



QUESTION TIME
OF THE
LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY
FOR THE
AUSTRALIAN CAPITAL TERRITORY

HANSARD

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Tuesday, 23 November 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) (2.01): The Deputy Chief Minister will be absent from question time today. I will endeavour to assist members with any questions in the Deputy Chief Minister’s portfolios.

Questions without notice Schools—COVID-19

MRS JONES: My question is to the Minister for Health. Minister, in mid-November you stated that the use of rapid antigen testing was being considered for ACT schools to assist children to be back in the classroom after an exposure to COVID faster than the current 14 days. A 14-day stay-at-home is a long time for children who have already had to endure months of lockdown this year. By 20 November you had decided we would not have rapid antigen testing in schools. Since then, more than one school has had numerous students sent home to isolate for 14 days, not leaving the house, with advice being to try and remain separate to others in their household. Minister, why are you not proceeding with rapid antigen testing?

MS STEPHEN-SMITH: I thank Mrs Jones for the question. This was a matter that was very carefully considered by ACT Health, by the Education Directorate and, indeed, by the cabinet. The issue was that when we got to that point, we had four weeks left of the school term in which we could potentially implement a pilot. In order for a pilot to be useful it would have had to be able to be implemented over the whole two-week period. We would have had to have an appropriate school turn out to be an exposure site—an appropriate school with an appropriate class, with parents and a school community who were willing to participate. And it would have had to become an exposure site within a two-week period.

We were also really conscious of the fact that it has been a very long year. While I recognise that some parents would certainly appreciate being able to participate in a rapid antigen test pilot, for others some of the feedback we had was, “Oh my goodness, not one more thing that I would have to think about and do!” That was certainly some of the feedback that we had from staff, as well. So, on balance—weighing up the pros and cons of a rapid antigen test pilot at this time of the year, and what we would learn from a pilot—we determined not to go ahead with it.

We will have the opportunity to look at the experience in New South Wales and Victoria, with the various things that they are doing. I note that even in the couple of days between cabinet consideration and announcement and within a couple of days after that Victoria changed its own arrangements around schools, as well. Their situation was evolving very rapidly. Really, it was about the fact that we only had four weeks left of the school term. Everyone is very tired at the end of a very long year, and there was a whole range of criteria that may or may not be met to make a pilot helpful.

MRS JONES: Minister, will a pilot or general availability of this testing be made available next year?

MS STEPHEN-SMITH: It is certainly our intent to go ahead with a pilot for rapid antigen testing in schools in term 1 of 2022. We will be able to learn from what has been done in New South Wales and Victoria and from the experience overseas, as well, where broad-based rapid antigen testing for screening has been trialled and then abandoned but rapid antigen testing on a test-to-stay basis, where it is applied to those students and teachers who would otherwise have to quarantine, has been rolled-out. We do have things to learn from that, and that is the type of pilot we were thinking about doing here in the ACT. So we are certainly undertaking the planning work to establish a pilot program for schools in term 1 of 2022, and we will have the advantage of learning from what is happening in other jurisdictions. I also note that in New South Wales the current pilot, including in Queanbeyan West school, has not completely eliminating the need for students to quarantine, but is reducing the quarantine period from 14 days to seven days. There are various different models, and this will enable us to look at what is happening across different jurisdictions and to determine what kind of model we would like to pilot next year.

MR HANSON: I have a supplementary question. Minister, why, when over 95 per cent of the adult population is fully vaccinated and only have to quarantine for seven days, do we still require children who are close contacts to quarantine for 14 days?

MS STEPHEN-SMITH: Unvaccinated children are subject to the same quarantine requirements as unvaccinated adults.

Planning—Molonglo Valley

MR HANSON: My question is to the minister for planning. Minister, the EPSDD commissioned a report from AT Adams Consulting to outline how to proceed with the Molonglo Valley major commercial centre. The report suggested two methods of proceeding: an estate development plan or going to a full concept plan that would require a Territory Plan variation and would delay any land release for 18 months. In last month's budget it was revealed that the government had decided to go with a full concept plan and a Territory Plan variation, and blamed the community for saying that they wanted more consultation when in fact the consultation can occur as an estate plan is developed. Minister, why was this slower option chosen?

MR GENTLEMAN: I thank Mr Hanson for his question. The Molonglo Valley is an important piece of planning into the future, and we want to make sure that all of the consultation can take place in advance of that planning rolling out, especially for the estate development plan. The government is developing a draft concept plan and I look forward to tabling that draft concept plan.

The EPSDD is working towards incorporating the concept plan through technical amendment. I recently met with representatives from the Molonglo Valley community council. While they were quite up-front about how disappointed they were about some parts of the delay, they were very keen to be involved in the planning into the future. Of course, if we hear from the community that they would rather go through a full Territory Plan variation process, then that is something the government will consider, but at this stage we are working towards the technical amendment.

MR HANSON: Minister, given your election commitment to fast-track the commercial

centre, why have you gone back on your word to the Molonglo Valley?

MR GENTLEMAN: That is not the case. We are consulting with the Molonglo Valley residents group. We started conversations with them. Most recently, the EPSDD are working with them on the technical amendment.

MRS JONES: Minister, now that this consultant's report is public and you have been shown up for unfairly blaming the community, will you use an EDP instead of the technical amendment option and make the land release faster, as promised last year?

MR GENTLEMAN: I have not blamed the community at all. I have explained quite clearly how we are consulting with the community. We want their input as we make these changes. They have told us that they want to be involved. That is why we are going through the process.

Light rail—vehicle fleet

MR PARTON: My question is to the Minister for Transport and City Services. The cracking issue in the CAF Urbos trams in New South Wales was only discovered after the floor and a layer of noise prevention coating was removed in one of the carriages. You indicated in an email to my office on the same afternoon that it was announced that Sydney's L1 line would be out of service for 18 months that there were no issues with the LRVs in Canberra. But, Minister, how could you possibly know that given the work required to identify these cracks and given the work that is required? Has Canberra Metro removed the floor and the protective coating of one of the carriages to ensure that there are no cracks, or are you blindly making an assertion?

MR STEEL: I was providing the information that we have provided to date on those issues, which are being looked at very closely by the ONRSR—the Office of the National Rail Safety Regulator—as well as Transport Canberra and City Services as well as Canberra Metro as well as the consortium partner CAF. The government will be responding to the Assembly with detailed information in response to its request on these issues.

MR PARTON: Minister, how can you be confident that there is no cracking in our LRVs if the necessary work to identify the issue has not been completed—a la the removal of the floor of one of the carriages?

MR STEEL: We will continue to undertake the necessary work led by the regulator and the consortium to look at these issues as appropriate. We treat rail safety very seriously, and I will be reporting back to the Assembly on the investigations that have been taking place, which have been very detailed in relation to this matter. But at this point no issues have been identified in relation to the Urbos 100 vehicles in Canberra.

MR CAIN: Minister, you have repeatedly said this will not be an issue in Canberra, because we have younger vehicles. That seems to beg a question: does this just seem you expect our LRVs to crack in a few years instead of now?

MR STEEL: I reject the premise of the question. I have not said that. What I have said is that to date no issues have been identified in relation to Canberra's LRVs.

Mrs Jones: No, you said they're younger. You said that last time.

MR STEEL: We do have a younger fleet. That is a fact. The New South Wales fleet came in in 2014-15. Ours were delivered for operation ahead of the start in April 2019. We do have a younger fleet of vehicles and there are differences in the fleet compared to the inner west light rail line. So all of those issues will be outlined before the end of the year in the government's response to the Assembly's resolution, earlier than what was proposed by Mr Parton.

Economy—employment

MR DAVIS: My question is to the Minister for Business and Better Regulation. The Canberra Business Chamber this week asked the ACT government to develop a long-term strategy for workforce capacity in the private sector. Could the minister update us on consultation with the Canberra Business Chamber and whether the government is considering the development of such a workforce strategy?

MR BARR: Madam Speaker, I will take this question, as it covers multiple portfolios, and coordination across the portfolios of both the minister for business and the Minister for Skills, as well as mine—that of the Treasurer, Chief Minister and Minister for Economic Development.

The Canberra Business Chamber's call was in fact made in a document that they released in the lead-up to the 2020 territory election. It is about two paragraphs of information, so it is not exactly clear what the Business Chamber is asking for. But what the government is working on a framework looking at addressing skill shortages, but it is linked with education and training provision. It is linked to work that is occurring at a national level through national cabinet around a national skills reform agreement. It is also linked to the work of the National Skills Commission, and it is heavily impacted, obviously, by national population policy and migration policy settings, including skilled migration policy settings.

In summary, what the ACT government will look at is capability within our education system and our skilled migration settings, capacity issues around the ability to attract and retain workers within our economy, and it will undertake research into reasons why skill shortages exist in Australia and in the territory; then there is an element of marketing and facilitation that goes to promoting Canberra as a place for people to live, work and study, over other destinations in Australia. All of that combined is work across multiple portfolios, and it is being coordinated through my office as Chief Minister.
(Time expired.)

MR DAVIS: Chief Minister, what role does the ACT Workforce Attraction Cooperative Grants Program play in the development of a long-term workforce capacity strategy?

MR BARR: It has a role to play, but it is important to have an understanding of what is meant by "long term" in the context of an evolving labour market. We can make some very clear observations about long-term labour market trends. There is going to continue to be a shift in the Australian economy towards higher skilled jobs. That is

clear. Health, education and professional services will continue to dominate jobs growth in our region and in our nation. Occupations that were performing well before COVID-19 are likely to continue to perform well.

The structure of the labour market could well change, though. The very nature of the pandemic means that there is uncertainty and volatility in short, medium and long-term data. It means that forecasts, data and modelling, of course, need to co-exist with the lived reality and actual judgements year to year in relation to, for example, skills that would be on a priority skills list, a skilled migration program, and the nature of the education and training provision that may or may not be possible in our city, our region and our nation.

Ultimately, in terms of private sector jobs, the key thing, particularly in our economy, where 99 per cent of businesses are of a small or medium size, will be the employer-employee relationship. That is about wages and salaries, and conditions—that, and the firms themselves providing specific training for their own employees in the specific needs of that business. That is a key factor here. The government alone is not the solution to this problem. We do live in an open-market economy. *(Time expired.)*

MS CLAY: Minister, are we placing a gendered lens on these policies and programs to help women in the private sector?

MR BARR: Yes. Clearly, there has been a massive shift in terms of education and training outcomes and skill needs across the economy. It was the case that 30 years ago only around 12 per cent of women held a tertiary qualification. It is now 50 per cent. That is a change delivered by federal Labor government policy, starting with the Whitlam government and accelerated by the Hawke government, which has seen a massive shift in who undertakes and who benefits from public education and secondary and vocational—

Mrs Jones: A point of order, Madam Speaker.

MADAM SPEAKER: Resume your seat, Mr Barr.

Mrs Jones: The question was whether we were putting a gendered lens on things, not if former Labor governments have in the federal parliament.

MADAM SPEAKER: The Chief Minister is responding in an appropriate manner. There is no point of order.

MR BARR: We have already seen a massive structural shift in the Australian economy, in terms of where new jobs are being created, the types of skills that are necessary and access to education and training, particularly for those who were not the beneficiaries of that over the last 50 or 60 years. That has changed dramatically.

Locally, the ACT has a higher proportion of its population with post-secondary education qualifications and a higher level of skills attainment by women than anywhere else in Australia—50 to 100 per cent more. There is a massive amount of investment occurring across our education and training system to ensure better

outcomes for groups who have not always had access to education and training.

The challenge over the next few decades is not so much around female participation; it is disadvantaged groups, and particularly Indigenous men. *(Time expired.)*

Roads—speed limits

MR MILLIGAN: My question is to the Minister for Transport and City Services. Minister, during estimates we asked about the number of accidents that occurred in the new 40-kilometre zone in Civic in the 12 months preceding and the months following the implementation of the reduced speed limits. Given the heavy focus on the safety of pedestrians in the government's spin on this issue, we were surprised to learn that, in the 12 months before the speed cameras were turned into cash cows for the ACT Treasury coffers, there was only one injury to a pedestrian, just one. What is your actual justification for the reduced speed zones, given that pedestrian safety does not appear to be one of them?

MR STEEL: I reject the premise of the question. One person injured or one person dying on our roads is one too many, especially with a population of our size. We know that nationally and in the ACT we have not seen the pedestrian road toll come down. It has been relatively static over a period of time; whereas we have seen the road toll come down for motorists over time because of the range of things that we have undertaken as part of our commitment to Vision Zero, which means zero serious injuries and zero deaths on our roads.

That is what our government has committed to do. That is why, under the road safety action plan, we committed to undertake changes to introduce 40-kilometre speed zones in the city and town centre and group centres around Canberra. We were very clear about that. We consulted on the strategy and then we implemented the actions that came out of that strategy. It was also a key part of the city and urban gateway design framework to have places, particularly in our city centre and also in Braddon, that are people-focused—that actually put people first, not cars, and that is what we have implemented, particularly on Northbourne Avenue, and in the design guide that was provided for Northbourne Avenue. We have reduced the speeds in those areas and in other town centres around Canberra. The changes were announced in March 2021. There was a grace period which we used to educate the community about these changes. There was very clear signage put up—variable message signs, changes to the speed signs—in accordance with Australian standards. There was a significant social media campaign, with 170,000 impressions for that campaign. Significant changes have been made— *(Time expired.)*

MADAM SPEAKER: Mr Milligan, your supplementary.

MR MILLIGAN: Minister, do you care more about road safety or filling Treasury's coffers with millions of dollars every year from speeding fines?

MR STEEL: I reject the premise of the question. We are committed to Vision Zero. It appears that the opposition would be the only government in the country, if they ever came into power, that would not.

MADAM SPEAKER: A supplementary, Mr Parton.

MR PARTON: Minister, has there been any discussion at any level of government about just how much extra revenue you could get from Canberrans if you reduced the speed limit in that zone down to 30 kilometres an hour, or even 20?

MR STEEL: I thank the member for his question. He is quite right to point out that many jurisdictions around the world have actually reduced their speed limits to 30k an hour in urban areas. We have a consistent speed limit of 40k an hour. We have made sure that we apply that to areas where there is high pedestrian activity, particularly in areas like Northbourne Avenue, where we have people crossing the street to get to the Alinga Street station. We are seeing people cross from the western side to the eastern side of the city across Northbourne Avenue. We are seeing people cross from the ANU to the inner north in Turner. This is an area of high pedestrian activity and it is appropriate that we have lower speeds in place to protect pedestrians and encourage the vibrant city that we want to build, a place where we have outdoor dining where people feel like they can go and frequent businesses—

Mr Parton: A point of order—

MADAM SPEAKER: Mr Parton.

Mr Parton: on relevance. The question was: has there been any discussion about reducing the speed limit down to 30 or 20? I am not sure that he is being relevant to the question.

MADAM SPEAKER: I believe he is being relevant to that question.

MR STEEL: There has been a recommendation—I think it is a World Health Organisation recommendation—for 30 kilometres per hour. Our view is 40 kilometres an hour is appropriate at this time. That is the consistent speed limit that we have applied across our town centres and group centres now for some time. We have extended that as appropriate based on the actions that have been outlined in the road safety strategy and the NCA and ACT government draft urban gateway strategy, which is now being finalised following consultation with the community.

Planning—ACT Planning System Review and Reform Project

MR PETTERSSON: My question is to the Minister for Planning and Land Management: can you update the Assembly on the ACT's planning system review?

MR GENTLEMAN: I thank Mr Pettersson for his interest in planning for the future of the ACT. The Planning System Review and Reform Project is making excellent progress. As members would be aware, I released a suite of project direction papers in November last year. These papers set the scene for the drafting and implementation of the next stage of planning reform. These papers won an award earlier this month from the Planning Institute of Australia for improving planning processes, and I extend my thanks to the hard-working staff across EPSDD who contributed to these papers. I acknowledge their passion in making sure we have a great city to live in into the future.

COVID, of course, interrupted some of the stakeholder consultation, but I am pleased to advise the Assembly that stakeholder working series is back up and running. The group of community and industry representatives is providing valuable policy feedback to inform our legislation.

We are also building on input from our traditional custodians of this land. We want to respect the knowledge, customs and traditions of the traditional custodians, through the planning system as well. So the Dhawura committee made up of Ngunnawal representatives have provided this input. I look forward to releasing a consultation draft of the new legislation early next year.

MR PETTERSSON: Minister, what outcomes will the review deliver?

MR GENTLEMAN: The planning review will deliver a planning system that provides certainty and flexibility, better outcomes for our buildings and public places and a connection between our strategic planning and localised outcomes. The planning system will also be better able to respond to our changing world. At the moment changing the Territory Plan can be cumbersome and can also duplicate processes across government. The planning review will deliver improved legislation and an improved process. It will also implement a new level of planning, being at the district level. This will be a mixture of maps and Territory Plan instructions and will replace our existing multitude of precinct codes.

Our district strategies are being informed by what the community has told us as well as by government strategies such as the housing strategy, transport strategy and climate change strategy. District strategies will provide Canberrans with a spatial plan for their local communities. It will be a shared vision for what we want to see and value about Canberra and broken down at the district level. I am expecting to release draft district strategies in the middle of next year for future discussion and consultation.

MS ORR: Minister, how is the ACT government delivering sustainability through the planning system?

MR GENTLEMAN: I thank Ms Orr for her long-term interest in planning, particularly in the Yerrabi electorate. The planning system has a critical role to play in ensuring we maintain a sustainable city. The government's focus on building up rather than out will continue to protect the sensitive landscape that surrounds our city, as well. One of the key features of the government's plans for density is that we want to limit our density to town centres, group centres and along major transport corridors. Of course, the Canberra Liberals want to build a city of unchecked urban sprawl accompanied by rampant dual occupancies. We would see houses in every backyard, congestion in our suburban streets and a loss of biodiversity that we will never get back.

The government is introducing new requirements for more trees and more green spaces for private blocks in our residential zones. More living infrastructure means fewer hard surfaces and reduced heat island effect as well. The government is focusing on delivering a range of housing choices for Canberrans. By limiting our density to these pockets we can make sure that our low-rise suburbs maintain their suburban character while also providing choices for people who want lower maintenance housing closer to the action.

National Multicultural Festival—COVID-19

MRS KIKKERT: My question is to the Minister for Multicultural Affairs. Minister, late last week you announced the cancellation of Canberra’s 2022 Multicultural Festival. Reasons cited for the cancellation were that the departmental staff who run the festival were deployed on other activities supporting the multicultural community during the COVID lockdown, thus losing crucial organising time. Minister, Events ACT runs many public events in Canberra. Why were they not brought in to assist to get the event off the ground for 2022?

MS CHEYNE: I thank Mrs Kikkert for the question. I appreciate her interest in the Multicultural Festival and how much it means to all of us in this place and the broader community. The ACT National Multicultural Festival is proudly community led and is supported by a small team in CSD that has deep relationships with our multicultural communities, organisations and showcase leaders. This is a team that also has experience in delivering the National Multicultural Festival. The Events ACT team has its own full calendar of events and had continued with the work on that.

MRS KIKKERT: How many cultural groups were involved in the 2020 festival, when it was last held and how many of these groups will be given the chance to fundraise via our other territory government events in 2022?

MS CHEYNE: I thank Mrs Kikkert for the supplementary question. I will take on notice the exact number of organisations and communities that were part of the 2020 festival, but I am pleased to tell Mrs Kikkert and the chamber that we are looking forward to supporting as many multicultural community groups and organisations as we can—both with our existing calendar of events, first with Australia Day and then Canberra Day, and we are also starting to look at opportunities within Enlighten. We have agreement that applicants for the National Multicultural Festival grants, which were applied for earlier this year, if they are eligible and successful, can use them to support their participation in the existing Events ACT calendar of events or with their own activities or fund-raising opportunities that they might like to pursue.

MRS JONES: Minister, will the 2023 festival go ahead as has been the regular practice for 25 years?

MS CHEYNE: It is difficult to know what Mrs Jones might mean by “regular practice”, but we are committed to having a celebration that is fitting of a 25th anniversary. We do want to do this properly. That is what the multicultural communities have told us, as well. Understand that it takes time to have a celebration that is fitting of the 25th anniversary. We do appreciate—and I think members are aware—that there are some challenges regarding the footprint, particularly due to some of the changes that have occurred in City Walk. We are working through those, but it does add some complexity. We look forward to engaging with the community.

As members know, we have established a community panel reference group made up of leaders in our community of multicultural groups, and also Jenny Mobbs from the Council on the Ageing. I am looking forward to meeting with them to start discussions about the 25th anniversary festival in 2023, but also about how we are going to support

our local groups later this week.

Jamison shopping centre—traffic management

MS CLAY: My question is to the minister for city services. Minister, Jamison is a busy group centre near a school with a thriving trash and treasure market on Sundays, but the community is concerned about traffic and pedestrian access. In April, TCCS completed an investigation on Bowman Street between Redfern and Wiseman streets. The study recommended the installation of at-grade zebra crossings on either side of the bus stop, a pedestrian refuge island near the Redfern Street intersection and a children's crossing next to the school. TCCS also completed an investigation on Bowman Street between Redfern and Catchpole in June 2021, following community inquiries about cars driving too fast. That study recommended installing two additional speed humps to reduce speeds.

Minister, when might the government be able to implement these recommendations?

MR STEEL: I thank Ms Clay for her question. I know that she has been raising this issue with my office in recent months.

The ACT government is committed to making our roads safe for all road users, whether they are driving, cycling, using an e-scooter or even walking. Bowman Street is, indeed, a very busy road in the heart of Macquarie that supports the Jamison group centre, an important community hub, as well as the nearby Canberra High School, the Canberra Southern Cross Club and the Big Splash Waterpark, amongst other uses in the area.

To support safety, there are a range of pedestrian refuge islands and a set of speed cushions installed on the road. A significant stretch of Bowman Street also has a speed limit of 40 kilometres per hour, including the area closest to the shops and the busy intersections that allow entry and exit to the car park. This was implemented in 2015, when the ACT government extended the 40-kilometre speed limit program to include all group centres, including Jamison.

Several studies have been undertaken about further improvements to this stretch of road in recent years. The government will consider the recommendations of these studies for implementation.

MS CLAY: Minister, what is the standard time frame between undertaking a traffic investigation and the government approving the recommendations, the work starting, and the works being complete?

MR STEEL: I thank Ms Clay for her supplementary. The ACT government will consider the findings of a range of different traffic studies that we undertake around various locations in Canberra, based on priority and road safety. We will need to assess what the priorities are right across the ACT before we make budget decisions about whether we are going to invest and make improvements to those areas.

In this case, the ACT government undertook a survey investigation on improvements on Bowman Street between Redfern Street and Wiseman Street in April 2021. The study recommended a series of potential interventions that could be installed to improve

safety in the area, including the installation of an at-grade zebra crossing either side of the bus stop interchange and a pedestrian refuge island as well as a children's crossing adjacent to the school. These interventions will be considered further for implementation based on the context of road safety priorities in the ACT.

MR DAVIS: Minister, when can the community expect any works to be commenced at the Jamison shops?

MR STEEL: We are undertaking a range of works at the Jamison shops, including recent upgrades to improve the health of the trees at the shops and reconfiguring the car parks. We have also undertaken further works, together with the local community, around Jamison.

We will continue to consider what has come out of these reports before we make decisions about implementation based on a set of road safety priorities that we have right around the ACT. There are a number of roads in the ACT that have major road safety concerns. That is why we are investing a significant amount of money in the Monaro Highway, for example, to remove at-grade dangerous signalised intersections along that route. That is why we are investing in other roads around Canberra to improve road safety. We will continue to look at what the priorities are in each region.

Planning—housing affordability

MS LAWDER: My question is to the Minister for Planning and Land Management. In last Monday's edition of the *Canberra Weekly* you were quoted as saying:

Providing increased housing choice will not only help us create diverse and attractive communities but also provide affordable housing in established communities.

On the same page the CEO of ACTCOSS was highlighting a housing and rental crisis with the ACT having the highest rate of rental stress in the country and at least 1,600 people experiencing homelessness each day. Minister, why are you treating people in the ACT with contempt by saying we have increased housing choices when the present conditions clearly demonstrate this to be utterly false?

MR GENTLEMAN: It seems extremely odd that the Canberra Liberals are willing to take up the simplistic old argument about land supply. We have just witnessed the federal parliament also try to blame the states and territories for planning and land supply issues. But, of course, the Reserve Bank keeps telling them that the issues are in the tax and transfer system.

The upcoming ILRP is forecast to supply dwellings for around 41,000 Canberrans at a time when our population is only expected to grow by 17,500. So the RBA has been very clear that the overall housing supply is not an issue affecting house prices in Australia, and they mean here, too.

We have provided written and verbal evidence to a federal parliamentary inquiry on the topic of housing supply and affordability. Luci Ellis, Assistant Governor of the RBA, said just last week that in Australia additions to the housing stock have run ahead of

population growth for a number of years. She also said that the combination of negative gearing and concessional capital gains means that it is very attractive to leverage into investor property.

So we are supplying an ILRP that will provide housing for the future of Canberrans. We want to make sure that that is appropriate and, where we can, affordable too into the future.

MS LAWDER: Minister, is the CEO of ACTCOSS wrong?

MR GENTLEMAN: I thank the CEO of ACTCOSS for her strong advocacy for those Canberrans that are looking to try and get into the housing market. Wherever we can we will assist her in that work.

MR PARTON: Minister, what immediate steps will you take in the planning area to relieve our housing crisis other than blaming things that are way outside of your sphere of influence?

MR GENTLEMAN: In my sphere of influence I have the ILRP. As I said, we are providing housing for 41,000 Canberrans in the ILRP when the growth expected is 17,500. You can see the clear levers that we have are being pulled by us as a government in that sense of housing availability for blocks across the territory and ensuring that we do not have urban sprawl into the future, costing Canberrans even more.

COVID-19 pandemic—testing fees

MS CASTLEY: My question is to the Minister for Health. Many MLAs have received emails from Canberrans planning to travel who are realising that, when asymptomatic, free COVID tests are not available. However, private pathology is able to conduct tests for around \$150. As of yesterday, the EPIC and Garran testing centres offered a fee-for-service test at just over \$110. Was it ever considered to provide this service to tax-paying Canberra residents for free?

MS STEPHEN-SMITH: I thank Ms Castley for the question. The availability of free COVID-19 testing in ACT government clinics has been consistently, throughout the entire pandemic, related to eligibility criteria that are determined on public health grounds. The eligibility criteria are around having symptoms, being identified as a close or casual contact or having been directed or asked to get tested by a health authority such as ACT Health or New South Wales Health. That has been consistently the case throughout the pandemic.

I certainly know people who have been turned away from testing centres because they have gone, as a matter of a lot of caution, when they did not have any symptoms and they had not been to a close contact exposure location—they had just been to a regional area that they thought might have cases, and they have been turned away from testing sites. Those criteria have been very clear throughout the pandemic.

Mrs Jones: A point of order, Madam Speaker.

MADAM SPEAKER: A point of order?

Mrs Jones: It is on relevance. The question actually was whether it had ever been considered to be provided for free; that is all.

MADAM SPEAKER: The minister is in order, but she has time to get to that point.

MS STEPHEN-SMITH: Given some of the requirements in relation to testing, in terms of both accessing health services and for travel, there is some work currently underway to consider whether arrangements could be put in place to enable those, particularly for people who are accessing health services.

MS CASTLEY: Minister, how was the current fee arrived at?

MS STEPHEN-SMITH: I will take this question on notice because my understanding is that we are not actually charging fees at free government testing sites. I have heard a number of times that people have been told that they can get their test result if they pay for it, but that is not the advice that I have received. I think there are some mixed messages here, and I will take the question on notice so that I can come back to the chamber with some clear advice about that. I know that we are working on setting up some arrangements that would enable people to pay in certain circumstances, and that we are also looking at those arrangements for people who are being asked by health facilities to get a test before they undertake a planned admission.

MR MILLIGAN: Minister, is it your intention to provide a fee-free COVID test service for those people who may be travelling interstate or who may not have symptoms?

MS STEPHEN-SMITH: We do not currently have any intention of providing a free service for people who are not being asked to go and get tested or are not being tested for a public health reason in the ACT.

Access Canberra—services

MR CAIN: My question is to the Minister for Business and Better Regulation. Minister, in answer to a question following recent estimates hearings, you confirmed that Access Canberra currently has 105 telephone and face-to-face service delivery staff out of a total of 705 full-time equivalent employees. Of that total, only 54.5 full-time equivalents are delivering services face to face. These shopfronts have reopened recently and there has been a surge in demand from Canberrans who need to complete transactions in person, with very long wait times at Access Canberra shopfronts. Minister, it seems that you did not do any planning or preparation in anticipation of high levels of demand when Access Canberra reopened. Please explain why you did not do that.

MS CHEYNE: I thank Mr Cain for the question. We did cover this quite extensively in yesterday's select committee hearing, but I appreciate Mr Cain was not present. I reject the premise of the question, Madam Speaker. Access Canberra has done an incredible amount of planning, pivoting, reorganising and moving resources to where they are needed. We did do an enormous amount of preparation for our shopfronts, noting that the shopfronts are still subjected to the density limits. That was previously

one per four-square metres when they reopened. It is now one per two. At Gungahlin, where we have a much bigger footprint, or floor print, that does mean that all of our counters are able to be open, but at our other shopfronts it means that some of the counters are closed to accommodate that.

We have been advising the community that if they do not need to attend a shopfront, there are many transactions—hundreds—that they can do online. There are only a handful that people are required to be at a shopfront for. But if people do want that extra assistance or do need that face-to-face assistance, for whatever reason, of course we are there to assist them. We have been working with the community and providing advice about wait times. We have also put into place mobile queuing to assist people where they have been waiting in line for perhaps a longer period than they would have expected. We have been offering them seating inside if they have needed it or water.

MADAM SPEAKER: Mr Cain, a supplementary.

MR CAIN: Minister, have you provided more resources to Access Canberra over and above the 54.5 full-time equivalents, rather than moving the staff around, to meet the extra demand?

MS CHEYNE: There are a lot of demands on Access Canberra's services right across its functions. Mr Cain would be aware that in the recent budget there is actually a significant investment in Access Canberra in a number of functions that it does. We are supporting Canberrans at the shopfronts and, as we discussed in the select committee yesterday, Access Canberra is actually servicing more people each day than it was this time last year when the requirements were not there. Access Canberra is meeting its responsibilities to the community.

MADAM SPEAKER: A supplementary, Ms Lawder.

MS LAWDER: Minister, if the current level of demand continues, will you be permanently increasing the front-line service delivery staff at Access Canberra?

MS CHEYNE: The work health and safety of our front-line staff is a priority for us. We have been engaging with staff on how best to support them. What I am pleased to say is that we have been tracking demand very closely and demand is going down. We did see a peak where wait times were around two hours, but those wait times have been coming down. At one point last week Tuggeranong service centre had the lowest wait time of nine minutes, but generally it was hovering around an hour. It is still continuing to come down. We have also implemented, as I mentioned, mobile queuing. So someone can use a mobile phone to scan a QR code and then get advice about when they are due back when they are at the front of the line, which assists them in going about doing other things or perhaps resting in the shade.

Municipal services—shopping centre upgrades

MS ORR: My question is to the Minister for Transport and City Services: how are upgrades to local shops supporting lively suburbs in our region?

MR STEEL: I thank Ms Orr for her question. In a week where we are debating the

ACT budget and its record investments in health, education and the overall territory economic performance, it is also important to outline projects that are small but make a real difference to benefit Canberrans at the local level.

Local shops are important hubs in the community, providing services, jobs and often acting as the heart of a neighbourhood. That is why our government is helping to make popular local shops even better, with funding in the budget to upgrade 11 of Canberra's 90 shopping centres over the next four years with upgrades at Campbell, Narrabundah, Gwydir Square in Kaleen, Duffy, Evatt, Kippax, Macquarie, Monash, Calwell, Lanyon, Brierly Street at Cooleman Court as well. These investments will benefit eight of Canberra's 66 local shopping centres and three of Canberra's 19 larger group centres.

We know that Canberrans love their local shops, and this will help to stimulate economic activity right across Canberra, whilst renewing infrastructure in our suburbs. Not only will the upgrades boost local construction and support local jobs but they will lead to improved local shopping precincts which will benefit the small businesses there as well as the residents that regularly use them.

MS ORR: Minister, what upgrades will the ACT government be considering for local shops?

MR STEEL: I thank Ms Orr for her supplementary. We understand that local shops are community hubs and we want these upgrades to respond to community priorities and needs. Residents in Duffy, Campbell and Kaleen have already provided their feedback on upgrades in their suburbs. This has helped to inform the final designs for those shops. For example, feedback was provided on the importance of landscaping, tree planting, the need for accessibility, safety and spaces to allow the community to gather and spend time with friends and family. With that in mind, designs for the upgrades were released around a month ago which incorporated that feedback.

For Gwydir Square in Kaleen, the government will provide a new public toilet, more car parks, better landscaping, more seating and a shade infrastructure at the playground. Upgrades at Duffy shops will also include a new public toilet as well as improved landscaping, a new playground and more active travel connections with new paths. At Campbell community feedback has emphasised making the shops more accessible by improving paths, car parking and landscaping.

With Campbell, Duffy and Kaleen the first shops to have construction commence, community consultation will soon begin on the remaining eight shops, which will give residents in those suburbs the opportunity to have their say on the upgrades and amenities that they would like to see at their local neighbourhood hub.

MR PETTERSSON: Minister, when can the community expect construction to begin?

MR STEEL: I thank Mr Pettersson for his supplementary. I am very pleased to say that the first round of tenders for Campbell, Duffy and Kaleen have already been released, and given the designs for these upgrades are shovel-ready we anticipate the successful tenderers will be in a position to commence construction on these three centres early in the new year.

We then hope to progress community engagement with the remaining eight communities to get their views on the types of upgrades and amenity that people would like to see at their local shopping centre. The feedback from this engagement will assist the government in undertaking feasibility and design works and get proposals to a shovel-ready state in those locations as well so that they can get underway with construction and create jobs and better communities.

Exact dates will be informed following consultation and detailed design, but these projects will be delivered in this term of government. I look forward to keeping the community up to date as we make our local shopping centres across the city even better with these upgrades.

Mr Barr: Further questions can be placed on the notice paper, Madam Speaker.