



QUESTION TIME
OF THE
LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY
FOR THE
AUSTRALIAN CAPITAL TERRITORY

HANSARD

Edited proof transcript

Tuesday, 6 February 2024

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Government—taxation

MS LEE: My question is for the Chief Minister in his capacity as Treasurer. Chief Minister, I refer to media reporting last week where you admitted once again that you are unlikely to deliver a surplus this year, and that revenue from payroll tax has slumped. Chief Minister, how much more will you be taxing Canberrans through increased rates and charges to cover this significant shortfall in the budget?

MR BARR: The government never intended to deliver a surplus in this fiscal year. It would not be economically appropriate given some of the cost-of-living pressures households are facing. Ms Lee, of course, does know that it is not for me to make policy announcements in response to questions in question time. The government's position on stage 3 tax reform is that rates are increased by 3.75 per cent per annum. That is below inflation.

MS LEE: Chief Minister, how much more interest on your ever-increasing debt will Canberrans have to pay?

MR BARR: I am pleased that inflation appears to have peaked. It is now falling at a rate faster than the Reserve Bank anticipated. The bond markets are now pricing in two interest rate reductions in calendar year 2024. Some columnists are predicting the first could occur early in the second half of this calendar year. It is anticipated the cost of borrowing will fall in the medium term as a result of inflation being brought under control. Therefore, the Reserve Bank will be in a position to normalise the official cash rate, which will then have flow on implications; I note, for example, that the 10-year commonwealth bond rate in recent times has dropped below four per cent.

MR CAIN: Chief Minister, will you be upfront with Canberrans today and tell them what will be the “bigger than expected deficit” for 2023-2024?

MR BARR: The deficit for 2023-24 will be known at the conclusion of the financial year, as part of the government's audited statements. There are many months to go yet in this financial year, Mr Cain, so I cannot put a figure on that now ahead of events transpiring. What normally happens is that, following the commonwealth budget in May, they bring forward a range of grants to states and territories, and that often significantly improves the budget position for the current fiscal year. Time will tell on that question, but it is clear that the GST pool is smaller and payroll tax has been impacted. But, on the positive side, we are seeing other own-source revenue lines performing quite strongly.

Taxation—general practice clinics

MS LEE: My question is to the Chief Minister and is in relation to the GP payroll tax. Chief Minister, freedom of information documents reveal that the director of general practice in ACT Health advised the ACT Revenue Office in response to your policy of tying bulk-billing rates to an amnesty for the GP payroll tax that it would be “both unwise and unachievable”.

Chief Minister, why did you ignore the director of general practice’s advice that the tying of bulk-billing rates to an amnesty was “unachievable”?

MR BARR: There are GP practices who are taking advantage of this, and I was pleased to see that the rate of bulk-billing has increased in the territory. Those opposite did not believe that was possible, but it has occurred. I encourage the commonwealth government to take a further step as part of strengthening Medicare to further incentivise bulk-billing, particularly for children and seniors.

MS LEE: Chief Minister, why did you attack hardworking GPs when your own officials said that this would be “unwise and unachievable”?

MR BARR: I did not attack GPs. What I sought to do was to defend the integrity of the tax system and put the emphasis where it should be, which is that the commonwealth government is responsible for the Medicare system. The commonwealth government made an excellent decision—after 10 years of neglect by your colleagues, Ms Lee, of the Medicare system—to triple the bulk-billing rebate incentive. What that did was lift the rate of bulk-billing in the ACT. I am calling on the commonwealth to take the next step and further incentivise bulk-billing, particularly for children and seniors.

MS CASTLEY: Chief Minister, why did you ignore the advice from the director of general practice to consider an amnesty until June 2025?

MR BARR: We provided an amnesty until 2023 and a pathway to encourage an increase in bulk-billing, and we are starting to see bulk-billing increase in the territory. I know those opposite have no interest in that happening. Their political party put in place policies for a decade that saw the rate of bulk-billing fall. We are about increasing bulk-billing.

Ms Lee: Madam Speaker, on a point of order: standing order 117 clearly articulates that question time is not for arguments. Can you ask that the Chief Minister be direct in terms of answering the question that was asked, which was very, very clear.

MADAM SPEAKER: The Chief Minister did respond. The question was about advice that was provided to him. Chief Minister, you have time left if you have anything further to add.

MR BARR: I have concluded my answer, Madam Speaker.

Taxation—general practice clinics

MS CASTLEY: Madam Speaker, my question is to the Chief Minister, and is in relation to GP payroll tax. Chief Minister, you said in the Assembly last year, whilst justifying your policy to tie an amnesty with bulk-billing rates, that you have listened to the public policy experts and you have provided a very strong incentive to get bulk-billing above 65 per cent. Chief Minister, freedom of information documents reveal that the Deputy Under Treasurer admitted, in relation to the proposal, that bulk-billing would increase: “This is a long stretch. It might do so at the margin, but

only if the practice was close to the 65 per cent mark already.” Chief Minister, who is right—you or your Deputy Under Treasurer?

MR BARR: The government’s policies, combined with the federal government’s policies, have seen bulk-billing increase, which kind of undercuts the argument put by the Deputy Leader of the Opposition.

MS CASTLEY: I have a supplementary question. Chief Minister, who were the public policy experts you were listening to, given we now know that you ignored the Health Directorate and Treasury in relation to tying an amnesty to bulk-billing rates?

MR BARR: The Under Treasurer of the ACT and, indeed, the heads of treasuries around the states and territories. This issue was discussed at the board of treasurers. All states and territories put forward their views and had a discussion on this matter.

MR COCKS: Chief Minister, did you listen to anyone who did not agree with your own opinion, given you ignored advice from GPs, the AMA, the RACGP, the federal health minister, the director of general practice and your own Treasury officials.

MR BARR: I listened to the most important advice—that being the desire of the community to see bulk-billing increase and to put in place an incentive that supported that. And the outcomes, combined with what the federal government has done—and I encourage them to do more—has seen bulk-billing to lift. Those opposite, and their party, presided over a decade of decline in bulk-billing. Medicare is a federal responsibility.

Ms Lee: I have a point of order. The Chief Minister continues to do what I know he wants to get to, because he wants to deflect from the question. But it is very clear, under the standing orders, about how you answer the question. It does not get into arguments.

Ms Berry: On the point of order, Madam Speaker, I think the Chief Minister answered in the first sentence, part of the question, and then he continued to answer and discuss the issue.

MADAM SPEAKER: I remind members that I cannot direct a member in how they answer. The question was around who he spoke to and listened to. The Chief Minister has replied to that, and I think the rest of the narrative is in the policy context of GP payroll tax.

Education—support

MS ORR: My question is to the Minister for Education. Minister, with students heading back to school, what cost-of-living relief is the ACT government providing for families?

MS BERRY: I thank Ms Orr for her question. The ACT government is delivering targeted cost of living relief to Canberrans who need it most, and this includes the ACT Labor election commitment in 2020 to establish a \$12-million Future of Education Equity Fund. This is the third year that families have been able to access

the education equity fund. The fund helps low-income families with the cost of education expenses, such as uniforms, stationery, excursions, camps, music lessons as well as sports equipment.

Education should be a great equaliser, but we know that children and families start their education from an unequal place. Eligible families can access payments of \$400 for preschool students, \$500 for primary school students and \$750 for high school and college students.

In 2023, Madam Speaker, the fund supported more than 5,000 students, with more than \$2.9 million distributed to families who needed it. 2024 applications for the fund opened on 17 January this year, and since 30 January we have had over 1,500 applications to access the fund.

Low-income families, families who are facing financial difficulty, from both public and non-government schools are eligible to access this assistance. Families can check out more about the fund and access to the fund from the Education Directorate website for more information.

MS ORR: Minister, what other education supports does the ACT government offer to families?

MS BERRY: When equity is improved in education, outcomes improve for all students. ACT Labor gets this. It is why the ACT government is continuing to invest in equitable access to technology for all ACT public school students. In 2018, free Chromebooks were provided to ACT public school students in years 7 to 12. Last week, more than 4,400 ACT public senior secondary students received their new Chromebooks.

The ACT government also recognises that the first few years of a child's life are their brain-building years. The cost of early learning should not prevent families from giving their child a great, equal chance at a good start in life. That is why the ACT government is now delivering 300 hours of free preschool to three-year-olds across the ACT. Not only is this great for kids; it saves the average family around \$1,329.

Do not forget that we are also continuing to provide free period products and other hygiene products to students across our public school system.

DR PATERSON: Minister, how is the ACT government ensuring our public education system continues to meet the needs of our growing city?

MS BERRY: I thank Dr Paterson for her supplementary. The ACT government is continuing to invest heavily in public school infrastructure across the ACT. In 2024, the ACT's newest public school, Shirley Smith High School in Kenny, opened its doors for the first time, welcoming 81 year 7 students. The school is all-electric, consistent with the ACT government's commitment to action on climate change. It has fantastic facilities, with priority use for the school community but they also more broadly for the community to use outside of school hours.

The ACT government is also building a new high school in north Gungahlin and a

second college in Gungahlin. We are also building new schools in Whitlam and Strathnairn. We are expanding and modernising Telopea Park School, Majura Primary School, Narrabundah College and Garran Primary School.

These major projects are in addition to the ongoing program of maintenance and upgrades across the ACT public school system. This includes the ACT government's \$99-million public school infrastructure renewal program, which in 2023-24 sees funding allocated to 51 projects across 37 schools.

Visitors

MADAM SPEAKER: Members, I draw your attention to the presence in the chamber and the gallery of the delegation from our twin parliament, the members from Kiribati. They are being led by the Chair of the Business Committee.

On behalf of all members here, warmest welcome to the ACT Legislative Assembly and to our wonderful community of Canberra as well. Welcome.

Members: Hear, hear.

Questions without notice Thoroughbred Park—development

MS CLAY: My question is to the Minister for Planning. Minister, you recently announced that you are currently in discussions with the Canberra Racing Club about the redevelopment of Thoroughbred Park. Can you confirm that the Canberra Racing Club has applied to the planning authority for a major amendment to the Territory Plan for this?

MR STEEL: I thank Ms Clay for her question. No, I cannot confirm that. The ACT government is aware that the owners of Thoroughbred Park and the Canberra Racing Club are considering a proposal that retains the race track in its current location, along with modernisation and consolidation of facilities and diversification of underutilised land. Of course, Thoroughbred Park is included within the Inner North and City draft district strategy and is identified as a change area and a key site. Such a proposal would require amendment to the Territory Plan to rezone the land or part of it. A variation to the crown lease would also be required. I understand that, to date, the CRC has not submitted an application to amend the Territory Plan to the territory's planning authority.

MS CLAY: Minister, in discussions with the Canberra Racing Club, have they raised public housing for the site?

MR STEEL: I am not aware of a specific proposal at this point in time for the whole site or in relation to public housing, but I do understand that ACT government officials are starting to have discussions with the Racing Club about their proposal, and I look forward to hearing more about the plans as they develop. Those would, of course, be required to be put on notification and to have consultation with the community as part of any process in the future.

MR BRADDOCK: Does the ACT government support establishing public housing on the site?

MR STEEL: I thank the member for his question. As he is aware, whilst we do not have specific inclusionary zoning requirements, there are requirements around making sure that we have 15 per cent affordable housing in these types of developments, so we will be certainly looking at what opportunities there are to provide more affordable housing—potentially public housing as well—as part of any development. Of course, there is further detail in the *Draft district strategy - Inner North and City* about the opportunity that could be provided on this site, in terms of providing more higher-density residential housing.

ACT Health—Digital Health Record system

MS CASTLEY: My question is to the Minister for Health. Freedom of information documents show that 231 patient referrals from clinicians did not go through to the Digital Health Record and were lost and undetected for up to 10 months. A review found that of the 231 referrals, eight of these were high risk referrals which needed immediate clinical review and triaging. Sadly, two of these referrals were for patients who have subsequently died or were put on palliative care.

Minister, can you reassure Canberrans that none of the patients' conditions deteriorated over the 10 months due to the referrals having been lost in the problem-plagued Digital Health Record system?

MS STEPHEN-SMITH: I categorically reject Ms Castley's description of the Digital Health Record. The reality is that this system has a lot of checks and balances in place, which is why this issue was identified. It needs to be clear: the 231 referrals, while a problem, were identified and have been addressed, and some of these issues did need to be escalated. I have no information that the outcomes for individuals who have passed away or were on palliative care were related to the referrals that were not received. The processes and the systems that were replaced by the Digital Health Record were far from perfect, and what the Digital Health Record is enabling is for the system to continue to improve and for these things to be identified in a systemic way.

As Ms Castley would be aware from the freedom of information documents, there was a thorough investigation of this matter, and a very, very tiny proportion of these were required to be escalated and addressed. I have received no further advice that these matters have resulted in poor clinical outcomes. I will go back and ask again, just to double-check, and if that information is different, I will advise Ms Castley of that.

MS CASTLEY: Minister, have all the 231 patients been advised that their referrals were lost for 10 months, and if not, why not?

MS STEPHEN-SMITH: The usual processes were followed in relation to this matter and following up these processes. Those processes are outlined in the documents that Ms Castley has received under FOI.

MR COCKS: Minister, is it the true that the IT system used for referrals, and which cost taxpayers \$3.7 million, was in use for just 436 days before being decommissioned and written off?

MS STEPHEN-SMITH: There was advice in response to a question on notice in relation to this matter. The way that Mr Cocks has, again, put this in the public domain is absolutely incorrect. I would refer him back to the question on notice response, which talks about what happened with this system. Yes, it was in place for a period of time, did its job and then was subsequently replaced; so part of that cost was written off. That process was well described in the question on notice and is not in any way being accurately represented by Mr Cocks in this place.

Housing ACT—maintenance

MR PARTON: My question is to the Minister for Housing and Suburban Development. Minister, recent RoGS data has once again highlighted that almost one in four public housing dwellings have structural problems, which technically classifies them as being “not of an acceptable standard.” Minister, what do you say to the thousands of tenants living in unacceptable properties given Housing ACT is supposed to be a model landlord?

MS BERRY: As Mr Parton will know, the ACT government has made significant investment in growing and renewing our public housing to ensure that it meets the needs of our tenants of today, and also tenants into the future, ensuring they are at least class c adaptable, or gold where possible, to ensure they are accessible to all public housing—

Opposition members interjecting—

MADAM SPEAKER: Ms Berry I would just concentrate on your response.

MS BERRY: No. It is an important issue and I thank Mr Parton for raising it but giggling about it—I do not think is the appropriate response from the Leader of the Opposition. It is important that we make sure that public housing tenants have exactly the same kind of housing that every other person enjoys in this community, which is why the ACT government invested heavily into renewing our public housing. At the end of our program, we will have renewed 20 per cent of public housing in the ACT. We remain the second highest per capita of public housing in the country, behind only the Northern Territory. It is our commitment to continue that legacy and ensure that as we renew public housing it meets the needs of our all tenants and is of the highest possible standard.

MR PARTON: Minister, regarding the one in four public housing dwellings with structural problems, how many of these properties have scheduled works to be completed in this financial year?

MS BERRY: I will have to take that question on notice. I do not have that kind of detail available for the Assembly today, but I am happy to provide it, if it is available. Of course, there is a continuing renewal program within public housing in the ACT. I note during the previous growth and renewal program, the Canberra Liberals stood in

front of that and stopped renewal from happening; stopped new houses from being built; and delayed the chance for tenants to be living in homes that best suited their needs. We are ploughing on with making sure that we provide homes that best meet the needs of all of our tenants, wherever they want to live in the city, because they are entitled to decent and good homes, just like the rest of us.

MS LAWDER: Minister, why are so many public housing tenants forced to live in unacceptable properties?

MS BERRY: The ACT government has invested heavily, and the Canberra Liberals know that. I have always worked very closely with the housing spokesperson, Mr Parton, on addressing issues if they are raised with me and following them up to ensure issues raised around property are resolved, whether the tenancy needs support or whether the tenant needs to move into a new home that better suits their needs. I will continue to do that because I think it something that we actually agree on. We want the best for the people in our community who do not have the same kind of chances as the rest of us to a decent and happy life, and they should have. That is why I am committed to the millions of dollars that the ACT government is funding into renewal, into new housing, and continuing to build more homes in our community that meet our needs.

Hospitals—emergency department waiting times

MS CASTLEY: My question is to the Minister for Health. Minister, three years ago you promised Canberrans that you would fix Emergency Department wait times within nine months by having 70 per cent of ED patients seen within a clinically acceptable time. RoGS data released last week shows that, rather than getting better, the wait times are getting worse. You have previously admitted that some measures to fix ED wait times have not worked. Minister, can you explain to Canberrans why year after year you continuously fail to fix ED wait times?

MS STEPHEN-SMITH: Again, Ms Castley completely demonstrates her lack of understanding of the difference between wait times and the time that people are in the Emergency Department and treated and then leave. It is absolutely not true that the RoGS data showed that wait times are getting worse. In fact, the RoGS data showed—

Ms Lee interjecting—

MS STEPHEN-SMITH: Ms Lee can laugh as much as she wants.

Ms Lawder: Madam Speaker, on a point of order: under standing order 118, answers to questions without notice shall not contain inferences or imputations, for example. If you could direct the member to not—

MADAM SPEAKER: This is a new standing order for question time that got introduced at the back end of last year. So, Members, please be aware.

MS STEPHEN-SMITH: Madam Speaker, for your information, Ms Castley is incorrect in claiming that the RoGS data showed that waiting times have got worse. In

fact, the RoGS data showed that waiting times had improved in the ACT Emergency Department system. There was a slight decline in the number of people who had been seen, treated and discharged from the Emergency Department or admitted into the hospital within four hours. These are two different things—two different pieces of data—which are constantly confused by those opposite. I am pleased to say that both pieces of data have continued to improve in the time since the end of the last financial year that RoGS was reporting on. Ms Castley would be aware that I tabled the quarter one 2022-23 performance report in this place towards the end of last year, which showed the improvement in the six months of that year, and this has continued to improve in the last six months.

MS CASTLEY: Minister, what were those measures that did not work and how much taxpayers' money did you waste on these failed measures?

MS STEPHEN-SMITH: As maybe a bit of a history lesson for Ms Castley and others who were not necessarily paying full attention at the time, at the time, I did a long interview with a journalist from the ABC and she took one snippet of it and turned it into this particular story, which was a lesson learnt for me. We had implemented a number of measures that did not have additional cost but were different ways of doing things in the Emergency Department. One of those things that did not last was what is called multidisciplinary triage. That was having a doctor as well as a nurse at the triage space. That turned out to be unsustainable and not a particularly helpful initiative.

What has helped is having a number of navigator positions—medical navigators and nurse navigators—in the Emergency Department. What has helped is standing up the Acute Medical Unit to ensure that those people with undifferentiated complex conditions can be admitted straight into the hospital without having to determine which subspeciality they would need to be admitted to. That has made a big difference in the flow through the Emergency Department. The Clinical Director of the Canberra Hospital Emergency Department, Sam Scanlan, stood up with the Chief Minister and me yesterday and talked about that as one of the initiatives.

There were a number of initiatives that have worked, that we have seen. But, as Dr Scanlan also talked about, this is a whole-of-hospital issue. So it has actually been having the whole hospital focused on ensuring timely discharge and really paying attention to and being held to account for that that has also contributed as well as the changes in the Emergency Department model of care.

MR COCKS: Minister, isn't it more accurate to say that you have failed in your commitment, given that so many indicators and experiences are getting progressively worse?

MS STEPHEN-SMITH: We are obviously going to debate this matter in detail this afternoon. But, again, Mr Cocks is categorically wrong that these things are getting worse. I have this week released the quarters 1 and 2, 2023-24 monthly performance report. This is a performance report that has been updated to provide monthly data rather than quarterly data. It was released earlier this week. It shows that, across the ACT as a whole, of the category 3 patients—urgent patients—in December 2023, 57.3 per cent were seen on time or commenced their treatment on time. That is a huge

improvement. At Canberra Hospital, which is what we normally talk about, the percentage of patients leaving the ED within four hours of presentation, by month, was 67.1 per cent in December 2023—again, an enormous improvement on the data that we saw in the RoGS.

This data is publicly available to the opposition. So they have absolutely no excuse for making these false claims that things are not improving. Our hospital staff have worked so hard in implementing new models of care with the support of the government making additional investments in our Emergency Department and across our hospitals to enable them to do this and to achieve these improvements in outcomes, and all the opposition can do is stand up and criticise them again.

Housing—homelessness

MR PARTON: Madam Speaker, my question is to the Minister for Homelessness and Housing Services. Minister, recent RoGS data shows that there has been no real improvement in homelessness data, highlighting significant government failures. The data shows that 11.5 per cent of homeless clients return to being homeless after achieving housing, and that one in four people did not have their accommodation needs met. These figures are alarming, and they have stretched OneLink and other community organisations to well beyond capacity. Minister, given the increased funding to homelessness services, why is there such a high percentage of people not having their accommodation needs met and returning to homelessness?

MS VASSAROTTI: I thank the member for the question. The RoGS data is always a really important moment for us to have a look at what is happening, not only here in the ACT, but across the nation. Certainly, we see in the RoGS data for homelessness services this year that we are seeing some positive moves. Unmet needs, particularly for homelessness services other than accommodation, was the lowest in the ACT, but we do see some challenges, particularly those that have been highlighted by the member.

One of the challenges, particularly around homelessness services, is that we are not going to solve homelessness through a specialist homelessness service system. Homelessness is actually a result of issues around affordable housing across the territory, whether it be in private rental or across the board in terms of the financial stress which we have seen, particularly because of big economic drivers such as the rising interest rates and persistently high rental rates here in the ACT.

Certainly, the significant investment in homelessness services in the ACT has made a big difference. We have seen an increase in the numbers of accommodation and other services provided to people who are experiencing homelessness, and we have been able to provide additional funding support to services that are already operating within the sector. This is a big challenge both here and across the nation, and we will continue to work to reduce homelessness, but it requires a response much bigger than within the specialist homelessness service sector.

MR PARTON: Minister, how do you personally reconcile promising a home for everyone before the last election and then failing so badly on this front?

MS VASSAROTTI: Certainly, from my perspective, from my party's perspective and from the government's perspective, we are committed to ensuring that we do provide a good, decent home for all, because we know that that is the basis of a good life. There have been some significant challenges, and I am really personally disappointed in terms of our inability to provide more public housing for people who are struggling and who sit on the wait list, particularly on the priority housing list. We have seen the wait list increase, and that is because of these broader pressures on people around housing stress and people that are experiencing homelessness.

I am actually really proud of the work that we have done, specifically within the specialist homelessness services, in terms of—as the member has noted—putting significant additional investment into the sector. But it is a sector that has seen increasing pressure. I do not resile from my ongoing vision to see homelessness as rare and non-recurring, and I will continue to work on that every day.

MS LAWDER: Minister, will you now acknowledge that your policy of a home for all has completely failed?

MS VASSAROTTI: I continue to say that my vision, and the vision of our party, is for every person to have a decent home. This is an issue that we need a multi-pronged approach to. We need significant investment, and we need to work across a whole range of areas, from planning, rental reform, direct investment into public housing and supporting our community housing providers to providing support to our specialist homelessness service.

This is a vision that I maintain and will continue to champion and work towards every single day.

Emergency services—Police, Ambulance and Clinician Early Response

MR MILLIGAN: Madam Speaker, my question is to the Chief Minister. Chief Minister, recent media reporting shows that your government has refused to expand the successful PACER teams, despite the ACT Deputy Police Commissioner saying that demand has outstripped the two current teams. Chief Minister, will you fund an expanded PACER program in the upcoming budget review?

MR BARR: Thank you, Madam Speaker. We have already announced that the budget review contains additional funding for the PACER program, and we will look forward to considering its future beyond the current fiscal year in the coming budget round.

MR MILLIGAN: Do you consider that around 40 per cent of police attendances are due to mental health issues, and that those resources could have been better utilised, considering if the PACER program could have attended those callouts instead?

MR BARR: I think the gist of the question was on the level of police-only attendance as opposed to PACER program attendance and if there could be a rebalance between the two. I think there possibly could be, and we will certainly look at that, Mr Milligan, in the context of the forthcoming budget, noting of course that the PACER response is multidisciplinary. It involves police, ambulance, and of course mental health expertise.

MR COCKS: Chief Minister, have you consulted with police, ACT Ambulance Service and mental health clinicians on the need to commit funding to expand the PACER program?

MR BARR: Yes, we obviously as a government have expanded the program, and as I say, we will consider future expansion as part of the coming and future budgets, Madam Speaker.

Education—Future of Education Equity Fund

MISS NUTTALL: My question is to the Minister for Education and Youth Affairs. Minister, the report from the inquiry into cost-of-living pressures in the ACT includes several concerns around accessibility of the Future of Education Equity Fund. Applications opened on 17 January and it takes families four weeks to receive the funds. This results in families not necessarily being able to access the funds before school starts on 31 January. Families tend to consider education expenses primarily in the lead-up to the start of the school year, so what accommodations were in place for families who needed the funds at the very start of the school year?

MS BERRY: It was ACT Labor's commitment to make sure that families who needed support got that support and to provide improved equity for those children and families who do not start school from an equal starting point. That is why we started the allocation of the fund earlier this year, which was the announcement that we made on 17 January, to ensure that families got access to funding to access the school equipment and school uniforms that they needed most. What we have found from the fund so far is that families are accessing the fund for the cost of excursions, uniforms and stationery, so Ms Nuttall is right in that people needed to access that funding prior to school starting.

Following the first couple of years of the fund being allocated, the Education Directorate worked on bringing the fund forward but also making sure that the process for applying for funding was much more streamlined, and then actually prioritising families who needed to access the funding more quickly so that they could access the supplies that they needed for school. We will continue to make sure that the fund is allocated in a way that meets the needs of families and, most importantly, that it supports those families who need it most.

MISS NUTTALL: Last year, it was reported that many families were unaware of the fund, so what measures are being taken to ensure that eligible families have the opportunity to apply this time around?

MS BERRY: We are in the third year of implementing the provision of the fund. Making sure that it is available earlier in the year was from the direct feedback that we received from the P&C council, the P&Cs across our public schools, and the Parents and Friends across the non-government school sector—making sure that it is available earlier, that it is more accessible to families who need it, and that the funds are allocated in a timely manner. That is what the Education Directorate has been implementing. As I said, we are always ready to listen about improvements that we can make to ensure that families get access to that fund when they need it.

Importantly, having that fund available for families who need it most to support their children with their education has been a priority of this government.

MS LEE: Minister, out of the 1,500 applications that were received in January this year, how many applicants have been approved and received funding?

MS BERRY: I have that detail. As I said, for some of the families who are accessing the fund, it is for stationery and uniforms. Of course, they are required at the start of the school year. Other items that families might require, such as excursions, might not be immediately required. Regarding funding that has been allocated, out of the 1,500 or so applications, 532 have been processed, with 381 applications being approved for payment. There is \$450,000 of committed funding. The average payment amount per application increased from \$1,175 in 2023 to \$1,260 in 2024. The 2024 fund closes on 29 November 2024. That ensures that families, at different times during the year, who might experience financial disadvantage can access the fund when they need it most.

Rural Fire Services—location

MR MILLIGAN: My question is to the Minister for Fire and Emergency Services. Minister, last year the Rural Fire Service was moved into temporary accommodation at the back of the Gungahlin Joint Emergency Services Centre, which I have been told is unsuitable. In the 2021-22 budget, your government committed \$8.2 million to be invested in the JESC to improve the accommodation. However, in March 2023, in response to a question on notice, you stated that the RFS would be moved to Mitchell and that a suitable site had been reviewed in 2021.

It is now February 2024. How long will the RFS have to remain in this unsuitable temporary accommodation?

MR GENTLEMAN: I thank Mr Milligan for the question. Of course, the Justice and Community Safety Directorate has been working with the ACT Rural Fire Service and SES chief officers and their volunteers throughout this process. They have established the capital works and infrastructure team and the ESA commissioner approved, back in 2023, the 100 per cent preliminary sketch plan designed for the Mitchell site following an open tender process.

Monarch Building Solutions was contracted to complete the detailed design and construction for the Mitchell facility and CWI has worked closely with Canberra Health Services and ACT Property Group to ensure site possession of the Mitchell location that is expected to occur in quarter 1 this year. Once the site possession is granted, construction will commence, with an anticipated completion time frame of quarter 4, 2024.

MR MILLIGAN: Minister, how much of the \$8.2 million budgeted two years ago has been spent on the renovations?

MR GENTLEMAN: I will have to take the detail of that on notice.

MS CASTLEY: Minister, can you guarantee that the move to Mitchell is still on the cards and going ahead?

MR GENTLEMAN: I most certainly can.

Government—skilled migration

MR BRADDOCK: My question is for the Special Minister of State.

Minister, Azadi-e Zan has been liaising with the ACT government about the Talent Beyond Boundaries program to bring skilled refugees from Afghanistan to Australia. They would then be able to obtain employment with the ACT government in roles in which we are normally experiencing skill shortages. I understand they met with parts of the ACT government in September and October last year. Can you please provide an update on discussions with the government on this program?

MR STEEL: The ACT government recognises the struggles being faced by women from Afghanistan and will continue to work with the organisation mentioned by Mr Braddock. I can confirm that both my office and also officials from Skills Canberra met with Azadi-e Zan in November to discuss the possibility of a program within the ACT government. The development of such a program does require collaboration between several government agencies and we are considering a proposal at the moment, but I do not have an announcement to make today in question time in relation to that issue. We have a strong skilled migration agenda in the ACT government, we regularly engage the commonwealth on this topic and will continue to consider this proposal.

MR BRADDOCK: Minister, what measures has the ACT government taken to ensure the mutual recognition of overseas qualifications in the areas where we need these skills?

MR STEEL: I am happy to take that on notice and draw from across government work that is being done in relation to that particular issue. We know that migrants from overseas often bring a strong skillset but it is not always recognised officially when they get here. That means the investment they have made for themselves in undertaking training or university study is not always put to use, which is a wasted effort. We do want to seek opportunities to better recognise those skills so they can be fully utilised in our labour market.

MISS NUTTALL: I do not want to ask the minister to pre-empt any policy decisions—

MADAM SPEAKER: No preamble, Miss Nuttall; to the question.

MISS NUTTALL: But I was wondering whether the minister could draw our attention to the directorates where these kinds of skills could be put to good use?

MR STEEL: We know that our skilled migrants bring a wide variety of skills that could be employed not just in the ACT government but right around the ACT, in private businesses and in our federal public service as well. The ACT government has a strong track record of supporting people who are newly arrived from overseas to obtain employment. We did that under the Jobs for Canberrans program because we

knew that particular group were suffering significant disadvantage in Australia during the pandemic. We were able to employ them in different roles to make sure they could gain meaningful employment for a period of time during that time. Of course, there are other pathways through our skilled migration program with the visas we have control over, and we are working with the commonwealth government to be able to provide opportunities to obtain a visa and work here in the ACT in a range of different occupations that are listed on the ACT Skills Needs list.

Visitor

MADAM SPEAKER: Members, I draw your attention to the presence in the gallery of Michael Moore, who was a former member here. On behalf of members, welcome back. Do not get up to any mischief, Dr Moore, in the gallery!

Questions without notice

Canberra Hospital—critical services building

DR PATERSON: My question is to the Minister for Health. Minister, as part of the mid-year budget review, you announced an exciting boost in funding to deliver more health services as part of the opening of the new Critical Services Building. Can you please provide an update on progress of the construction and preparation for opening this significant investment in health infrastructure?

MS STEPHEN-SMITH: I thank Dr Paterson for the question. Yesterday, the Chief Minister and I announced a further \$17 million investment in operational funding for the new Critical Services Building, on top of our \$122 million investment in the 2023-24 budget. The new Critical Services Building is the centrepiece of the \$660 million Canberra Hospital expansion project, delivering a state-of-the-art health facility with more treatment spaces for Canberra and the surrounding region.

By mid this year, construction on the Critical Services Building will be complete. Operating theatre pendants are now being installed, and later this month two MRI machines will be craned into the new building. The fit-out of inpatient wards is finishing, incorporating the design features consumers told us were important to them. All major building services have been installed and are progressively being commissioned in this first of its kind, all electric green star rated major hospital building. In the third quarter of this year, CHS will transition services into the new Building 5, as it is now known on campus. Canberra Health Services has been heavily focussed on finalising models of care, and a detailed operational commissioning program has been underway in the run-up to the opening of clinical services.

The \$17 million announced yesterday will further expand our health workforce to support even more services in the new building. There will be a new six-bed behavioural assessment unit in the Emergency Department, two triage corners that will enhance patient flow, more MRI services and, across the hospital, an expanded medical emergency team that will support the expanded hospital campus. It is an exciting time as we continue to transform the Canberra Hospital campus, just as the Labor government has been doing for more than the last decade.

DR PATERSON: Minister, how are the government's investments in the health

system supporting the community to better access health services and benefit from our new state-of-the-art health infrastructure?

MS STEPHEN-SMITH: The ACT government has invested more than \$2.1 billion in health infrastructure over the past decade and \$1.4 billion in additional investments into our public health system and services in this term of government. The Barr Labor government has a comprehensive plan for our public health services that will deliver better health infrastructure for our growing city and ensure patients can access the right care in the right place at the right time.

Of course, planning for the new more-than-\$1-billion northside hospital is well underway, with work in 2024 focussing on detailed planning and design. This will be supported and informed by ongoing engagement with the community, clinicians, consumers and key stakeholders. The nation-leading engagement with consumers on the Canberra Hospital expansion project resulted in changes to the Australasian Health Facility Guidelines, and we will use this as a blueprint for consumer and carer engagement into the future.

The next stage of the Canberra Hospital Master Plan is also taking shape. Planning is underway to deliver a new pathology and clinical support building, new inpatient buildings and other critical campus infrastructure changes. We are also upgrading health facilities in our community to provide high-quality health care closer to home, with our four new health centres, the Watson Health Precinct and the Southside Hydrotherapy Pool.

We are supporting access to health care for our growing city now and into the future. We have delivered community medical imaging facilities, an expanded hospital for women and children and much more. We are currently in the process of finalising a research centre and wellbeing hub at the Canberra Region Cancer Centre to deliver a truly comprehensive cancer centre. I was there last week with Senator Gallagher, formally opening the last of the linear accelerator machines, co-funded between the ACT and commonwealth governments, demonstrating our capacity to build partnerships with commonwealth governments of all stripes—but it is even better when it is a Labor government that is committed to public health care.

MS ORR: Minister, our public health workforce are vital to delivering high-quality health services in the ACT's new health infrastructure. How are you supporting them in the government's work to deliver this extensive program?

MS STEPHEN-SMITH: I thank Ms Orr for the supplementary question. The Barr Labor government has invested in more health workers, a positive culture and state-of-the-art health infrastructure because we have listened to our health workforce. We will ensure that they have great places to work. Over this term, Labor have not only met our commitment to an additional 400 health professionals; we have gone well beyond that to bring on more than 500 doctors, nurses, midwives and allied health professionals to our public health services.

Our healthcare workers have been heavily involved in the design of the Critical Services Building. The Clinical Advisory Group and the clinical working groups were absolutely vital in defining clinical requirements. This input has ensured that we are

delivering a purpose-built facility that can provide the best possible outcomes for clinicians, patients and the wider Canberra community. The ACT's health workforce is continuing to work closely on developing the next stage of the Canberra Hospital Master Plan, our new Northside Hospital and our community based services.

Yesterday we announced a \$27 million investment in initiatives to attract and retain talented staff and recognised specialty development across nursing, midwifery and allied health. This builds on our investments over the term in wellbeing, the Health Workforce Strategy, support for students studying at our local universities and phase 1 of the nursing and midwifery ratios, to name just a few.

The Labor government is growing our health workforce, providing a great place to work and ensuring our healthcare workers remain among the best paid in the country—and I am sure we all thank them for their incredible efforts.

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