



**QUESTION TIME**  
OF THE  
LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY  
FOR THE  
AUSTRALIAN CAPITAL TERRITORY

**HANSARD**

Edited proof transcript

Thursday, 27 June 2024

This is an **EDITED PROOF TRANSCRIPT** of question time proceedings that is subject to further checking. Members' suggested corrections for the official *Weekly Hansard* should be lodged with the Hansard office as soon as possible.

## Thursday, 27 June 2024

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## **Ministerial arrangements**

**MR BARR** (Kurrajong—Chief Minister, Treasurer, Minister for Climate Action, Minister for Tourism and Minister for Trade, Investment and Economic Development) (2.00): Again, Madam Speaker, Minister Cheyne will be absent from question time today due to illness. Minister Steel will assist in city services and I will assist in Minister Cheyne's other portfolios.

## **Legislative Assembly—unparliamentary language**

**Ms Lee:** Madam Speaker, in relation to the comments you made this morning, I withdraw.

**MADAM SPEAKER:** Thank you indeed.

## **Questions without notice Economy—credit rating**

**MS LEE:** My question is to the Treasurer. Treasurer, analysis by former Labor Chief Minister, Jon Stanhope, and Dr Khalid Ahmed, former senior ACT Treasury official, shows that the ACT is the highest taxing jurisdiction in Australia, imposing taxes at 135 per cent of its capacity. It also shows that across Australia, other jurisdictions have a pathway back to a balanced budget or are already there. Their analysis says:

It is almost certain, based on past forecasting performance, that the revenue forecasts are significantly overstated, in which case the forecast improvements in the operating budget will vanish.

Treasurer, given this damning analysis of your budget by one of your former Labor Chief Ministers, how can you maintain any confidence in the ACT retaining its AA+ credit rating?

**MR BARR:** Whilst I am sure we all enjoy reading the commentary of the former Chief Minister and a former Deputy Director-General in the Treasury agency, that is their opinion and they are entitled to it. I do not think anything is going to change their opinion. In relation to credit ratings, the normal process at the conclusion of a budget round is that the credit rating agencies will assess the territory's fiscal position and make a determination. That will occur in the same way as it has every budget year.

**MS LEE:** Treasurer, when are you expecting to meet with Standard & Poor's, or any other rating agency, in relation to the territory's budget and credit rating?

**MR BARR:** The usual practice is by the spring, so several months after the budget.

**MR CAIN:** Treasurer, for full transparency, will you undertake today, to provide the details to this Assembly of any discussions your government has with S&P Global about the territory's credit rating. If not, why not?

**MR BARR:** The territory has an annual discussion with Standard & Poor's and the next

one will be scheduled for the coming months.

### **Budget—education**

**MS LEE:** My question is to the minister for education. Minister, late last week you announced \$24.9 million over the next four years to improve literacy and numeracy outcomes for ACT public school students, an announcement that followed the release of the Literacy and Numeracy Education Expert Panel’s final report. However, budget papers released on Tuesday showed that only \$1.7 million is new money, with the remainder of the funds coming from within Education’s existing resources. Budget papers also show that there is no additional new money in any of the forward estimates for these reforms. Minister, how can you assure Canberra parents and teachers that you are taking these reforms and recommendations seriously, given that you have not put money behind them?

**MS BERRY:** I also said, in my announcement last week on the funding to respond to and apply the recommendations by the expert panel, that this was the start of the process; we would be developing an implementation plan this year and the recommendations that were put forward by the expert panel to phase in this program of work were to begin from January next year. And I have made a commitment publicly that there would be more to come.

**MS LEE:** Minister, will you be up-front with the Canberra public and release, before the October election, your plan for the full implementation?

**MS BERRY:** I have been up-front about the implementation of the recommendations regarding Strong Foundations.

**MS LAWDER:** Minister, what programs are you cutting within your directorate to pay for the implementation of these reforms?

**MS BERRY:** There is a realignment of the work of the Education Directorate to provide more of a focus on implementing these recommendations that have been put in place by the expert panel.

*Mr Cain interjecting—*

**Mr Gentleman:** A point of order, Madam Speaker. Mr Cain has interjected three times in two questions already in question time. He was on a warning this morning. I ask that he be named and that he withdraw from the chamber.

**MADAM SPEAKER:** No, he was one step short of a warning, but I think I have just put him on one.

### **Hospitals—digital health records**

**MS CASTLEY:** Madam Speaker, my question is to the Minister for Health. Minister, last weekend a patient with a very advanced infection was admitted to the Canberra Hospital and put on a drip for the next one to two months to treat golden staph in his bones. On Sunday night this patient, who had no reason to believe he would not get

better, opened MyDHR and saw a task which asked him whether he had considered his end of life choices—whether he had made funeral arrangements and considered his preferred type of burial et cetera.

He became very distressed. There was no-one around to console him; he had barely any sleep. He was crying on the phone when he explained how reading this made him feel. He was shocked and alone. He confirmed with a nurse the following morning that he is okay and is not dying. There are also reports of another patient, who had suspected leukaemia, receiving the same message. Minister, is this patient's experience not symptomatic of the common dysfunction of Canberra Health Services under your oversight?

**MS STEPHEN-SMITH:** I reject the last part of the question; I do not think it is. But I agree with Ms Castley that that is not acceptable. It is not an acceptable use of the Digital Health Record, the MyDHR function, for patients to receive those kinds of questions without any support available to them. I will follow that up with Canberra Health Services and find out how that happened. That is absolutely not what we would expect from a patient experience. We would expect that, when patients are critically ill, staff are having sensitive conversations with them. It is absolutely inappropriate that they are seeing that on MyDHR without support available to them or in inappropriate circumstances. I will seek to address that as quickly as possible.

**MS CASTLEY:** Minister, will you promise that no-one else will receive a notification like this and that all correspondence of this sort in the future will be done face to face?

**MS STEPHEN-SMITH:** We will try to rectify this as quickly as possible. If it is some kind of automated function or something that is pushed automatically from a staff note to the patient's MyDHR, I cannot guarantee that that will not happen again in the next little while. We will seek to address this as quickly as we possibly can. I absolutely apologise to anyone who has had this experience. As I said earlier, it is entirely unacceptable that a patient would have that experience.

**MS LAWDER:** Minister, along with your apology, can you identify how many other people may have had a similar notice under this system that you have been dealing with for the past five years?

**MS STEPHEN-SMITH:** The Digital Health Record was implemented in November 2022 and there have been many benefits from it. MyDHR, which has been an incredibly popular function in the Digital Health Record, appears to be the issue. Saying that this has been an issue for five years is completely incorrect. However, I will take the detail of the question on notice and see if we can identify that. It may be that we would only be able to identify if complaints have been received in relation to this. Some people would have received notifications on MyDHR that they did not look at and that would now be way down in the system. Whether we can pick those up, in terms of trying to count those numbers, I cannot say for certain. I will take the question on notice and come back to the Assembly.

### **Budget—cost of living**

**MS ORR:** My question is to the Treasurer. Treasurer, what practical and targeted

measures are included in the budget to help with the cost of living for Canberrans who need it most?

**MR BARR:** I thank Ms Orr for the question. There is a \$143 million package of concessions contained within the budget. It includes support for over 40,000 households, with electricity, gas and water rebates. There is also support for apprentices and trainees, with a payment of \$250. We have expanded the Utilities Hardship Fund to increase the available vouchers to \$300 to support more households. We have extended the Rent Relief Fund to provide more support to Canberrans who are experiencing rental stress. We have expanded public transport concession fares. And we have provided additional funding to a number of community organisations who provide support directly to Canberrans in need, including for emergency material and financial aid programs and food relief services.

**MS ORR:** Treasurer, why is it so important to keep energy costs low for Canberrans?

**MR BARR:** Power bills can be the largest bills a household would receive in the course of a month, a quarter or a year. We have seen, in other jurisdictions, very large price increases. The ACT's decision to move to long-term fixed price renewable energy contracts has provided stability in our energy prices. To help with energy costs, we have sought to complement the \$300 per household initiative from the commonwealth government through returning \$61.3 million in surplus revenue from the large-scale feed-in tariff to households, as well as provide the \$800 electricity, gas and water rebate to 44,000 Canberra households in 2024-25. Of course, households can save even more on their energy bills by engaging with their electricity retailer and looking at the different plans and savings options that are available from the retailers.

**MR PETTERSSON:** Treasurer, what proven every-day cost-of-living supports do these new budget initiatives build on?

**MR BARR:** I thank Mr Pettersson for the question. Of course, they build on access to health care when and where you need it, particularly through our established network of nurse-led walk-in centres. They build on initiatives like the Education Equity Fund, which provides support for students across our education system. More than 5,000 students have already accessed support in 2024 from that fund. It builds on our free three-year-old preschool program. These and a number of other initiatives contained within the budget are helping tens of thousands of Canberra families with their everyday costs.

### **Hospitals—emergency department waiting times**

**MS CASTLEY:** My question is to the Minister for Health.

Minister, since 2020 through to 2021 you have been given over \$11.2 billion for health funding, yet you have failed to meet your own targets for emergency department presentations whose length of stay is four hours or less, with only 56 per cent of patients meeting this benchmark against a target of 90 per cent. You have also failed to meet any of your own elective surgery targets, with 26 per cent of category 1 patients, 56 per cent of category 2 patients, and 33 per cent of category 3 patients not being seen within clinically recommended time frames. Minister, how embarrassed are you that you have

received more than \$11 billion dollars in funding in this term of government, and yet you are still nowhere near your promise to see 70 per cent of ED patients in four hours or less?

**MS STEPHEN-SMITH:** Ms Castley is right. This week marks my fifth anniversary in this job as health minister. I am pleased to say that we have in fact seen a significant improvement not only in emergency department performance but in the capacity of our health system throughout those five years.

As Ms Castley would be aware if she looked at the latest quarterly performance report, our hospitals are now seeing 63 per cent of patients in our emergency departments on time, with a median wait time of 25 minutes which has come down from 48 minutes in 2020-21. So a very significant improvement in median wait time. We are also seeing patients leave the ED within four hours at 57.5 per cent, which is in fact above the last published national average figure.

*Ms Castley interjecting—*

**MS STEPHEN-SMITH:** As I have made the point to Ms Castley many, many times in this place, this is an incredible result for our hospitals, which are not comparable on a jurisdiction-by-jurisdiction basis with an entire other jurisdiction's hospital system because we do not have any of the smaller regional or outer metropolitan hospitals which tend to see people very quickly because they are not very busy. Canberra Hospital is one of the busiest emergency departments in the country—

*Opposition members interjecting—*

**MADAM SPEAKER:** Members, members!

**MS STEPHEN-SMITH:** and on a peer comparison, Canberra Hospital has consistently performed, particularly for category 2, better than most of its peers around the country. Ms Castley will continue to talk down our hospital system in the face of all evidence that it is continuing to improve. I will not!

**MS CASTLEY:** Minister, should Canberrans believe what you say, or believe what you do when it comes to health outcomes?

**MS STEPHEN-SMITH:** I think Canberrans should believe what I say and what I do. The consistent feedback that I get from Canberrans, particularly in relation to, for example, the management of a global pandemic, is that people absolutely appreciated how upfront both the Chief Minister and I were in talking to them about what we knew, what we did not know, what we were doing and why we were doing it, and that we said what we were going to do and we did what we said we were going to do.

It is exactly the same in our hospital system. We have committed significant resources to improving our emergency department performance, and we have in this budget again as well—including the funding for the operation centre at Canberra Hospital, which has seen a significant change in the way that this performance is monitored. I was visiting the operation centre recently. It is operating very well to improve patient flow, even in its relatively early days. So we will continue to make these investments—record

investments—in our health system. There is \$2.6 billion into our health system next year—

*Opposition members interjecting—*

**MADAM SPEAKER:** Members!

**MS STEPHEN-SMITH:** As the opposition has pointed out, it is a significant increase in investment in health over the last five years because that is what Labor does. Labor believes in public health and we will continue to invest in it. Canberra Liberals have no plan for our public health system except a royal commission and delay tactics.

**MADAM SPEAKER:** I will give the call to Ms Lawder but can we just ask members to hush!

**Mr Parton:** We'll try.

**MADAM SPEAKER:** You can do better than that, Mr Parton, and consider yourself warned for being cheeky.

**MS LAWDER:** Minister, why should Canberrans believe that you can, all of a sudden, do your job properly just because your funding has increased from \$2.3 billion to \$2.6 billion?

*Opposition members interjecting—*

**MS STEPHEN-SMITH:** I point Canberrans to—Madam Speaker?

**MADAM SPEAKER:** Members, please. You have just been asked to be quiet. You already have Mr Cain and Mr Parton on a warning, so please. Ms Stephen-Smith.

**MS STEPHEN-SMITH:** I would point Canberrans to the data and the actual facts which show that we will deliver a record number of elective surgeries this year, that our emergency department performance is improving and that we are continuing—

*Opposition members interjecting—*

**MS STEPHEN-SMITH:** Madam Speaker, really? This is ridiculous!

**MADAM SPEAKER:** Like I said, you have two members warned. You asked the question; have the respect to have the minister respond.

**MS STEPHEN-SMITH:** I am finished, Madam Speaker.

### **Planning—Thoroughbred Park**

**MS CLAY:** My question is to the Chief Minister. You have formed a steering committee to consider next steps for Thoroughbred Park. This is a major site close to the heart of Canberra, on the light rail, and an excellent choice for more housing and community facilities. The industry has put up a \$2 billion development but there are



other options on the table. I have heard concerns in the media and from the public that the ACT government might only be looking at the horseracing industry's plans and might make a decision behind closed doors, rather than running a transparent and open process and picking the best option for the community. Who does the steering committee report back to?

**MR BARR:** To me.

**MS CLAY:** Who is on the steering committee?

**MR BARR:** The Deputy Director-General of Economic Development, the Deputy Under Treasurer, Economic Revenue and Insurance, the Coordinator-General for Housing, the Deputy Under Treasurer, Budget Procurement, Investment and Finance, the Deputy Director-General of the Environment, Planning and Sustainable Development Directorate, the Chief Executive Officer of the Suburban Land Agency, the Deputy Director-General of City Services, the Deputy Director-General of the Justice and Community Safety Directorate, and the Chief Executive of the Canberra Racing Club.

**MISS NUTTALL:** When will the government run public consultation ahead of making a decision about the site?

**MR BARR:** In the years ahead.

### **Health—eating disorders**

**MR COCKS:** Madam Speaker, my question is to the Minister for Mental Health. Minister, residential eating disorder centres, like the Wandji Nerida centre in Queensland and other centres around the country, are a proven way to help people experiencing eating disorders. This model was expected to be up and running by now in the ACT.

After funding was committed by the Liberal federal government, the then ACT Minister for Mental Health, on 2 June 2020, advised that construction would start in 2021-22, but the project has been repeatedly delayed in ACT budgets since 2021. Once again, the physical completion date has been moved back. Minister, when will the construction of the residential treatment centre for eating disorders be completed and when will services commence?

**MS DAVIDSON:** I thank the member for the question. I went out there just last week with a number of stakeholders, including people who had come down specifically from Queensland to see the progress on our eating disorders residential treatment centre. It is very close to completion at this point. I could not tell you the exact date, off the top of my head, but it is very close to being completed. It is expected to be open soon. The finishing touches are being put in place.

The people who came down from Queensland particularly noted some of the elements of the construction that they felt were really important for supporting the right model of care to be delivered for people. Also, the people from Bondi Junction were able to come and see what we are doing in our centre and get some great ideas for things that

they might want to do in their centre in future.

The recruitment of staff for this centre has been very successful. We have been keeping our stakeholder organisations from the reference group engaged throughout this process, to make sure that what we are doing is aligned with the planning for this centre, which dates all the way back to 2018, when Minister Rattenbury first took on this work to make sure that we are providing a service that fills a gap in the ACT. It will be wonderful to see that completed very soon.

**MR COCKS:** Minister, what is the impact of the delays, which were confirmed in the budget, on people with eating disorders who have been waiting for these services since 2019, given your previous comments about the importance of early intervention?

**MS DAVIDSON:** I thank the member for the question. The work has been progressing to get this centre open. It is going to be open very shortly. In the meantime, people who need treatment have been able to continue accessing the same treatments that they have been accessing while that construction has been underway.

A number of major improvements have been made to our stepped model of care for eating disorders across the ACT. They include the opening of the clinical hub, which has made a massive difference in reducing waiting lists so that people are able to start treatment, and an early intervention service for eating disorders. We know that there are ways in which these services can connect with each other, thanks to the clinical hub, that will improve people's transition from one step in their treatment plan to the next, as they progress towards recovery.

One of the things that we would like to see in future in the ACT is a day program. Having the residential centre open will enable us to have more options for how we might want to deliver a day program in the future. That will help enormously with people who have received inpatient treatment for medical stabilisation but may not yet be ready to progress to the residential centre or continue with the eating disorders program. A day service is something that we are looking at. We have been progressing that work while continuing to get the construction and the model of care established for the residential treatment centre.

**MS CASTLEY:** Minister why, five years after this centre was promised, are we still waiting for you to stop dragging your feet and making excuses about this service? Will you commit to taking on notice and reporting back to the Assembly the date the centre will open?

**MS DAVIDSON:** I very much look forward to being able to report back to the Assembly on the successful opening of the centre, which is imminent. The work to progress a centre of this nature does take some time because of the level of consultation that is required with the community.

*Opposition members interjecting—*

**MADAM SPEAKER:** Members, please! Mr Rattenbury.

**Mr Rattenbury:** Madam Speaker, on a point of order: we continue to have repeated

interjections from the members of the opposition. It is hard for the minister to answer the question when this sort of chirping is going on.

**Ms Castley:** Madam Speaker, to the point of order: I asked the minister if she would report back to the Assembly on a completion date. She must have some idea—

**MADAM SPEAKER:** I am going to take her response about coming back and informing the Assembly about the opening as relevant to that. There is no point of order.

### **Budget—economy**

**MR PETTERSSON:** My question is to the Treasurer. Treasurer, what are some of the economic opportunities and challenges for the ACT identified in the 2024 budget?

**MR BARR:** I thank Mr Pettersson for the question. Pleasingly, we are on track for our 34th year of consecutive economic growth—a record that no other state or territory comes close to being able to replicate. But, like every jurisdiction, we do face economic challenges, particularly in the short term, and there is, at this point in time, a softening in the national economic outlook. Business and consumer confidence has been impacted, particularly by higher interest rates. Our strong labour market, our strong level of public demand, and the facts that we are now seeing real wages growth and our city continues to grow are expected to be the main factors that will underpin our ongoing economic activity. Our strong infrastructure program, delivering over a billion dollars a year of new infrastructure, is also supporting our growing community and tens of thousands of jobs.

**MR PETTERSSON:** Treasurer, why is it so important for economic and construction confidence to have a stable pipeline of infrastructure projects over the medium term?

**MR BARR:** In outlining an \$8 billion infrastructure investment program over the next five years, we are providing certainty to the marketplace. The capital investment priorities continue to be in health, education, public transport, public housing, climate action and urban renewal. There is investment in small, medium and major projects across all areas of the ACT government, including in the public trading enterprise area that includes the Suburban Land Authority, the City Renewal Authority, Housing ACT and Icon Water. The government remains focused on the delivery of the infrastructure program. We are on track in the financial year that is about to end to deliver over a billion dollars of additional infrastructure for our community.

**DR PATERSON:** Treasurer, how does this budget create and protect both private and public sector jobs?

**MR BARR:** The budget's focus is on providing certainty over the medium term. Those in the public sector have an understanding of the job security that comes with our decisions in relation to insourcing certain government activities. There is a clear pipeline of recruitment in our health sector, for example. Job vacancies in the care economy are growing. There is a lot of demand for workers in that regard, so we need to set out a long-term plan to ensure there is confidence that there will be jobs available in our public health system over the next four or five years. We have given that certainty through the investments in this budget.

In terms of private sector activity, an example is, of course, our investment in growing our tourism sector, which employs around 20,000 Canberrans. This sector has grown strongly in rebound from the difficult COVID years and has very strong potential for growth in the future. Making it cheaper and easier to get to Canberra is a really important part of the government's focus on supporting the growth of our tourism industry.

### **Motor vehicles—licences and registration**

**MR COCKS:** My question is to the Acting Minister for Government Services and Regulatory Reform. Minister, the ACT already has some of the most expensive driver licence and registration fees in the country. As one example, a five-year licence costs \$127 in Tasmania and \$163 in Western Australia. Meanwhile, people in the ACT are paying \$218 in comparison. This pattern is repeated across licence categories and other fees and charges. ACT residents consistently pay more. In the middle of a cost of living crisis, there seems no logical reason for Canberra to have far higher costs than other states, yet this government has taken no action to alleviate the burden and I have to wonder whether ACT Labor cares. Minister, why does this government keep inflating the cost of living through higher fees and charges for Canberrans?

**MR BARR:** On behalf of Minister Cheyne, who is of course absent today, I will take that question.

I note the commentary, Mr Cocks. I do not accept the nature of that commentary, unsurprisingly. I would advise him that of course the ACT government has a range of concessions and discounts associated with each of those categories of fees and charges that he mentioned. In relation to drivers licences, for example, we provide a 30 per cent discount on licence renewal for those drivers who have had no infringements against them in the last five years. More than half the drivers in the territory receive that 30 per cent discount because they are safe drivers and they have demonstrated that they are safe drivers on the road for a period of five years or more.

**MR COCKS:** Chief Minister, why are registration and license fees so high in Canberra when we have fewer roads than other jurisdictions? Are you seeking to penalise ACT drivers?

**MR BARR:** We are certainly not seeking to penalise ACT drivers. What we are seeking to do, in the example that I provided before, is to reward good driving behaviour.

**MR PARTON:** Chief Minister, why do you slug Canberrans with ridiculously high registration fees for caravans when they are used almost exclusively on roads in other states and territories?

**MR BARR:** We have a range of options available for caravan registration, including part-year ones, because not everyone is taking their caravan on the road, interstate or otherwise, for 12 months of the year. So there are some substantive discounts available for those, for example who only wish to take their caravan on the road in the summer months or the winter months.

**ACT Policing—facilities**

**MR MILLIGAN:** My question is to the Minister for Police and Crime Prevention. Minister, the ACT Ombudsman’s report released yesterday identified “deficiencies in aspects of watch-house operations, in particular the infrastructure relating to the age of the facility and its ability to meet the current needs of a range of people in detention and staff compared to when the facility was built”. The report makes 21 recommendations, including addressing issues with the infrastructure, yet the budget provisions for the watch-house upgrades are not to be completed until 2026. Minister, given the known age of the watch-house and the issues with the overall age of the Civic police station, why have the upgrades to this facility not been given more priority in the budget?

**MR GENTLEMAN:** I thank Mr Milligan for the question. Indeed police worked fairly quickly on the early recommendations from that report, as soon as they got an update on it. I can say that we have been extremely cognisant of the need for upgrades at the city police station and, of course, the JESC. We have seen quite publicly the work that has been done, with \$3.1 million for the city police station for remediation and refurbishment. The officers at the city station were very keen to get back to the station and are very pleased with the work that has been done. Of course, there is more work to be done. That is in our forward plan for remediation where necessary. Of course, that includes around the watch-house.

**MR MILLIGAN:** Minister, will you now consider pushing for the upgrades to be made immediately, in line with the report?

**MR GENTLEMAN:** A number of works were done immediately by ACT Policing, following the initial recommendations from the report. They include work that needs to be done to ensure that it is a safe environment to work in and that it complies with the jurisdictional work that needs to be done. We will continue that work, alongside our colleagues in ACT Policing.

**MR CAIN:** Minister, will you make further provision for the training required as part of the 21 recommendations in the report?

**MR GENTLEMAN:** Training is ongoing in ACT Policing. There is lifelong learning in that career. I can say that it is well up to speed. Training continues through ACT Policing general duties. As AFP officers move through their careers, training continues right through. It does not stop at any point.

**Education—early childhood education**

**MISS NUTTALL:** Madam Speaker, my question is to the Minister for Early Childhood Development. Minister, access to universal child care is advantageous to both the children who attend the services provided and the families who are given the flexibility of having those hours of care available. With that in mind, is the ACT government planning to extend the number of hours of universal child care for three-year-olds in the coming years?

**MS BERRY:** We do not make those kinds of announcements during question time,

although I have been pleased to see the success of the program as it is currently being rolled out. It is beginning with a careful phase-in for targeted young people and their families, to ensure that those people who were not going to access three-year-old preschool and get that support are the families and young people that we are starting with.

This year we already have 84 providers, representing 143 services, who are providing free three-year-old preschool for the one day. In quarter 2 of 2024 there were 3,183 people who were enrolled in the program. We have 5,000 three-year-olds in the ACT who are eligible for up to 300 hours of free three-year-old preschool. It makes a significant financial difference for families—around \$1,300 a year saved in preschool fees by rolling out that program.

We have been careful to work with the sector, understanding that there is a workforce shortage within the early childhood education and care sector, to make sure that we are not overwhelming them at a time when they need our support the most.

**MISS NUTTALL:** Minister, could you outline why the ACT government arrived at the goal of 15 hours a week of universal child care for three-year-olds, despite some stakeholders setting the ideal number as high as 30 hours?

**MS BERRY:** Because the research shows that at least 15 hours, as a minimum, provides some of the best opportunities for young people within that time frame. After listening to the experts, that is the minimum number of hours that we have provided.

**MS CLAY:** Minister, what can we expect to see the ACT government doing to support this workforce, considering the significant shortage in the sector caused by poor conditions and low pay?

**MS BERRY:** As members will know, I worked with the early childhood education and care sector for a number of years, prior to being elected to this place, campaigning alongside them for improved wages and conditions. I am pleased to see that, finally, under the Labor government, there is some recognition of the early childhood education and care sector.

In the ACT we have been able to provide scholarships for early childhood education and care services to ensure that they can employ qualified, professional early childhood preschool teachers, as well as people who are entering the early childhood education and care sector. We know that that is not enough. More needs to be done to support early childhood education and care workers. However, the ACT government is doing what it can, working with the sector and making sure, again, that we not overwhelming them. We are not able to magic up early childhood educators overnight, but we are ensuring that we work closely with the sector to understand where we can provide the additional supports that are needed. We are not the ones who have all of the levers, particularly with regard to wages. As I said, I am pleased to see that there has been some positive movement from the federal Labor government in recognising the importance of this sector.

### **ACT Policing—facilities**

**MR MILLIGAN:** My question is to the Minister for Police and Crime Prevention and Minister for Fire and Emergency. Minister, the ACT Auditor-General's report released last week identified that there was a significant gap when it came to assessing the costs associated with facilities services. It said that there was a risk that "the territory's payments are incorrect for facilities costs" due to the lack of an appropriate strategic asset management plan. As a result, almost half of the infrastructure at ACT government policing sites was rated below average or average, with over 100 separate projects that needed urgent attention, some of which required immediate or imminent renewal or replacement to the tune of \$7.5 million. Minister, given the recent problems with the Gungahlin JESC and the civic police station, why has the government not done a strategic asset management plan for ACT Policing facilities?

**MR GENTLEMAN:** I thank Mr Milligan for the question. As I have mentioned previously, we are working through a strategic asset management plan across ACT Policing. A master accommodation plan puts forward opportunities for growth in the number of ACT police across the whole ACT. Indeed, we do have some older buildings that we have talked about in this place and also publicly. As needs come up, we will rectify those buildings and make them safe and habitable for ACT police. As I said earlier in my previous answer, police were very pleased with the results both at the city police station and at the JESC. We were able to move police officers out for quick repair and refurbishment of both of those areas, and they were very pleased to move back in.

**MR MILLIGAN:** Minister, when can the ACT public and ACT Policing expect the release of the strategic asset management plan?

**MR GENTLEMAN:** We will look at that when it is completed. There is still a bit of work to do. I would say it is still a couple of months away.

**MR COCKS:** Minister, given the need for \$7.5 million, why was more money not made available in the budget to meet these urgent repairs?

**MR GENTLEMAN:** Funding was provided in the budget to meet those urgent repairs, and those repairs have been completed, as I said, at the city police station at the cost of \$3.1 million, and at the JESC at the cost of \$1.5 million for repairs and \$0.5 million for the refurbishment of the police area.

### **Roads—ACT Road Safety Fund**

**MS LAWDER:** Madam Speaker, my question is to the Acting Minister for City Services. Minister, recent analysis of ACT Roads crash data showed more than 60 per cent of crashes on the Tuggeranong Parkway were rear-enders, an increase from the 2017 figures which showed 44 per cent were rear-enders.

In 2019, your government installed or painted chevrons on the parkway aimed at promoting safer distances between vehicles and to reduce tailgating behaviours and rear-end crashes. Responses to a question on notice showed that TCCS received \$40,000 from the ACT Road Safety Fund for this pilot project.

An analysis of the pilot program found that:

From the data gathered, it is concluded that the chevron markings have not reduced tailgating or increased the safe distance between vehicles traveling on the Tuggeranong Parkway.

Minister, who approved the application for grants through the ACT Road Safety Fund?

**MR STEEL:** I am happy to take the question as the Minister for Transport and minister responsible for road safety. There is a Road Safety Advisory Board, and that board makes the decisions and recommendations around who receives grants from that Road Safety Fund, as well as the minister in relation to strategic projects.

**MS LAWDER:** Minister, who is on that board, and is it normal practice for the government to award a grant to itself, as it did from the 2019 ACT Road Safety Fund?

**MR STEEL:** I thank the member for her question. The purpose of the fund is to provide funding for road safety initiatives, and quite often those funds go to universities to undertake different research projects. This was an innovation that we wanted to explore. Usually, the funds are used for one-off funds to understand whether a particular road safety intervention works before then the government more broadly through its budget might consider ongoing funding for a project.

We do not have many roads in the ACT that are as high speed as the Tuggeranong Parkway, and this was a good road to test this particular application of chevron markings, but, of course, there are other measures that the ACT government is broadly looking at to improve safety on the Tuggeranong Parkway. In the future, we have got future planning going on around Parkes Way and the south-west corridor, looking at the future growth of Molonglo, and we will be looking at other interventions as well.

**Ms Lawder:** Point of order. The first part of that question was about who is on that road safety board, which we are halfway through and the minister has not touched on.

**MADAM SPEAKER:** If you are able to provide any information, Mr Steel?

**MR STEEL:** I am happy to come back on notice with the details of all of the individual members of the board, but as I said, the minister also has a role in relation to some of the strategic projects that are funded through the road safety fund.

**MR PARTON:** Minister, was this value for money for ACT taxpayers, given that crashes have markedly increased and analysis found that the chevrons have not reduced tailgating whatsoever on the parkway?

**MR STEEL:** I thank the member for his question. Of course, the whole idea of this was to test to see if the intervention worked, and line marking is a relatively low-cost intervention in terms of the whole spectrum of different things that can be put in place around road safety. Roads are very expensive, and some of the road safety measures go from very low-cost interventions, like safety barriers and so forth which have been installed on the Tuggeranong Parkway over recent years in addition to this particular intervention, right through to a range of other measures which are very expensive.

Of course, the toll of road trauma associated with crashes can be quite high in terms of



the financial cost as well as, of course, the other costs to the community, and so we are looking constantly at ways that we can try to reduce that cost to the community. We will continue to look at what is happening in other jurisdictions. We will test out things and look at what works, and if things do not work, then we will not continue them into the future, and when things do work, we will look at what the opportunities are.

One of the particular opportunities that we will look at with further improvements along ACT roads in the future is variable speed limits. We have been considering that in relation to the Tuggeranong Parkway, but with further planning underway on the broader corridor associated with Molonglo and the growth of traffic coming out of those new suburbs, we are looking at how that might be implemented with further infrastructure works. Of course, we funded planning for some of that work in the budget with the new east-west arterial road from John Gorton Drive through to the parkway.

### **Nurses and midwives—staff to patient ratios**

**DR PATERSON:** My question is to the Minister for Health. Minister, you have announced over \$86 million to support the expansion of nurse- and midwife-to-patient ratios. Can you please provide further information to the Assembly on the investments you have made in ratios over this term of government?

**MS STEPHEN-SMITH:** I thank Dr Paterson for the question. The ACT Labor government is incredibly proud to have committed to two ratios in 2020 and to be investing an additional \$86 million in safer workloads for our nurses and midwives in the 2024-25 budget. This builds on the \$50 million investment in the 21-22 budget to deliver phase 1 of the ratios framework.

After close negotiation with the Australian Nursing and Midwifery Federation ACT branch on phase 2 of mandated minimum nursing and midwifery-to-patient ratios, the new funding will support 137 full-time equivalent nurses and midwives across the ACT's public health services, building on the 90 full-time equivalent places funded through phase 1.

Phase 2 will be rolled out across 33 units at Canberra Health Services, including maternity services, where we will count the baby in the ratio. The ACT will be the second jurisdiction in Australia to count the baby in ratios, responding to evidence from our midwives and nurses and to ensure care provided to babies in postnatal services is recognised.

Madam Speaker, with the resounding 83 per cent yes vote on the ACT public sector service nursing and midwifery enterprise agreement, we are confident that our commitment to ratios and better working conditions for our nurses and midwives has been welcomed by these important professions. I want to thank: the ANMF ACT, the members that have actively contributed to a great outcome for ratios and the officials who have worked diligently to bring this together.

ACT Labor will continue to support ratios for our nurses and midwives and assessment of safe staffing across relevant allied health professionals, while the Canberra Liberals never committed to ratios and simply cannot be trusted when it comes to practical support for our nurses and midwives. Madam Speaker, ratios are yet another example

of Labor's practical, proven and progressive plan for our health services and our health workforce.

**DR PATERSON:** Minister, how do ratios support a safer environment for nurses and midwives and benefit health care consumers when they are accessing hospital services?

**MS STEPHEN-SMITH:** I thank Dr Paterson for the supplementary. Research shows that nurse and midwife-to-patient ratios have a positive impact on patient outcomes. Patients are more satisfied with their care, they recover faster and have fewer complications such as infections. This means patients can return home to their loved ones sooner. Ratios also have a positive and meaningful impact on safer care outcomes such as fewer falls, as well as resulting in patients being less likely to return to hospital after their discharge.

Implementing ratios also importantly supports nurses and midwives with safer workloads. With dedicated shift team leaders to support them in their clinical role and the best night shift nurse and midwife-to-patient ratios in the country, the ACT's ratios framework will support better work satisfaction and team development. The research clearly demonstrates ratios support a positive culture and result in less burnout. Nurses and midwives are less likely to take unplanned leave because the staffing structure through ratios provides greater support, safety and job satisfaction.

As well as maternity ratios, the phase 2 framework will also support ratios in the emergency department, intensive care unit, coronary care and perioperative services. This will further support our teams as they establish themselves in the new Critical Services Building in August. We will also be implanting ratios across Dhulwa, subacute mental health and inpatient, paediatrics, rehabilitation, cancer services and Clare Holland House to support even better care in these areas.

Madam Speaker, ACT Labor's ongoing commitment to ratios will support nurses and midwives to deliver high quality, safe patient care for our community. The additional \$86 million investment in this week's budget demonstrates the value we place on supporting our highly skilled and dedicated nursing and midwifery professionals.

**MS ORR:** Minister, how is the ACT government supporting the recruitment and retention of nurses and midwives to implement the next phase of ratios?

**MS STEPHEN-SMITH:** I thank Ms Orr for the supplementary question. Canberra Health Services has undertaken significant work to recruit and retain nurses and midwives for Canberra and will continue their work over the next two years as ratios are phased in across 33 inpatient units.

A specialist team that includes talent acquisition experts has been established, dedicated to recruitment of nurses, midwives and other clinical roles. Recruitment campaigns have been underway both domestically and internationally, and so far this year, the website has received over 55,000 visits. CHS has been successful with the international recruitment campaign, receiving more than 700 expressions of interest for health care roles and offering 113 nurses and midwives employment.

Through financial relocation support, study assistance, scholarships, clinical

supervision, career opportunities like academic appointments, mentoring, a focus on wellbeing and attractive conditions—all of these things have demonstrated that Canberra Health Services is a great place to work.

The nursing and midwifery enterprise agreement, which, as I said, received an overwhelmingly positive response, also establishes a yearly professional development allowance of \$750 plus two \$1,000 education and development payments in addition to embedding the ratios framework. The successful undergraduate student of nursing and midwifery program supports career pathways through direct placement in CHS, and Madam Speaker, all final year nursing and midwifery students in Canberra this year are being guaranteed a position with CHS in 2025.

CHS have also focused on developing workforce plans, including for nursing and midwifery, to continue its focus on long-term retention and the sustainability of the professions in our health services.

Madam Speaker, Labor governments recognise the integral role of nurses and midwives. With the support of the professions, I look forward to seeing the implementation of ratios as part of delivering better workplaces for them and even better care for our community.

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