



QUESTION TIME
OF THE
LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY
FOR THE
AUSTRALIAN CAPITAL TERRITORY

HANSARD

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Wednesday, 27 May 2026

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Questions without notice

Canberra Hospital—building defects

MR PARTON: My question is to the Minister for Health. The Canberra Hospital expansion project is yet another example of an ACT government project that has blown out in both time and cost, ballooning an estimated \$160 million over budget, and eventually delivered years behind schedule. When projects are mismanaged at this scale, it inevitably raises serious questions about what corners may have been cut and what problems may now be emerging beneath the surface. Minister, have you been made aware that serious building defects have been identified in Building 5, and are you able to give any details to the Assembly on that matter?

MS STEPHEN-SMITH: I reject the premise of the Leader of the Opposition's question, as a starting point. This project was actually delivered on budget, and it was delivered in the timeframe that was set once the location had been chosen in 2018. So, it is actually a good example of where Infrastructure Canberra—which was then Major Projects Canberra—has delivered a project in collaboration with clinicians and consumers and with the expert advice of a construction partner, and delivered that project on budget and on time, despite the fact that we were in the middle of a global pandemic for most of that period, where the Canberra Liberals' alternative would have seen a great big hole in the middle of Canberra Hospital, and fewer beds throughout the pandemic.

Anyway, at risk of debating the question, I will go to Mr Parton's actual question. I am aware that, on opening, there were some challenges in relation to some of the drainage inside the Canberra Hospital expansion and Building 5. There were various reasons identified for some of those challenges, and some rectification work was undertaken by the contractor during the period where rectification is undertaken as part of the existing contract.

I know that there have been some issues raised in relation to the helipad. Some of those issues have been quite misrepresented. But there was some work done in relation to the helipad in response to some feedback from the helicopter operators. There are other minor things that always occur when a brand-new building is opened.

MR PARTON: Minister, are you able to provide a list of the defects that have been identified in the critical services building since completion? What has the contractor/builder been required to fix?

MS STEPHEN-SMITH: I can take on notice a list of all the defects. However, the reason a defect period exists in a construction contract is because there is a recognition that constructing these types of buildings is a very complex process—particularly for something like a critical services building at a hospital.

These are very complex things to build and it is not always the case that—where clinicians, consumers and experts have been closely involved in design, there is also a difference between looking at the design—even walking through those rooms in a prototype shed of the type that we had—is sometimes different from the way that they are going to be built.

So, in terms of actual defects, I will certainly take the question on notice and be happy to come back to Mr Parton in relation to this standard part of a construction process.

MRS MORRIS: Minister, what was the contracted defect liability period with the builder? Have building defects arisen outside of this period?

MS STEPHEN-SMITH: I will take the question on notice, Mr Speaker. Thank you.

Crime—Civic

MRS MORRIS: My question is to the Minister for Police, Fire and Emergency Services. In 2023 you said that the success of Canberra's night-time economy was intrinsically linked to public safety. But business owners and industry witnesses have now told the night-time economy inquiry that families, women and people on their own feel less safe in the city, that police are under resourced, that walking through parts of the city is scary and that people are being deterred from coming to places like Garima Place and Civic. The government's own City Renewal Authority audit recorded hundreds of antisocial behaviour incidents which caused people to leave or avoid public spaces.

Minister, do you maintain that the success of Canberra's night-time economy is intrinsically linked to public safety, and if so, why has your government allowed such dangerous and antisocial behaviour to get so out of control?

DR PATERSON: I do continue to say that the success of the night-time economy is linked to public safety, and that is why I am very proud to say that we have one of the safest communities in Australia. Our crime rates have been going down year on year for the past decade.

I spoke to the Chief Police Officer yesterday and looked at the crime rates and the apprehensions and incidents within the Civic centre and Braddon areas, and this year those rates have decreased from the previous year. I think that it is absolutely to do with ACT Policing's amazing work. They have run multiple operations through our city centre.

Mr Parton interjecting—

DR PATERSON: Mr Parton is butting in to suggest that I talk about our significant investment in ACT Policing numbers—we are at over \$100 million in more ACT police. But, again, public safety is broader than police, and so there has been significant work by the City Renewal Authority—fantastic place-making work.

Our venues in the city centre do amazing things, but the Canberra Liberals and their fearmongering on this are absolutely atrocious.

Opposition members interjecting—

DR PATERSON: If they would actually look at the data about public perceptions of safety, the reporting on government services data nationally suggests that in the ACT, at home at night, walking alone during the day and walking alone at night, ACT

residents report the highest rates of perceptions of safety.

MRS MORRIS: Minister, when will your government admit that Labor's decade-long campaign of underinvestment in local policing has made our city less safe?

DR PATERSON: Our city is not less safe. Our city is more safe than ever. And that is testament to the community services that work in our city day in, day out. It is testament to the businesses that work in the city. It is testament to the City Renewal Authority and the level of investment there. It is testament to our ACT police. This is a whole-of-community initiative, and we do have a very safe city centre. It is a centre that is under construction at the moment, and I definitely acknowledge the impact on hospitality and retail businesses in the city centre, but the benefits of the construction there will benefit both the broader Canberra community and those businesses for generations to come.

MR MILLIGAN: Minister, are small business owners and industry groups wrong to publicly warn about safety concerns in Civic?

DR PATERSON: I have met with city groups. I have met with city retailers. We set up multiple different action groups and a taskforce over the past year. Those groups have been working with businesses in the city centre, with government, and so there has been sustained conversations and sustained actions by the government through the city centre and in—

Mr Parton: A point of order on relevance. The question was very specific from Mr Milligan: are the business owners and industry groups wrong to publicly warn about safety concerns in Civic? I do not believe that the minister is being relevant to that question.

MR SPEAKER: She has not explicitly answered it perhaps in the way you might like, but she has certainly been relevant to the issue at hand. She has got some time to go, and she may have further to add. But she is certainly on topic, Mr Parton.

DR PATERSON: We will absolutely continue to work with businesses in our city centre. We will definitely continue to hear any concerns that they have. ACT police are incredibly responsive if there are issues. I think one point that I would like to make, and this is in direct response to some of the work that has been going on, is that ACT police are working with businesses in Garema Place to look to establish a more permanent presence there. So ACT police have listened. The government has listened. We have responded. The crime rates and the apprehensions and incidents within the city centre have reduced.

Mr Parton: A point of order under 118AA: the minister was asked to tell us whether industry groups and business owners were wrong to publicly warn about safety concerns in Civic, and at no point has she addressed that part of the question.

MR SPEAKER: I think she was responsive, Mr Parton. I think that she has not explicitly answered it the way you might want her to, but she was relevant to the issue at hand and she did respond to the question. I accept that she has not perhaps been as explicit and fulsome as you might like, but I think she was consistent with standing

orders, so there is no point of order. Next question.

Mr Parton: Thank you, Mr Speaker.

MR SPEAKER: Thank you, Mr Parton.

Public schools—performance

MS LEE: My question is to the Minister for Education and Early Childhood.

Minister, the independent ACT Public School System Resourcing Review found—and I quote:

Although ACT student achievement is often high on raw measures, it compares less favourably with national averages once parental education and socio-economic advantage is considered. Further, even more advantaged ACT students often underperform in NAPLAN against peers of a similar background in NSW and Victoria.

Minister, do you agree with these findings by the independent panel?

MS BERRY: I thank Ms Lee for her continued interest in and support for public education in the ACT. I agree with the work that the expert panel did on reviewing our public school system. It went deep under the bonnet of our public school system to understand where changes need to happen and what reforms need to happen to improve the outcomes for all children. I agree that there is more work to be done, which is why I commissioned the review; it is why the ACT government has agreed to 18 of the 25 recommendations and agreed in principle to seven more. I look forward to implementing those recommendations.

MS LEE: Minister, why have you repeatedly claimed that the ACT has a high-performing education system when this independent review, which you claim that you have commissioned, shows that even our most advantaged students are underperforming compared to their peers interstate?

MS BERRY: The chair of the independent review also said that the ACT public school system is one of the best public school systems in the country, which, of course, I agree with. But we always want to make sure that we improve and do better, so that every student has that same chance to have a great education. I have been very happy to have that work done by the independent review panel and by Professor Ken Smith, in providing advice to the ACT on the way forward.

Ms Lee: A point of order, Mr Speaker. The question that I asked the minister was very straightforward. She is talking at length in general about the actual review and the panel, but she has not actually answered the question directly. So it goes to relevance.

MR SPEAKER: Do you want to remind me of what the specific question was that you asked?

Ms Lee: The specific question was that she has repeatedly claimed, and made a claim, that the ACT is best performing, when this independent review has clearly contradicted

that.

MR SPEAKER: In answer to that, she said at the outset that the review had said that it is a well-performing education system. I have not looked at the review to confirm that, but she has been relevant in responding in that way.

MS BARRY: Minister, isn't it true that you ignored the warning signs, dismissed concerns from teachers and parents, and only acted when you were forced to?

MS BERRY: Absolutely not. The review showed that the government is listening, and the review panel did listen to all the stakeholders in this place. This will build on the 10 years of a progressive government supporting and funding its public school system, including providing free Chromebooks, free lunches, the Future of Education Equity Fund and Stronger Foundations, all backed in by the Future of Education Strategy, and now building on a new journey for our public school system and our community, breaking down the autonomy and ensuring that there is consistency and equity across the whole of our public school education system.

Mr Cocks: A point of order under 118AA. I note that the minister has responded based on the actions of the independent review panel, whereas the question itself was: "Isn't it true that you ignored the warning signs, dismissed concerns from teachers and parents, and only acted when you were forced to?"

MR SPEAKER: You asked the question: is it true that you ignored the warning signs? She said, "Absolutely not." So she was explicit in answering the question. You may disagree with her answer, but I think she has been relevant and responsive.

Public schools—occupational violence

MS LEE: My question is to the Minister for Education and Early Childhood. Minister, the independent ACT Public School System Resourcing Review said:

Also concerning to the Panel were reports from schools and stakeholders alike that the current system is not improving safety for staff or students. Incident reports continue to increase, and LSAs assigned to support student's one-to-one were described to the Panel at times as 'bodyguards' or 'punching bags.'

Minister, how could you preside over a system where staff assigned to support students are being described at times as "bodyguards" or "punching bags"?

MS BERRY: I thank Ms Lee for her question and concern for staff and students within our public education system. I would say that education never stays the same. There are significant changes within our school system have become more apparent, particularly after COVID, where the complexity of students' needs have increased, and schools have responded appropriately. However, the review and the expert panel have provided recommendations that go towards providing better support to schools to manage these kinds of situations through a consistent and more equitable approach. Those are the recommendations that the government has agreed to, and I look forward to implementing them.

MS LEE: Minister, how long have you been aware that staff in your education system feel unsafe at work?

MS BERRY: I have presided over the education portfolio for 10 years, and, after COVID, incidents of violence in our schools increased. Complexity around student behaviour has changed. The need has changed. Complexity and behaviour of our school community have also put some members of our school community at risk. That is not particularly just an education issue; that is a cultural and societal issue that education is part of. We have responded to that with a variety of work and approaches, working closely with teachers, school staff and their unions to implement change. Clearly, we need to do more, and that is what this review has described for us. I take the review recommendations seriously and, as I said, I look forward to working with all stakeholders of our public school system to implement those recommendations.

MR CAIN: Minister, isn't this evidence of a complete failure of your duty of care as education minister?

MS BERRY: No, it is not. It is the education minister listening, implementing a review and then agreeing with the recommendations that the expert panel has provided.

Planning and development—urban growth boundary—Western Edge

MS CLAY: My question is to the Minister for Planning and Sustainable Development. In April last year, this Assembly passed my motion calling for the government to protect the western edge by setting an urban growth boundary this term. Last week I had the privilege of attending a screening of the newly released documentary *On the edge*, produced with the support of the Conservation Council, and a panel discussion which included Ngunnawal emerging elder Selina Walker, who talked about the importance of building housing and the importance of protecting country and First Nations heritage. Minister, how will First Nations custodians be included when deciding where to set the urban growth boundary?

MR STEEL: I thank the member for her question. The question also cuts across Minister Orr's portfolio. Minister Orr is leading the work on developing a nature conservation strategy and a landscape plan, which will address the issue of the establishment of an urban growth boundary for the ACT.

The City and Environment Directorate, of course, has a range of different mechanisms to consult with First Nations people in the ACT around planning and environment issues through the Caring for Country process. We will no doubt be engaging through that process with our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community and more broadly with the community here in Canberra on the development of these plans, which will of course directly affect their interests, and hopefully protect not only the environmental interests of our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community but also their cultural interests.

I am sure the Heritage Council will also be involved. Of course, they have Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander representation. There will be the opportunity for a range of community organisations to put themselves forward to participate in the process of engagement that the government will be undertaking in the development of a landscape

plan for the ACT that proactively protects areas of environmental value in the territory in addition to the existing protections that are currently in place through our heritage system for cultural values as well.

MS CLAY: Minister, who is primarily responsible for engaging with First Nations custodians and how will they make sure that the ACT government is truly listening and incorporating First Nations voices and not just presenting a line on a map as a consultation afterthought?

MS ORR: I will jump on this one and have my turn, because it is something that I am working with Minister Steel on in partnership—very much so. There are a number of things that Ms Clay has gone to in her questions. There are the studies that Minister Steel is undertaking looking at environmental values and how those would go for conservation under our environmental laws. With the urban growth boundary, we have made the policy announcement that we will be having as the foundation layer of the new landscape plan critical environmental areas with critical conservation values and that that will be the basis for the urban growth boundary.

Going to Ms Clay’s question on the urban growth boundary and how that will be reflected in the landscape plan as to First Nations and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people’s care for country and want to have their landscape recognised within our work, that is something that we are very conscious of. The Government Landscape Architect is commencing in their position. One of the things I have tasked them with is reaching out to community and having a discussion with community around how they would like to see their landscapes incorporated into the work that we are doing.

Just as a bit of an anecdote and an aside, whenever I talk about the landscape plan, people usually go straight to Burley Griffin and I often say to them, “We actually had people here long before that and they had very important landscapes too, and we have an opportunity through this work through the ACT Landscape Plan to actually reconcile some of that past and make sure that it is reflected in where we go in the future.”

We are not jumping ahead to having any pre-determined outcomes, because that would be, I think, disingenuous to having a genuine conversation. We will be looking to work with a range of members of the community. *(Time expired.)*

MISS NUTTALL: Minister, which First Nations people will the government work with?

MS ORR: I will continue on from when my time ran out, because I was actually about to go to that point exactly. I was out on the weekend doing yam daisy planting and a few others bits with community and, with traditional custodian cultural advisers that we work with at the City and Environment Directorate, we were having a few chats and yarns around how we could approach this work and connect up with the Government Landscape Architect to start to inform that view. Again, its early days with this work, but I can assure the Assembly and anyone who is listening along that there is certainly a very strong intention from government to make sure that our traditional custodians and the landscapes that they value are reflected in the work that we are doing.

Public housing—maintenance

MR EMERSON: My question is to the Minister for Homes, Homelessness and New Suburbs. Eighty-four days ago the ACT Ombudsman reported they were not satisfied Housing ACT was meeting its legislative obligations in response to tenant repair and maintenance requests. A key recommendation from the report was for Housing ACT to establish frameworks to monitor, measure and report on performance for managing maintenance requests and provide assurance it is satisfying its legislative obligations, such as completing non-urgent requests for repairs and maintenance within 28 days, a recommendation which was accepted. Minister, since this report, what action has been taken to ensure non-urgent repairs are being completed within 28 days?

MS BERRY: The advice I have is that non-urgent repairs are happening in the required timeframe and I have been meeting with Housing ACT to understand better the processes to ensure that those KPIs are met. Housing ACT is always striving to meet the needs of our tenants in the appropriate timeframes. There will be some change in that space, particularly as the government moves to insource maintenance across our public housing system. I can take on notice if there is some more detail that I can provide the Assembly and I will bring it back at an appropriate time.

MR EMERSON: Minister, are you aware that there are non-urgent repairs previously raised with Housing ACT, including fixing improperly fitted fly screens and windows that do not open, that are contained in the ombudsman's report published 84 days ago that still have not been addressed?

MS BERRY: I will take that question on notice. I do get correspondence from individuals and from members in this place advocating for individuals. I am just not aware of those specific ones, whether they have been addressed yet, but I will take it on notice and investigate.

MS CARRICK: Minister, have you or your office reached out to the ombudsman for tenants details so you can contact residents to ensure all the maintenance problems raised in the report are resolved?

MS BERRY: No, I do not believe that my office has, but I will take it on notice and check if that is the case from Housing ACT.

Public schools—occupational violence

MS LEE: Mr Speaker, my question is to the minister for education. Minister in your response to the ACT public school system resourcing review you have announced an additional \$9.326 million in funding. How much of this \$9.326 million is going directly to front line staff?

MS BERRY: As Ms Lee knows because she attended a briefing in my office, that funding is not for implementation of the review recommendations to frontline staff. It is for implementing systems, getting information technology set up, ensuring that we have the appropriate supports. One of the recommendations was on the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander guidance group, making sure that is set up, so that when all those systems are in place, we can have those careful conversations, going forward, to implement the recommendations made in the review.

These recommendations are big recommendations; they are big reforms. They are the first of their kind in over 50 years for the ACT public school system. They will take time to introduce. This is not merely a tick-box exercise. It will require significant buy-in from our school communities, and a significant culture shift from both our schools and our broader community.

We need to make sure that the systems that are set up in the first instance are appropriate, and carefully consider the recommendations before we implement them.

MS LEE: Minister, how much of this \$9.326 million of funding is going to address escalating incidents of violence in our schools?

MS BERRY: I have just responded to what the \$9.326 million funding is going towards. We continue work with the education union—

Ms Lee interjecting—

MS BERRY: Ms Lee, if you would just shh for a moment, I can provide some more information.

That initial investment is to set up systems, so that we can carefully implement—working with all of our stakeholders—this significant reform that the review has recommended for our public school systems.

MR COCKS: Minister, will any of this \$9.326 million, or the systems you are talking about, actually fix the gap between what your officials say and what is actually happening in schools?

MS BERRY: I am responding to the recommendations that have been provided by the expert panel in their review work. This initial funding—which I understand is supported by both Families ACT and the Australian Education Union—is a first step towards a giant reform process in our public education system.

I am happy to work with anybody in this place who wants to see those recommendations implemented, by carefully considering them, working with our stakeholders, and seeing our public education not just be the best in the country but even better than that—and that we are providing the best opportunities for children by supporting our teachers and school principals. That is my goal. It has been my goal for the whole time I have been in this job. I look forward to implementing the recommendations as required.

Fuel security—community service providers

MR WERNER-GIBBINGS: My question is to the Minister for Disability, Carers and Community Services. Minister, how is the ACT government engaging with community service providers about fuel supply impacts on the services they provide Canberrans?

MS ORR: Thank you Mr Werner-Gibbings for your question.

Last week I did actually convene an information briefing attended by over 100 representatives of the community service sector here in the ACT. The briefing provided

an opportunity for the ACT government—our officials, both from the City and Environment Directorate and the Health and Community Services Directorate—to provide a lot of updates and take questions on the National Fuel Security Plan and the approach the ACT government is taking to securing fuel supply here in the ACT for our Canberra community, as part of the nationally coordinated approach that we are looking at.

It was also an opportunity not just for the community sector to hear about the work that is going on across government but for us to hear from the sector—certainly, we have had a number of individual representations—and to come together with the sector to start to talk about some of the impacts they are seeing, or that they are concerned about, and that they want fed into the scenario planning that we are doing in the event that we do need to progress to higher stages of the plan.

So all in all, it was a really positive discussion; and, certainly, while we continue to not see ongoing impacts to fuel supply to Australia, it is one where the collaboration will put us in good stead should we need to respond further.

MR WERNER-GIBBINGS: Minister, why is industry consultation important to the ACT government?

MS ORR: I think this is one where, with the community sector and particularly our community sector partners, we will see a lot of different impacts that sometimes go beyond the things that might initially instantly come to mind. And it is one where, again—while our fuel supply does remain stable—we need to be prepared for any future issues that arise and get that really good understanding of the day-to-day practices of the community sector, where we would see impacts, and feeding that information and detail into our scenario planning.

It will help us to be prepared, should we need to move to restrictions or fuel rationing, and it is also continuing to build that relationship between the sector and between the government so that we have those open lines of communication, should we need to work quite quickly.

MS TOUGH: Minister, following the community information briefing, how will the government communicate with the community sector if circumstances change?

MS ORR: This was one of the outcomes of the briefing that we had. We provided more information on how you can contact our new procurement and grants hub, which we have stood up within the HCS Directorate to be that initial point of contact and that constant point of contact for our community sector—so raising awareness of that and letting people know that they can get in contact with that area as an initial point and one point of contact with government. There are also contact points with contract managers. And also, working with our peak sector bodies, we had presentations, as well, during the briefing, from ACTCOSS and from National Disability Services raising that there are places that you go and different contact points that you can go to get information.

We are also looking at how we can continue to have that joined-up response, particularly working with the peaks, and keeping that regular information communication coming in. We will also look to do further updates and information as

required through our newsletters. And, certainly, if circumstances change significantly, we would look to moving to further direct communication and information briefings on a more regular basis.

Deputy Chief Minister—conduct

MS LEE: My question is to the Chief Minister. Chief Minister, for years your education minister ignored the evidence of experts, teachers and families about declining literacy and numeracy outcomes in ACT government schools and only acted after the Canberra Liberals forced an independent review. We now have the independent ACT Public School System Resourcing Review, which has revealed that this minister has presided over deep and systemic failures within the ACT education system. Chief Minister, given that the same education minister is also embroiled in a current Integrity Commission investigation into serious corruption allegations, what does it take for you to sack her?

MR BARR: I thank Ms Lee for that long diatribe of a question that is based in an alternate reality, really. So I reject the premise of the question. I have full confidence in the Deputy Chief Minister's work, and I particularly applaud her work in the education portfolio over a decade, where she has been focused on wanting to enhance equity in our education system, and very eloquently outlined the range of measures that she has put in place whilst minister to achieve that end.

MS LEE: Chief Minister, given that the long list of failures of this education minister go well beyond including school maintenance, lack of support for students learning with disabilities, and the fact that she is overseeing nine months of no response to industrial action, do you still retain confidence in the education minister?

MR BARR: Yes, and I refer the member to my answer to the previous question.

MR PARTON: Chief Minister, are you prepared to go down with your education minister?

MR BARR: I reject the premise of the opposition leader's question. I know the Canberra Liberals are very experienced in going down. We have seen quite a few of you take that particular path. In politics, there are snakes and ladders, Mr Speaker—

Mr Cocks: A point of order. I think the Chief Minister may be debating this point.

MR SPEAKER: If you are going to ask a question like, "Are you going to go down with your minister?" you are inviting a response, Mr Cocks, so we will allow a little bit of latitude, if you are going to ask questions like that. I think he has concluded his answer. We will move on to a new question.

Public schools—senior secondary language courses

MR BRADDOCK: My question is to the Minister for Multicultural Affairs. Minister, community language schools are highly upset by what appears to be a significant decrease in funding and support for community language schools, following on from, in quick succession, CIT Solutions closing down and the Education Directorate not

seeking to replace this language training for public school students.

Minister, why is government support for community language training decreasing when language training is diminishing across the ACT?

MR PETTERSSON: I thank Mr Braddock for the question and his long and continued advocacy for community language schools and language in general. I want to speak to the specifics of CIT Solutions and secondary school language education. I think the specifics of community language schools have been well canvassed in this place. I have received a large number of representations, both from community language schools and from the peak association, the CLSA, as to how the arrangements for funding of community language schools has been operating.

Following those representations, I sought a review to be undertaken that would engage and consult with all stakeholders. That review has been undertaken and, as informed, there were some draft guidelines. We then went back to the same people we consulted with to seek their views as to the appropriateness of any proposed changes and funding of that potential program. I look forward to the continued engagement of all stakeholders in this space. It is clear to me that everyone is passionate and wants to see language celebrated. It is about making sure the government can continue to do that in the best way possible.

Senior secondary language courses—order to table document

MR BRADDOCK: Mr Speaker, under standing order 213, I move:

That, in accordance with standing order 213A, the Assembly orders the Minister for Multicultural Affairs to provide to the Assembly a copy of the review.

Debate (on motion by **Ms Stephen-Smith**) adjourned to a later hour.

Questions without notice

Public schools—senior secondary language courses

MR BRADDOCK: Minister, why are schools facing a future where they receive less funding? And how is this meant to cover their rising costs—in particular, public liability insurance?

MR PETTERSSON: I thank Mr Braddock for the question. One component that I think underlies Mr Braddock's question, but not all of it, is how funding is allocated to different schools. As it currently operates, there is flat funding per student. One of the proposals is that funding would scale, based on the size of the school, which would see students at smaller schools receiving a greater amount of funding than students at larger schools.

MISS NUTTALL: Minister, why are preschools and play groups no longer eligible, given this is the ideal age in which to learn a new language?

MR PETTERSSON: I thank Miss Nuttall for the question. These are proposed guidelines. Decisions have not been made. We are genuinely seeking feedback on the

work that has been undertaken. I understand that consultation closed on Friday. I have received some of that feedback already. Many very useful suggestions and points have been raised. I look forward to considering those and continuing to work with all stakeholders in this space to ensure that the funding arrangements we have in place deliver a really good outcome.

Lakes and waterways—water quality

MISS NUTTALL: My question is to the Minister for Climate Change, Environment, Energy and Water. Minister, thank you for your update yesterday on the Water quality—Lakes and Waterways—Improvement Assembly resolution of 28 October 2025. There was a lot of helpful detail in this statement and I would like to ask about a couple of aspects. It is fantastic that your tabled paper speaks so highly of the Healthy Waterways Program, which was implemented under former Minister Rattenbury when he was Minister for Water. Where next for the Healthy Waterways Program? Will it continue under this Labor government or is it finished now?

MS ORR: Certainly with the Healthy Waterways Program we continue to work on the next iteration of programs and approaches to improving our water quality across our catchments. I believe I am on the record as saying that we have been publicly consulting on the next plan for Lake Tuggeranong. That one is part of the Healthy Waterways Program and one that we look to be coming out shortly. We have finished consultation and have been finalising the strategy for the next 10 years on a healthier Lake Tuggeranong. Following our cabinet processes, we will come out with a plan for that. We will then—and I believe this has been flagged in estimates discussions previously—look to catchments across our region to make sure that we are putting in place longer-term planning to consistently improve the water quality within our catchment system.

Miss Nuttall has quite often asked about specific projects that would have been covered under previous iterations of the Health Waterways Program that really go to infrastructure. We will continue to look at infrastructure, but what we have learnt from those earlier iterations of the Healthy Waterways Program is that, while we can put in infrastructure that will clean water that is going to our catchments, a much bigger focus on preventing pollutants from getting into our system in the first place is needed within our programs. That is what we are looking at doing as we work through this next range of updating our responses to improving Canberra’s water quality.

MISS NUTTALL: Minister, would you revisit the renaturalisation of Sullivans Creek as part of your ongoing work on specific lakes and waterways, given the merits that led to initial planning work back in 2023?

MS ORR: I note that the renaturalisation of many of our waterways has been a topic of interest in the chamber in this term of government and also the previous. I am on the record as saying that we are not looking to renaturalise Sullivans Creek. It is not government policy. We do have the options paper that was put forward, and certainly where we are doing work within that catchment area and we can build on the recommendations that were made in that report, we will look to incorporate it.

I would note—and it is not just Sullivans Creek; there is also Yarralumla Creek and other creeks where everyone has said, “Please, come and look at this”—that there are

different components to this. Water quality is not necessarily the only factor to consider. We also look at the health of waterways from a cultural perspective and making sure that the waterways, particularly those that have been turned into drainage systems, are brought back to what they would have been in their original form. That is actually a very important part of Sullivans Creek and other projects we talk about. We also look at the environmental factors of just having a much healthier ecosystem.

There is also consideration of the issue of planning risk. There is a reality within our water system that concrete drains that we see across our city were made to move water out of the area to enable people to build homes and other development in the surrounding area. One of the challenges we have, and one of the balancing factors we need to consider, is that, in renaturalising these creeks, it will lead to more localised pooling of water in heavy rain events. With climate change, we are seeing more and more of those, and the options for us to renaturalise are going to be far more case-by-case and discrete projects rather than looking at, I guess, doing everything all at once. These are the things that we need to manage, and we are building all of those considerations into our ongoing programs.

MR BRADDOCK: Minister, when will you develop the Lake Ginninderra plan, which includes Yerrabi Pond?

MS ORR: The next focus I believe we will be taking is on Lake Burley Griffin. We do have a timeline for all of the plans. I do not have it in front of me, so I will come back to Mr Braddock with the indicative timeframes for the next tranche of work on the plans.

Planning and development—Manuka

MS CARRICK: My question is to the Minister for Planning and Sustainable Development and it is about the Manuka hotel.

Minister, the redevelopment of the Manuka hotel site has raised serious community concerns regarding compliance with approved planning expectations and the apparent absence of key public amenities, most notably the cinemas that were widely understood to form part of the original vision and were indeed part of the DA. This raises broader questions about oversight, accountability and the integrity of the planning process in the ACT. Minister, why did the Access Canberra compliance team fail to identify the omission of the promised cinemas during construction and why was the developer not required to rectify this before completion?

MR STEEL: I thank the member for her question. I will seek some advice from the independent regulator and come back to the Assembly.

MS CARRICK: Minister, will the ACT Planning Authority consider or approve a retrospective development application that excludes cinemas, despite earlier expectations or representations that they would be delivered?

MR STEEL: I will seek advice from the chief planner in relation to that matter and come back to the Assembly on notice.

MR EMERSON: Minister, what is the purpose of the ACT planning and approvals process if key elements of a development can be altered or omitted like this without transparent review or enforcement?

MR STEEL: I thank the member for his question. Of course, we do have existing enforcement mechanisms under the Planning Act, and I have also set out the wish to review some of those enforcement mechanisms and the penalties that may be applied for contraventions of the Planning Act. That will get underway over the next year and it will be an opportunity to see whether further improvements can be made to the regulatory powers available to the independent agency, Access Canberra, who acts as a delegate for the independent Territory Planning Authority in enforcing provisions under the Planning Act. We do want to make sure that we continue to strengthen the Planning Act to make sure there is continued integrity in the planning system, particularly around development applications, but I do not want to comment specifically in relation to this matter before providing further advice to the Assembly on the current situation.

Budget—debt

MR COCKS: My question is to the Chief Minister.

Chief Minister, independent economist Saul Eslake’s review of the fiscal sustainability of the ACT highlighted that operating deficits essentially represent a failure to pay for today’s costs and services, because any long-term infrastructure—indeed, any infrastructure—is effectively excluded from the operating balance. Chief Minister, what was the cumulative total of operating deficits you accrued during your tenure as Treasurer?

MR BARR: I will take that question on notice, as it relates to the headline net operating balance.

MR COCKS: Chief Minister, how long will it take for the amount of debt that you accrued for operating deficits to be paid off, if the budget continues with the average cash balances predicted in your government’s current budget?

MR BARR: Of course, the budget position will change from year to year, based on a range of variables including revenues and expenditures and infrastructure decisions.

Mr Parton: I think the answer is, “Never.”

MR BARR: Mr Cocks’s question is largely hypothetical, inviting me to speculate on future government policy but—

Mr Cocks: Kind of like the forward estimates.

MR BARR: I would make the observation that once the territory has fully funded its superannuation liability then around five per cent of the annual operating budget is freed up, in order to meet either future infrastructure requirements or debt repayment.

The territory has been on a long journey to fully fund that significant liability that was shoved to us by the commonwealth upon self-government, and completion of that task

is an important metric that we have been working towards. It will have a significant impact on the territory's fiscal capacity once that liability is fully funded. We are now within sight of that. Twenty years ago, we were three decades away.

MRS MORRIS: Chief Minister, do you accept any responsibility for handing future generations and young Canberrans billions of dollars in debt, with no plan to pay it off?

MR BARR: We do have a plan to pay it off, and I have just outlined part of that.

I am also happy to accept responsibility for the delivery of infrastructure that this community needs now, and that those future generations will enjoy. Examples of that can go as far as building the Cotter dam, which services this community for more than a century—

Mr Cocks interjecting—

MR BARR: It goes to the investment in hospitals, it goes to the investment in education, in schools and TAFE facilities—

Mrs Morris: You are just making future generations pay for it all.

MR BARR: Future generations are going to use the asset. We are utilising and paying for, now, infrastructure that was build 30 or 40 years ago and was financed by debt. Governments are not like households. Governments do not retire. Governments continue. Governments need to build assets for multiple generations—

Mr Parton: I think they might retire eventually!

MR BARR: for decades into the future. Government—ACT government—will continue, I would hope. Whilst ever there are humans alive in this city there will be an ACT government, is my hope. And that government will be charged not only with meeting current responsibilities but also planning for the future.

Debt-financed infrastructure is the way every government in the world funds long term infrastructure projects. It is a sensible way to do so because it does spread the cost of an asset that will be utilised for 50 or 100 years—over more than one generation.

Members interjecting—

MR BARR: A practical example of using the Liberal party's ideology would be that you would have to pay in cash in advance for every asset you bought. I am sure each one of you have had a mortgage at some part of your life; when you have borrowed for an asset, being housing, and you have paid it off over time.

Members interjecting—

MR BARR: This, Mr Speaker, is not an unusual practice for governments, or, indeed, households, and it is an entirely reasonable way to fund long term infrastructure.

Budget—transport

MR COCKS: My question is to the Minister for Transport. Minister, in looking at the current-year budget, the final independent report on the fiscal sustainability of the ACT observes that the current forward estimates incorporate declines in projected transport spending. Which transport programs or services does the 2025-26 budget assume will cease or be cut to achieve those reductions?

MR STEEL: We are continuing to invest in our transport system, both buses and light rail, and we will have more to say in the 2026-27 budget when I hand it down. Of course, we continue to make progress against our commitments in relation to delivering stage 2A of light rail and stage 2B. The flexible bus service is, I guess, one example where we have funded it for a year whilst there is an evaluation of the program, and then we will consider future funding beyond that year based on that evaluation. So there will be programs that are not funded beyond one year, in order to undertake reviews; that is common. And then we will, of course, make decisions in future budgets around continued funding for those and improvements to those services.

We will continue to deliver our bus system, and, indeed, on 20 July, we will be increasing the frequency of services, particularly on some of the higher capacity routes—the R4, R5 and R6 services—and returning services to their previous routes in Belconnen on the R2 and R3 routes as well. We will continue to invest in that while recruiting more staff and delivering on our election commitments. We will do that over a number of budgets, and that will be outlined in those budgets.

Mr Cocks: A point of order, Mr Speaker, under 118AA. The question was about the projected declines in transport spending over the forward estimates, and the specific question was: which transport programs or services does the current-year, 2025-26, budget, assume will cease or be cut to achieve those reductions. The minister has spoken about his aspirations for spending more. He has not addressed those reductions

MR SPEAKER: On the point of order?

Mr Steel: On the point of order—I have actually specifically mentioned an example of a program that has been funded for one year.

MR SPEAKER: I think what the minister has outlined is the fact that it might look like there is a decline because some are funded for a year pending a review, and there will also be additional budget decisions—

Mr Cocks: He hasn't said which.

MR SPEAKER: So I think he has been relevant and responsive. He might not have given you the exact answer you wanted Mr Cocks, but he has been responsive under the standing orders. Mr Cocks, do you have a supplementary?

MR COCKS: Minister, do the forward estimates assume any reduction in bus service kilometres, frequency, reliability or staffing?

MR STEEL: I do not believe they do. We will continue to deliver a reliable, frequent bus service for Canberrans. As I outlined in the answer to the previous question, we are

actually increasing the frequency based on the savings that we have found in the network, based on real world conditions on our road network with the construction of the Commonwealth Avenue Bridge. So we will continue to deliver bus services using the full complement of buses and recruiting more drivers to make sure that we can service the community. And, of course, we have got further election commitments which we will be delivering over the term to improve services even further.

MR PARTON: Minister, why do Canberrans continue to suffer because of your government's financial mismanagement, despite your deadpan stand-up comedy routine here in the chamber?

Ms Berry: A point of order. I seek your guidance, Mr Speaker, on the language that Mr Parton used to describe Minister Steel's answers to questions in this place and whether that was parliamentary.

MR SPEAKER: I will get some advice. I think it is certainly verging on irony, which is not allowed under the standing orders. I will hear what the Clerk's advice is.

We are going with "imputation", Mr Parton: so, it could be ironic; it could be an imputation; it could be an inference. I once sought advice from the Clerk and he said, "You'll know it when you hear it, when those matters come up." And I think I recognise it when I hear it. So I will say that the question is out of order because of the way it was asked—you want to talk about stand-up comedy routines and so on. It was not a legitimate question. That being the case, new questions.

Youth—homelessness—Woden Youth Foyer

MS TOUGH: My question is to the Minister for Homes, Homelessness and New Suburbs. Minister, with the Woden Youth Foyer officially opening on 4 May 2026, can you please detail why this is such an exciting achievement for the ACT government, and what benefit will this foyer have for residents?

MS BERRY: I thank Ms Tough for her question. The Woden Youth Foyer is the first one of its kind in Canberra. Woden is Education's first youth foyer that aims to transform the lives of young people who are transitioning into adulthood.

Opposition members interjecting—

MS BERRY: The Youth Foyer is for young people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness and are engaged with education. Young people can stay at the foyer for up to two years and, during this time, are supported to build their independence and resilience. The ACT government committed to build the Woden Youth Foyer, and they received \$10 million towards the cost of the construction from the federal government's Priority Community Infrastructure Program.

I am excited to have visited the first Education Youth Foyer in Canberra, and I look forward to seeing young Canberrans find their independence and break that cycle of homelessness.

MS TOUGH: Minister, which Canberrans will be supported by the Woden Youth

Foyer?

MS BERRY: I thank Ms Tough for the supplementary. The foyer will support young people aged between 16 and 24, and it has 20 self-contained apartments. There are three rooms designed for young parents, with facilities to accommodate children, as well as two fully accessible rooms. The whole foyer has been built to class C adaptable standard, so that future modifications can be made to suit residents' physical needs as required.

The foyer is truly a remarkable home for vulnerable young Canberrans, with dedicated spaces to help them grow and gain the skills that they need to support themselves once they leave the foyer.

MR WERNER-GIBBINGS: Minister, how many other youth foyers are there in Canberra?

MS BERRY: Thank you, Mr Werner-Gibbings. We have one other youth foyer, known as Our Place. Barnardos manages the Our Place program, which supports up to 24 young people in Braddon. On Monday, the ACT government announced that funding has been allocated for the youth foyer at Braddon over four years, for the continued operation of Our Place.

Our youth foyers are vital in helping young Canberrans get into safe housing and break the cycle of homelessness. I look forward to working with them to see successful outcomes for these young people.

Canberra Health Services—occupational violence

MR PARTON: My question is to the Minister for Health. Minister, in the space of a fortnight last month, we learnt from the media, and not from you, that there had been a series of serious and violent assaults on frontline health staff at Canberra Hospital. Minister, do you accept this as clear evidence of a health system under strain and a government that is losing control of the most important public service?

MS STEPHEN-SMITH: I thank the Leader of the Opposition for the question. The health system is under strain, and that is why, in last year's budget, we invested an additional \$1.1 billion to support the ACT public health system. Our staff do an incredible job in sometimes difficult circumstances. But it is a very long bow to draw between that and the specific instances of occupational violence that have been talked about recently regarding the Behavioural Assessment Unit. In both of these instances, we are talking about people with significant disordered behaviour and quite different circumstances. That is my understanding. The incidents themselves are quite different. I need to be clear, as I have been on many occasions, that any instance of occupational violence across our health services is unacceptable. That is why we have had a range of occupational violence strategies over many years in our health services. That process has been refreshed now and new work is underway, which we will no doubt discuss in relation to Mr Parton's motion, which he seems to be pre-empting with this question today.

MR PARTON: Minister, how can healthcare workers have confidence that their

workplace is safe when repeatedly raising critical workplace safety concerns are not being actioned?

MS STEPHEN-SMITH: If Mr Parton, the Leader of the Opposition, has specific examples of where staff believe that concerns that they have raised have not been actioned, I am very much interested in hearing about those. We take incidents of occupational violence, whether that is physical violence, verbal abuse or whatever it might look like, very seriously. Canberra Health Services has, for example, supported staff to take out workplace protection orders against consumers who are known to behave in unacceptable ways towards our staff and from whom our staff feel threatened. We have the Nurses and Midwives: Towards a Safer Culture strategy. Two iterations of that strategy have rolled out Safewards across all of our hospitals, reducing instances of occupational violence and restraint of patients. It builds that understanding and prevents escalation of violent situations.

We have posters right across our health services that were co-designed with our staff, reminding consumers and families that our healthcare workers are also family members and people in our community with interests, and that violence and aggression is not acceptable in our services. We have ongoing training in relation to the de-escalation of people whose behaviour is heightened, not just for our professional health staff but also for our wards people and our security staff. So there are a lot of things in place. Can we do better? Of course. We always have more to learn and more to do, and that is why we are getting on with that work.

MRS MORRIS: Minister, at what point do repeated operational failures become a question of ministerial competency?

MS STEPHEN-SMITH: I reject the premise of Mrs Morris's question. There is no evidence that this is the case. I take these issues very seriously and I have in the entire time that I have been health minister and in the period since the last election, where I have been Minister for Mental Health as well.

Mr Barr: I think it is time, Mr Speaker, all further questions can be placed on the notice paper.