



QUESTION TIME
OF THE
LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY
FOR THE
AUSTRALIAN CAPITAL TERRITORY

HANSARD

Edited proof transcript

Friday, 8 October 2021

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Ministerial arrangements

MR BARR (Kurrajong—Chief Minister, Treasurer, Minister for Climate Action, Minister for Economic Development and Minister for Tourism) (2.00): Minister Steel will be absent from question time today. Ms Berry will be taking questions in his place.

Questions without notice

Budget—business support

MS LEE: My question is to the Chief Minister. Chief Minister, I refer to the observation of Dr Jane Rennie of CPA Australia that the ACT budget provides “insufficient support for business”. She also states:

Tellingly, the budget speech only mentions business twice, in the context of existing supports, and doesn’t specifically mention small business.

Chief Minister, given the commonwealth grants are paying for half of the COVID business support grants, why doesn’t your budget provide more support for small business?

MR BARR: The single largest initiative in the budget is the business support grants. The budget speech is necessarily contained to a reasonable period of time. If colleagues would like me to spend several hours going through every single element of the budget, I could deliver! My colleagues who have heard me talk about the budget would all nod and say that I could make a three-hour budget speech. But, Madam Speaker, convention and protocol normally suggest that you confine your comments to around 20 to 25 minutes, which is what I do. In relation to the number of items and things that you can mention, I think that, of all the budget analysis, the question of how many times a certain thing is mentioned in a budget speech has to be amongst the weakest commentary you ever hear about budgets.

Ms Lee: Madam Speaker, a point of order.

MADAM SPEAKER: Resume your seat.

Ms Lee: That was part of the preamble, but the question was: why does your budget not provide more support for small business?

MADAM SPEAKER: The minister is speaking about small business and I am sure he will get to that point. There is no point of order.

MR BARR: Thank you, Madam Speaker. There are a number of initiatives and, if the analyst had bothered to delve into the detail of the budget, she would have seen that there are initiatives across export industries, and that the small business hardship scheme specifically referenced “small business”, together with support for tourism, arts, accommodation, sport and fitness. In the ACT context, nearly all of those are small business. So the totality of investment to build a bridge over the pandemic for business has been close to half a billion dollars. That is the equivalent of building a new football

stadium for Canberra. That is the totality just of the grants and tax concessions, let alone the fact that economic development is seven per cent of the budget spend, a very significant spend.

MADAM SPEAKER: Ms Lee.

MS LEE: Chief Minister, if, as you say, you have plenty of things in the budget for business, why is it that the MBA, the AHA, CPA Australia and the Canberra Business Chamber have all come out to call this a business-light budget? Is that why you did not front up and appear live to answer questions at the Canberra Business Chamber virtual budget breakfast?

MR BARR: The organisations are free to make whatever commentary they want, but the numbers speak for themselves in terms of the expenditure associated with business support, hardship grants, tax concessions, the future job fund, the international engagement strategy and the fact that the ACT has had the fastest business growth of any jurisdiction in Australia; more new businesses than any other state or territory. Every month, since the data has been collected, there are more new business entries than there are exits, which is why the ACT sees growth month on month in the number of businesses operating in the territory.

DR PATERSON: A supplementary.

MADAM SPEAKER: Dr Paterson.

DR PATERSON: Chief Minister, can you please detail the important role that small business plays in the ACT?

MR BARR: Nearly 30,000 small businesses account for employment in the territory, which would be slightly more than 25 per cent of all employment in the ACT. There are larger employers: the federal government, the ACT government, the universities, medium-size business and the large Australian employers. But across more than 30,000 businesses, and growing each and every month, we see more diversity in the ACT economy and we see, increasingly, small businesses who have a vision and a view beyond just the Canberra market. That is where growth will come in future. Any city, any economy, that just wants to buy and sell goods and services to itself will not be able to grow rapidly.

That is why it is important that we have a focus on national and international markets—because, whilst the ACT is two per cent of the Australian economy, Australia is two per cent of the world economy. The bigger markets clearly are national and international. That is why next week's ACT Chief Minister's Export Awards are such an important opportunity to celebrate the success of many small and medium-size businesses who are tapping into export markets, including businesses that have served this city and this nation—and, indeed, the world—so well during the pandemic, including a previous exporter of the year, Aspen Medical.

Hospitals—waiting times

MRS JONES: My question is to the Minister for Health: you are the sixth health

minister in the last 20 years of the Labor-Greens government, after Stanhope, Corbell, Gallagher, Corbell, Fitzharris. For most of the last 20 years, the ACT has had the worst-performing emergency department times in Australia. On 31 January 2021 you committed to fixing the ACT's ED wait times in nine months. Nine months is now. In Wednesday's budget, however, it was disclosed that the outcome for the 2020-21 year was 46 per cent of ED patients seen on time, 24 per cent below your own target of 70 per cent. Minister, who is responsible for the failure to meet your own 70 per cent promise on ED waiting times?

MS STEPHEN-SMITH: Probably a couple of points of clarification for Mrs Jones that are directly relevant to her question. She keeps repeating this so-called commitment in relation to waiting times. When I was talking to the journalist—and I have corrected this with her a number of times—I was actually talking about the number of people who are in the emergency department for four hours or more, what is called the NEAT. That was the number we were focused on, because that is a number that reflects what we know in relation to increased potential for mortality and morbidity if people spend a long time in the emergency department. So Mrs Jones can say it has many times as she likes, but she is completely misrepresenting and continues to do so.

The other point of clarification I make for Mrs Jones is that we did have a plan to look at increasing the number of people who spent four hours or less in the emergency department, and that plan has been partially implemented. We realised that plan needed some additional funding, and that is funded in the budget—all of those additional funding measures that we have put in the budget around increasing staff in the emergency department, introduction a medical navigating position in the emergency department, introducing an acute medical unit, is a pathway for people, and Mrs Jones is welcome to a full briefing on that if she is interested.

The other clarification I give to Mrs Jones is that the budget is data up until 30 June, so there is really no point in saying you have not met what you are supposed to be doing in October and looking at data as of 30 June.

MRS JONES: Minister, given the Chief Minister has made it clear how much he values human life, how many people have had severe health outcomes as a result of not being seen on time in the emergency department, like the suicidal girl I saw earlier this year who gave up on seeking help after having spent over four hours at Calvary and then a further 10 hours at TCH?

MS STEPHEN-SMITH: Obviously we all hear very disturbing stories from our constituents and people who contact us around their experiences in the emergency department, particularly people with mental health challenges. It is often difficult for them to be admitted in the timely way when our mental health capacity is strained, as it has been this year and we know that it has been. So I am very sorry to hear about that experience.

We are always very supportive of following up individual experiences if they are referred to us. But it is one of the specific challenges we face in the emergency department around ensuring that people with mental health challenges can be admitted on time. And that is exactly why we have invested through this budget in a new acute mental health ward in 12B, which is now open and up and running.

MR HANSON: Minister, have you achieved your promised NEAT target of four hours in ED, which you promised nine months ago? If not, will you now apologise for breaking your promise?

MS STEPHEN-SMITH: Again, for the clarification for Mr Hanson, I indicated to the journalist that we had a plan to achieve that. I also said it was a very ambitious target and it would be difficult, and I outlined to the journalist the many challenges that we would face. So then identifying this as a firm promise that was never, ever going to have any challenges associated with it is completely and utterly a misrepresentation.

Mr Hanson: On a point of order of relevance, Madam Speaker, the question is whether she broke her promise. It appears that she has clarified she made a promise to achieve these targets. Whether they are difficult or not is not the issue. The question is: did she achieve these targets—yes or no. If not, will she apologise.

MADAM SPEAKER: There is no point of order.

MS STEPHEN-SMITH: I think it was exactly what I was saying—it was not a guarantee. It was not a promise that I was going to get there, because of all the challenges that were associated with it. It was a long conversation with a journalist about the plan we had to move in stages towards achieving this target, and then a long conversation with the journalist about the many challenges associated with that. You sit down in an interview with a journalist and they take short grabs, and the opposition misrepresents them. And that is exactly what has been happening here for months.

Mrs Jones interjecting—

MADAM SPEAKER: Mrs Jones, that is enough interjection.

Government—Integrity Commission

MR DAVIS: My question is to the Chief Minister. Chief Minister, on Tuesday our New South Wales neighbours saw a change of premier, when Gladys Berejiklian resigned pending an inquiry into her conduct by the New South Wales Independent Commission Against Corruption. Since then, I have been contacted by several of my constituents who have asked me why the ACT does not have a specific, in name, independent commission against corruption. How do we give our community confidence that we are committed to exposing and eliminating corruption in government should it exist here in the ACT?

MR BARR: In the last parliament this place voted unanimously to establish the ACT Integrity Commission. There was an extensive committee process. Mr Rattenbury was involved in the committee, as were members of the opposition and the government. We then had a very extensive debate in this place to frame the legislative framework for the ACT Integrity Commission. We have established the Integrity Commission independent from the executive, so I am not the minister responsible for the Integrity Commission. The Integrity Commission sits outside the executive as it is, indeed—along with the Electoral Commission and a number of other statutory organisations—a creature of the parliament. There is a parliamentary committee that oversees the work

of the Integrity Commission. So you can tell your constituents, Mr Davis, that the ACT does indeed have an Integrity Commission.

MR DAVIS: Chief Minister, what should Canberrans do if they suspect corrupt conduct from parliamentarians or government officials?

MR BARR: There is a pathway, depending on the nature of the alleged conduct, to report that either to the Integrity Commission or to the commissioner for standards. There are, of course—

Ms Lee: Madam Speaker, on a point of order, can I seek your advice on this? You have made it very clear on a number of occasions that questions that are in order are questions that are directed to ministers who have responsibility. The Chief Minister, in his own answer, has just said that he does not. He is not the overseeing minister for the Integrity Commission. Could you rule on whether Mr Davis's question is in order?

MADAM SPEAKER: I think—

Ms Lee: I don't mind it; I am just asking.

MADAM SPEAKER: It is a fair question because no one in this chamber has direct responsibility in many ways for the independent commission. In its nature, we created an independent body. The Chief Minister is responsible for the act; not for the commission itself, but he is responsible for the act, so in that sense, and wearing that hat, he can reply to the question.

Ms Lee: On the point of order and your ruling, Madam Speaker, with questions relating to the Integrity Commission, you do consider them to be in order to be asked during question time of the Chief Minister?

MADAM SPEAKER: I will take some further advice on that because it is independent. It is like saying that there are questions of the Auditor-General, the Electoral Commission or, indeed, our own Clerk.

Ms Lee: I know; that is why I am trying to get clarification.

MADAM SPEAKER: I am quite happy to get some clarification and come back.

Ms Lee: Okay; thank you.

Mr Davis: Madam Speaker, with your indulgence, to confirm the wording of the question, I asked the head of the government what Canberrans should do if they suspect that there is corrupt conduct by a parliamentarian. I think it is reasonable to ask the head of the government what he would advise constituents to do if they thought such instances existed, and point them in the right direction. If Ms Lee actually had a point of order, it may have been with respect to the first question.

Ms Lee: It was; that is what we are doing. It is a supplementary; that is what we are asking.

MADAM SPEAKER: Members, I will allow the supplementary, but I will come back to members with further advice.

MR BARR: The time has expired.

Budget—infrastructure

MR HANSON: My question is to the Treasurer. The budget contains a five-year infrastructure program spend of \$5 billion. Over the next four years of the budget cycle and forward estimates—four years, not five—can you confirm that the infrastructure program is \$4.48 billion?

MR BARR: As I recall there is net new capital in this fiscal year of \$89.678 million, net new capital of \$155.119 million in 2022-23, net new capital of \$74,346 million in 2023-34 and net new capital of \$135.864 million in 2024-25, which collates to a four-year net new capital of \$455 million.

MR HANSON: Can you confirm that, in February 2021, your budget for 2020 and 2021 had a four-year infrastructure program of \$4.3 billion?

MR BARR: I will need to go back and look at the budget papers. There has been some movement in terms of the capital works reserve, and some capital provisions have shifted from one fiscal year to the other. But the net new capital is \$455 million. That is expensed, obviously, and accorded new policy initiatives within the budget papers. I refer Mr Hanson to table 3.2.1—financial impacts of new policy decisions.

MR CAIN: Minister, can you confirm that this year's budget has only a 4.2 per cent increase on infrastructure over four years compared to last budget?

MR BARR: The net new capital is \$455 million over four years, and then there is additional capital in the first year outside the forward estimates.

Budget—health

MS ORR: My question is to the Minister for Health. Minister, can you please update the Assembly on how the ACT government is investing in our health system through the 2021-22 ACT budget.

MS STEPHEN-SMITH: I thank Ms Orr for the question. The 2021-22 budget sees \$2.1 billion spent on health in the 2021-22 financial year—30 per cent of the ACT budget, and a record \$8.5 billion over four years for the health portfolio. We are committed to providing free high-quality public health care and continuing to support our amazing frontline health staff in what they do best.

Through this year's budget investment, we will be responding to our growing community's needs and focusing on the continued transformation of our health system, through initiatives to continue building and improving health infrastructure, with a total investment over the forward estimates of \$867 million; continued funding, of course, for our COVID-19 response; \$73 million to keep improving our health system, including \$50 million for nursing and midwifery ratios; almost \$130 million for our

critical hospital services, which will include \$39 million for more emergency surgeries and post-surgery care; \$28 million for additional intensive care unit capacity at the Canberra Hospital; \$23 million to keep improving and expanding the capacity of Canberra Hospital's emergency department; \$16 million for more services at Calvary Public Hospital Bruce, including delivering more emergency department capacity, with 24/7 operation of the medical imaging services; \$15 million for two additional cots in the neonatal intensive care unit; and \$7 million to deliver even more elective surgeries and continue the enhanced recovery after surgery program. In addition, there is \$22 million for better care in the community, including in partnership with non-government organisations, for the delivery of programs that address health needs in the community, more alcohol and drug services, investments in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health, LGBTIQ+ health services and disability health services.

MS ORR: Minister, what plans does the government have to deliver better care across our hospital system?

MS STEPHEN-SMITH: The ACT government has committed to employing 400 new clinical staff over this term of government, including doctors, nurses and healthcare professionals, to provide more healthcare services as our city grows. The impact of new initiatives across the health portfolio shows considerable progress towards our goal. By the end of 2021-22, we will have invested in an additional 257 health professional full-time equivalent staff, nearly 65 per cent of our commitment delivered in one budget. This includes more than 90 nurses across Canberra Hospital and Calvary Public Hospital through the nursing and midwifery ratios alone, and more medical, nursing and allied health staff in our emergency departments, intensive care, acute medical services, surgical areas, endoscopy, neonatal intensive care and, of course, in the community.

This government will maintain our focus on delivering our vital health infrastructure projects, ensuring that the health system has the space it needs to provide quality treatment and care into the future. This includes continuing planning and design work for the new north-side hospital and significant investments in upgrades at Calvary Public Hospital to ensure continued provision of safe and effective services as our city grows.

Along with planning for a new modern north-side hospital, a \$12 million commitment, we are committed to the delivery of the Canberra Hospital master plan and will commence early work for a new multistorey car park at the Canberra Hospital to continue providing enhanced facilities at the hospital campus.

We are also investing in a range of areas to deliver better care through implementing a new model of patient navigation to better coordinate care across the health system for people with chronic and complex conditions, including a new paediatric liaison and navigation service; co-designing a gender-focused peer-led health service with non-government organisations and LGBTIQ+ stakeholders; and developing and implementing a plan to respond to the LGBTIQ+ health scoping study.

DR PATERSON: Minister, how will implementing nurse ratios contribute to improving outcomes and the hospital system?

MS STEPHEN-SMITH: I thank Dr Paterson for the question. The ACT government

has committed to implementing nursing and midwifery to patient ratios because we know that ratios save lives and improve care. We want to ensure that our staff are able to work in the safest environment possible to provide the best care possible.

Ratios are a process of organising care of patients to a mandated number of nurses and midwives every shift. The ACT government has developed, in partnership with the Australian Nursing and Midwifery Federation, the Australian public sector nursing and midwifery framework. The framework provides a blueprint for determining the right number of nursing and midwifery staff and skill mix to care for patients within our public hospitals. This will ensure a safer environment for everyone, patients and staff.

Ratios mean that nurses and midwives will have more time to spend with patients providing direct clinical care. Research shows that improved patient outcomes are seen through decreased complication rates, decreased re-admissions, and shorter lengths of stay in hospital. It also means that nurses and midwives enjoy greater job satisfaction, which will enhance Canberra Health Services and Calvary Public Hospital as better employers of choice.

In consultation with the Australian Nursing and Midwifery Federation, it has been agreed that ratios will be implemented in a phased approach across both public hospitals. Preparations are already well underway for the first phase to be implemented.

This budget included \$50 million allocated over the next four years to recruit more than 90 additional full-time equivalent nursing positions through our health system for phase 1, so by the end of this financial year. With this financial commitment, we anticipate implementing ratios and increasing staff levels very shortly, with recruitment to commence as soon as the enterprise agreement is finalised.

We, of course, committed to implementing ratios at the last elections, as did the ACT Greens. I do not recall the Canberra Liberals doing that. Now they are claiming to be the champions of nurses, but they did not make this commitment. We did and we are delivering on it.

Environment—social cost on carbon

MR PARTON: My question is to the Minister for Water, Energy and Emissions Reduction. Minister, can you tell the chamber about the social cost on carbon introduced in this budget and what ACT government activities it will cover?

MR RATTENBURY: I thank Mr Parton for the question. I am delighted to have a chance to talk about this. The social cost of carbon is a concept that essentially measures the economic and social consequences of a tonne of carbon emitted into the atmosphere. This is, I guess, a developing area that identifies there is a true cost to that because of the way that carbon emission flows through into climate change. We know, of course, the impacts of climate change. The ACT has experienced them already, and they are anticipated to get worse in future.

The social cost of carbon is a way of measuring that, of putting a price on that emission. We are using it in the ACT government as a signal to our directorates of the consequences of their emissions. It will act as an incentive for directorates to reduce

their emissions. The funds raised from that social cost of carbon will be used to invest in further emission reduction projects so that we can continue to reduce our emissions here in the territory. This is part of being a responsible government that takes these issues seriously. That is very clear with our own agencies—that is, as a government, we expect to set a very clear example in our efforts to tackle climate change here in the territory.

MADAM SPEAKER: A supplementary.

MR PARTON: Minister, does the social cost of carbon apply to activities under the infrastructure investment program, and, if not, why not?

MR RATTENBURY: I am not quite sure where Mr Parton is going with the question, Madam Speaker, but I will do my best to answer it. The social cost of carbon applies to the emissions of ACT government agencies. I think that is the clearest answer I can give. I am happy to arrange a briefing for Mr Parton and any of his colleagues with my agency but also with the ACT Climate Change Council. They have actually recommended to the ACT government that we adopt this approach. It is an internationally recognised mechanism for being very transparent and very clear in how one measures one's impact and also in how you might incentivise efforts to reduce emissions. Hopefully that has answered Mr Parton's question. As I say, I am happy to organise a follow-up if that is of use to him and his colleagues.

MR HANSON: A supplementary, Madam Speaker.

MADAM SPEAKER: A supplementary, Mr Hanson.

MR HANSON: You might need to take this on notice as well, Minister. Does the social cost of carbon apply to the production of materials and supplies used in the ACT government's infrastructure investment program?

MR RATTENBURY: I did not take the previous question on notice. I was very clear in my answer that it applies to the measured scope 1 and scope 2 emissions of ACT government agencies. On reflection, particularly now having heard Mr Hanson's question, I think those opposite are trying to get at scope 3 emissions. There is no recognised measure of scope 3 emissions under any carbon accounting frameworks, either internationally or locally, at this point in time. The actual answer to both Mr Parton's and Mr Hanson's questions, if I have understood them, would be no.

Business—COVID-19

MR MILLIGAN: My question is for the Chief Minister. At last Thursday's select committee the Canberra Business Chamber said they felt there was a disconnect between support for stood-down workers as opposed to businesses and that businesses were seen as some amorphous being which is not about people. They said owners were not only eating into their savings but borrowing against their homes, putting their homes and families at future risk. Do you understand the dire straits many small businesses are in?

MR BARR: Yes.

MR MILLIGAN: Chief Minister, are you concerned that businesses are borrowing against their mortgages just to keep going so that they can continue to pay the commercial rates that you are charging them?

MR BARR: I do not believe commercial rates are the principal issue. As to what particular businesses might be borrowing against, that will obviously depend on the circumstance of those businesses. So you need to be a commercial operator owner to be paying rates.

MS CASTLEY: Chief Minister, how many businesses will fall off the cliff, and what will you do about it? Aren't these people Canberrans too?

MR BARR: My greatest regret through this is that the commonwealth government abandoned JobKeeper. In its second iteration that was a much better-designed program that provided necessary support for business for its largest cost—being labour—and kept the worker attached to the business. Now, unfortunately, because of the rush in the design of the first phase of JobKeeper, tens of billions of dollars were paid to companies that did not need assistance. A lot of that money went into dividends to shareholders and bonuses to executives, when it should have been kept or reclaimed by the commonwealth to provide support for exactly the businesses Ms Castley is talking about.

Budget—public housing

DR PATERSON: My question is to the Minister for Housing and Suburban Development. Minister, how does this year's ACT budget support public housing in the ACT?

MS BERRY: I thank Dr Paterson for her question. In this year's budget the ACT's contribution to housing in the ACT was significant. The ACT government is the largest social landlord, with over 12,000 dwellings, home to more than 20,000 Canberrans. Building on a strong base of public housing, the ACT government will make one of the single largest investments to increase and improve the amount of public housing in the history of self-government, to provide essential housing for low income Canberrans at risk of homelessness.

In the budget \$100 million has been committed to increase social and affordable housing in the ACT. In addition to advancing and supporting the build-to-rent and community housing sector, this package includes an additional \$80 million for public housing maintenance over the next three years. This funding will ensure that public housing tenants live in safe and secure homes that meet their needs. The package also includes \$19 million in additional funding for the Growing and Renewing Public Housing program to support the delivery of the government's commitment to add 400 additional public housing dwellings and renew another 1,000 properties.

This funding is a strong statement that the government is committed to growing, renewing and maintaining a public housing portfolio that is better able to meet the needs of our diverse community, regardless of their abilities or circumstances. In particular, the maintenance funding injection reflects our commitment to continuously improve

the maintenance services to provide homes that suit the diverse needs of our tenants.

The ACT government is the strongest supporter of public housing, with the highest ratio of public housing in the country. This commitment will enable tenants to live in suitable homes for families, people with disabilities, women escaping domestic and family violence, and all households needing the support of public housing. *(Time expired.)*

DR PATERSON: Minister, what impact will this boost to growing, renewing and maintaining public housing have on tenants?

MS BERRY: Growing, renewing and maintaining public housing will improve the lives of existing Housing ACT tenants as well as making more homes available for families in need of housing in Canberra. Over the last few years I have met so many tenants who have moved into their new homes, and it has changed their lives in a most remarkable way.

Gloria and Daniel are two such wonderful tenants that I have met through the process of moving into their new home. Their new two-bedroom class C adaptable home in Kaleen is spacious, well located, and cheaper to heat and cool. Automatic doors through the complex mean that Daniel can get in and out of his home more easily. I was so grateful to hear Gloria and Daniel's story. There are hundreds of tenants just like Gloria and Daniel who are moving into new homes designed and built to suit their needs. It will be a place that they can call home for years to come.

The \$80 million investment in the maintenance of public housing will also significantly benefit existing tenants and prolong the life of public housing. The boost to maintenance funding will include upgrades to kitchens, bathrooms and laundries, modifications to support disability or ageing in place, security upgrades for tenants experiencing domestic and family violence, including security screens for doors and windows and lock changes, roof repairs and upgrades, replaced floor coverings, internal or external painting, as well as other general works and repairs. This work ensures that public housing tenants will continue to live in safe, well-maintained homes.

MR PARTON: Minister, can you now guarantee that all maintenance requests will be fulfilled within the regulatory time frames?

MS BERRY: If a public housing tenant contacts Programmed ACT to have maintenance conducted on their home, it will be triaged appropriately. If it is required and it is urgent then it will be assessed, and that maintenance will occur. If Programmed or Housing ACT are unaware of the maintenance, it makes it a little bit difficult to make that commitment. I encourage Mr Parton, if he has constituents contact his office regarding maintenance, to make sure that they have also contacted Programmed to ensure that they are aware—

Mr Parton: On a point of order, Madam Speaker, the question was not to detail the process around maintenance requests; it was very specific: can you guarantee that all maintenance requests will be fulfilled within the regulatory time frames? I would ask that the minister be relevant to the question.

MADAM SPEAKER: She is being relevant. There is no point of order. Minister, you

have a minute left.

MS BERRY: It does give me the chance to go on and respond in more detail about the ACT government's commitment. We already have the second highest ratio of social housing in Australia, with 27 dwellings for every 1,000 people—much higher than the national average of 17 homes. The ACT leads the country in the provision of public housing, with 25 dwellings for every 1,000 people, against the national average of 12 dwellings.

Mr Parton interjecting—

MADAM SPEAKER: Not again, Mr Parton.

MS BERRY: The government acknowledges that there is more work to do, and we continue to invest in providing more and new public housing for people who need it.

Mrs Jones: Madam Speaker—

MADAM SPEAKER: Mrs Jones?

Mrs Jones: Madam Speaker, the question was quite direct, and the minister is now reading a pre-formed answer on something else.

MADAM SPEAKER: No, the question was all about housing maintenance and the investment in this year's budget. Mr Parton is seeking a simple yes or no answer, and we all know I am not going to direct the minister to provide a simple yes or no answer.

MS BERRY: Madam Speaker, the ACT government is committed to providing social housing for people who need it. *(Time expired.)*

Budget—National Arboretum and Stromlo Forest Park

MS CLAY: My question is to the Minister for Transport and City Services and Special Minister of State. In the 2021-22 budget it states that one of the priorities of the Chief Minister, Treasury and Economic Development Directorate is continuing to progress the National Arboretum Canberra and Stromlo Forest Park master plans, including consultation with key user groups. They are great facilities, and I have ridden and walked at both, but I have heard from many users and user groups that they are worried about announcements about paving roads at the arboretum and a paved car park at Stromlo. They are desperate to improve their user experience with investment in new trails and they do not want any disincentives to use these. What community and stakeholder consultation was conducted prior to making the decision to pave the roads in the arboretum and build a paved carpark at Stromlo?

MR STEEL: I thank Ms Clay for her question. Quite extensive consultation has been occurring in relation to both of those venues, firstly through the master plans for both of those venues. I will read from the car parking section of Stromlo Forest Park master plan. It noted that formal car parking would include permanent infrastructure in the form of paved and lit carparks and all-weather surfaces for access at all times of the year. That is why, in the budget, we have invested in making sure that we are

formalising the car parking at Mount Stromlo so that more people can enjoy this fantastic venue, including cyclists and people engaging in other recreational activities. It will see the provision of safe, sealed and clearly defined car parking spaces at the park to accommodate the increased visitation that that venue has seen over time. The site will form part of a new car parking area in alignment with the master plan, which can be viewed at the Stromlo Forest Park website.

Having an asphalted car park will improve safety, and the efficient allocation of car spaces will help to alleviate some of the safety concerns. I know that, when I have been there, there has been significant rutting in the car park. We want to make sure that it is safe for all park users to use. The funding will allow for both the design and construction of the car park. That design will occur this financial year. I know that the venue managers will continue to consult directly with the users of that venue.

In relation to the arboretum, similarly, a master plan was undertaken some time ago, which has also committed to the sealing of some of the internal roads in the arboretum and, importantly, the provision of safe car parking as part of that. That was funded, I believe, under the local roads and community infrastructure program. (*Time expired.*)

MS CLAY: Will the car park at Stromlo be paid parking for users?

MR STEEL: There is an ongoing conversation that we are currently having about how we can make Stromlo Forest Park the best possible recreational facility for Canberra, for interstate visitors and for Canberrans alike. We have noted the model that is currently in existence at the arboretum, where all of the revenue from the car parking, which is paid parking, is used to improve the fantastic facilities at the arboretum. So we are considering the range of options that might be available in relation to Stromlo Forest Park to make sure that the facilities there continue to get better over time. We have a new trails manager, who has been doing some fantastic work on the trails up there, which I know that the mountain biking community, in particular, has responded really well to. I am looking forward to how we can improve the facilities there and make sure that they are maintained. I know I have been out there with you, Madam Speaker, to have those conversations.

MR BRADDOCK: How will the paved car park at Stromlo fit in with the Stromlo Forest Park master plan, which identifies a village hub on the same site?

MR STEEL: As I mentioned in the answer to the first question from Ms Clay, part of the master plan for Stromlo Forest Park was making sure that there was safe, sealed parking that could be used by those who are visiting the arboretum. Of course, there are future plans that are set out in the master plan that will be progressively achieved over time, including future accommodation facilities, potentially, future road connections, and future playing fields as well. All of those will be completed over time. This is an import first step going forward. We are looking forward to getting on with this work and providing better facilities for users of this fantastic recreational venue.

ACT Policing—COVID-19

MRS KIKKERT: My question is to the Minister for Health. Minister, in a COVID Select Committee hearing last week, the Human Rights Commissioner asked that

people apprehended by police for breaking quarantine could be returned to their location of quarantine rather than to the city watchhouse or the prison. Minister, why are COVID-positive cases or close contacts of COVID-positive cases being taken to the watchhouse and the prison?

MS STEPHEN-SMITH: I really think it is a bit difficult to ask the Minister for Health a question about the operations of policing. In regard to what police have been—

Mrs Kikkert: It's a health order.

MS STEPHEN-SMITH: I am the health minister; that is right, Mrs Kikkert. I am not responsible for ACT Policing.

Opposition members interjecting—

MADAM SPEAKER: Members! Mrs Jones!

MS STEPHEN-SMITH: I might ask Mrs Kikkert to repeat the actual question that she wants answered.

Mrs Kikkert: Minister, in the COVID committee hearing last week—

MS STEPHEN-SMITH: Not the whole thing; just the question is fine.

Mrs Kikkert: Minister, why are COVID-positive cases or close contacts of COVID-positive cases being taken to the watchhouse or the prison?

MS STEPHEN-SMITH: The advice that we have from ACT Policing is that when people are being charged with breaches of the COVID-19 public health directions, that is generally associated with other activity for which they are being charged. As a general proposition, people are not being taken to the watchhouse or, indeed, to AMC as a result of breaching public health directions; they are being taken to the watchhouse or AMC as a result of being apprehended for other activities, and they happen to be also breaching public health directions.

MRS KIKKERT: What changes to legislation, if any, do you need to make to enable people to be returned to their place of quarantining or isolation rather than to the watchhouse or the prison?

MS STEPHEN-SMITH: We do not need to make any changes to legislation. Police can already do that.

MRS JONES: Has the Human Rights Commissioner raised a reasonable question here, given that she has obviously had complaints about this matter? And how does taking people who have had close contact with COVID cases or, indeed, who have COVID to the watchhouse or the prison fit with your health orders?

MS STEPHEN-SMITH: As I indicated earlier, the advice we have from ACT Policing is that when this has occurred it has generally been as a result of people being apprehended for sometimes quite serious alleged offences. That is the reason Policing

have indicated to us, to ministers, that they have taken the actions they have.

The Human Rights Commission is absolutely legitimately raising these questions, and I know that these questions have been raised by other people as well. That is why we have sought the advice from ACT Policing in relation to this matter. But ACT Policing officers are putting themselves at risk in working in the community with people who are COVID-19 cases and close contacts. Police are doing so with appropriate personal protective equipment and they are doing so in a very responsible way. They are working very closely with our other agencies to ensure that our compliance and enforcement regime is absolutely focused on engagement and education to the greatest extent possible. Where, unfortunately, they come into contact with people who are cases or who are contacts who are also engaged in other activity for which they would normally be arrested and taken to the watchhouse or the AMC, unfortunately, sometimes that has to be the case.

Budget—seniors and veterans

MS LAWDER: My question is to the assistant minister for family and community services. In the 2021-22 ACT budget there are multiple new initiatives that relate to children and young people but none specifically for seniors or veterans. In this past year, we have seen an increase in the isolation of seniors all over the city, who are also disenfranchised by a majority technology and data response to COVID-19. Minister, why isn't there a single new budget initiative relating to your portfolio of seniors and veterans?

MS DAVIDSON: I thank Ms Lawder for the question. In response to the issues that people have been raising around what they have been experiencing with COVID-19, the ACT government has provided additional support to a range of community organisations who can help with providing information to people and providing support to people during a difficult time. We know that this will continue on for quite some time to come, and there are a number of things in the ACT budget to help with that. Specifically in relation to what in the ACT budget might be helpful for older Canberrans, there is quite a lot of work being done in the age-friendly city plan, including upgrades in—

Ms Lawder: On a point of order, Madam Speaker. The question asked specifically why is there not a single new budget initiative relating to seniors and veterans, not what is in the budget, as business as usual.

MADAM SPEAKER: The question is about initiatives for seniors in the ACT budget. That is what the minister is answering. Minister.

MS DAVIDSON: Thank you. That is a really good point. One of the reasons there is not a single budget line item relating to seniors is that we have many budget line items that will bring great benefits to older Canberrans—for example, some of the work that Minister Steel is doing in implementing our age-friendly suburbs. For example, there are upgrades to footpaths in suburbs like Chifley, where there is quite a lot of work can be done to make it easier for people to get around their neighbourhood. Particularly at a time when they are trying to avoid using public transport, that is really appreciated.

There is the work that Access Canberra are doing with the new Belconnen service centre, making sure that it is dementia-friendly. I know you have a really strong interest in that. We have been listening to what the community has been telling us and responding to that. *(Time expired.)*

MS LAWDER: Minister, when will your government finally start to prioritise Canberra's older residents, given your own acknowledgement that seniors have been disproportionately affected by COVID-19, as opposed to measures that have been in the budget for several years? Is there anything specific to the COVID-19 response for seniors?

MS DAVIDSON: There have been a number of things that we have been doing in response to the impacts of COVID on seniors—for example, providing additional funding for print materials that will help people to get access to the information that they need, and some additional funding to advocacy organisations. For example, ADACAS are receiving additional funding in this year's budget. They provide some fantastic advocacy support to older Canberrans. As well, some additional support was provided to COTA ACT back in August related to COVID.

In addition to that, sometime in the next couple of weeks I expect to open the next round of the seniors grants, which will provide a really important opportunity for community organisations and community groups who are doing fantastic work helping to keep everyone connected—and with a real COVID-19 lens on it this year—and to get access to some funding to enable those activities to take place.

In this year's round of the seniors grants, for example, there was a theatre performance that was created and performed by older Canberrans, particularly about what they were experiencing during COVID-19. In addition to that, I also expect that we will see some of the experiences that people have had during the last year and a half feeding into the older persons mental health and wellbeing plan, which is currently being worked on and which I look forward to talking about more in future months.

MADAM SPEAKER: Mr Milligan, a supplementary.

MR MILLIGAN: Minister, why have you said nothing about veterans when it was included in the initial question, which was referring to seniors and veterans?

MS DAVIDSON: Thank you for that question. There is quite a lot of work being done to support veterans in our community. There has been some work done in relation to the royal commission into veteran suicide and making sure that ACT veterans' experiences are reflected back to federal government in drafting up those terms of reference. The veterans grants program will soon make \$80,000 available to projects and activities to support veterans' and their families' wellbeing to promote veterans as valued members of our ACT community.

This funding will also have a real lens on it for the impact of COVID-19 on the veteran community. They have had a particularly hard time this year, not just with COVID-19 but also with everything that people have been talking about around what has been happening in Afghanistan. That has been a particularly difficult experience, when they have not been able to get together in the way that they normally would. But they have

been incredibly responsive—finding ways to stay connected with each other while the lockdown has been happening. I think that our ESOs and community organisations who have been supporting that work are to be congratulated for the efforts that they have made to make sure that people are staying socially connected at a very challenging time.

Budget—business support

MS CASTLEY: My question is to the Minister for Business. Yesterday the *Canberra Times* carried the headline, “Business groups have slammed the ACT budget,” featuring a range of business groups criticising the budget for providing no new support for crippled small businesses. The Canberra Business Chamber’s Graham Catt called on the government to guarantee that local Canberra businesses will get tenders and grants to support large infrastructure projects such as light rail. Why was there no new support for small business in your budget beyond the schemes that are already operating?

MR BARR: Madam Speaker, given the question strays mostly into areas I have responsibility for, I will take the question. In relation to the final part of Ms Castley’s question, I draw her attention to the Canberra region local industry participation policy that has amongst its other requirements; that the territory entity must, of course, pursue value for money in procurement; that there be no discrimination consistent with national and international agreements—free trade agreements, Ms Castley, which your party likes to champion; and the third point is enhancing opportunities for local businesses.

So within any ACT government procurement, depending on the value of the procurement, there must either be a local industry participation plan or, indeed, an economic contribution test for each procurement depending on the value of the procurement. That has a positive weighting in favour of business also from the Canberra region. We do extend beyond the borders of the ACT to make that economic contribution test, because clearly there are a lot of businesses that operate in the Canberra region that may have part of their business in New South Wales. So we take a broader assessment.

I draw your attention, firstly, to the local industry participation policy. In relation to support within the budget, the single largest expenditure item is business support grants. And amongst the next largest items is the small business hardship scheme, coming in at nearly \$50 million. These are the single largest expenditure items—the centrepiece of the budget, the reason the budget is in a \$950 million deficit— (*Time expired.*)

MS CASTLEY: Chief Minister, will the government mandate extra local procurement for the large infrastructure projects so that Canberra small businesses and workers benefit?

MR BARR: For a contract that is between \$200,000 and \$5 million an economic contribution test must be completed and submitted, and there will be a 10 per cent default weighting in favour of local businesses submitting to tenders between \$200,000 and \$5 million. For a contract value over \$5 million the local industry participation plan is mandatory, and there is a further 10 per cent default weighting in the evaluation process. For a contract value between \$25,000 and \$200,000 there is a requirement that a quote must be sought from a respondent located in the Canberra region—must be sought.

I draw the attention of members opposite to the requirements under the free trade agreement that the Australian government has signed that we must be consistent with those national and international agreements in relation to government procurement. So when Tony Abbott went off to China to do the ChAFTA and when Dan Tehan is off negotiating with the UK and the EU, free trade agreements require that there not be discrimination. That is what it is about. But, within our procurement policies, we are able to have a positive weighting in favour of local business, and we do.

Mrs Jones: Why only 10 per cent?

MR BARR: Because that is the maximum allowed under free trade agreements. I have to say that this absolute hypocrisy on trade from the Liberal Party is extraordinary to witness! *(Time expired.)*

Mrs Jones interjecting—

MADAM SPEAKER: Mrs Jones! If I have to come to you one more time you will be warned.

MR PARTON: Chief Minister, do you agree that Canberra will miss out on huge economic benefits and jobs if the government funds out-of-town business to do these major projects?

MR BARR: No, because of the local participation policy requirements for contracts greater than \$5 billion. It is inbuilt within the procurement guidelines. Even if the head contractor, which is often the case for projects \$500 million or more, is indeed a tier 1 national infrastructure company, there are requirements in their tendering to utilise local contractors. The bulk of the ACT government's infrastructure program sits well below those really big ticket items—250 projects contained within the program and only a handful are over \$250 million in value. So overwhelmingly the delivery of the infrastructure program is undertaken by Canberra region businesses.

But there are some examples where we simply do not have the skills or capacity—light rail being one, because there is no-one who builds light rail in Canberra—where we need to bring that capacity in. Until we built stage 1, there had never been any rail built by a territory government in the ACT. There are some infrastructure projects that require national or international expertise; there are others, though, that we do every month or every year. And that is the staple of the local infrastructure program—that we have in place a local industry participation policy that is consistent with what is allowed under free trade agreements.

This is the thing that just boggles the mind—that you lot go out there claiming your party as the advocates of free trade, and yet when it is actually applied you whinge about it. Unbelievable!

Government—land release

MR CAIN: My question is to the Minister for Housing and Suburban Development. Minister, in the year to September 2021, Canberra house prices have risen by 28 per

cent, according to CoreLogic's home property value index. Your Indicative Land Release reports show that the total promised release of single blocks between 2019 and 2021 was 3,544, yet the land and property reports from June 2019 to December last year show that only 841 blocks were settled.

Mr Parton: Quite a shortfall!

MR CAIN: This is a shortfall, as Mr Parton has said, of quite an amount—2,703. Minister, is this shortfall and the resultant acute scarcity generated by you, the effective monopoly supplier of land in the ACT? Is this what is primarily responsible for the increase in recent sales and the boom in housing prices in

MR GENTLEMAN: Madam Speaker, it is appropriate that I take that question, as the minister with responsibility for ILRP, as well as the decisions that are made in cabinet across land release well into the future. As you will see in this budget, Madam Speaker, we have had a strong Indicative Land Release Program to look at the demand that is growing across the territory, in particular, with the way we have looked at release planning for the future—that is, that we are moving to a more compact, efficient city. So you will see more smaller sites allowed as individual sites across the territory.

In the past we have not seen a reflection, particularly, of the Indicative Land Release Program in the cost of houses in the territory. The cost of houses is a market force. The cost has grown quite significantly, and we see that. We have a land release program that can look at the population growth across the city and the way that the city grows. Those are decisions that are brought to us in expert advice. Cabinet deliberates on those over many, many months. We have some expert advisers. Louise Crossman in my office in particular has done a lot of work with directorates and officials over this budget. I commend her for the work that she has done.

There is a lot of work that goes behind the ILRP. It is a very important piece of work so that we can deliver a land release program that is suited to the territory and that allows us to grow in a way that is economical and efficient.

The Canberra Liberals went to the last election on an urban sprawl policy. They wanted to go right out, bulldoze Kowen Forest and build across the Murrumbidgee. Heaven knows what the cost of living would have been then. *(Time expired.)*

MR CAIN: Minister, what plans do you have to ensure that the actual releases of land, as opposed to houses, match your promises?

MR GENTLEMAN: It is very well thought out and very well delivered in the ILRP, and it was part of this budget. All of the work that has been done by the experts, by our officials and by market analysts looking at what we need to deliver for Canberrans in the forward years is in that budget document. I commend the document to the Liberals.

MR PARTON: Minister, what plans do you have to improve the affordability of detached housing?

MR GENTLEMAN: Of course, there are a number of detached dwellings in the ILRP, our land release program, over the forward years that the government will be delivering.

There will also be a number that the private sector will be delivering. In regard to price, though, as I said, that is a market decision. Market forces—

Mr Parton interjecting—

MR GENTLEMAN: Market forces do drive the price, and investors drive the price as well across Canberra. We need to make sure that we have the number of dwellings available, and all of that work has been done over many years. So the very early work, doing the due diligence to ensure that we can deliver those blocks of land in time has been done, and they are now in the land release program.

Budget—Franklin Nature Reserve

MR BRADDOCK: My question is to the Minister for Planning and Land Management. I noticed in the budget there is a commitment to the enhancement of the Franklin Nature Reserve. Can you please provide further details of what this budget item is for?

MR GENTLEMAN: I thank Mr Braddock for the question. It is, of course, important, as we look at that last question, to think about how we deliver for Canberrans, not just in housing but in the way that they can live in the territory close to nature, which is what they love. I really do want to commend Ms Orr for the work that she did in the last Assembly with me, in delivering the Franklin grasslands for the people of Gungahlin and for all Canberrans to go and visit. I had the pleasure of opening the grasslands with Ms Orr and the Canberra Friends of Grasslands. At the time I was given a very expert tutorial on the Ginninderra peppercress and the mycelial network, which I was very intrigued by. Our experts in Parks and Conservation do a fantastic job. In this budget we have allocated just over \$3.2 million to Franklin grasslands.

MR BRADDOCK: What outcomes from this investment will visitors to the grassland be actually able to see?

MR GENTLEMAN: You will see that funding delivered not just for Franklin grasslands and our temperate climate grasses and woodlands across the territory, making sure that we can have plenty of opportunities for reserving those areas that are most important to us. Of course, there are lots of endangered species that live in these areas, so we want to make sure that we can do that. Each of these areas must have a conservation plan and a plan of management as we go forward. The offsets program helps us to fund these opportunities and gives opportunities for us, our children and our grandchildren to enjoy those spaces into the future.

MS ORR: Can you please tell the chamber how the focus on Franklin grasslands has brought a focus on Gungahlin grasslands and what the government is doing for those?

MR GENTLEMAN: As I talked about earlier, I think Canberrans really enjoy those areas. It is important that we set them aside. When we look at the Gungahlin area, there are quite a number of nature reserves set aside, including for vegetation, as in the Franklin grasslands. Of course, grasslands provide a very good opportunity to set aside an ecological footprint. We often talk about trees across the ACT and trees in our nature parks, but grasslands are an important way of preserving that habitat. It is a different habitat for different species of vegetation and different species of animals. There is a

historic view to Ginninderra grasslands in particular.

Budget—emergency services

MR PETTERSSON: My question is to the Minister for Police and Emergency Services. Minister, how is the ACT government investing in police and emergency services through the ACT budget?

MR GENTLEMAN: I thank Mr Pettersson for his support of policing and emergency services across the ACT. We are continuing our strong investment in our police and emergency services in the 2021-22 budget.

We are making significant investments in our Emergency Services Agency, including: initial funding of \$15.2 million to help modernise and sustain our ambulance service; more than \$12.7 million for standard and low-emission vehicles and associated infrastructure; and over \$2.4 million to upgrade critical ICT systems to increase the capacity at the emergency triple zero communication centre and the incident management room.

We are also vesting funding in ACT Policing, including more than \$11.4 million to improve accommodation for our police and emergency services in Gungahlin; \$4.2 million to meet the growing and increasingly complex workload associated with forensic and medical services; \$6.6 million to replace ACT Policing's core radio comms system; and over \$11 million for expanded enabling services to support operational capacity.

These budget initiatives will ensure that our emergency services and police remain well resourced and that Canberrans remain safe and well protected as the city continues to grow.

MR PETTERSSON: Minister, how will these investments support the work of our frontline responders?

MR GENTLEMAN: I would like to begin by thanking our frontline responders for their ongoing commitment and dedication to serving our community. Our police officers, firefighters and paramedics do a wonderful job responding to emergencies and looking after Canberrans, often in challenging circumstances.

The ACT government has a proud record of supporting our police and our emergency responders and will continue to do so now and into the future. We are enabling our frontline responders to keep our community safe through major investments in this budget. We are providing significant funding for staffing, vehicles, infrastructure, ICT, accommodation and services over the next four years.

We have been listening to our frontline responders about what they need, and their invaluable feedback has helped us shape our initiatives for the 2021-22 budget. I look forward to continuing to work with them to ensure that they remain well supported and well resourced into the future.

MS ORR: Minister, how will these investments improve community safety into the

future?

MR GENTLEMAN: I thank Ms Orr for her interest in community safety. When discussing community safety, it is important to note that Canberra is one of the safest cities in Australia. We have some of the most effective and best-performing emergency services in the country. This is no mistake. It is a result of this government's ongoing record of investment. It is always done in the past. This government is continuing to keep Canberra safe through the delivery of well-resourced, community-focused services.

The investments in our police and emergency services in the 2021-22 budget will improve community safety by boosting the capability of our paramedics, firefighters and police officers to respond to emergencies. It will ensure that Canberrans continue to receive a high standard of service in some of their most difficult times and that our frontline responders can keep up with the growing demand. It will also enable us to maintain a skilled and resilient workforce that is well equipped and supported.

Community safety will always remain a high priority for the ACT government, both in this budget and into the future.

Mr Barr: From car parks to free trade, I ask that all further questions be placed on the notice paper.