



QUESTION TIME
OF THE
LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY
FOR THE
AUSTRALIAN CAPITAL TERRITORY

HANSARD

Edited proof transcript

Tuesday, 22 September 2026

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Questions without notice

Palliative Care—Community Options palliative care service

MR PARTON: My question is to the Deputy Chief Minister and former Minister for Health.

Minister, this morning on ABC Radio you said that funding for Community Options has not been cut and that funding is continuing. In my interview with Alice Matthews this morning, she stated that you had messaged her as the former health minister and that you had said that Community Options had made the decision to shut down. Do you stand by the characterisation that the Community Options group just made a decision one day to shut down their services and that this decision had no relationship with your government's decision to discontinue their funding in this space?

MS STEPHEN-SMITH: It is absolutely my understanding that the funding for the Palliative Care Service is absolutely continuing.

Dr Paterson: If I could assist with the question. The Palliative—

Mr Cocks: Point of order: the question was about the minister's comments on radio, not about another minister's understanding, and the minister had commenced an answer.

MS STEPHEN-SMITH: I will continue to answer the question.

MR SPEAKER: Just on that, the minister had taken a stand and is answering. I do not think we can have two ministers answering. One minister does. The question has to be taken a bit before that, and it is directly relating to the minister's comments on radio. Minister.

MS STEPHEN-SMITH: Thank you, Mr Speaker. That was absolutely my understanding. If the Minister for Health takes a supplementary question, maybe that can be corrected.

I would certainly note that that was the understanding on the basis of a couple of meetings that I have had with Community Options where there had been some detailed discussions that did not in any way involve this program but that Community Options was struggling with viability because of changes to aged-care funding, because of NDIS funding challenges and because it had not been successful in a commissioning round for the CATS program as it transitioned from CASP to CATS. Those were—from my very clear understanding in my meetings with Community Options—the challenges that I had understood the organisation was facing. If I was incorrect about the funding for this particular Palliative Care Program, I apologise for that. Certainly, the last information I had as minister was that that funding had not been removed and that that was not in any way relevant to the challenges that Community Options was facing.

MR PARTON: Can you confirm whether the government has reduced, changed or otherwise altered the funding available for Community Options, either in the palliative care area or the Community Transition Support Program area?

Ms Stephen-Smith: This is a very different question, Mr Parton.

Mr Parton: No; it's not. It's not at all.

Mr Cocks: It's a supplementary.

MR SPEAKER: Members! You are taking this question as Minister for Health?

Dr Paterson: Mr Speaker, I would seek your determination regarding standing order 59, which says:

A Member may not anticipate the discussion of any subject which appears on the *Notice Paper* ...

This is the exact debate that we will be having to Mr Parton's motion after question time.

MR SPEAKER: Standing order 130, which relates to that, is removed when it applies to question time. We have had this debate before. We are going to address that in a standing orders review. It used to apply to questions. It no longer applies to questions, so you can anticipate debate in questions.

DR PATERSON: All right. I will answer the question. The funding for the Palliative Care Program has not ceased; it is ongoing funding of \$140,000. Community Options wrote to the ACT government in July confirming that they will no longer seek a renewal of their contract and a continuation of funding.

MR CAIN: Minister, can you explain precisely what has changed that means Community Options can no longer deliver the service, if the funding has not been cut?

DR PATERSON: Precisely nothing has changed for the government. The government has ongoing funding to support the Palliative Care Program. What has changed is that the Community Options board's decided to close their service in the ACT. That is a decision independent of government. Government has ongoing funding for \$141,000 to deliver a palliative care program in the ACT, and that will continue.

Public schools—staffing

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

Minister, the ACT Australian Education Union has said that "staffing shortages and split and collapsed classes have become chronic". Yet last week in the media you revealed that your government does not even collect data on how many classes are being split or collapsed in ACT government schools.

Minister, how can you possibly manage staffing shortages, assess their impact on student learning or develop policies to address them when your directorate does not have even the most basic information?

MS STEPHEN-SMITH: I thank Ms Lee for the question, because it is a really

important one. This goes to the heart of the reform program that is underway for the “one public education system”. We have been operating a public education system in the ACT with a high level of school autonomy, with principals responsible for managing their schools, their staffing, the way that teacher absences are supported and managed and a whole range of other things that, frankly, should not be the responsibility of principals and business managers at schools. They would be much more efficiently managed in a centralised way. That was something that was very clear through our school system resourcing review. That is why we are now undertaking this reform program.

Part of that reform—and it has been clearly discussed with the union and with school leaders—is that, if the Education Directorate, the Education Support Office, is going to lean in and support schools in terms of relief staffing, casual staffing and how to manage teacher absences and reduce the incidents of split and collapsed classes, we need to have better information on that. That information has been held at the school level. The Education Directorate is now working through updates to the Student Administration System to ensure that that information can be gathered as a more centralised source of information in a way that does not put an extra burden on schools in terms of administration—so through the existing Student Administration System—and will then work with schools to support them to manage unexpected teacher absences.

So this is absolutely part of the reform program. I agree with Ms Lee that it is not ideal that we do not have that information. But it is a factor of the history of our autonomous public schools.

MS LEE: Minister, just to be clear then: are you seriously asking parents, teachers and students to accept that a directorate with a budget of around \$1.5 billion and thousands of employees cannot tell Canberrans how many classes are being split or collapsed across the ACT school system?

MS STEPHEN-SMITH: I really refer Ms Lee to my first answer. The vast amount of that money goes to the 93 public schools—soon to be 94 public schools—and the preschools across the ACT. Up until now, they have operated very much on an autonomous basis, managing those situations within the school environment, and that information has not been collected centrally. We are moving to collect that information.

Ms Lee has been the shadow minister for education for some years. I have been the education minister for only a short period of time. If Ms Lee had been so concerned about this matter six months ago, maybe she could have asked about it then. She has asked about it after we have started fixing the problem.

MRS MORRIS: Minister, how can parents have any confidence that you understand the true extent of the teacher shortage crisis in ACT schools if your directorate does not even know how many classes are being split or collapsed?

MS STEPHEN-SMITH: I thank the Deputy Leader of the Opposition for her question. She has put a lot of tone of voice into that, but I refer her to my first answer.

Members interjecting—

Mr Cocks: Point of order, Mr Speaker, on personal reflections.

MS STEPHEN-SMITH: I withdraw, Mr Speaker.

Obviously, the Deputy Leader of the Opposition is passionate about this topic, but I would refer her to my first answer. This is an issue that I very well understand, having got out to the extent that I can and met with teachers, principals and school leaders. I want to thank all of those teachers, parents and students who have shared their information with me, including Lacey-Mae, who is in the audience today, who has written an open letter to me, which I have received and not yet responded to, talking about the impact of teacher shortages and collapsed and split classes.

I very much understand that this is a significant issue, and I would really like us to have more central information in relation to the data. In the meantime, the Education Directorate is working with schools to better understand the issue and to understand how that data can be collected centrally in a way that is going to provide the least administrative burden on schools, so that the Education Directorate and the Education Support Office can lean in and support schools.

But, in the meantime, I thank all of the teachers who are working so hard in such a challenging environment. I recognise that there has never been a more difficult time to be a teacher than it is now—with technology, with behaviour and complexity in students and families, and with these workforce pressures which exist across the country.

Urban growth boundary—establishment

MS CLAY: My question is to the minister for planning.

Minister, thank you for publishing the *Statement on progress in considering an urban growth boundary*, which was provided in response to my 2025 parliamentary calls to set city limits and protect the western edge. The update says that government in the first half of this year has been doing investigations of the western edge area. The report shows 37 investigations and studies have already been completed. What further studies does government need to complete before it can simply decide to protect the western edge?

MR STEEL: Ecological studies—including assessments of threatened flora and fauna, woodland birds, grassland species, hollow-bearing trees and broader ecological values—a cultural heritage assessment; and a detailed land attributes study, including a topographical survey, a tree survey and assessment.

I want to reiterate that no decisions have been made about the western edge, and the reason for that is we need to undertake those studies to gather the evidence to be able to make informed decisions and to consult with the community about further extending protections on the western edge. The current status of the western edge is that it is a non-urban area, and what that means is that it already has a level of protection under the Territory Plan from new suburbs being built in that area.

So, what we are talking about here is extending protections, particularly to areas of high conservation or environmental value. What that might mean is quite significant changes

for rural landholders; we need to show the evidence that we are gathering through these studies, to be able to work with them and make decisions about further protections in that area.

I fully expect that there will be significant extra protections in the western edge as a result of the work that is underway and that we will be consulting on around the middle of next year, as part of an updated planning and transport strategy as well as a draft Territory Plan amendment, which we will put to the community for their views next year. We are looking forward to that. That will be informed by the rigorous evidence base that is being developed at the moment, and it will inform the setting of an urban growth boundary for the ACT, which we believe will cover significant parts, if not the full area, of the western edge.

MS CLAY: Minister, noting the report's commitment to consultation with traditional custodians and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, when will this consultation take place for land decisions about the western edge and city limits?

MR STEEL: It will take place in relation to the planning and transport strategy. I have already asked the City and Environment Directorate to brief me on how they want to undertake that consultation with First Nations peoples, and of course we will be consulting with the broader community as well. That will include any changes to the Territory Plan to enact the urban growth boundary for the ACT, which is not just focused on the western edge but other areas of Canberra as well.

MS VASSAROTTI: Which First Nations people and organisations will the ACT government consult with before key land decisions are made?

MR STEEL: I thank the member for her question. That is exactly the advice I have sought from the City and Environment Directorate.

Urban growth boundary—establishment

MR EMERSON: My question is also to the minister for planning.

The western edge investigation area covers almost 10,000 hectares of unique country west of Canberra, an ecological sanctuary home to beautiful rivers, critically endangered ecosystems and many threatened plants and animals. It is also a site of significant cultural importance to Ngunnawal people.

Last year's resolution requiring the ACT government to establish an urban growth boundary has led to a community campaign calling on the government to protect the Western Edge from development by keeping it outside this urban growth boundary. Almost 3,000 Canberrans have signed the "Save Our Western Edge!" petition, some of whom join us in the gallery today.

Noting our love for nature here in the bush capital, the extensive community interest in this issue and the government's own self-stated commitment to nature conservation in the ACT, is the government on track to release an amendment to the Territory Plan to establish an urban growth boundary by June 2027 as agreed in last April's Assembly resolution?

MR STEEL: I thank the member for his question. Yes, we are on track to meet the resolution and we will be releasing both a draft planning and transport strategy in June next year, as well as a draft amendment to the Territory Plan, enabling the urban growth boundary.

But importantly, what we are also doing is that we are continuing the reforms that our government brought to the election as an alternative to urban sprawl, which is to support more housing within the existing urban footprint of Canberra through the missing middle housing reforms which have already gone through the assembly, but also through transit oriented development and shop adjacent development.

It is one thing to rule out future urban development on the fringes of Canberra, but we also need to make sure that we are enabling more housing for our growing population, and we want to see that happen in more areas within our existing urban footprint and we are doing that work at the moment.

I really appreciate the support of the campaigners for the western edge for those significant reforms to enable more housing close to rapid transport connections, close to shops, amenities, jobs and services, because we need to make sure that as our city grows, we are growing in a compact and sustainable way and creating more walkable neighbourhoods that allow us to continue to have the high quality of life that we have and protect our environment around Canberra as well—and within Canberra through our network, the nature conservation network and the network of nature reserves.

So that work is happening at the moment. There will be multiple touch points for consultation as we bring forward further changes on transport oriented development. We already have been out there on the northern gateway changes. We have already been out there with the changes proposed in the Thoroughbred Park precinct as well.
(Time expired.)

MR EMERSON: Minister, why hasn't the ACT government already committed to fully excluding the western edge from the urban growth boundary, given the community support for doing so and noting the Canberra Liberals, ACT Greens and many independents committed at the 2024 election to protect the western edge from development?

MR STEEL: I thank the member for his question. As I noted in the answer to the previous question, this area is a non-urban zone, so new estates cannot be built in these areas as it stands. What we are talking about here is an extended level of protection to areas particularly of high conservation value, and that is a conversation that we need to have with the rural leaseholders in that area and we need to present them with the evidence showing that there are higher ecological values in parts of that area that might warrant extending protections to those areas—so a higher level of protection than what is currently there.

So we need to have that evidence base developed through the studies that are underway. But of course the studies are not just limited to the western edge. There are studies that have been occurring right across the ACT and the urban growth boundary will be looking at applying across a wider part of the ACT than just the western edge.

So the default is there is no development allowed. And what we are looking at is how we can extend protections to areas within the western edge as well as other parts of Canberra and we are doing that work to be able to then consult with the community to hear their views based on that evidence and what that level of protection looks like through the creation of an urban growth boundary. And I am looking forward to presenting that in line with the Assembly resolution at the middle of next year.

MS LEE: Minister, when will the community members who are passionate about this issue, like those who are present in the gallery today, be consulted on setting an urban growth boundary? What is the time frame?

MR STEEL: Well, I refer the member to the answers I have already provided.

Ms Lee interjecting—

MR STEEL: I have been very clear that we said June for the urban growth boundary with the draft changes to the Planning and Transport Strategy and a draft major plan amendment. And then of course, there is a statutory process that needs to be undertaken there and the Assembly committee may wish to inquire. That will be a decision that they will need to make in relation to the Territory Plan amendment.

I do not have direct control over that. They will need to consider those changes, but the default is that no new suburbs can be built in these areas, so they already have a level of protection. What we are talking about here is potentially expanding that based on the studies that are underway and we will present through those studies being completed, the information that the community needs to have an informed decision, both those who are supporters of further protections in the western edge and the existing rural landholders in this area, who will no doubt also want to have a say as part of the consultation as well.

Public schools—staffing

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

Minister, last week we heard from ACT Parents about the ongoing impact of industrial action on students and families. We heard of over-crowded classes, with some students being placed in classes of up to 50 students, students being moved into split classes due to teacher shortages and disruptions to learning.

We also heard from year 3 Macgregor Primary School student Lacey-Mae, who is joining us in the chamber today along with her mum and granddad:

The strikes are impacting students learning harshly as well as teachers' health. Students are over being disappointed when sports days and excursions are cancelled last minute due to strikes.

Minister, these issues of teacher shortages and split classes did not arise overnight. After more than two decades in government, do you take responsibility for the failures of your predecessors, and what do you say to students like Lacey-Mae, and so many others

across the ACT government school system, for allowing teacher shortages and workforce pressures to worsen to the point that they are now disrupting learning across their schooling?

MS STEPHEN-SMITH: I thank Ms Lee for the question, and again, thank Lacey-Mae and her family for joining us in the chamber today and for her advocacy. It certainly is a piece of persuasive writing that has got a lot of attention, so great to see our public education system supporting young people like Lacey-Mae to learn to argue a case in writing.

What I would say to all of the students across our public education system and to the teachers and to parents and carers, is that we absolutely understand the challenges that teachers and students are facing with workforce challenges at the moment. This is not an issue that is unique to the ACT. This is a national issue of teacher workforce shortage. It is one we have been talking about in this place for some years.

The Public School System Resourcing Review has pointed the way to some solutions in the ACT to ease that pressure. One of those solutions is undertaking more work centralised in the Education Directorate to improve the efficiency of things like supporting schools when there are unexpected teacher absences. Part of the response to that is going to be collecting more information so that more structured arrangements can be put in place. But there is also a range of other mechanisms in terms of workload that have already been implemented through Strong Foundations, including providing standardised materials to teachers to reduce their workload in preparation for classes, and those activities will continue. We will continue to work with the union, with the teaching workforce and with school leaders to understand how we can reduce that workload, stop teachers getting as sick and ensure that every student has a teacher in front of them.

MS LEE: Minister, what are you doing to address the system failures right now—right now—including disrupted learning, cancelled activities and a lack of available teachers in classrooms—as you said yourself, a teacher is not in every classroom—instead of continuing to talk about long term reform and getting more data?

MS STEPHEN-SMITH: In her earlier question, Mr Speaker, Ms Lee was criticising us for not having data and now she appears to be criticising us for wanting to get the data. I am not sure she can have it both ways.

These are not only long term reforms. I also indicated in my response to the earlier question that we are already undertaking action to reduce the workload on teachers. The Education Directorate is already working with schools and school leaders to support them to deliver increased improvement in recruitment and retention, support for teachers and bringing more teachers into the classroom. In 2026 the directorate is supporting the engagement of 18 Permit to Teach School Based Teacher Education Programme, or STEP fellows, and 38 Learning Support Assistants under the University of Canberra STEP Program. This is bringing more qualified teachers into the classroom more quickly. We are not going to solve this problem overnight, but we are taking urgent action to address these issues with our teachers, with our school leaders and in collaboration with parents and Parents ACT as well.

I would just note, Mr Speaker, that in her first question on this topic I think Ms Lee was blaming industrial action for split and collapse classes and I want to be really clear that industrial action is not the cause of split and collapse classes and that I strongly support the right of teachers to take industrial action as part of the negotiating process. We will continue to negotiate in good faith to reach a resolution to the enterprise agreement as quickly as possible to reduce those interruptions—

Ms Lee: Point of order. Mr Speaker, the minister has attempted to misrepresent my words and put her own spin on it and I ask her to actually review that and withdraw.

MS STEPHEN-SMITH: I am happy to review the *Hansard*, Mr Speaker. That was how I heard Ms Lee's question. If I was incorrect, I am happy to withdraw that, but I did need to clarify to ensure it is clear on the record.

MRS MORRIS: Minister, can you guarantee to parents that conditions in our schools will improve this year, or are you asking them to simply trust that future reforms will fix problems your government has allowed to develop over years?

MS STEPHEN-SMITH: I thank the Deputy Leader of the Opposition for her question. Well, we are certainly working hard with schools, but this is not a problem and a challenge that can be addressed overnight. There is a national teacher workforce shortage. There has been a taskforce. There has been a lot of work to ensure we could get more teachers into our schools. That work has been successful but there is clearly more to do to ensure there is support for schools where there are unexpected teacher absences to ensure there can be a teacher in front of every class. That is certainly an objective I share with the teaching workforce and with the union, but I am not going to make commitments that I know are going to be very challenging to deliver because of a national teacher workforce shortage.

Visitors

MR SPEAKER: Members, in the gallery we have four staff members of the WA parliament who are visiting. They are part of the ANZACATT program, and they are having a look at how we do business. I am sure they will all go back and report favourably, if we all can continue to perform as well as we are at the moment—and behave during question time, particularly you, Mr Cocks! They are interested in standing order 118AA, so we will see how that plays out.

Welcome to the ACT. I hope you have a good time here.

Questions without notice

Health centres—North Gungahlin Health Centre

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

Minister, Labor committed to new health centres for Gungahlin and Tuggeranong on the same day in 2020. Next month, the government will celebrate the opening of the South Tuggeranong Health Centre while the North Gungahlin Health Centre is still yet to be designed. Why did the government prioritise Tuggeranong over Gungahlin?

DR PATERSON: I will take that on notice.

MS CASTLEY: Minister, will my community get to celebrate the opening of the north Gungahlin health centre before the next election?

MS STEPHEN-SMITH: I will answer as the Minister for Health Infrastructure. I apologise; I should have taken the last question. I was trying really hard to avoid being triggered by a question to the Minister for Health.

There was earlier planning in relation to Tuggeranong. It was an easier site to build on than the Gungahlin site, which required some subdivision and further planning work. So it was easier to get on with the build in the Tuggeranong site. I am really pleased that we will deliver the new health centre in South Tuggeranong in just a couple of months. So it will open before the end of this year.

There is further planning work that is required for the north Gungahlin site because it is it is planned to be a shared site between an emergency services facility, a health facility and a sports facility across that site. That required some further work and consideration around the investment and the planning for that site.

Ms Castley: Just on a point of order: if it is going on notice, the supplementary was: will the community get to celebrate before this term is over? Will we expect it by then?

MR SPEAKER: You did talk to the issue, but you were not clear on when it will open and if it will be open before the next election. If you do have something to add, Minister?

MS STEPHEN-SMITH: I will not be pre-empting future budget decisions in relation to the North Gungahlin Health Centre, but I can assure Ms Castley that there is continued consideration in terms of infrastructure investment in every budget process, and we will be making announcements in in the context of those budget processes as they proceed.

MR EMERSON: What about the Inner South Health Centre? Will that be delivered before or after the North Gungahlin Health Centre?

MS STEPHEN-SMITH: The Inner South Health Centre will be delivered before the north Gungahlin health centre. Planning is very well underway. Obviously, there has been a major plan amendment that was approved. It has been supported as a territory priority project. Pre-development application consultation is underway, and I would encourage anyone who has an interest in the Inner South Health Centre to engage in that process through YourSay or directly through the pop-ups that have been occurring through in the inner south. I have been to a couple myself at Narrabundah shops and at Griffith shops, and there has been really good engagement from the community on what the design of that looks like. In fact, despite some of the public commentary, there has been really strong positive feedback about the about what the health centre will deliver for the inner south. I know that a lot of people had said they wanted a walk-in centre. It is going to be a health centre that is more targeted at people with chronic illness, community nursing, community allied health and, of course, a state of the art dental facility. That will be delivered, we expect, by mid-2028, if all goes to plan in terms of

the development application and construction process.

Cemeteries and crematoria—Southern Memorial Park

MS CARRICK: My question is to the Minister for City and Government Services. Minister, the government has spent almost \$3.3 million on planning, investigations and design work for Southern Memorial Park since 2011-12—15 years—yet there is still no commitment to construction funding. At the same time, the Cemeteries and Crematoria Authority has stated it will continue to investigate options for future interment capacity at the Woden Cemetery. Southern Memorial Park is expected to provide around 100 years of capacity. Minister, why has the government still not committed construction funding or a delivery timetable for stage 1 of Southern Memorial Park after spending almost \$3.3 million over 15 years to plan it?

MS CHEYNE: Certainly I would refer Ms Carrick to what is on the public record. It is not that the government has not been doing any work towards this. There has been a development application process. Obviously, that has been a considerable amount of work. It remains subject to future funding. I appreciate that Ms Carrick made remarks earlier this morning about what is in the board's statement of intent for Canberra Memorial Parks. What is in that statement of intent is not new; it has actually been in there for several years. We know that Woden is rapidly reaching capacity, and it is a genuine risk that the board has identified as we look to make sure that there is a viable option for the south side.

MS CARRICK: Minister, can you rule out expanding Woden Cemetery into Eddison Park?

MS CHEYNE: That is a hypothetical, Mr Speaker, and I think I am also being asked to make an announcement of government.

Mr Cocks: On a point of order: I do not believe that this was a hypothetical question. It was asking about the scope of existing announcements.

MR SPEAKER: I agree it is not hypothetical, but it is asking the minister to rule something out, in terms of a policy. If she is not prepared to take the question and considers that a matter of policy, I will accept that as a response. The minister does not have anything further to add.

MR EMERSON: Minister, when do you expect Southern Memorial Park to be ready to accept interments?

MS CHEYNE: I do not have a figure in front of me. It is obviously dependent on those preliminary works getting underway. One of the challenges with Southern Memorial Park is that it will have a significant amount of establishment work to undertake. That will mean that, once that has been completed, the acceptance of interments will be able to happen quite quickly, but site establishment and making sure that it is a place that is appropriate for the public and appropriate for its purpose are extremely important for us. To clarify, stage 1 of Southern Memorial Park received development application approval on 6 July this year, so we are now working through the next stages.

Drugs—suspected drug overdose deaths

MRS MORRIS: My question is to the Minister for Police, Fire and Emergency Services. On 5 September, ACT Policing reported seven deaths from suspected drug overdoses in the previous month and warned of potentially lethal drugs circulating in Canberra. On behalf of the opposition, I express our sincerest condolences to families and loved ones who were impacted by those deaths.

Minister, what has ACT Policing established about the substances involved and the sources supplying them?

DR PATERSON: This will be a matter determined by the Coroner. We have had numerous drug overdose deaths over the past few weeks. We have had an awareness-raising campaign by ACT Policing, ACT Ambulance Service, and Directions ACT, encouraging the community to get their drugs tested, if they do choose to take drugs, and raising awareness of Naloxone and the availability of that in the community, because we are seeing an issue with drugs that have very potent synthetic opioids in them. Some individuals may not be sure what they are taking, and obviously these drugs are very toxic.

MRS MORRIS: Minister, what, if any, resources have been allocated to police to help them identify and disrupting the supply of these lethal drugs in the community?

DR PATERSON: Police have allocated very significant resources to disrupting the distribution and sale of drugs in our community. We recently had the statement regarding the grow houses that police had uncovered. That was an operation that had been undertaken with the Western Australia Police, and 11 grow houses in the ACT were uncovered and individuals were charged. We also saw the arrest of seven OMCg members in the past couple of weeks, and a huge amount of drugs, cash and firearms were seized as well. So there are—

Mrs Morris: On a point of order, Mr Speaker, on relevance: my question goes specifically to the supply of these lethal drugs that are circulating in the community; whereas, the minister is speaking broadly about grow houses and—

MR SPEAKER: She still has a minute to go, Mrs Morris. So we will see if she does turn her attention to that. She has been relevant in turning to the response to drugs.

DR PATERSON: I do not know how Mrs Morris would know whether these drugs were responsible for those individuals deaths. It seems quite a ludicrous question in her point of order. What I was saying is that the police are investing significant resources in disrupting drug-trafficking activities in the ACT.

MR CAIN: Minister, following these deaths, have you received advice on whether your government's drug decriminalisation policy is attracting drugs to Canberra?

DR PATERSON: The national drugs survey looks at wastewater testing across the country, and what we have seen across every jurisdiction is a significant increase in the levels of drugs in the wastewater analysis. Other jurisdictions have not legislated change to drugs of dependence and yet we have seen a very consistent rise across the

country. So we do not believe that it is a result of the legislative change.

Australia-European Union Free Trade Agreement—ACT impact

MR WERNER-GIBBINGS: My question is to the Minister for Trade, Investment and the Knowledge Economy.

Minister, negotiations on the Australia-European Union trade agreement have concluded. Can you outline what this agreement means for the ACT and how Canberra businesses, workers and institutions stand to benefit?

MR BARR: I thank Mr Werner-Gibbings for the question. The Australia-EU trade agreement is the most significant trade agreement for the ACT that I can recall. That is because we have the most knowledge-intensive economy in the country. Our strengths lie in research, higher education, professional services, cybersecurity, defence industries, digital technologies, space capability, health innovation and clean technology. These are the precise sectors that will benefit the most from stronger economic integration with Europe.

For Canberra businesses, the agreement will improve market access, reduce barriers to trade and investment, and provide greater operational certainty in one of the world's largest and most sophisticated economic regions. For our universities and research institutions, it creates new opportunities to deepen existing EU partnerships, to expand collaborative research and to accelerate the commercialisation of innovation. For workers in the ACT, the benefits are jobs, more exports, more investment and more international collaboration support for the high value, highly skilled employment that underpins our economy.

Importantly, the agreement also contributes to economic diversification. At a time of increasing global uncertainty, strengthening our economic relationship with Europe significantly broadens the opportunities for businesses in the ACT.

The government has consistently advocated for greater international engagement, because Canberra succeeds when our businesses, our researchers and our innovators are connected to the world. So, we are strongly calling on the Australian parliament to support this agreement when it comes to a vote.

MR WERNER-GIBBINGS: Minister, which ACT industries are best placed to take advantage of the new opportunities created by the agreement?

MR BARR: There are several sectors where the ACT is exceptionally well-positioned to benefit. Firstly, in our technology and cybersecurity industries, we are Australia's leading centre for cyber capability, and stronger links with European markets will support new contracts, partnerships and export opportunities. Secondly, our universities and research institutions have longstanding relationships throughout Europe. The agreement provides an opportunity to deepen those collaborations, to attract further investment and to turn research excellence into commercial outcomes. Thirdly, Canberra's growing space sector stands to benefit from stronger engagement with one of the world's most advanced space ecosystems. Partnerships in satellite technology, earth observation, communications and space research all present significant

opportunities. We also see significant benefits for clean energy technologies, professional services, health innovation, advanced manufacturing and defence related industries.

More broadly, the agreement is well suited to the ACT, because modern trade is increasingly about trade in services, the exchange of ideas, expertise and innovation, rather than simply the movement of goods. Canberra's economy is built on knowledge, talent and ingenuity. This agreement helps connect those strengths to new markets, to new customers and to new sources of investment. All of this combines to support our economic growth and the creation of even more high-quality jobs for Canberrans.

MR EMERSON: Chief Minister, what is the government doing to address issues like payroll tax, high insurance costs and higher rents in the ACT relative to other jurisdictions, which might hinder some of the opportunities you have described in your remarks?

MR BARR: I do not believe they are a hinder to that. This trade agreement, which is the focus of the question, is the most substantive agreement that Australia can strike to diversify economic opportunity. We currently have trade agreements with 19 countries in a bilateral sense, and there are another 11 that are covered by multilateral. This is an agreement with 27 countries. It is the most substantive thing that the Australian government can do in partnership with the states and territories to support Australia's future economic growth. We support it so strongly because it is all upside for the ACT. Our services economy stands to benefit more than any other state or territory from this. It is a really important and substantive issue that will come before the Australian parliament, and I am calling on every member of that parliament to support this agreement. If anyone representing the ACT votes against it, it will be to their eternal shame.

Mr Emerson: A point of order, Mr Speaker.

MR SPEAKER: I think the minister has concluded—but, yes, Mr Emerson?

Mr Emerson: It is on responsiveness to the question, under standing order 118AA. The question was about what the government is doing to address other barriers to realise the opportunities. We heard about the opportunities realised through the potential trade agreement but nothing about those barriers.

MR SPEAKER: On the point of order, Chief Minister?

MR BARR: I did respond in the very first sentence to say I do not accept that those are barriers to the advances that we are going to get. This is about accessing export markets; it is not about our internal settings. That should be pretty clear. The benefit for Canberra businesses is the business they will undertake and secure in Europe. It has got nothing to do with our tax rates here.

MR SPEAKER: Thanks Minister. There is no point of order, Mr Emerson. I accept that he pivoted pretty quickly after responding to your question; however, I think he was responsive, albeit briefly.

Public schools—staffing

MS LEE: Mr Speaker, my question is to the Minister for Education. Minister, last year a number of government high schools in Tuggeranong were forced to operate on reduced timetables, with some students regularly sent home early because schools were unable to fully staff classes. Minister, are all ACT government high schools currently operating on a full five-days-per-week timetable? And if not, which schools are on reduced timetables?

MS STEPHEN-SMITH: I will take the question on notice, and I would just note that no assumptions should be drawn out of the fact that I am taking the question on notice in terms of whether or not that is the case.

MS LEE: Minister, what analysis, if any, was conducted to assess whether school budget cuts would affect schools' ability to operate a full five-days-per-week timetable?

MS STEPHEN-SMITH: I reject the premise of the question in the way that Ms Lee has described the budget cuts. As I have said multiple times in this place, the 26-27 budget has—

Mr Cocks: Point of order—

MR SPEAKER: Stop the clocks, please.

Mr Cocks: I believe that the minister is actually trying to debate the question itself, whereas it was a very clear question about what analysis has been done.

MS STEPHEN-SMITH: Prefaced on an incorrect assumption.

MR SPEAKER: I am not sure, Mr Cocks. I think we are very early on into the minister's response. Let's see how she goes. I will listen attentively.

MS STEPHEN-SMITH: Thank you, Mr Speaker. As I was saying, there have not been cuts to the education budget. An additional \$40 million was put into the education budget of \$1.2 billion. What we are doing, Mr Speaker, is exactly what the Public School System Resourcing Review indicated we should be doing, which is allocating resources on the basis of equity to our schools. I want to emphasise, Mr Speaker, that school budgets for the 2027 year have not been finalised, and the Education Directorate is working with all of the principals and school leaders to ensure that the indicative budgets that were provided, that we understand what the implications of those were. There is \$8 million set aside as an exceptions pool for those who are going to be challenged in transitioning to meeting the student resource allocation budgets. That have been provided on the basis of the recommendations of the school resourcing review. So no decision has been made. There have been no cuts.

Ms Lee: Point of order: I know that she has only got 30 seconds left, but the question specifically was in relation to any analysis about the effect that it would have on the schools' ability to operate a full five-day-a-week timetable.

MS STEPHEN-SMITH: Well, given that the budgets for schools for 2027 have not

been finalised, that is the work that the Education Directorate is currently doing with principals to understand what budget they need to ensure that they can continue to operate effectively.

MR PARTON: Minister, can you guarantee that no ACT government school will be required to operate on a reduced timetable week in 2027 due to your school budget cuts?

MS STEPHEN-SMITH: I can guarantee that there have not been cuts to the education budget in the 26-27 budget, and I can guarantee that the Education Directorate will continue to work with every principal and with every school to understand what the transition to the student resource allocation budgeting means to them. And we will continue to work with principals to understand how that transition is made. But it is very important, Mr Speaker, that if you conduct a major review like the Public School System Resourcing Review, that you actually take the recommendations seriously.

Now, I also understand that the receipt of the early budget projections under the SRA model to school principals have caused some legitimate concern and distress in the school communities. And that is why I am seeking to assure the school communities that the Education Directorate will work with every principal and every school to understand what the potential implications of those budgets were; why we have an exceptions process in place to ensure that every school gets the funding that it needs to operate efficiently and effectively; but most importantly, to ensure that every school can be an excellent first choice for every family in the ACT.

We have got a set of recommendations to support us to do that. We will take seriously those recommendations, but we will also take seriously the feedback from our principals, from our school leaders, from our teachers, and of course from parents, carers and students themselves.

Public schools—senior secondary language courses

MISS NUTTALL: My question is to the Minister for Education. Minister, we understand that after fears Lake Ginninderra College would stop offering the last college-level Indonesian language courses in the ACT, you advised the community, via Balai Bahasa Indonesia ACT, that:

UCSSC Lake Ginninderra will include Indonesian in its 2027 subject offerings and will determine whether the program runs next year based on student demand and teacher availability.

If we lose this course, young people in public schools will no longer be able to study Indonesian in college anywhere in the ACT. What is your directorate doing to support Lake Ginninderra, its staff and its current and prospective students, in promoting, supporting and retaining this Indonesian language course, and when will we know for sure that this course is continuing?

MS STEPHEN-SMITH: I thank Miss Nuttall for the question, but I think she has answered it in her question. I have provided the information as she has indicated, and Lake Ginninderra College will—sorry, Lake Tuggeranong College, no Lake

Ginninderra, sorry, confused between electorate and college—Lake Ginninderra College will make that decision on the basis of teacher availability and student interest in undertaking Indonesian language study.

One of the challenges that we have with languages is in relation to what is taught across a particular school network. One of the things that the Education Directorate is looking at in its language strategy is how do we ensure that there are actually pathways within school networks, within enrolment areas, for continuous language learning for particular languages.

There are, of course, a lot of languages that are not taught in ACT schools. I understand it would be a real shame to lose Indonesian. I am certainly not saying that is going to happen, but we cannot make decisions on the basis of one or two students and no teacher availability for a whole school system. So, I definitely understand the concern that people are raising in relation to this matter. We will continue to work on having language pathways across our language programs, but I have no further information in relation to Lake Ginninderra and Indonesian beyond what has already been provided to the community.

MISS NUTTALL: Minister, if the course is cancelled, will you consider a centralised language school model? If not, what is your alternative for current year 10 students wanting to study Indonesian in lieu of a centralised language school model?

MS STEPHEN-SMITH: We are continuing to consider what the next steps are in terms of language education, and so I am happy to take the question on notice and come back to Miss Nuttall with some more information in relation to that.

MR BRADDOCK: What work is your directorate doing more broadly to ensure language continuity across the ACT public education system in the context of the college budget cuts?

MS STEPHEN-SMITH: I think it is probably best that I take that quite broad question on notice and come back to the Assembly with some answers.

Lakes and waterways—Molonglo Reach—waterskiing

MR MILLIGAN: Mr Speaker, my question is to the Minister for Sport and Recreation, Minister, the ACT Government permits waterskiing at Molonglo River for specifically approved users, while general recreational access remains restricted. Minister, what specific safety risk prevents a licensed member of the public using Molonglo River?

MR STEEL: I thank the member for his question. I have got to admit I have not yet been briefed on waterskiing requirements on the Molonglo River, but I will go and find out, and I will come back on notice.

MR MILLIGAN: Thank you. Minister, why does the government restrict recreational access rather than establishing clear and consistent access criteria based on the demonstrated safety and environmental risks?

MR STEEL: Thank you. I will come back on notice to that one as well.

MS LEE: I assume he is going to take it on notice, but, Minister, after almost 15 years of restricted public access, will you consider whether controlled recreational waterskiing can return to Molonglo River in time for future summer seasons?

MR STEEL: I will seek some advice from the department and come back in relation to that matter.

Housing affordability—portable rental bonds

MS VASSAROTTI: My question is to the Attorney-General, who has responsibility for residential tenancies. The minister would know that both Victoria and New South Wales have introduced portable bond schemes in recent years. South Australia will introduce a scheme next year. Even the ACT Labor membership believe this is a good idea. Has the ACT government done an analysis of the financial pressures faced by renters—in particular, around the requirement to finance a bond for a new rental while waiting for the bond to be returned from the previous rental?

MS CHEYNE: I will clarify this, but I do not believe that we have. Certainly in light of the motion that we are debating tomorrow and our understanding of the schemes in South Australia, Victoria and New South Wales, we have been considering the costs that have been associated in setting up those schemes, including the administrative ones, and how they may relate to and/or seek to alleviate any pressures that there might be for renters in the ACT. I think we all agree with the objective of portable rental bond schemes, but it is not as simple as the government holding onto a bond and moving it to the next residential tenancy agreement. It relies on, effectively, like tenants moving into another tenancy—effectively the same people—and it does not really assist when there is a schism or a break-up in a relationship or a tenancy relationship. It really is a broader question of exactly what we are trying to solve, but I look forward to expanding on that in the debate tomorrow.

MS VASSAROTTI: Minister, I missed whether you actually answered this partially in your first answer. Has the ACT government consulted with the Victorian or New South Wales governments to explore whether a similar scheme could be introduced in the ACT?

MS CHEYNE: I do not think I used the word “consult” in any formal way, but of course we have relationships with those governments and I understand that some conversations have occurred. Certainly the feedback from those jurisdictions is that all the schemes have had significant start-up fixed costs, as well as significant ongoing costs. I would note that all three of those jurisdictions seek to recoup some of those ongoing administrative costs by requiring people to pay a fee to enter the portable rental bond scheme. I think it is \$25 a year in New South Wales and Victoria, and SA is contemplating a fee of between \$35 and \$50. That is a distinct difference from what is currently on the notice paper for tomorrow.

MISS NUTTALL: Minister, do you know how much the average tenant would need to front up to pay a bond here in the ACT?

MS CHEYNE: I think it is about \$2,000 for a tenancy, based on data from 2023-24. Perhaps it is a bit over that—maybe \$2,300. It is hard to pin down an average, but I believe, from what we have previously published on bond data, that, if we apply an average, it is about that. But, of course, there are all sorts of different tenancy arrangements, and how much someone might pay for one tenancy can vary very significantly to another.

Transport Canberra—MyWay+

MR BRADDOCK: My question is to the Minister for Transport.

Minister, I have heard of situations where school buses will be observed as travelling full but at the same time record negligible tap-ons and tap-offs through the MyWay+ system. At the same time, the MyWay+ family accounts feature, which would allow parents to efficiently manage the MyWay+ cards of their children, is a launch feature that remains in development. Minister, are you treating these two issues as related? What is the government doing about these particular issues?

MS CHEYNE: I thank Mr Braddock for his question and acknowledge his long-term support for public transport and also his particular ongoing interest in MyWay+ and holding NEC to account. I do believe that there is a degree of correlation here, but I am not treating them as the exact same issue.

I certainly acknowledge—as my predecessor did as well—that the delay in delivering family accounts is regrettable. It was intended to be part of MyWay+ and it is something that remains outstanding. I recognise that it has made it harder than it should be for parents to manage their children’s cards, including where it might extend to situations to confirm whether a child’s card has sufficient funds on it. So I do accept that there are likely instances where that does relate.

But it is premature at this stage to entirely attribute the negligible tap-ons that Mr Braddock describes solely to that delay. There can be, I suspect, instances of sheer noncompliance, or there might be equipment or data recording issues separately. All of those may be contributing. Transport Canberra is examining those causes, and I can confirm that it is still progressing family accounts with Digital Canberra and the NEC.

MR BRADDOCK: Minister, does the government have an anticipated or target date for the commencement of family accounts? If yes, can you please enlighten the Assembly?

MS CHEYNE: I wish I did, but I don’t. There is no confirmed date currently available. I acknowledge that this capability has taken much too long to deliver. While I cannot announce a date until there is a tested and credible delivery schedule, I have made it clear—and I think I owe it to the Assembly and to the community—that an indefinite “in development” status is simply not acceptable.

What I have learnt since taking this portfolio is that family accounts are more complex than originally anticipated, in that they require some identity elements, consent, privacy and security controls. Transport Canberra, Digital Canberra and NEC are all working through those dependencies. I certainly hope, with Digital Canberra taking a greater

role now in the management of the contract with NEC but also with the delivery of the digital capability, we will see some progress before too long. But I also completely accept that I cannot continue to say, “We’re working on it.”

MS CLAY: Minister, how much fare revenue does the ACT government collect from school students each year?

MS CHEYNE: I will have to take that on notice, simply because the calculation needs to account for discounted fares, fare caps, transfers and the free travel that is available under the Student Transport Program, together with incomplete validations. I am happy to seek that data, and I will look to provide the Assembly with a properly reconciled figure. I just do not have the breakdown of those figures that I would be able to sum together in a way that would be reliable.

Roads—congestion

MR COCKS: My question is to the Minister for City and Government Services. Minister, in what may be the greatest understatement I have ever uttered in this chamber, residents in my electorate of Murrumbidgee are reporting gridlock conditions on main thoroughfares like John Gorton Drive, Cotter Road and Adelaide Avenue. As a result, congestion levels on suburban streets are rising beyond safe levels as people seek alternative routes. This is creating a litany of consequences, from noise disturbances to crash hazards, and flow on impacts to teachers and LSAs just trying to get to work and support vulnerable kids. Minister, why is this city’s road network failing so many Canberrans?

MS CHEYNE: While I am not diminishing Mr Cocks’s description of what is occurring, I do not agree with the premise that our road network is failing Canberrans. What I would acknowledge is that we have an extraordinary number of upgrades occurring at once, and we have had some significant closures. Indeed, there is a significant period of closure for Coppins Crossing Road, which I anticipate will be the last time before we get to a point when the bridge is formally opened.

We are not going to shy away from the work that needs to be undertaken for our roads in the ACT, and there is a considerable amount. We have an extensive road network. The extent of our road network, both in the length and width of our roads, is considerably higher than in other jurisdictions. It requires a lot of maintenance effort. It requires a lot of planning and civil engineering work. We are getting on with the job, but I also appreciate that it has consequences when there is plenty of work occurring all at once—let alone with the works in the city and with Commonwealth Avenue Bridge. We do actively monitor this. We have bluetooth sniffer devices, which effectively pick up on when a mobile device is travelling through an area. We also have CCTV cameras that report through to our transport centre, and we can adjust traffic lights for flow where necessary. But, of course, we need to make those decisions in a careful way, given they will inevitably have flow-on consequences.

MR COCKS: Minister, does the government take any responsibility for the increases in speeding, collisions, near misses and frustrated driving on suburban streets located off congested main roads?

MS CHEYNE: No, we do not, because, ultimately, those who have a licence and those who are driving a vehicle are agreeing to abide by longstanding, well-known road rules. It is not something that the government can take responsibility for—for every individual decision. My message to the community is to please be patient and to consider leaving earlier or later if you have that flexibility with your workplace, and I certainly understand that not everybody does.

We are looking forward to the opening of Molonglo River Bridge around the end of this year, and I think that is going to make an enormous difference for how people travel through this city. And, pleasingly, the Commonwealth Avenue Bridge has not been as disruptive as we expected, and with the switchover to occur in January, we also expect that to be relatively smooth and to, effectively, create the same environment that Canberrans have got used to this year but on the other span of the bridge. We are trying to take into account all of the pressures that are occurring across the city, but there are a lot. Some of these factors depend not just on whether they are related to the school holidays or on what time might be the most convenient but simply on when we are able to align all of the contractors and services and equipment that we need.

MR CAIN: Minister, is suburban congestion a low-priority issue for this government?

MS CHEYNE: Well, obviously not. You only have to look at the extraordinary contribution that both the ACT government and the Australian government are making to assist Canberrans move around our city. We did inherit the Y plan. We did inherit a whole lot of decisions that have cost successive governments a lot of money. We are getting on with the job of making it easier to move around, not just with our roads but with our active travel network as well. We certainly appreciate the support we have received from the federal government in co-funding many of those initiatives.

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