



QUESTION TIME
OF THE
LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY
FOR THE
AUSTRALIAN CAPITAL TERRITORY

HANSARD

Edited proof transcript

Thursday, 6 March 2025

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Questions without notice
Ministerial records—caretaker period

MS CASTLEY: My question is to the Minister for Health. Minister, you have repeatedly told the Assembly the CEO of Canberra Health Services called your chief of staff in the middle of an election campaign to discuss a non-urgent matter and early stage unverified data. That turned out to be data showing the impending insolvency of Canberra's hospital network—data which you chose to keep secret. Minister, is it normal practice for portfolio executives to call your Chief of Staff about non-urgent matters and unverified data in the middle of an election campaign?

MS STEPHEN-SMITH: I will again, as I did yesterday, refute Ms Castley's characterisation of the information that was provided. There is absolutely nothing in the information that was provided that suggests that Canberra Health Services was going to be insolvent by the end of the year. That is absolutely untrue, and Ms Castley has absolutely no basis for making that assertion. As I have repeatedly said to her, and to this place, the decisions that government made after the election were what was going to determine whether Canberra Health Services needed to reduce activity to stay within budget or whether additional funding would be provided to ensure that the elective surgery, the—

Ms Castley: Point of order, Mr Speaker, on relevance. I asked the minister if it was normal practice—

MS STEPHEN-SMITH: I am getting there.

Ms Castley: —for portfolio executives to call the chief of staff on non-urgent and unverified data.

MR SPEAKER: Thank you, Ms Castley. The minister has assured me she is getting to the answer.

MS STEPHEN-SMITH: This was my second election campaign as a minister. The Chief Minister made clear yesterday that ministers continue to be ministers through the caretaker period and they continue to have responsibilities for the day-to-day management of government. That is absolutely clear in the guidance on caretaker conventions. In the 2020 election, of course, we were managing a global pandemic. So it is the only comparator that I have to go on, and I can assure Ms Castley that during the 2020 election campaign it was absolutely standard practice for the Director-General and the CEO of Canberra Health Services to provide my chief of staff, regularly, with information about what was happening in the health system and in the COVID response.

MS CASTLEY: Minister, how much contact did you or your office have with the CEO during the election campaign?

MS STEPHEN-SMITH: I will clearly have to take that question on notice.

MR HANSON: Minister, do you actually expect anyone to believe that the CEO of Canberra Health Services called in the middle of an election, just to tell your office

what you had already been saying publicly for months?

MS STEPHEN-SMITH: I think what Mr Hanson has highlighted is that the data provided simply confirmed what I had been saying publicly for months—that the hospital was busy.

Ministerial records—caretaker period

MS CASTLEY: My question is to the Minister for Health. Point (4) of the Assembly's code of conduct requires that:

Members should always act in the public interest, make decisions and choices on merit, and not seek to gain financial or other benefit for themselves, their family or friends.

Minister, were you acting in the public interest by hiding information during the election which showed a surge in health demand that would eventually lead to a \$300 million budget blowout?

Ms Orr: Mr Speaker, my point of order is that the code of conduct is administered by the commissioner, who is appointed here, not by ministers. So, if Ms Castley has an issue under the code of conduct, I am not sure that this is the best place to be raising it in the first instance.

MR SPEAKER: Ms Orr, I take your point. Ms Castley, I believe that your question pertains to how the minister interprets the code of conduct, and I think the question is in order. Minister?

MS STEPHEN-SMITH: We had a long conversation in this place yesterday about the fact that the *Guidance on caretaker conventions* does not provide any advice to public servants about what factual information they can or should, of their own initiative, be providing to ministers. We talked about the fact that ministers retain responsibility for the day-to-day management of government during that process and that the caretaker conventions are really about decision-making. What is required is that, if ministers or the government are going to take a decision that would bind a future government, the opposition and any other relevant party should be advised and consulted about that.

There was no request for any action to be taken as a result of this day-to-day information that was provided. The caretaker conventions are absolutely clear. I did not seek this information, but the caretaker conventions are absolutely clear that ministers may seek factual information and information relating to the day-to-day business of government from senior executive officials during the caretaker period, and it is inappropriate for this material to be incorporated into party political purposes. This wasn't incorporated into party political purposes; it was simply factual information. It was provided in accordance with the *Guidance on caretaker conventions* as it stands. We resolved yesterday to have an inquiry into the caretaker conventions, and that is the appropriate place to be considering these matters.

MS CASTLEY: Minister, do you deny enjoying a political benefit by keeping this information secret?

MS STEPHEN-SMITH: I absolutely do deny that. This was not information that would have provided any—as I have said on radio, just think about what I would have said if I had made this information public: “Hey, everybody, I have received some information that has told me that the hospital is really busy, just as I told you in July, in August, in September and in October—exactly as I have been telling you as we made every single one of our health election commitments, including our first election commitment to 800 more health workers across the five years; just as we talked about when we made the commitments to additional health infrastructure, including the northside hospital that the opposition waited until the last week of the campaign to confirm its commitment to; just as we talked about the community-based health infrastructure that the Canberra Liberals never committed to implementing; just as we talked about the expansion of our nurse-led walk-in centres that the Canberra Liberals do not support; just as we talked about the expansion”—

Mr Cocks: A point of order: the minister has clearly moved into debating issues rather than answering the question.

MR SPEAKER: Yes, she probably has, but she has answered the question. We probably are in a debating mode now, Minister. If you—

MS STEPHEN-SMITH: I have made my point.

MR COCKS: Minister, has your conduct always been consistent with your obligations under the Assembly’s code of conduct?

MS STEPHEN-SMITH: Yes, I believe it has. If Mr Cocks has any evidence that that is not the case, I refer to Ms Orr’s point of order earlier: that any such allegation should be referred to the appropriate authority for investigation and not for slurs in this place.

Planning and development—220 Northbourne Avenue

MR RATTENBURY: My question is to the Minister for Planning. Recently it was reported that Geocon is now developing a site at 220 Northbourne Avenue, which was previously slated for a built-to-rent project by Evri Group. Given that Geocon appears likely to submit a new development application for this site, will the government ensure that a proportion of the new homes includes public housing?

MR STEEL: I thank the member for his question. I will take some advice in relation to that matter. I do not have that information to hand with me at the moment.

MR RATTENBURY: What percentage of public or community housing does the government believe is necessary in new developments like this?

MR STEEL: I thank the member for his question. I think he is aware that there is not a general policy on inclusion rezoning, except for the fact that during the process of delivering the ILRP, we look at identifying around 15 per cent for affordable or social—including public—housing as part of that process. There are not necessarily requirements on specific blocks or precincts. That is not to say that it could not happen in the future. I am currently looking at what are the mechanisms to potentially do that

on some sites.

The government is willing and open to having discussions with particular proponents, particularly around build-to-rent models. We have been clear that we will have that conversation on a case-by-case basis about what contribution we might be able to provide to help facilitate that from a financial point of view.

MS CLAY: Minister, with the mechanisms you just described, will you set separate targets for public homes, for community homes and for affordable homes?

MR STEEL: We already do that through the Indicative Land Release Program in terms of the broad 15 per cent target, and, of course, we have separate targets in relation to the delivery of public housing. Labor has a very clear commitment that we brought to the election, which is being led by the Deputy Chief Minister, to build 1,000 public homes by 2030. We will be supporting the delivery of that target for public housing.

Planning and development—Woden town centre

MS CARRICK: My question is to the Chief Minister. As you know, the Woden town centre has lost much of its recreational facilities, including an indoor sports stadium, Pitch and Putt, bowling greens, a bowling alley, tennis courts and the YMCA, and the outcomes-based planning laws have now changed the zoning to allow the demolition of the 50-metre pool and the ice rink. They will be replaced by five Geocon residential towers and a 25-metre pool. We are experiencing antisocial behaviour, concerns about safety and a lack of maintenance in the area.

On 19 February, in the annual report hearings, I asked you if it was possible to work with the Suburban Land Agency to leverage the CIT to facilitate social and economic development and to do place plans around the core of the Woden town centre. You said:

It would be. Whether it would be SLA or another area of government would depend on available staff, workload priorities and the like. Certainly, both the CIT opening and the public transport interchange will present opportunities for activation and community events. Let me consider what might be the best part of government to lead that work.

Will you support a cross-directorate task force to plan the social and economic development of the Woden town centre?

MR BARR: I thank Ms Carrick for the question. I will be consistent with the answer I gave in annual reports just a week or so ago and give consideration to the matter. I will not announce government policy in question time, as that is against the standing orders.

MS CARRICK: When will you advise me about the best part of government to lead this work?

MR BARR: We are currently considering significant changes to machinery of government matters and the amalgamation of certain government agencies, so it will not be before then. I suspect that the budget round and the new financial year would be an appropriate time to consider such arrangements.

MR COCKS: Chief Minister, when will you consult with Woden residents on improved recreational facilities, as you promised at the election?

MR BARR: I will not be doing that consultation personally, but the area of government will make an announcement in due course.

Crime—bail

MS MORRIS: My question is to the minister for police. This morning ACT Policing confirmed they have charged seven teenagers with various offences, including driving stolen motor vehicles, failing to stop for police, aggravated burglary and driving offences. These teenagers have been apprehended by police more than 190 times, with one boy being charged with more than 70 offences.

Minister, do you accept that the ACTs bail system is broken and is putting the community at risk?

DR PATERSON: I thank the member for the question.

Yes, the ACT Policing established Operation Minlaton in February this year to address a spike in residential burglaries and vehicle thefts believed to be conducted by a small cohort of teenage offenders. So, as Ms Morris pointed out, those seven teenagers have been arrested in relation to the vehicle thefts.

In relation to the bail laws, as the Attorney-General has said previously in the Assembly, there will be work done to review the bail laws in this term of government. Further to that, the Chief Police Officer answered questions on the radio this week around his views on the bail laws. As he said then, ACT Policing's views on the bail laws are written in the submission that they provided to the bail inquiry of the Justice and Community Safety Standing Committee last term.

MS MORRIS: Minister, how can you be confident that the teenager who was released on bail will not reoffend this time, given two of the teens that have been rearrested for breaching bail conditions eleven times before?

DR PATERSON: As I said, there is going to be work done on bail reform this term. We also had the election commitment and commitment last term to pursue electronic monitoring.

So electronic monitoring is going to provide an opportunity to explore monitoring of people who are on parole, who are potentially in home detention and who are potentially on bail. Victoria, I think, or Tasmania, has just recently, in the last week, looked at electronic monitoring for young offenders. So that is something that we will be watching. As we progress to implement electronic monitoring in the ACT, we will look to see how other jurisdictions are doing it.

MS BARRY: Minister, do you regret axing the bail review?

DR PATERSON: That is a question for the Attorney-General.

Crime—bail

MS MORRIS: My question is to the Minister for Police, Fire and Emergency Services and it also relates to the seven repeat youth offenders re-arrested and charged by police this morning. What do you say to the hundreds of families who have personally experienced these crimes and the thousands of Canberrans who no longer feel safe in their homes because your government is soft on crime?

DR PATERSON: I strongly refute Ms Morris's assertions. I say to the families who are impacted by that crime, I am really sorry for what you have experienced. We know that property crime has a serious impact on the community. What I will say is that, in the last year, property crime has reduced by about seven per cent in the ACT, so we are seeing a reduction in property crime. ACT Policing have their Outsmart the Offender campaign, which is a campaign run to encourage the community to protect their assets—their house and their bikes—by using lock systems, using cameras for houses, and that type of thing. ACT police, as well as doing the hard yards out there and keeping the community safe, are also about prevention of these types of crimes.

MS MORRIS: Minister, will you apologise to the hundreds of families who were unnecessarily subjected to home invasions by repeat offenders because the bail system is broken and the community is suffering from crime?

DR PATERSON: I strongly reject the assertion of Ms Morris's question. As I said, I feel deeply sorry for the families that are impacted by property crime. It is a terrible crime. As I said, property crime has been reducing in the ACT, thanks to the good work of ACT Policing.

MS CASTLEY: Minister, it is clear that the police are doing their job. When will you do yours?

DR PATERSON: I am doing my job by recruiting more police numbers. The ACT government has a significant investment in ACT police. That is an investment to see 150 new police over the next five years. We are also pursuing investment in police infrastructure—looking at a new city police station, city headquarters, and a Molonglo police station. I am passionate about investing in our ACT police, to see them supported to be able to do the job that they do.

Waste—recycling facility

MR WERNER-GIBBINGS: My question is to the Minister for City and Government Services. Minister, can you please update the Assembly on how the government is ensuring Canberra has state-of-the-art recycling infrastructure to meet the needs of our growing population?

MS CHEYNE: I thank Mr Werner-Gibbings for the question. The ACT government is committed to providing modern, efficient recycling infrastructure that supports our growing population and evolving waste management needs. Following a competitive procurement process, Veolia has been selected to design, build and operate a state-of-the-art materials recovery facility in Hume. This facility will process up to 115,000 tonnes of mixed recyclables annually, reducing our reliance on interstate

processing, notwithstanding that interstate processing is certainly preferable to dumping all of our recycling in landfill.

The facility will feature world-leading sorting and recovery technology, improving resource recovery rates and ensuring higher quality recycled materials. This investment will future proof Canberra's recycling capacity, enhanced environmental sustainability and support new local jobs in the burgeoning circular economy.

MR WERNER-GIBBINGS: Minister, what benefits will this new facility bring to the Canberra region?

MS CHEYNE: It will deliver significant environmental, economic and social benefits. It will improve recycling rates, reducing waste sent to landfill and ensuring more materials are repurposed locally. By eliminating the need to transport recyclables interstate, it will lower emissions and enhance sustainability. It will also create 130 local jobs during construction and 24 permanent positions, strengthening the workforce in our circular economy. Additionally, it will include an education space for schools and the community, raising awareness about recycling and waste reduction. This investment reflects our commitment to a cleaner, greener and more sustainable future.

MS TOUGH: Minister, what advanced technologies will be used in the new facility to improve recycling and sorting?

MS CHEYNE: I thank Ms Tough for the supplementary It will incorporate cutting edge recycling technology to maximise resource recovery. Advanced optical sorting systems will use laser identification and air jets to separate plastics, while high powered magnets will extract metals. A glass purification plant will crush and wash glass, ensuring higher quality recycled materials like those we use in some of our road and line marking efforts. The facility will also feature enhanced baling processes for container deposit scheme materials. With real time data collection and monitoring systems, operations will be continually optimised for efficiency. These innovations will significantly reduce contamination, increase the purity of recyclables and support our transition to a more sustainable circular economy.

Domestic and family violence—support for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander victim-survivors

MR EMERSON: My question is to the Minister for the Prevention of Family and Domestic Violence. There is a letter in my inbox that is also in yours, Minister. The letter is from former chair of the ACT Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Elected Body, Tanya Keed—who joins us in the gallery today. It reads:

In my role I am constantly receiving calls from women or their families about serious issues and incidents of domestic and family violence within the homes of our community members in the ACT. This morning another came in—a woman bashed so badly that she requires hospitalisation. She has been told that she needs to go on a waitlist for assessment to receive support.

Minister, Ms Keed's question and mine today is: who exactly is currently funded to provide specialised DV service supports to Aboriginal women in the ACT?

DR PATERSON: I thank the member for the question and thank Ms Keed for her email, which we will respond to. I would also like to thank Ms Keed for the work that she does—incredibly important work in the ACT working with victims of domestic, family and sexual violence.

The ACT government seeks to support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island people in the work that it does and acknowledges the very high rates of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples impacted by domestic, family and sexual violence. This work started last term, and I would like to thank Ms Berry for her prioritisation of funding Aboriginal community-controlled organisations in the previous budget. The ACT funds five Aboriginal community-controlled organisations for domestic, family and sexual violence responses, with over \$4 million provided directly to Aboriginal-led organisations. These organisations are Yurwan Bullan, Yerrabi Yurwang, Yeddung Mura, Sisters in Spirit Aboriginal Corporation and WhISPers. Yurwan Bullan received \$1.3 million from May 2023 to 2026, Yerrabi Yurwang received \$530,000 from July 2023 to January 2026, Yeddung Mura received \$952,000 from April 2023 to 2026, Sisters in Spirit Aboriginal Corporation received \$1.016 million from April 2023 to June 2026 and WhISPers Community Healing Our Way received \$180,000 from April 2023 to June 2026.

MR EMERSON: Minister, when it comes to crisis support, if an Aboriginal woman is beaten in her home here in the ACT this afternoon, who can she call to get immediate culturally safe support without being waitlisted or triaged out and to be guaranteed a safe place to sleep tonight for herself and her children?

DR PATERSON: I would recommend that someone call ACT Policing to begin with. I would also recommend the Domestic Violence Crisis Service as an immediate point of call and also the Canberra Rape Crisis Service. They are 24 hours a day and are there to support people experiencing violence.

MR RATTENBURY: Minister, is the government committed to investing a significant portion of the \$6.1 million in federal funding announced yesterday for gender-based violence in the ACT into Aboriginal community-controlled organisations to provide specialised, culturally safe family and domestic violence support services for First Nations people?

DR PATERSON: I thank the member for the question. That will be a matter for the budget. The money comes to the ACT midyear, so that will be a budget process. What I can say is that the ACT does and will strongly support Aboriginal community-controlled responses to domestic, family and sexual violence.

Environment—earless dragon

MS CLAY: My question is to the minister for the environment. Minister, on Tuesday you spoke passionately about the need to protect the earless dragon and ACT government efforts to save it. Canberra Airport Group has planned a road, since 2009, that will run through and fragment key habitat of the earless dragon. In 2022, the earless dragon was uplisted to “critically endangered”—the last stop before extinction.

After the former Greens environment minister raised serious community concerns, federal Labor environment minister Plibersek sent the airport back to the drawing board until Canberra Airport Group could show the road would not increase the risk of extinction. But last month work on the road commenced. It is now paused due to community protest.

Minister, when did you last contact your Labor colleague, federal environment minister Plibersek, on the project, and what was the outcome?

MS ORR: I would like to thank Ms Clay for the question. I think it is quite a topical matter, given events that are underway. I would note that Ms Clay and I have actually had a number of discussions about this, and it goes to those as well. We do have a briefing set up tomorrow, once the sitting week is over, for Ms Clay to put a series of questions to officials and so forth.

The airport is not under the jurisdiction of the ACT government, and the federal minister does not report to me. Going to the point of Ms Clay's question of when the last time was I was in contact with the minister, there have been a number of discussions regarding the Canberra grassland earless dragon and what the impact could be based on the action that the airport is currently undertaking and how we move forward from there. Those discussions will continue to be ongoing. They are not with one particular group or one particular person. They are with a range of people and advisers and organisations that can help to put together what is quite a complex puzzle in hoping to get to a good outcome. So rather than heading into a political storm of "Labor should do this" and "someone else should do this" or "this should happen" or "you should talk to this person", what I can assure Ms Clay I will keep doing is working with everyone with an interest in this to hopefully find a good, nature-positive way forward.

Miss Nuttall: A point of order on relevance. I think it was specifically about when the last time was that the minister contacted the federal Minister for the Environment. Is that information you are able to provide?

MR SPEAKER: I think that the minister answered the question. Ms Clay?

MS CLAY: Minister, are you able to explain to the Canberra community what the road is for?

MS ORR: I would note that the road is being developed by the Canberra Airport, which does not report to me and I do not have oversight of. Rather than speak for the airport—I think Ms Clay, would like to know the answer to that question—I would direct Ms Clay to them.

MR RATTENBURY: Minister, when were you last in contact with the Canberra Airport Group about this project and what was the outcome of that conversation?

MS ORR: I refer the member to my original answer: I have been in contact with a range of stakeholders and will continue to work through the issues at hand.

Hospitals—waiting lists

MS CASTLEY: My question is to the Minister for Health. According to your own data, on 11 October 2024, the percentage of overdue ready-for-surgery category 1 patients was 21 per cent. Four months later, as published on 27 February, this had increased to 24 per cent, even as demand for surgery fell. Minister, why has the percentage of category 1 patients overdue for elective surgery increased in this period?

MS STEPHEN-SMITH: I will take that question on notice. I am aware that there are two different types of data in relation to overdue elective surgery. One is around people who are on the waitlist and the other is around the proportion of people who received their surgery who were overdue at the time of receiving their surgery. Given that I have not had a look at the source of data that Ms Castley is using, I will have to take the question on notice and check which of those types of information it is and respond to the rest of the question on that basis.

MS CASTLEY: Minister, is it acceptable for one-quarter of these patients, who are supposed to get surgery within 30 days, to be overdue?

MS STEPHEN-SMITH: Obviously, we vastly prefer that no patients are overdue when they receive their surgery. We do have a specific focus on ensuring that category 1 patients receive their surgery on time. I am pleased to say that after some period of increase in elective surgery waiting lists, in part due to COVID-19 and in part due to the theatre fire at the former Calvary Public Hospital Bruce, we have started to see a turnaround in elective surgery waiting lists, and that is really heartening. Of course, we will continue to work on this.

MR HANSON: Minister, despite claiming for the past two days in question time that everything was hunky-dory in the health system, why is the percentage of Canberrans waiting for cat 1 elective surgery getting worse?

MS STEPHEN-SMITH: I think that is fundamentally exactly the same question as Ms Castley's first question, so I will take that on notice. I have never said that everything in the health system is really fantastic and going super well. No health system could ever claim that everything is super fantastic, everything is going well and that nobody is ever waiting for care. That is simply not how health systems work, and every health system in the country is experiencing it.

Mr Hanson interjecting—

MS STEPHEN-SMITH: What I just said to Mr Hanson is that we have started to see a turnaround in our elective surgery waitlist because—

Mr Hanson: Not cat 1s.

MS STEPHEN-SMITH: This is a different set of data. Mr Hanson, I have already said that I will need to take the question on notice and understand what data the opposition is referring to. It may well be lag data that is already out of date.

Hospitals—waiting lists

MS CASTLEY: My question is to the Minister for Health. I again refer to elective

surgery waiting times. On 11 October 2024, the percentage of overdue ready for surgery category 2 patients, was 45 per cent. As with category 1 patients, this percentage also increased after the last four months, to 51 per cent. Could the minister explain why the percentage of category 2 patients has also increased?

MS STEPHEN-SMITH: Again, I will take that question on notice, but it would be super helpful, in order to be able to answer the question, if Ms Castley in asking questions, would provide the source of the data to which she is referring, so that we can check what type of data it is—

Ms Castley interjecting—

MS STEPHEN-SMITH: If she is referring to the Canberra Health Services fortnightly update on waiting lists, that is published fortnightly—

Ms Castley interjecting—

MS STEPHEN-SMITH: So why she would be referring to October 2024, is beyond me. So—

Ms Castley interjecting—

THE SPEAKER: Ms Castley, you have had your chance. Ms Stephen-Smith, you are done?

MS STEPHEN-SMITH: I am done.

MS CASTLEY: Minister, don't Canberrans deserve better than a fifty-fifty chance that they will get the surgery they need, in the timeframe their doctor says they need it? It is CHS data, Minister.

MS STEPHEN-SMITH: Well if you could point me to the actual CHS data, rather than just saying that, Ms Castley—

Ms Castley interjecting—

MS STEPHEN-SMITH: —it would be helpful. Sorry, through you, Mr Speaker.

Of course, as Ms Castley has said, we want to see everybody getting their surgery on time. Of course, we absolutely do. But we know that we have seen significant impacts, through the COVID-19 pandemic, which those opposite seem to have completely forgotten about, and through the Calvary Public Hospital theatre fire, which knocked out five public hospital theatres for 10 months. We are now doing an incredible amount of elective surgery to meet our elective surgery target this year. Canberra Health Services is publishing fortnightly what those waiting lists look like, by specialty, and that is providing transparency to the community. Of course this is operational data. So, again, it will be helpful if Ms Castley would try different—

Ms Castley: It is on your website.

MS STEPHEN-SMITH: So then why do—

Ms Castley: You asked for the source.

MS STEPHEN-SMITH: But you are talking about October.

MS MORRIS: Minister, if you needed elective surgery, would you opt for the public system?

MS STEPHEN-SMITH: I am perfectly happy to answer this question. If I needed elective surgery, no I would not, because I do not need to. I have private health insurance and I would use my private health insurance. I could self-insure if I did not have private health insurance. I would encourage everyone in Canberra, if they need elective surgery, and they have private health insurance, and they can afford to, to use their private health insurance. It is one of the ways that people can help take pressure off the public health system.

One of the challenges we face in the ACT is that we have the highest proportion of people who hold private health insurance and about the lowest proportion of people who use their private health insurance. That places additional pressure on the public hospital system. Now part of the reason for that, I absolutely recognise, is that people also face high gaps. I am in a very fortunate position of being able to use the private system. It is a very fortunate position that I am in, and so therefore, I would do that.

Sport and recreation—Stromlo to Cotter bike trail

MISS NUTTALL: My question is hopefully to the Minister for Planning and Sustainable Development regarding Stromlo mountain bike trails. Minister, the time line for construction of the Stromlo to Cotter link trail is meant to begin this year. Can you give us an update on specifically when we will see progress?

MR STEEL: I am happy to take the question on notice and will come back to you with some further information. I do not believe that it is within my portfolio responsibilities at the present time as minister for planning, but I will come back to you on that.

MISS NUTTALL: Is the government going to provide any additional funding or staffing to improve maintenance on these trails, given that mountain bikers are super keen about it?

MR STEEL: I will come back on that. I think you are referring to the Cotter flow trail, which is not part of the Stromlo Forest Park precinct, where there has obviously been a significant amount of extra investment in maintenance through the insourcing contract for maintenance. I can certainly come back to you with some further information about the maintenance of that and what is being proposed once the flow trail has been built, which it has not been at this point.

MS CLAY: Given how divided responsibility is amongst many ministers, as was just demonstrated, who is taking the lead to communicate with the mountain biking community to let them know there is transparency and leadership on this?

MR STEEL: Stromlo Forest Park has offered to provide that connection. We have discussed that in the Assembly in the past through various pieces of private members' business. They can contact Stromlo Forest Park management. There is also a stakeholder reference group as part of Stromlo Forest Park that has a range of user groups represented. That is a really good place to talk about a range of issues—those that relate to not just mountain biking but also the broader recreational precinct. The Cotter flow trail will connect with Stromlo Forest Park, so it would be a relevant item of discussion.

Canberra Health Services—surgeons

MS CASTLEY: My question is to the Minister for Health. As the figures demonstrate, the percentage of Canberrans who are now overdue for their elective surgery has increased under your watch since you were re-elected. Minister, can you explain how this situation will change following the resignation of most of Canberra's orthopaedic surgeons in recent weeks?

MS STEPHEN-SMITH: It is not true that of most Canberra's orthopaedic surgeons have resigned in recent weeks.

MS CASTLEY: Minister, do you deny the resignations of orthopaedic surgeons are ultimately because of your appointments, your decisions and your mismanagement?

MS STEPHEN-SMITH: I cannot speak on behalf of the individuals. I believe I took a question on notice earlier in the week to provide some information about the resignations for each person. What I can say, is that Canberra Health Services and I have ensured that additional locum cover has been brought in, in case it is required to cover orthopaedic lists. There have been some other challenges in relation to orthopaedics that do not relate to resignations. One of the really promising things in relation to the decisions that we have made about visiting medical officers is that other craft groups are coming to the table and having conversations about how we can make it work. As I have said yesterday or the day before, we have said to everyone who has a contract that is expiring within the next six months that we will extend that contract for six months, have a conversation about the arrangements for those visiting medical officers. But the pathway that we are on around patient-centred care, organising our services around patients, will continue, and what we want to do is have a conversation and share information.

In the meeting I had last week with orthopaedic surgeons, there was a recognition that, I think in their words, mistakes have been made on both sides, and there was an agreement that we would work together to try to have a constructive conversation about how people could share information so there was transparency from the side of the operations centre and the side of the surgeons, around who was a priority for surgery and around how those orthopaedic surgical lists would be managed. So I would really discourage Ms Castley from scaremongering about this issue. There is no evidence to support that this has had an impact on elective surgery waiting lists for orthopaedics.

MS BARRY: Minister, isn't it time that you admit that you are the problem with the Canberra health system?

MS STEPHEN-SMITH: I am sorry Mr Speaker; I am going to need Ms Barry to repeat the question.

MS BARRY: Minister, isn't it time that you admit that you are the problem with the healthcare system?

MS STEPHEN-SMITH: I would certainly say to Ms Barry that she should maybe look at some of the data about the improvements in performance of the health system. I note that Ms Castley has completely stopped talking about emergency department performance because we have become one of the best performing jurisdictions in the country. Our hospitals are among the best performing against their peers in emergency departments because of the changes we have implemented to improve flow through our hospitals, because of the investments that we have made to open the new Critical Services Building at Canberra Hospital that has had incredible feedback from patients, carers and clinicians about the flow through that hospital, the way that the hospital is supporting people. We have brought together an integrated public hospital system to enable our hospital system to become more efficient and we are seeing those elective surgery waitlists now turning around as part of those planned care initiatives. Like every jurisdiction in the country, we have been affected by the impacts of COVID-19 and, in our case also by the impacts of a theatre fire at Calvary Public Hospital, which are now being recovered from. So no, Ms Barry, I absolutely reject that assertion.

Children and young people—Next Steps for Our Kids strategy

MS TOUGH: My question is to the Minister for Youth and Families. Minister, I understand there has been considerable progress with the Next Steps for Our Kids strategy, particularly in relation to setting up the new contract arrangements through the Children, Young People and Families Panel. Can you provide us with an update?

MR PETTERSSON: I would like to thank Ms Tough for her keen interest in and advocacy for children, young people and families in the ACT. There has, of course, been a substantial amount of work to progress the next Steps for Our Kids strategy. I would like to acknowledge my predecessor, Minister Stephen-Smith, for the work she did to commence and drive this strategy from the beginning.

One of the biggest successes has been the forming of the Children, Young People and Families Panel. This is a new group of non-government organisations that support children, young people, families and carers by providing them with a range of different supports. The panel will deliver therapeutic and cultural services across several service packages. These range from sustaining families, which include intensive family support, preservation and restoration services, kinship and foster care, extended aftercare support, contact and transport services and functional family therapy for youth justice.

There are currently 12 providers on the panel and they will start delivering services in a phased way. Services commenced in late 2024 and will be rolled out over the next 12 months. The panel sees the government commit more and more to the provision of early intervention and prevention services for some of our most vulnerable Canberrans and always work to keep children safely at home with family.

MS TOUGH: Minister, what work is being done to support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families through the panel arrangements?

MR PETTERSSON: The panel includes an Aboriginal community-controlled organisation, Yerrabi Yurwang. This service was established in 2019 and came from an idea of like-minded Aboriginal community members who wanted Aboriginal people to deliver services for Aboriginal families. This embodies the Closing the Gap and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Agreement principles of self-determination for Aboriginal communities.

I had the absolute pleasure of visiting with Yerrabi and their board just a few weeks ago at the beautiful Yarramundi Reach. It is clear to me that they are committed to making long-term changes for families engaged with their service. Under the new panel, Yerrabi started delivering services in late 2024 under the Sustaining Families Program directly to Aboriginal children, young people and their families. They are supporting Aboriginal families early and taking a whole-of-family approach. This is where the needs of all family members are considered in recognition that children grow and thrive in healthy families.

They have also partnered with OzChild to deliver a successful pilot of the Functional Family Therapy program, focused on supporting young people at risk of involvement with the justice system. This program was recently funded long-term due to its success and is one way we are preparing for the system to raise the minimum age of criminal responsibility in July 2025.

MR WERNER-GIBBINGS: Minister, what impact is the new panel and Next Steps for Our Kids having on trends in kids in care?

MR PETTERSSON: Thank you, Mr Werner-Gibbings. I am pleased to say that we are seeing an impact on the system through the Next Steps initiatives. The Productivity Commissioner's *Report on government services* reported that, in the ACT on 30 June 2024, 608 children and young people were living in out-of-home care, down from 723 in 2022-23. This is 115 less children than the previous year and a great result, as we have more options to keep children at home with families. The *Family matters* report for 2024 also noted the rate of overrepresentation of Aboriginal children in out-of-home care decreased from 14 per thousand in 2023 to 11.7 per thousand in 2024. This is an important step in the right direction and a demonstration that some of the measures in place for Aboriginal children and families are taking effect.

We know there is a lot more work that is needed, and that is why we invested in the 2024-25 budget an additional \$9.9 million for four years to implement Next Steps and make lasting change.

Budget—reporting methods

MR COCKS: My question is to the Treasurer. Treasurer, the ACT government uses non-standard budgeting measures: specifically, the Headline Net Operating Balance, or HNOB. Meanwhile, every other jurisdiction in Australia uses the Uniform Presentation Framework, or UPF. Since becoming Treasurer, have you reviewed the use of HNOB, and will you move the budget process to UPF to align with the standard approach used

by every other state and territory?

MR STEEL: I thank the shadow treasurer for his question. This has been a long discussed matter that has come up on regular occasions at the Assembly in various sittings. We do utilise the Headline Net Operating Balance measure because it provides the greatest level of transparency about the current budget position so that the government can make decisions and other members of the Assembly can understand the position of the ACT's finances, particularly when taking into account the superannuation liability that the ACT has, which is different to other states that do not use the net operating balance measure.

We present the finances according to Australian Accounting Standards. We present as much information as is useful to provide that transparency for people to see the state of our finances. It is because of that superannuation adjustment that we do present it through the Headline Net Operating Balance.

MR COCKS: Treasurer, what are the trade-offs, from your perspective, of sticking with this non-standard approach and what are the drawbacks?

MR STEEL: The Headline Net Operating Balance is the ACT government's key fiscal measure of public finances. It is calculated as the difference between revenue and expenses from transactions, as defined by the ABS Government Finance Statistics framework, to arrive at the net operating balance plus the superannuation return adjustment.

The SRA is not defined by the GFS or Australian Accounting Standards; the SRA is included in the HNOB to account for the unique nature of public sector defined benefit superannuation arrangements in the ACT. The net operating balance includes interest and dividend revenue derived from financial assets but excludes gains and losses on investments, which are treated as other economic flows. The HNOB also includes all expenses associated with the defined benefit public sector superannuation arrangements. So, this SRA, effectively, adds back the net gains and losses on the investment component to ensure that the fiscal position is not understated, as these gains provide a source of funding for the long-term superannuation liability. Our goal here is to provide the most transparent set of accounts as we can—

Mr Cocks: A point of order. I have given the Treasurer some time. The question was not about what the different measures are. I am specifically interested in the trade-offs when adopting this particular measure and what the drawbacks of that are. The Treasurer has gone largely to a defence of the current arrangements.

MR SPEAKER: I think the Treasurer has to some extent answered the question, broadly speaking, on the pros and cons. He has got 40 seconds left if he wishes to continue.

MR STEEL: I have finished, thank you.

MR SPEAKER: Thank you. Is there a supplementary? Mr Milligan.

MR MILLIGAN: Minister, does your government's use of non-standard budgeting

reflect your own prioritisation of spin over acknowledging and dealing with the true extent of the ACT's budget problem?

MR STEEL: No, quite the opposite. It provides a transparent statement of our accounts so that we can make the right decisions in the budget process based on a true measure of the accounts because of our unique circumstances in accounting for that superannuation liability. If we did not do that, we would also be criticised by the rest of the parliament for not doing that and not properly treating that in the way that it should be. We present the accounts in a range of different ways to provide the full set of information about where the accounts are up to.

Mr Hanson interjecting—

MR SPEAKER: Mr Hanson!

Mr Barr interjecting—

MR SPEAKER: Mr Barr!

MR STEEL: We will continue to do that into the future.

MR SPEAKER: Members! We have one to get through; that is all!

Sport and recreation—Taylor district playing fields

MR BRADDOCK: My question is to the Minister for Sport and Recreation. I visited the Gungahlin Bulls Rugby League Football Club “come and try” day—and I believe you did as well—at the Taylor playing fields. They operate out of a number of shipping containers there, and have done so for a while. A very clear question they are seeking an answer to is: what is the government's plan to provide permanent facilities, and in roughly what time frame will that happen, so that they can start to plan for their future?

MS BERRY: Yes, I did have a great conversation with the sports club out there about their aspirations for the future and indicated to them that any kind of changes to that area would be part of budget processes, as Mr Braddock would well know. I think that they took on board my thoughts, with respect to making sure that I work with them about what their needs are in the future, having regard to new sports fields that would be built there, as well as future pavilions and change rooms. I am happy to keep working with them on their aspirations going forward.

MR BRADDOCK: Minister, why isn't this type of infrastructure planned out beyond the budget cycle so that clubs know and can prepare in advance?

MS BERRY: They are definitely committed to, as far as election commitments are concerned, and the needs within our community. Each year budgets are made; ministers put in their applications to budgets, to make sure that they have a good way of going forward, particularly with spending like this, at the sports field at Gungahlin. Whilst you can make a commitment, the budget cycle is yearly.

MISS NUTTALL: Minister, does the government have a time line on when the Sport

and Active Recreation Infrastructure Survey will be turned into a more structured delivery road map, which might aid clarity on this, beyond just the listening report?

MS BERRY: That was not the commitment that we made, when we did that survey, but we are certainly happy to talk with sports clubs about their aspirations, which was what the survey was designed to do, to give us some idea of what their aspirations were, going forward, to inform the government's future sport and recreation commitments.

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