



QUESTION TIME
OF THE
LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY
FOR THE
AUSTRALIAN CAPITAL TERRITORY

HANSARD

Edited proof transcript

Wednesday, 4 February 2026

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Questions without notice

North Canberra Hospital—business case

MR PARTON: My question is to the Minister for Health. Minister, the government's website for the new northside hospital states that a business case would go to the government for approval in early 2026. Has the business case for the new northside hospital been to cabinet for approval yet, and, if yes, will you table it in the Assembly?

MS STEPHEN-SMITH: No. We have had, I think, two cabinet meetings in 2026—a couple of expenditure review committee meetings. The business case has not yet come to cabinet, but even if it had, it would be part of the budget process and would not be tabled in this place before it had been considered appropriately through the budget process.

MR PARTON: Minister, what is the updated total cost of the new northside hospital project?

MS STEPHEN-SMITH: Clearly, I cannot answer that question, and neither can I take it on notice, because, as I indicated, the whole business case will be considered through the budget process.

MR COCKS: Minister, why are you hiding the total cost of one of the most expensive health infrastructure spends in territory history?

MS STEPHEN-SMITH: I am not hiding the cost of this project. In fact, the ACT Labor government has already provisioned more than \$1 billion in the budget for this important project, a project that the Canberra Liberals only decided to commit to in the last couple of weeks of the 2024 election campaign and which they now appear not to support at all.

Canberrans support investing in important health infrastructure, renewing the hospital infrastructure in Canberra's north to deliver a modern, state-of-the-art facility to support patients, carers and families, and the fantastic staff that work at North Canberra Hospital, and to meet the needs of the growing community and the aging community in the north of Canberra.

If the Canberra Liberals do not support a new northside hospital, then they should come out and say so. ACT Labor will always support investing in health infrastructure. We have recently delivered the critical services building at Canberra Hospital, and I get incredible, positive feedback about that.

We are currently partnering—through the very early contractor involvement process—with Multiplex, our partner in delivering the critical services building, in the early stages of work for the new northside hospital. We are consulting and engaging with the community, with staff and with other stakeholders to ensure that, similarly to the critical services building, the new northside hospital will deliver modern, state-of-the-art facilities to meet the needs of Canberrans into the future on Canberra's north side.

Swimming pools—ACT aquatic strategy

MR RATTENBURY: My question is to the Minister for Sport and Recreation. Minister, on 8 December 2025, you received a letter from 26 community and sporting organisations requesting that you actively consult with all aquatic pool users and urban swimmers in the co-design of an aquatic pool and urban swimming strategy. On 24 December, you responded, declining the offer to co-design the strategy; rather, you indicated that the government would engage a consultant. Why is the government unwilling to work with the community to undertake a co-design process, given the willingness and expertise of many aquatic organisations to assist you?

MS BERRY: I thank Mr Rattenbury for his question. It is simply not true that the ACT government is unwilling to work with sporting and aquatic organisations. I have written to over 30 aquatic user groups with regard to the strategy and the process going forward. They will be very much deeply embedded in the consultation process.

It is important that we have an expert to gather all the information, the data, and the most up-to-date, modern methods of building pools, as well as understanding the data for ACT usage and across the region. This is some of the information that the consultant will bring together to develop a document for all the aquatic users to be able to look at. It will not be confined to aquatic users. Other sports user groups might be interested in the development of this strategy as well. I am very much open to discussing, consulting, engaging with and including anybody who is interested in pools with regard to the development of a strategy. To suggest that I am not is simply not true.

MR RATTENBURY: Minister, do you appreciate the difference between a consultation process and a co-design process?

MS BERRY: Yes. However, in this circumstance I am putting forward a process to the aquatic user groups, including other user groups that might be interested, as well as broader community groups, children, families and others that use pools for recreation and/or for formal or informal sports use, to ensure that as many people as possible are engaged in the development of a strategy. It could include parts of a co-design process. However, the engagement of a consultant is an important part of developing the strategy going forward, to bring all the information together so that everybody in the aquatic user groups and others can have some information to work with, and so that we can come to the development of a strategy from a really good and informed position. That is not to say that any of their expertise or knowledge does not form an important part of that. Of course, it does. That is why we are engaging with them.

MISS NUTTALL: Minister, why will the ACT aquatic strategy focus exclusively on built facilities, and why will it not extend to urban lakes and waterways, given that community organisations are informing you about the growth of urban swimming?

MS BERRY: Again, I have considered the work that the minister for the environment and water is doing with regard to different strategies and approaches to addressing health within our various lakes and facilities across the ACT. The focus will be much better aligned with our built facilities, like aquatic facilities, in the ACT. It does not mean to say that a future, broader aquatic strategy that included other water usages could not be attached to the strategy. But the focus for the main part of this work is on built facilities.

Swimming pools—Canberra Aquatic Centre

MR EMERSON: My question is to the Chief Minister. The Adelaide Aquatic Centre was delivered for \$135 million and includes a 50-metre pool, a 25-metre pool, an indoor warm-water rehabilitation pool, an indoor learn-to-swim pool, an outdoor lagoon pool, diving amenities, an indoor leisure space with splash zones and water slides, an outdoor splash pool, a sauna, a steam room, a cafe and a gym. The Stromlo Leisure Centre was designed and constructed for \$36 million and includes a 50-metre pool, a 20-metre program pool, a splash park and more. Chief Minister, how can it possibly be the case that you have budgeted \$138 million for the new Canberra Aquatic Centre but cannot guarantee that it will deliver, at the bare minimum, like-for-like replacement of what we already have at the Civic pool, including an outdoor pool and a 10-metre diving platform?

MR BARR: I thank Mr Emerson for the question. I visited the Adelaide site during its construction and our officials have engaged with those developing that project. It is a similar project budget but in a different location and with a different set of site parameters than are pertinent here in Canberra. I note that I believe that project started at \$80 million and has escalated in cost considerably. There has been a very significant increase in construction costs across all infrastructure projects in Australia post COVID, so the reference to Stromlo is relevant but you must factor in the escalation of costs associated with construction.

The government's objective within the available project budget is to deliver as much as possible, but trade-offs will be necessary. The representations to government have included, perhaps at the grandest end, a component that might be considered a sports facility that could host a Commonwealth Games or Olympics swimming versus, at a community level, the desire for a range of facilities, including features that Mr Emerson listed. We are going through the early stages of development. We also have to meet the requirements of the National Capital Plan, in relation to what can be built on the site. Also, the Aquatic Strategy that Minister Berry is developing will look at the provision of other elements that could not be delivered at Commonwealth Park within the project's budget, associated with other facilities across the territory.

We will endeavour, within available resources and available sites, to deliver as much as we possibly can, but there are some constraints associated with the development of each of those projects, such as timeframes, budget considerations, what is allowed under planning rules, and other issues that might emerge, including Big Splash. All of that is being taken into account.

MR EMERSON: Chief Minister, will you commit to delivering a new deep-water dive pool to ensure the survival of aquatic sports like water polo, underwater rugby, underwater hockey and, of course, competitive diving before the Civic pool is demolished?

MR BARR: To be clear on the Civic pool, it will remain open until the new facility in Commonwealth Park is complete. It will likely be open until the end of this decade. It is unlikely, given progress to date, that the Civic pool would close before the end of the decade. If it did, it would be because the other project was complete and open.

In relation to diving facilities, as we indicated in the statement that the Deputy Chief Minister and I made, we recognise the need, together with the needs of other sports that utilise those facilities. Currently, they are outdoor and seasonal only. We have had requests for them to be indoor and to Olympic standard, which would bring the cost to something like \$60 million to \$80 million for a standalone facility or a component within a project. I am being asked for like-for-like, and then other sections of the community and stakeholders ask for an indoor Olympic standard. They are different asks. We will endeavour to deliver as much as we possibly can across all the different sites and meet as many of the community requests as possible, but there do need to be trade-offs, and that is what we are working through at the moment.

Mr Emerson: Mr Speaker, I have a point of order. I seek your assessment of the responsiveness of the Chief Minister's answer to the question about whether the government will commit to a new dive pool before the current pool is demolished. We got a lot of other great information, but I do not think that question was answered.

MR SPEAKER: I think he was pretty comprehensive in his answer, to be frank, Mr Emerson. Sorry to disappoint you.

MS CARRICK: Chief Minister, if you cannot afford competition-level diving facilities in the new Canberra Aquatic Centre now, how can you guarantee you will be able to afford them somewhere else later?

MR BARR: Ms Carrick, the expectation is that the site conditions at other locations would enable a deeper dig, if you like. A major driver of cost is the depth you need to dig in order to get a five-metre-deep pool. What you are digging into—rock versus softer earth—drives cost, as well as the size of the body of water. They are factors that drive the cost. So too does indoor versus outdoor facilities. These are all factors that are being considered and have to be weighed up against the other requests that have come through the community consultation in relation to the Commonwealth Park site, which is why we have left open the option to deliver the dive facilities at another location.

There is also a question in relation to the National Triangle, around vistas, views and the like that the National Capital Authority must take into account, as well as permissible uses at that particular site. Clearly, the NCA approached the ACT government to offer Commonwealth Park for a pool. They want more usage of Commonwealth Park and they believed, in their master planning process, that a pool would deliver that. We agreed with that, and that is why we are proceeding down this path. It is how we were able to attract a 50 per cent contribution from the Commonwealth towards the project.

Hospitals—capacity and staffing

MS CASTLEY: My question is to the Minister for Health. Minister, my office was contacted by a number of Canberrans over the Christmas period with concerns about staffing levels at both the North Canberra Hospital and Canberra Hospital. Minister, how many times was a Code Yellow declared over the Christmas-New Year period?

MS STEPHEN-SMITH: I will take the detail of that question on notice. There were quite regular Code Yellows called in relation to staffing shortages, particularly in the

intensive care and emergency departments but also sometimes in relation to the neonatal intensive care unit over the summer period and still at the moment. Some time ago, Canberra Health Services started using the Code Yellow to specifically give effect to some of the clauses in the enterprise agreement about emergency staffing arrangements so that it really supports the additional pay for staff who come in when there are staffing pressures.

It is not unusual to have a bit of staffing pressure over summer, as I indicated in my ministerial statement this morning. However, Canberra Health Services will be bringing on more than 500 additional graduate staff in 2026, with nurses, midwives, allied health professionals and medical professions. We are certainly very much focused on ensuring that we have sustainable staffing. In addition to that, we have brought on 137 full-time equivalent nurses and midwives to meet our commitments to ratios as well.

The feedback that I have had from so many people recently about their experience at both Canberra Hospital and North Canberra Hospital has been about not just the professionalism and the excellent clinical care but also the really positive attitude of our staff, which I think is an indication that people are feeling good about the services that they are delivering.

MS CASTLEY: Minister, for those Code Yellows that you are taking on notice, could you please provide the Assembly with a table listing the cause, duration and the impact that each Code Yellow had during December and January?

MS STEPHEN-SMITH: I am happy to do that. I understood that Ms Castley's original question was only in relation to Code Yellows related to staffing. So I will do that in relation to those Code Yellows that related to staffing matters over the summer period. I will take that on notice.

MR PARTON: Minister, can you provide a guarantee that patient safety and outcomes have not been adversely impacted due to staffing shortages, which you have conceded are ongoing?

MS STEPHEN-SMITH: I think I need to clarify for the Leader of the Opposition—who I understand is a very new shadow minister for health—that this does not necessarily mean that, overall, we have had staffing shortages. There are a range of mechanisms, including the Code Yellow, that are used to bring additional staff in. Code Yellows are stood up and then they are stood down when the pressures are eased, because additional staff come in. As part of the Code Yellow process, there is an indication of there being no adverse patient outcomes. Certainly there has not been any indication of any adverse patient outcomes as a result of calling these Code Yellows over the last little while.

Public housing—maintenance

MS BARRY: My question is to the Minister for Homes, Homelessness and New Suburbs. My office continues to receive complaints from public housing residents about delays and inefficiencies in the management of public housing maintenance. We understand that your current strategy for insourcing maintenance will be considerably more expensive than the current outsourcing model. Minister, will you guarantee that

your more expensive insourcing strategy will not result in fewer maintenance jobs being completed?

MS BERRY: I think there is a little bit of hypothetical in that question on what might happen in the future. What I can say is that through insourcing we can be assured that there is a very connected relationship with the people who will be responsible for the maintenance and upgrades of public housing properties in the ACT through the pilot work that we have been doing across some of our multi-unit properties. We have had very positive feedback from both our employees who have been doing the cleaning and upgrade work in our multi-unit properties, and the tenants, about the improved situation that they find themselves in because of the work and the relationships that are being built through that process. It will take a long time. It is a very big contract, but I am confident that there will be many improvements across a range of different areas through the direct employment of housing ACT maintenance services.

Mr Cocks: Point of order, under 118AA. The minister, while not seeking to rule that last question out of order based on any potential hypothetical, has not actually answered the question in regard to the potential of fewer maintenance jobs being completed.

MR SPEAKER: I think she got pretty close, but there were certainly elements about whether there was going to be an increase in costs which I do not think the minister did go to. Or you might clarify Minister?

Mr Parton: The point of order is regarding relevance obviously on 118AA. The question was very specifically: will the strategy result in fewer maintenance jobs being completed? Our view is that the question was not answered.

MR SPEAKER: Minister, I will leave it with you. I will uphold the point of order and ask you to have a look at that under 118AA and get back to the Assembly if you have something further to add.

MS BARRY: Minister, have you considered doing an efficiency review of the maintenance program?

MS BERRY: I think we are kind of past that work. We have been reviewing the contractors and we have been working towards this insourcing approach to understand what we might be able to do to improve. As I said, we have had very positive feedback on the pilot that we have been conducting in multi-unit properties and that pilot will continue to roll out with domestic and family violence upgrades, as well as disability upgrades, in public housing properties. This is work that we are seeing great improvements in when it is being insourced by the ACT government. Yes, there could be increases in cost by doing that work. However, my focus is ensuring that public housing tenants get the best possible outcomes through this process. They are clearly not getting that at the moment and I want to see an improvement in that space.

MR COCKS: Minister, is your insourcing program, given your comments just now, now putting Labor's ideology above proper fiscal management?

MS BERRY: No. It is a strong value of the Labor government that we work through an insourcing process, where we can, for jobs that do not need to be required to be

contracted out. That is something that the ACT government has been doing for some time and we will continue to do that work. I see the Housing ACT insourcing project as a really important part of that work and I am committed to—

Opposition members interjecting—

MR SPEAKER: Members. Members, she is answering the question. You might not like the answer, but she is giving a relevant answer. I recommend you listen to it.

MS BERRY: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I appreciate your ruling on those interjections and I am happy to answer questions about the insourcing work that the ACT government is doing, particularly in the Housing ACT project. The pilots are going really well and I look forward to seeing more positive outcomes.

Swimming pools—deep water pools

MR RATTEBURY: My question is to the Minister for Sport and Recreation. Minister, on 3 January this year, in relation to the new Civic pool project, an ACT government spokesperson said, “Decisions have not been made ... including whether diving facilities will be part of the project.” Then, just 10 days later, on 13 January, you said, “There’s no dive pool at the Civic facility, that is true.” Minister, was the statement on 3 January from a spokesperson true?

MR BARR: I will take those questions. Yes, the process at the moment is that the Infrastructure Canberra directorate is working through the detail of the consultation process and the requests for facility or amenity, and assessing that against the indicative cost. That process has not concluded, but early advice was that the cost of a five-metre dig would consume a disproportionate amount of the project.

That information has progressively been provided to government as further work has been done, but final decisions in relation to the scope of the Commonwealth Park project, and indeed other works, have not been finalised. But indications are—as I indicated in my response to Mr Emerson’s question—that to dig that deep in the rock in that location would consume a disproportionate amount of the available project budget. But we will make final decisions in relation to the location and type of aquatic facility and pools—depth, width, indoor, outdoor and location—as we progress through the finalisation of the early contractor involvement and then, ultimately, the approach to market in relation to Commonwealth Park.

Then, of course, there is the broader aquatic strategy that the minister has announced. I think it is reasonable to assume that, for matters or facilities that cannot be delivered in Commonwealth Park, every effort will be made to deliver them elsewhere in the Territory.

MR RATTEBURY: Chief Minister, what happened in those 10 days that saw the two different quotes being given? Was there a cabinet meeting to discuss it?

MR BARR: There was not a cabinet meeting between those dates, but information obviously continues to be relayed to ministers. A cabinet meeting was held in the last week of January to confirm the release of the aquatic strategy that Minister Berry, in

her correspondence with stakeholder groups, indicated would be coming. She indicated that before Christmas, and at the first cabinet meeting in the New Year that announcement was made.

You also wrote to me, Mr Rattenbury, on Christmas Eve—I think the correspondence arrived just before close of business—indicating a desire to have a discussion in relation to the Phillip pool and to look at alternative options. As I had foreshadowed in November 2024, an alternative option I foreshadowed then, has been pursued.

MISS NUTTALL: Chief Minister, how long will Canberrans who rely on diving facilities and deep-water pools be without access to such facilities, based on your current planning?

MR BARR: I thank Ms Nuttall for the question. As I indicated in my response to Ms Carrick and Mr Emerson, the current facility in Civic will continue for many years to come—at this stage, I suspect, through the rest of the decade. Should that change, we will, of course, advise the community with plenty of notice—noting, of course, that it is seasonal; it is not available all year around. In relation to new facilities, once we have settled on a preferred location for replacement facilities, we will advise that, and it will be the government’s endeavour to ensure that there is a seamless transition from one season to another, noting that if the facility is outdoor, then that could occur over the course of a calendar year. For example, Civic pool might close at the end of the summer season of a particular calendar year, and then a new facility would open at the beginning of the next summer to ensure that continuity of use.

Housing—National Housing Accord

MR WERNER-GIBBINGS: My question is also to the Chief Minister. Chief Minister, can you provide an update to the Assembly on the government’s progress implementing commitments made under the National Housing Accord?

MR BARR: I thank Mr Werner-Gibbings for the question. There is no doubt that the increase in the supply of social and affordable housing is a key focus for the National Housing Accord. It sets a clear direction, lifting supply through coordinated action, with an agreed national target of 1.2 million new, well-located homes over five years, from mid-2024 onwards, backed by commonwealth incentives and enabling programs.

Our direct accord commitments for affordable homes—the ACT’s allocation—is 175 dwellings, with an agreed rollout profile of 35 homes per year from 2024-25 to 2028-29. Across the broader program, since July 2024, the ACT leads all Australian jurisdictions in dwelling completions against the target, with 3,129 new homes delivered in this period.

The ABS data to December 2025 shows an uptick in ACT building approvals, with 4,353 dwellings approved in the territory over the 12 months to December 2025 forming part of the 5,157 dwellings approved since the commencement of the accord.

Quarterly approval and commencement data is volatile, given our relatively small numbers, but it is a positive signal from the market, and we will continue, obviously, to work hard in partnership with industry, community housing providers and the

commonwealth to achieve our targets under that national commitment.

MR WERNER-GIBBINGS: Chief Minister, how is the ACT government working with the commonwealth government and industry to increase housing supply in the territory?

MR BARR: We are using a number of different avenues, and particularly in public housing, we are seeing the Housing Australia Future Fund provide additional funding. There are 85 new homes being funded under the HAFF round, being a joint investment process, with \$66 million from the commonwealth and \$75 million from the territory government to ensure that these homes under that round of the program are available by 30 June 2029.

We continue to engage with community housing providers to ensure the continued funding for projects through the Housing Australia Future Fund rounds, and round 3 is now open. We continue to submit and be part of that process, and to date we have secured well above our population share of that national program.

We will continue working closely with the commonwealth and industry on a range of practical and sensible reforms to streamline building and development approval processes, and we will support the workforce and future workers in this area by seeing more tradies trained in the territory through investments in free TAFE and \$10,000 apprenticeship incentives.

MS TOUGH: Chief Minister, what can Canberrans expect to see throughout 2026 as part of the government's housing agenda?

MR BARR: I thank Ms Tough for the supplementary question. The government is working on planning reforms to deliver more diverse housing, including medium and high-density homes in well-located areas. I think the Assembly is well-aware of the process there.

We hope these missing middle reforms will remove planning barriers to make it easier to build more medium-density homes in existing suburbs. We have announced targeted and technical amendments to the lease variation charge framework and valuation methodology to support more housing supply. The government will also continue to implement tax reforms to reduce the cost of entry into the housing market.

We will also continue our program of infill and greenfield land releases, enabling construction of tens of thousands of additional homes that will include a mix of market, community, public and affordable housing. In addition to these releases, based on current construction and planning activity, it is anticipated that around 9½ thousand new dwellings, on top of the government programs, will be delivered through private sector projects that are in the planning pipeline or under construction over the next five years.

Public schools—hours of operation

MS LEE: My question is to the Minister for Education and Early Childhood. Minister, the opposition has been made aware of a number of schools across the ACT that are not

delivering a full-time schedule, with many of them ceasing face-to-face teaching on one or more days of the week. Minister, why are schools no longer providing full-time contact hours?

MS BERRY: I thought Ms Lee was referring to this year, and I was curious as to which school she meant where there had been some change happen this year. I thought, “Gee, that happened fast.” Yes, there are a couple of schools that have worked with their community and changed some of their rostered school hours to allow for different, flexible types of learning, and to change the way the schools are operating. I understand that those schools have worked with their school communities and engaged with them. They were piloting that particular process; then they went back to the community to check whether that was working for them. I understand that the community had positively received the pilot. I think there are only a couple of them in the ACT public school system that are running that process. I understand that that has been welcomed and agreed to by the community.

MS LEE: Minister, how many and which schools participated in this pilot?

MS BERRY: It was not a pilot designed for a bunch of schools. Particular schools were running pilots that were suitable for their own particular situation. I will have to take the question on notice, but I understand that it is a very small number.

MR PARTON: Minister, are you able to detail the exact level of engagement and consultation that has been done with parents before these decisions were taken?

MS BERRY: I will take that question on notice. If there is information that I can provide to the Assembly, I will do that.

Mr Cocks: A point of order.

MR SPEAKER: Mr Cocks?

Mr Cocks: Strangely enough, it is on 118AA. The original question—I was hoping that the minister would get to it through the supplementaries, or I would have jumped up sooner—was about the reason that schools are no longer providing full-time contact hours. The minister has spoken extensively about the process of speaking to the school community and the idea that maybe the school community supports these cutbacks in hours. I do not believe that the minister has actually answered the question: why?

MR SPEAKER: I think she was pretty responsive to the question, Mr Cocks. I do not uphold the point of order.

Public schools—hours of operation

MS MORRIS: My question is to the Minister for Education and Early Childhood. Minister, in 2025 a number of Tuggeranong government high schools were forced to operate on a reduced timetable of 4½ days per week and students were regularly sent home early. We have had parents and other members of the school community tell us that this reduction was driven by ongoing teacher shortages. Minister, how does the government justify its failure to effectively manage teacher workforce shortages,

resulting in the disruption of students' learning time? And what responsibility do you accept for the impact this has had on the educational outcomes for students in Tuggeranong?

MS BERRY: I can confirm that two schools were operating under this flexible learning period. Initially, there were situations where there were not enough casual staff to cover all the classes. The classes might have been split, combined or moved to supervised online learning. Flexible learning periods are designed to develop independent learning skills and time to practice and consolidate skills and knowledge, to enhance student confidence and application. The two schools operating under this flexible arrangement regularly review these arrangements with a student-centred focus and with the consistency of student learning as the main priority. Parents can opt for their children to sign out of the school and complete these programs in alternative settings if they prefer—that is, they can go home or go to a library somewhere else—

Opposition members interjecting—

MS BERRY: Well, you want the answers and I am giving them to you—but they must have permission from the parents. All students are expected to remain at school and engage in these flexible learning periods. It would be rare, I think, that students would not be part of the flexible learning periods. The increase in unplanned staff leave across ACT public schools is attributed to a range of reasons I have talked about at length in this place, including that teachers do not go to work when they are sick, which is appropriate. Sometimes there will be flu-like symptoms or an increase in family care responsibilities. Because of the increase in those circumstances, we have not been able to replace teachers immediately, but, as I said, the programs for those flexible learning outcomes in those public schools were working quite well, and I understand the schools were engaging very closely with their community. I have taken on notice that information being provided.

MS MORRIS: Minister, given that teacher shortages have been well known for quite some time, why did your government fail to put effective measures in place to prevent these schools from being forced into a reduced timetable?

MS BERRY: An incident occurred in 2019-20 called COVID. Many people here would have experienced that. It has a long tail. It has created a different culture with all of our work situations, including within our schools. Teachers and school staff do not go to work sick, and that is appropriate. They should not be going to work when they are sick. There was a time when people were encouraged to soldier on and get to work regardless of having a runny nose. That is no longer the case. We are seeing that COVID still exists and is rampant in our community. Flus also exist in our community and are quite severe when you get a case of the flu. It has led to situations where people have needed to take an increased amount of leave.

Mr Cocks: It's taken a fair time to respond to that new reality, though.

MS BERRY: Well, you cannot magic up teachers. Teachers are qualified professionals and it takes some time for them to get their qualifications. The Education Directorate and the ACT government, as well as the national government, have been working on a range of strategies. In fact, more than ever before, under the Albanese government, we

have had an increase in teacher enrolments—more than ever before. We are starting to see a shift, with more teachers being engaged in education, and we are hoping to see a change from that.

MS LEE: Minister, which is making ACT schools fail to deliver a full-time schedule: flexible learning arrangements, COVID or teacher shortages?

MS BERRY: All three. It is not as easy as the opposition would like—that you could magic up a group of teaching professionals to work in our public school system. There is COVID's tail. It exists in our community. It is unlikely to go away any time soon. And there is the flu. There is a requirement that staff do not come to work when they are sick, which is entirely appropriate. Then they have to introduce flexible school arrangements. That is what has happened. Those two schools have been engaging very closely with their school communities about that process.

Public schools—access to generative AI

MS LEE: My question is to the Minister for Education. Minister, recent reporting has revealed that ACT students are unable to access generative AI tools on their school-issued laptops, a stark contrast to students in New South Wales, who already have access to this emerging technology. Minister, given the rapid and accelerating role of AI in education in the future workforce, why has your government fallen behind and failed our students in equipping them with the necessary tools and digital infrastructure that are required for the future?

MS BERRY: This is rich coming from Ms Lee. When we were introducing free Chromebooks, she was very negative about the provision of free Chromebooks for public school students, and now she is wanting to make sure that they—

Mr Cocks: On a point of order: I believe that the minister has moved into debating the question.

MR SPEAKER: I think the minister has a long time to go over that and we will see what she comes up with.

Mr Cocks: But it is still debating.

MR SPEAKER: She is getting close; I will grant you that. But, if you want to ask a political question, you are going to get a political answer.

Mr Parton: Did you write this or was it ChatGPT?

MR SPEAKER: Just answer the question, Minister.

MS BERRY: I can reassure Mr Parton that I have never used ChatGPT. So make your judgements on my—

Opposition members interjecting—

MS BERRY: Wow—there is no need to be nasty! Our schools are actually working

very closely around the introduction of AI—not being afraid of it but grasping it for all its opportunities with teaching application in our schools and also learning from our students. I do have some information—I just cannot put my finger on it today—which I will bring to the Assembly, because it is important that Ms Lee is informed about these matters.

MS LEE: Before I go to my supplementary, Mr Speaker, can I confirm, Minister, that you are taking some part of that question on notice?

MS BERRY: Yes.

MS LEE: Thank you. Minister, when will ACT students be able to access this key technology on their school-issued laptops?

MS BERRY: It turns out that I do have some information on that. The Education Directorate, as I said, is committed to making sure that we use AI in our schools both for teachers to be able to use as well as students. Teachers across the ACT are already engaging students in discussions around generative AI and incorporating these tools into teacher-led learning activities, as I said in my first answer. The directorate is continuing to focus on building staff capability first in dedicated professional learning.

Feedback is being sought on the different preferred platforms for trials in the ACT. However, we are ensuring at this stage that participation in the use of AI is limited to 13 years and older. The trial will incorporate lessons learnt from national AI student trials. It will be conducted on platforms that meet appropriate safeguards. A broad suite of professional learning for staff was released in term 4 2025 and there are more planned from term 1 2026. Professional learning is designed to support those new to AI and those working at the forefront of AI in the classrooms.

As I said, our teachers are professionals and their professional development is important to them as well. Ensuring that our teachers are fully prepared for introducing AI into our classrooms is the first priority, and that is the work that the Education Directorate and the ACT government are doing.

MR CAIN: Minister, who made the decision to restrict access to AI technologies and on what basis was that decision made?

MS BERRY: I might have to take some of that question on notice with regard to restrictions on access with regard to Chromebooks. However, our teachers have been attending professional development—in fact, I attended one of their professional development opportunities in October last year with Google Gemini and NotebookLM—and they have been working towards introducing that into our schools to ensure that AI is used appropriately and safely.

Mr Cocks: Point of order—

MS BERRY: I took the question on notice at the start.

MR SPEAKER: A point of order, Mr Cocks?

Mr Cocks: Yes, on relevance. The minister is not responding to the question around the decision. She is now discussing other issues.

MR SPEAKER: She said that she is going to come back with further information about when that decision was made, and she is expanding on the answer. She has been relevant in saying that she is going to come back, and she is providing further information. So there is no point of order.

Public schools—phonics results

MS LEE: My question is to the Minister for Education and Early Childhood. Minister, year 1 phonics screening checks are designed to give parents, teachers, schools and the broader community clear information about whether children are learning to read effectively. Minister, why is your government refusing to release the results of the year 1 phonics test?

MS BERRY: One of the recommendations of the expert panel was that this information is a diagnostic tool and that the year 1 phonics test, or any test of that nature, might be used to create league tables. The expert panel also recommended that the ACT government legislate to ensure that they were not able to be used for league tables and the ACT government will be doing that work.

In the meantime, we will be releasing some parts of the year 1 phonics test when it is available. The first part of that test was piloting to make sure the professional development that we were providing to teachers was actually working on the ground in the implementation of delivering the year 1 phonics. But there is no point in any use for anyone, other than teachers, to release year 1 phonics tests for six year-old children publicly so that there can be league tables created across the ACT. I have committed to release year 1 phonics once we have gone through the completed period of implementing the program. Some of that information will be released, but in a way that is useful for the community. The tool is for teachers as a diagnostic tool.

MS LEE: When will that program come to an end and when can Canberra expect to see those results?

MS BERRY: I will take that on notice.

MR PARTON: Minister, if the government believes its literacy reforms are working, will you commit to releasing all of the results of the year 1 phonics test?

MS BERRY: No. On expert advice.

Swimming pools—access during heatwaves

MISS NUTTALL: My question is to the Minister for Sports and Recreation. Minister, during the recent heatwaves, Yass Valley Council opened up their pools for free to give the community a break from the heat.

Mr Parton: Good on them.

MISS NUTTALL: Good on them, indeed. A few local councils also did this in New South Wales and Victoria. Honestly, it sounds like a great idea. I would love to see it in places like the Lakeside Leisure Centre and the Active Leisure Centre in Erindale. Have you considered opening up government-owned pools in the ACT for free during heatwaves? If not, why not?

MS BERRY: Yes, it is something that the ACT government could consider, but they do not make decisions from questions in the Assembly—in this place. But I also note that every five minutes in this place, over the last couple of days, despite the interrogation of the ACT government's budget, the Greens are asking us to spend more money. Every five minutes there is a call to spend more money. There has to be a process for how that many is spent. It is called the budget, and we release it each year.

In circumstances where there are heat waves, yes, in the future is something that the ACT government might consider but it did not on this occasion. Heatwaves are very rare activities, and I know that we had a shortage of at least one pool in the ACT, which meant that there was, perhaps, more activity at other pools than there normally would have been. It is certainly something that could be considered but it was not on this occasion.

I acknowledge and congratulate the Yass Valley Council for doing it. They have one pool; we have a number of pools, so it would end up being a significant financial commitment should be ACT government consider that.

MISS NUTTALL: Minister, have you noticed whether people in the ACT use public pools more during the heatwaves if that is the kind of data you gather?

MS BERRY: We do collect data, and I have released it publicly in a reply to a question on notice. I did not include it in pool usage; I put it in pool income—from Belgravia Leisure—in an answer to Ms Carrick. Yes, there would be that information available from Belgravia. I think if anybody had visited pools on any of the days that were quite warm—particularly on those 40-degree days—they might have seen an increase in some pools, but not all pools. I did visit Woden pool on one of those heatwave days and it was not busy at all. There would be some pools that might have had increased usage. Dickson pool was quite popular during the heatwaves, but I would not say that that was the case for Woden.

MR BRADDOCK: Minister, will our pools' role in heat relief, or as a heat refuge, be considered as part of the ACT's new aquatic facilities strategy?

MS BERRY: The government does not announce policy during question time.

Mr Braddock: Point of order. I was just asking if it would be considered; I was not asking for an announcement of an initiative.

MR SPEAKER: The question was basically asking whether it will be rolled out of part of the strategy. She said that that will not be announced as part of government policy. I think that is reasonable.

Woden interchange

MS CARRICK: My question is to the Minister for Transport. Minister, the new Woden interchange has been under construction for around three years. In an answer to a question on notice on 21 November last year, you said that the new Woden interchange will be complete by the end of March 2026. In your ministerial statement this morning you said that the new Woden interchange is expected to be completed in the first half of this year.

Minister, what month will the new Woden interchange open to buses, bringing to an end route diversions that have been delaying buses for eight months now?

MR STEEL: I thank Ms Carrick for her question. Those two statements that I made are consistent, and I made that latter statement in my ministerial statement earlier this morning. The latest advice is that the expected completion is in April for the Woden interchange, with operations then commencing thereafter commissioning. It is not too far away. It has taken a little bit longer than expected due to substantial utility works that were required—far more than what was anticipated when the project began—but once it is completed, it will be able to be incorporated into Transport Canberra's network without too many issues and without any substantial changes to the timetable or network,

I will keep Ms Carrick abreast of the details of the exact opening time. Indeed, we will be making the community aware through quite detailed communications when operations are due to commence so that they can make adjustments, moving from the temporary interchange into the permanent facilities, which are futureproofed for light rail and in the interim will provide safer access to our bus services

MS CARRICK: Minister, will the Easty Street bus layover still be required once the new Woden interchange opens, given the availability of the Phillip oval layover and the large new bus depot on Athlon Drive?

MR STEEL: Yes, it will, but the extent of the use will be far more limited now that both the depot has opened and the interchange will be opening. There will not be as many buses that we will need to layover there, because there will be opportunities in other locations around Woden, but those facilities are still required permanently to support buses on the network, and of course that was factored into the design of the facilities that have been put onto Easty Street. We are looking forward to seeing the interchange open so that we can get the best use out of that asset and the expanded capacity in that interchange compared to the old interchange, which was more than 50 years old, unsafe, lacked solar access and had a range of other disadvantages.

MR EMERSON: Minister, are there plans to open the new road through the CIT West Plaza between Bradley and Bowes Streets once the new Woden interchange opens, given community concerns about cars moving through the new public space?

MR STEEL: Yes, we consulted on that very early in the design of the development of the Woden CIT project, so that has been contemplated at the point that the project is complete on the Woden interchange. Some further minor infrastructure improvements are required on the Bowes-Bradley connection, directly adjacent to Grand Central Towers, where there was a bus stop, so some further works will be required there just

before it opens to provide a new north-south connection that did not exist previously.

In the town centre, of course, this will provide better access for those with mobility issues who are wanting to get dropped off closer to access into the CIT or the Westfield shopping centre, but there are also opportunities to potentially utilise that road and have it closed off for events in the future as well. That is something the government is willing to discuss with stakeholders who may be interested in using the western plaza, including the roadway, which is very much a slow zone and has been designed as such to make sure that safety is in mind, but it does still provide access to the businesses in that area, as well as providing access to passengers with a disability.

Land—breaches in lease conditions

MS CLAY: My question is to the Minister for City and Government Services. Access Canberra have publicly stated that they are undertaking regulatory action against seven lessees for failing to meet the requirements of their Crown leases. The government has already publicly identified Richardson shops and Big Splash as two of those sites. What are the other five sites and what action has been taken on those sites?

MR SPEAKER: Mr Steel, will you take that one?

MR STEEL: I will take that question on notice. Obviously, Access Canberra acts on the delegated authority from the independent Territory Planning Authority. I will have to seek advice from the independent Territory Planning Authority and Access Canberra as to exactly whether I am able to release the block and section numbers of the sites that they are looking at in relation to ongoing investigations and compliance action. There are a range of different sites with different zoning. Yes, those two are known about: Big Splash at Macquarie; and Richardson shops is one. But there are five other sites, and I will come back to the Assembly with what information I can on those.

MS CLAY: Minister, regarding the regulatory action for Big Splash, what specific steps were taken and when between the controlled activity order of 9 September 2025 and the notice of consideration to terminate the lease issued last Friday?

MR STEEL: There is a process that is established under the Planning Act 2023. The process generally starts with an investigation by Access Canberra. They may issue a show cause notice, after which they may issue a controlled activity order. There is then a range of other options set out under the Planning Act that Access Canberra may look at, and they are currently in that later stage.

Following both a show cause notice process and a controlled activity order process, they have now issued a notice of intent to terminate a lease. They have given 15 days to the lessee to respond. We are still in that period at the moment. They will no doubt consider the response from the lessee at an appropriate time.

I would certainly refer Ms Clay to the Planning Act, because that is what Access Canberra are following. It is important that they follow the law, and that they give the proper natural justice opportunity to the lessee, and procedural fairness. If they do not do that, the decisions that Access Canberra may make in relation to that particular lease may be challenged, and that may not have an outcome that Ms Clay or indeed her

community may desire. They have to follow the procedure under the act, and that is indeed what they are doing.

MR BRADDOCK: Minister, as part of taking it on notice, could you please check whether the Gungahlin cinema site is also the subject of regulatory action and, if not, why not?

MR STEEL: I will take it on notice as to whether it is subject to the investigation. I will have to seek advice from Access Canberra about how much information I can provide in relation to that particular site in Gungahlin.

Public schools—Strathnairn School

MS TOUGH: My question is to the Minister for Education and Early Childhood. Minister, I understand that the newest ACT public school opened this week. Could you please tell the Assembly about the school?

MS BERRY: I thank Ms Tough for the question. Named after its significant location on Ngunnawal Country, Strathnairn School is the ACT's newest and 93rd public school. It opened on Monday this week. It was exciting to be part of the school's opening on Monday morning with the principal, Nicole Nicholson, and her team as they welcomed 100 new students from preschool to year 2. In future years, Strathnairn School will have capacity for up to 780 students in preschool to year 6. Information about 2027 enrolments at the school will be available when enrolments open in May this year.

Students and staff currently have access to brand-new, state-of-the-art spaces for preschool, junior school learning, outdoor play, a library and administration. The additional indoor and outdoor learning spaces, canteen and school hall are expected to be ready during the second half of 2026.

MS TOUGH: Minister, could you please tell the Assembly about the design of the school?

MS BERRY: I thank Ms Tough for the supplementary. Strathnairn School is located in the suburb of Strathnairn. The suburb is bound the Murrumbidgee River and Ginninderra Creek, making it a region of vital cultural significance. The school has been designed with consideration of the nearby reserves, as well as being environmentally sustainable as part of the Ginninderry development. Comprehensive planning has ensured the school is conveniently located, well-designed, inclusive, sustainable, safe and able to meet the needs of the enrolments for that area. Consistent with the ACT government's commitment to take action on climate change, the design includes sustainable materials and a solar-power generation system, and it has a five-star Green Star rating.

MR WERNER-GIBBINGS: Minister, will there be an early childhood centre and an outside-of-school-hours service on the school grounds?

MS BERRY: I thank Mr Werner-Gibbings for that supplementary. Yes, there will be an early childhood education and care centre and out-of-school-hours care on the school grounds, and the YMCA will be operating both of them. The early childhood centre

will be licenced for up to 130 children per day. Children from birth to five years of age will be attending in the coming months. In the next couple of weeks, the YMCA will begin providing before- and after-school care. Families can make bookings through the YMCA Canberra website or through contacting the school directly. Outside-of-school-hours care will be from 7 am to 9 am and 3 pm to 6 pm, and vacation care will also be available during school holidays.

Sport and recreation—sports fields

MR MILLIGAN: My question is to the Minister for Sport and Recreation. Minister, an article in the *Canberra Times* at the end of last year confirmed that certain parts of Canberra, particularly Gungahlin and Molonglo, do not have their fair share of sporting fields relative to their population size. Minister, how does the government identify future gaps and shortages in playing fields across Canberra?

MS BERRY: I did not catch the first part of that question—because I was pressing buttons by accident—but I will give it a crack anyway. The ACT government is working towards making sure that we have suitable and enough playing facilities across the ACT. In my ministerial statement this morning, I talked about the number of new sports fields and sports facilities across the ACT as part of the ACT government's election commitments, including the Stromlo playing fields, the Throsby playing fields, the Taylor playing fields and upgrades or expansions to Basketball ACT's stadium in Belconnen.

I am constantly working with all sports groups to understand where there are better ways that we can make sure that there is good use of our existing sports facilities equally across the city but also understanding ways that that could be expanded by including training or matchplay lighting at those facilities. We have also piloted partially turning on sports fields that had previously been turned off as a result of the millennial drought in the 2000s. We have successfully partially turned on junior training Melba-Copeland sports fields. The Canberra High School sports field has also been partially turned on, and we are investigating other dryland ovals that could be assisting in that space as well as increasing lighting opportunities across the ACT.

MR MILLIGAN: Minister, does the government have a target ratio for sporting fields to population?

MS BERRY: I think there is going to be a lot of work coming out of a motion later on today, Mr Milligan, that might bring a whole lot of information together that I will be able to provide to the Assembly and the community going forward. The government's work involves engaging with the sports communities themselves and understanding their growth in participation across the various sites and clubs and then working with them to ensure that that growth can be managed on existing sites or where we might need to increase and improve other facilities.

MR COCKS: Minister, what is the government's current plan to fix the shortage of playing fields, noting for your benefit—given that you were distracted at the start of the question—that an article in the *Canberra Times* at the end of last year confirmed that certain parts of Canberra, particularly Gungahlin and Molonglo, do not have a fair share of sporting fields relative to population size and that Gungahlin and Molonglo will still

be underserviced even after the completion of the Taylor, Throsby and Stromlo playing fields?

MS BERRY: I cannot recall that article. I think one of the journos wandered out to some of the fields and counted them all up. They are all available online; so he did not need to do that.

Mr Parton: Dedication.

MS BERRY: Not getting enough clicks on his stories. Again, I am working with the sports clubs and communities. In fact, I am holding a joint round table with the sort of top nine sports clubs around the ACT.

Mr Cocks: A round table always fixes it.

MS BERRY: Well, if I wasn't talking to them you would be upset. I am talking to them and listening to them about what their needs and priorities are in addition, to building the new fields at Stromlo, Taylor and Throsby and also looking at ways that we can include lighting that extends the period of time that sports can play on our sports fields.

Commissioner for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children and Young People

MR PARTON: My question is to the Minister for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs. Minister, last week the *Canberra Times* reported on the resignation of the first Commissioner for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children and Young People, Vanessa Turnbull-Roberts, less than halfway through her five year term. The *Canberra Times* goes on to state that your office was made aware of issues that senior members of the First Nations community had with the commissioner, specifically her “persistent absenteeism” and staff turnover in the office. Minister, how much has the establishment and operation of the commissioner’s office cost ACT taxpayers to date?

MS ORR: The budget for the office is outlined in the budget papers. Mr Parton is welcome to go read those and have a look to get the answer to his question. It is printed. They are there. It has been put out in every budget paper as to the cost of the office. It has not been hidden.

MR PARTON: Minister, for that rather large figure, what practical and tangible outcomes—can you list the practical and tangible outcomes—that have been achieved by the commissioner and that office in those two years?

MS ORR: The commissioner and the commissioner’s office is required to provide an annual statement of the work that they have been doing over a 12 month period. The former commissioner has provided those statements and they are publicly available and have been considered through things such as annual reports and processes.

MS BARRY: Minister, when were concerns about the commissioner raised with you and what action did you take?

MS ORR: Regarding concerns with the commissioner, certainly I received feedback

for a number of decisions that are under my portfolio jurisdiction, including this particular one where concerns were raised with the community. Through those concerns coming through, the former commissioner was working with the community to address those concerns and looking at what could be done.

What I would like to point out though is that the former commissioner, Vanessa Turnbull-Roberts, resigned for personal reasons and I would like to acknowledge the work that she did do in the time that she was in the role and certainly the important role she has been in, having been the inaugural commissioner in this territory. It is a role that was called for by the community. It is something that is very much supported by the community and it is a role that I think we will continue to see go from strength to strength. I am not going to sit here and discuss the personal circumstances of any of the officials that report to me, including Ms Turnbull-Roberts. I wish her well in her next endeavours.

The Acting Commissioner, Barbara Causon has been appointed and will continue to act in the role. We are currently in the process of filling the role permanently. The office is fully staffed. It is doing a lot of work and I am certainly receiving positive feedback from the community about this role and how it is continuing to progress and develop.

Mr Cocks: Point of order. I am sorry to do it, but under 118AA, the question was very simply a when question. There was not a timeframe mentioned in the minister's response. It would be useful to get an actual answer to the question.

MR SPEAKER: Yes, I will uphold that one. The question was specific about when you received any concerns and what action you took. I did not hear a response to that in your answer Minister, so if you could respond to the 118AA that would be appreciated.

Mr Barr: Mr Speaker, I think we are 10 per cent more efficient than we were yesterday! We will take that as a productivity benefit for this place, and I ask that all further questions be placed on the notice paper.