auditor-General's report that the government is required to respond to within a certain period of time. That was what I was referring to with respect to report. But you are asking questions about a time when I was not here and Ms Windeyer was not here, so we will have to go back if you want more specific details about it. I think now it is time to focus on what the government is doing, which is working with the community, being guided by the community about where they want the ACT government to focus its response to this report, and we are getting on with that work.

MRS KIKKERT: Yes, I understand that. But you mentioned—

THE CHAIR: Mrs Kikkert, I am conscious of the time.

MRS KIKKERT: There is a report. It was done by the ACT—

THE CHAIR: Mrs Kikkert, there is a substantive member of the committee who has not had a chance to ask a question, and you have had a few supplementary questions. I am going to go to Mr Pettersson for a substantive question.

MR PETTERSSON: Thank you. Minister, what is the health justice partnership, and how is it supporting women at risk of domestic violence?

Ms Berry: The health justice partnership has been an outstanding partnership to make sure that we can support women in ways and places where they feel safe, and they can get legal support in different ways than they might normally need to. The research is very clear, and the numbers are very clear: women are more likely to experience or be at risk of experiencing domestic and family violence when they are pregnant or just at the birth of a child. So it is making sure that we have those legal supports in place, in places where women visit safely, like hospitals, maternity wards, or other places like that.

That means that they can get that support right at their bedside. It provides legal advice in a way where it does not need to be reported, so it takes the pressure off nurses, who are mandatory reporters, to ensure that those people are getting supports across a range of different services through the conversations that they might have with a legal professional at those sites. It is a really fantastic program. We have had nothing but positive feedback from it. Ms Windeyer, did you have some more detail to offer on that one?

Ms Windeyer: In relation to the Health justice partnership, they have received

ongoing funding for the next four years, and in addition to the three existing partnership sites, funding now supports clients in the emergency departments as well. More than 900 people have received help from a partnership lawyer. The most common legal problems faced by clients are domestic and family violence, issues relating to children, and housing and finance. Many of the clients who have sought legal advice, were, in fact, unaware that their problems had legal solutions, and most would not have been able to access legal help or would not have accessed that legal help if it was not available in the familiar healthcare setting where they were located.

MR PETTERSSON: That is great, thank you.

THE CHAIR: Mrs Kikkert with a substantive question.

MRS KIKKERT: Minister, \$80,000 of funding was granted to Menslink for the year 2020-21 to expand mentoring and counselling services for boys and young men. I note that there has been an increase in demand for counselling services in light of COVID-19. EveryMan Australia, ACT's largest service for men at risk, has also expressed a need for more counsellors to support their men. Women's refuges such as Toora Women and Doris Women's Refuge have been in need of counselling services to support the wellbeing of their own staff, the women escaping domestic violence who turn to them for support, as well as paediatric trauma counselling services to help children who are impacted by the violence they experience in many different ways. Minister, what is the ACT government doing to address the significant demand for more counselling services, particularly as part of improving responses to domestic and family violence?

Ms Berry: Thanks, Mrs Kikkert, for the question. As you may be aware—or you might not be aware—the challenges that you have identified include workforce issues in having the expertise within our community or within those sectors to be able to provide those additional reports. However, even with that challenge, the Office of the Coordinator-General for Family Safety is continuing to work with the community and the sector about how the government can support those organisations in a range of different ways. The domestic and family violence levy has made an impact on the supports that we have been able to provide over the last number of years since the levy has been in place.

However, we continue to work through the issues that are being raised, working closely with the sector to make sure that we can meet their needs. We have been discussing and working with the sector on those workforce shortages to identify ways that we can support those services to provide counselling to women and children who are being impacted by family and domestic violence. I can ask Ms Windeyer to provide some information about the work that we are doing around the therapeutic supports for young people and how Toora has been involved in those conversations.

Ms Windeyer: There are a range of different types of therapeutic supports that we are looking at, for both children and young people. In relation to young people, the Got your Back program is for 12- to 25-year-olds who have experienced domestic and family violence. It is run by Relationships Australia in youth centres during term time, after school. That is led by the young people exploring the issues they choose with a theme each week.

We are in the process of finding a community service to partner with to deliver a new service to support children to recover from their experiences of domestic and family violence. That will be for children aged 5 to 12. All of the refuges have funding for child support workers, but we have supplemented that through some funding in relation to the services generally. I would just like to acknowledge the really hard work of those who are working in our service sector, particularly during the COVID period. They do an extraordinary job. One of the ways in which we hear about the demand is through the domestic and family violence roundtable we have established with the Victims of Crime Commissioner, where those who work in the sector, or who work with people who experience domestic and family violence, come together. They bring issues into that roundtable so that we go away and come back to them with solutions or work with them to develop responses.

One of the issues, Mrs Kikkert, that has arisen during the past year—and it is not unique to the domestic and family violence sector—is, as the minister said, a workforce issue. The great resignation that is occurring across the world, perhaps as a result of COVID, has hit those services quite hard. There is not a simple solution, is what we say, and it is in more than the crisis sector. When we are looking at where we allocate resources and attention, we have to realise that many people who experience domestic abuse do not report to a crisis service or to a response service that we might think of—for example, the police or one of our crisis services or refuges.

In fact, they might be more likely to talk to a friend or to someone—as we were talking about—in the health justice partnership. We have started to invite a broader range of services to the domestic and family violence roundtable so that we can try to expand out, so that we can get a more integrated system for people who experience domestic abuse and for everybody.

MRS KIKKERT: You mention that you are supporting some refuges. Have you spoken to Toora Women and Doris Women’s Refuge, and also EveryMan about the demand and what they are in need of, in regard to supporting their clients with mental health?

Ms Berry: Mrs Kikkert, I understand all of those organisations are part of the roundtable that the Victims of Crime Commissioner facilitates, and it provides feedback directly to me and to the Coordinator-General. So, any concerns that they have, we hear directly from the horse's mouth. Then we can work with those organisations about a way forward. It is, unfortunately, a bit more of a complicated space, over and above funding, because there is a workforce issue that the world has been challenged with.

MRS KIKKERT: Can you just clarify, Minister: is EveryMan also on that roundtable?

Ms Berry: I believe so, yes.

THE CHAIR: Thank you, Mrs Kikkert. I have a few more questions but nothing that I think we can get through within two minutes. So I will put it to all committee members: does anyone have any quick clarifications or questions they think we could

cover in the remaining two minutes?

MR MILLIGAN: I am fine.

MRS KIKKERT: Yes, I have a clarification.

THE CHAIR: No worries, Mrs Kikkert.

MRS KIKKERT: The *We don't shoot our wounded* report was done by the ACT Victims of Crime Commissioner. So the ACT government actually conducted that report. Minister, you mentioned before that the reason there was a long delay of silence—10 years actually of neglect and silence—from the ACT government was because—

THE CHAIR: Mrs Kikkert, I did say it needed to be a quick question, not a speech.

Ms Berry: Mrs Kikkert, you are wrong. That is not the case.

MRS KIKKERT: So who is it done by?

Ms Berry: What I said was that it could be the case. I do not know specifically the reasons.

MRS KIKKERT: Could you please take it on notice?

Ms Berry: Because it was in 2009, it did not require an official response from the government as for Auditor-General's or committee reports, at the time. That could be, I said, one of the reasons. What I have said is that we are committed now to respond to the report, and we are working with the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community to do that in a respectful way, listening to what their priorities are and then delivering as a government with a Coordinator-General for Domestic and Family Violence, a minister specifically for the prevention of domestic and family violence, the family safety levy and now our sexual assault and response program of works as well. So a lot has happened and changed since 2009, Mrs Kikkert, and the ACT government is committed to ensuring that we do what we can now to respond to these terrible issues within our community, and we will continue to do that.

THE CHAIR: Thank you, Minister Berry. The time being 12 o'clock, we will wrap up now. On behalf of the committee, I would like to thank Minister Yvette Berry and her officials, and Minister Rebecca Vassarotti and her officials, for attending today's hearing. The secretary will provide all of you, and your offices and officials, with copies of the proof transcript of today's hearing when it is available. Please take some time to check it for accuracy. For everyone who appeared today, if you took any questions on notice, please liaise with our committee's secretary to provide answers to those questions as soon as practical. I would like to thank, once again, all of our witnesses for attending today's committee hearing. Today's committee hearing is now adjourned.

The committee adjourned at 12.01 pm.