QUESTION TIME

OF THE

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FOR THE

AUSTRALIAN CAPITAL TERRITORY

HANSARD

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Tuesday, 27 October 2026

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Ministerial arrangements 1
Questions without notice:
Canberra Health Services—performance 1
Canberra Health Services—specialist referrals 3
Operation Kingfisher—potential criminal charges 5
Government procurement—Strathnairn school 5
Business—relocations interstate 7
Public schools—funding 7
Public schools—staff and student safety 10
Government procurement—Whitlam school 12
Housing—Canberra house pattern book 13
Access Canberra—customer credits 15
Taxation and levies—commercial land rates 15
Strathnairn School—funding 16
Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples—Our Booris, Our Way 17
Access Canberra—Woden shopfront 18
Canberra Health Services—ophthalmology 19
Free period products rollout 20
Government procurement—conduct in procurement 22

Ministerial arrangements

MR BARR (Kurrajong—Chief Minister, Minister for Trade, Investment and the Knowledge Economy, Minister for Tourism and Events, and Minister for Major Projects) (2.00): As I think members are aware, Minister Paterson will be absent from question time today for personal reasons. The Deputy Chief Minister will assist members with questions in the health and mental health portfolios, and Minister Cheyne will assist members with questions in police, fire, emergency services and gaming reform portfolios.

Questions without notice

Canberra Health Services—performance

MR PARTON: My question is to the minister representing the Minister for Health. Minister, former Labor Chief Minister Jon Stanhope recently described the decline of our hospital system under this government from one of the best to being one of the worst performing in the country and that "that deterioration was no accident, rather it culminated through deliberate policy choices". The evidence is clear. There are 65,000 people waiting for specialist appointments, referrals being closed following changes to eligibility criteria and nurses preparing for industrial action amid stalled pay negotiations and concerns about respect.

Minister, given repeated independent inquiries of identified governance, workforce capability and culture as ongoing issues, do you accept that these are warning signs of a broader failure in the management of our public health system?

MS STEPHEN-SMITH: No, I do not. And, in fact, when I read that article, I did wonder whether Mr Stanhope and Mr Ahmed had actually bothered to look at any information about the performance of the health system.

Our emergency department performance has gone, over the last few years, from being known to be well below the national average to being one of the best in the country. It is the best on the four-hour rule—the number of people who are seen and treated within four hours at our public hospitals. And, particularly, compared to peer hospitals, both Canberra Hospital and North Canberra Hospital now perform very well. We delivered a record number of elective surgeries last year—more than 17½ thousand elective surgeries—and are on track for our 70,000 elective surgeries over the four years.

Mr Parton has talked about outpatients. I think it is really important, when you say there are 65,000 patients on the waiting list, that we also recognise that Canberra Health Services delivers around 250,000 outpatient appointments every year—250,000 outpatient appointments every year.

Historically, the ACT public system has delivered a much wider range of outpatient services than most around the country. So, the changes that are being made by Canberra Health Services are being made by clinicians on the basis of evidence and in response to the review that was undertaken by Michael Walsh at the behest of this Assembly. We see another pattern here, Mr Speaker, where the opposition demands that we undertake a review and then demands that we do not implement the

recommendations.

Mr Cocks: A point of order.

MR SPEAKER: I think the minister has concluded.

Mr Cocks: The point of order was on debating.

MR SPEAKER: I accept that, but it is concluded.

MR PARTON: Minister, does your government accept responsibility for the ongoing failures which have resulted in prolonged waiting lists, record workforce dissatisfaction and decisions that now risk leaving patients without the specialist care that they were referred to receive?

MS STEPHEN-SMITH: I accept responsibility and this government accepts responsibility for the significant improvements in the performance of our health system over recent years, particularly since the COVID-19 pandemic. You talk to Canberrans and they will say that our territory and our health system had one of the best responses to the COVID-19 pandemic you could see around the world. And since then, we have seen significant improvements in performance, including in elective surgery, in emergency departments and now in the focus on outpatients.

Mr Speaker, what I think is ethically and morally unacceptable is to allow people to wait on an outpatient waiting list when they will not be seen. A number of the people who are on these waiting lists, whose position is being reviewed, have been on the waiting list for years because there are national shortages of these specialists. It would not matter how much funding was put in by the government; we cannot recruit and retain specialists in some of these areas, in order to provide additional outpatient appointments in some of these areas. It is not ethical to leave people on a waiting list for four years or six years without telling them that they are not likely to be seen.

Opposition members interjecting—

MS STEPHEN-SMITH: These changes have been made based on evidence by clinicians reviewing the evidence of who should be prioritised in terms of access to these clinics, and that clinical evidence is actually being used.

Ms Lee interjecting—

MS STEPHEN-SMITH: Ms Lee seems to think that we should not be basing decisions on clinical evidence and that these decisions should not be being made by clinicians.

Mr Cocks: A point of order. The minister is not only addressing a point which was not raised at all but again debating the question.

MR SPEAKER: Mr Cocks, the minister was responding to an interjection. If you do not interject, she will not respond to it.

Ms Lee: A point of order. That was a personal reflection on me, and I ask the minister to withdraw.

MR SPEAKER: I must say that I did not hear what she said—

Opposition members interjecting—

MS STEPHEN-SMITH: If I have misunderstood Ms Lee's interjections as thinking that she did not think we should be following the evidence, I apologise for that misinterpretation of her interjections.

Ms Lee interjecting—

MR SPEAKER: Thanks. Members, if you are going to interject, there is going to be a consequence to that, so I would ask that you do not interject and you will not have that consequence. A supplementary Mrs Morris?

MRS MORRIS: Minister, why are we still hearing the same concerns raised by staff about workplace respect and serious clinical governance and patient safety concerns, while patients continue to experience serious barriers to accessing care?

MS STEPHEN-SMITH: That is a very broad question. Every health system faces challenges. It is very, very difficult to deliver health services that keep up with demand in an aging population and with increasing expectations and increasing health technology.

I recognise that our healthcare workers work really, really hard and that sometimes it is a very stressful job. I will always talk up the work of our healthcare workforce. I will always celebrate that work. Dr Patterson will always celebrate that work. This government will always celebrate the incredible work of our healthcare workers: those in the emergency department who have significantly improved the performance; those in the rest of the hospitals that have improved that patient flow so that the emergency department can be quicker; those who deliver our elective surgeries and have delivered record numbers of elective surgeries last year and are on track to deliver our election commitment of 70,000 elective surgeries; and those who work so hard in our outpatient clinics. All of those staff deserve our support, and every time members of this place talk down our health system, they are talking down the work of these incredible staff.

Canberra Health Services—specialist referrals

MR PARTON: My question is to the minister representing the Minister for Health. Minister, the community is furious that Canberra Health Services commenced advising patients that existing referrals to specialist outpatient clinics have been closed because they no longer meet revised referral criteria despite those referrals having been accepted under the previous criteria. Minister, when were you or your successor informed that CHS was reviewing referral criteria in a way that could result in existing referrals being closed?

MS STEPHEN-SMITH: We have been talking about for some time, including in

forums like the general practice forum, that we were going to need to review the way that outpatient clinics were done. As I have indicated earlier, this work was commenced prior to Michael Walsh's review, but it is also absolutely in line with the recommendations that Mr Walsh made to Canberra Health Services that we needed to get a better handle on outpatients. It is also the feedback that we have had from GPs. They want certainty—certainty is hard. They want better information about whether or not referrals are going to be accepted and what the referral criteria are.

Mr Parton: That is not what Rebekah Hoffman said this morning.

MS STEPHEN-SMITH: Actually, I listened to what Rebekah Hoffman said, and it was in fact—if you listened to what Betty Ge said, she actually said that GPs in the ACT, noting that Rebekah Hoffman works in New South Wales and not in the ACT, were aware of this work. Yes, they want a better connection and they are getting a better connection and better communication from Canberra Health Services about this work. Clinicians themselves do not want to know that there are people sitting on the waitlist list for years when those clinicians know that people are unlikely to ever be seen and also know that for many of those people who are on the waiting list actually they do not need a specialist appointment or they have already sought help somewhere else. Betty Ge gave the example on radio this morning of students who have actually moved interstate or people who have actually moved interstate, because we have a transient population. She gets, as a GP, that phone call from CHS or gets the letter and says, "Well, yes, of course that person is not going to get that service. They don't even live here anymore."

MR PARTON: Minister, just to be clear, did you receive advice that these changes could affect tens of thousands of patients who had already been waiting for specialist care? And are you willing to table this advice?

MS STEPHEN-SMITH: I will obviously take that question on notice on behalf of the minister, but, again, I think Mr Parton claiming that this is going to affect tens of thousands of people is him making up his own facts here. As we have indicated, there are 65,000 people on the waiting list, but there are always going to be people on the waiting list. Canberra Health Services delivers around a quarter of a million outpatient services every year. There are always going to be new referrals, and there are always going to be people on the waiting list, and the waiting list is always going to be triaged by clinicians.

MRS MORRIS: Minister, was it you or your successor who approved this approach?

MS STEPHEN-SMITH: I thank the Deputy Leader of the Opposition. As I indicated earlier, this has been a discussion for quite some time as to how we were going to better manage outpatients and be honest with our community about what was achievable and be honest with people who have been on the waiting list for years that were unlikely to be able to be seen. I think it is unethical to leave people on a waiting list for years, knowing that they could wait for many more years and may never be seen, and not let them know that. I think that that is unethical.

Mr Cocks: Point of order, Mr Speaker: under 118AA, the question was in fact about who approved the measure, not how long we have been having a discussion around it.

It is different from the earlier question, and I do not believe that the minister has answered that question.

MR SPEAKER: Minister, do you have anything further to add?

MS STEPHEN-SMITH: I am happy to take that question on notice.

Operation Kingfisher—potential criminal charges

MS BARRY: My question is to the Attorney-General. Attorney-General, the Integrity Commissioner's Operation Kingfisher report found that some of the conduct of the individuals named could constitute criminal charges. Are you aware of any criminal charges being considered by police following the findings in the Operation Kingfisher report?

MS CHEYNE: No, I am not aware.

MS BARRY: Attorney-General, have the DPP communicated with the government, or have you sought advice from the DPP, as to whether there will be prosecution of the individuals that were found to have engaged in serious corrupt conduct, and if so, when?

MS CHEYNE: I will take that on notice. I would note that there has been a discussion in this place before about, where there has been a finding of corrupt conduct, what is the appropriate method to which that is then referred for possible investigation and charge, if that is appropriate. I do not have an update on how that issue has been resolved and so in the interests of being as accurate as possible to the Assembly, I will take it on notice.

MRS MORRIS: Is it in the public interest to prosecute people who have been found to be seriously corrupt in public office, given that this legislature has established indictable offences for such conduct?

Mr Barr: Point of order, Mr Speaker, that would be seeking an expression of opinion.

MR SPEAKER: Yes, I am happy with the minister taking it because it is asking if something is in the public interest, which I think is a reasonably established principle. It is in the public interest or not. Are you willing to take it, minister or?

Mr Barr: Asking for a legal opinion then?

MR SPEAKER: If it is in the public interest, not if it is in the legal interest.

MS CHEYNE: I am not sure that it is for me to say on any individual matter what is or is not in the public interest without having all of the facts and material available. All I have is the Integrity Commission's report.

Government procurement—Strathnairn school

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

Minister, Labor first announced a new school for Strathnairn ahead of the 2020 election, promising it would open in 2025. Phase 1 did not open until this year. Phase 2 is not yet complete. And the original announcement was for a $45 million project; the original budget was $62 million; so far, the project has cost over $100 million.

Last week's release of the Education Directorate's desktop review showed the phase 1 delegate was the former executive group business manager in the Education Directorate who was the subject of adverse commentary in Operation Kingfisher; and the phase 2 delegate was the then-director-general who has since been found to have engaged in serious corrupt conduct. How extensively has the government tested whether the involvement of either delegate on the Strathnairn School project lead to a worse outcome in terms of cost, delays or delivery?

MS STEPHEN-SMITH: I am disappointed, I guess, with Ms Clay's question, particularly in relation to the fact that the document she is referring to specifically identified that the recommendations of the tender evaluation panel had been followed in every other procurement, and that there is no indication that any of the issues that lead to the outcome in Operation Kingfisher had been identified. There were no red flags in relation to any of the other procurements, including Strathnairn School.

Ms Clay: A point of order on relevance. The question was "How extensively did the government test the involvement of those two officials in that project?"

MR SPEAKER: I think the minister had concluded her answer, but do you have anything further to add, Minister?

MS STEPHEN-SMITH: By dint of the fact that those two officials held the positions that they did, Mr Speaker, they would have been delegates on a number of projects, and decision makers on a number of projects, and that is exactly what the document that was tabled shows; that they were in fact delegates on a number of projects. And there is no reason; there has not been any report that the government has received; I am not aware of any report that has been made to any integrity official in relation to any other procurement; and so there is no evidence that this particular procurement of Strathnairn School was affected by any of the issues that came to light through Operation Kingfisher, and indeed the Auditor-General's report before that.

MS CLAY: Minister, why did the cost of the Strathnairn school project increase from $45 million at announcement to over $100 million on delivery?

MS STEPHEN-SMITH: I will take that question on notice, recognising that there have been really substantial increases in construction costs over recent years.

MR BRADDOCK: Minister, what detailed project checks were undertaken on that particular project, to ensure the government had the confidence there was no influence from the involvement of those two delegates?

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

Business—relocations interstate

MS CASTLEY: My question is to the Minister for Business and Industry. ABS data shows that the ACT currently has the highest rate in the country for businesses moving interstate. The data also shows that, over the last four years, two per cent of local firms have crossed the border on net. Minister, why is this happening?

MR PETTERSSON: I thank Ms Castley for her question and her strong advocacy on behalf of Canberra businesses. There are a range of factors that could lead any one particular business to choose to relocate. I am not going to speculate on any one particular decision for any particular business. There are a couple of things I would advise the member may be of interest. There are a range of opportunities that can sometimes present in other jurisdictions, from government supports, in particular, for industries that are targets of the ACT government. We are competing with other jurisdictions that are providing quite lucrative incentives for businesses to conduct their businesses in those jurisdictions, which presents challenges for the ACT to match some of those incentives. There are, of course, some other issues that may be of interest to, in particular, business, but I am not going to go through a detailed list of those in question time.

MS CASTLEY: Is the minister confident that government policies are not responsible for businesses leaving the ACT? If so, what is the evidence for this view?

MR PETTERSSON: I thank Ms Castley for the question, though I cannot fully accept the premise of it. The ACT is a fantastic place to do business. We have the third-highest business growth rate in the country. That, to me, says that we are doing a good job here in the ACT of supporting businesses to start up and grow. I acknowledge that that is not a uniform experience for every business, particularly in these inflationary times, and that there are some businesses locally that are doing it tough. However, the ACT's story on the whole is a positive one. When businesses make decisions in their best interests, that is not always in alignment with what is best for the ACT—I recognise that. We are hopeful that we can continue to see business numbers grow here in the ACT, and we will do our very best to ensure that every business and more businesses want to stay here in the ACT.

MR EMERSON: Minister, what new measures has the ACT government introduced to support the viability of small business in the ACT in this term of government?

MR PETTERSSON: I thank Mr Emerson for the question. We are still completing the actions from the last business strategy. There are only a couple of outstanding items to that—and that was the centre of Ms Castley's question the other day. I am looking forward to releasing the next Small Business Strategy for the ACT. We want to do everything we can as a government to support business to thrive in this city. There are a range of business supports that exist and a range of initiatives and grants that are available to businesses to take up. We want to work with business to make sure that the local economy is thriving. I look forward to providing more information to the chamber with the release of that strategy.

Public schools—funding

MS LEE: My question is to the Minister for Education. Minister, in a recent opinion piece in the *Canberra Times* titled "Front up and explain to public school families why you're making these cuts", the head of the ACT branch of the AEU, Angela Burroughs, wrote:

> Public school principals are being left to deliver that news themselves, absorbing decisions made somewhere else. That is no way to run an education system or to develop "one public education system" as suggested by the review.

Ms Burroughs went on to say:

> A government cannot outsource its decision-making and then outsource the blame for it too.
>
> The scale of what's happening deserves far more scrutiny than it's getting.

Just last week in question time, you accused me of spreading misinformation and you accused me of scaremongering and of causing the distress caused by your debacle when it comes to school budgets. Minister, why are you continuing—

Mr Pettersson: Point of order. I would ask that you direct Ms Lee to direct her comments through the chair.

MS LEE: Through you, Mr Speaker: Minister, you accused me—

Mr Pettersson: A point of order, Mr Speaker—

MS LEE: What you said: address it through the chair. Through you, Mr Speaker—

Mr Pettersson: You can't be serious, Ms Lee.

MR SPEAKER: Standing order 42 requires all comments to be directed to the chair. You need to make sure you are doing that.

MS LEE: Are you going call a point of order every single time someone says that?

MR SPEAKER: Members, this is question time, not debate time. Could you ask your question and direct it through me, please, Ms Lee?

Mr Pettersson: You're not talking through the chair.

MR SPEAKER: Mr Pettersson, you have had your point of order.

MS LEE: Through you, Mr Speaker, the minister accused me of spreading misinformation and the minister accused me of fearmongering and creating distress that she is responsible for. Minister, why are you continuing to outsource the blame for this budget debacle caused by you?

MS STEPHEN-SMITH: I thank Ms Lee for the question. I do not resile from my comment. Last week, she was spreading misinformation and causing distress. But I also have recognised, and I have done it a number of—

Ms Lee: Point of order. Mr Speaker, I seek your guidance. The minister has now continuously accused me of spreading misinformation, and I ask you to make a call about whether that is actually accusing me of misleading the Assembly.

MR SPEAKER: I do not think that she has said words to that effect. But, that said, if she is doing that, that is a matter for the Assembly to determine, if you want to move a substantive motion. My understanding is that what she said is that you have misled the community, which is somewhat different. But you would need to move a substantive motion.

Ms Lee: On that point of order, Mr Speaker: you have also—correct me if I'm wrong—given advice that using the word "misinformation" and the term "spreading misinformation" is unparliamentary, and I ask her to withdraw.

MS STEPHEN-SMITH: Mr Speaker, I do not believe I actually did use that word, but I will withdraw. If I did, I withdraw.

MR SPEAKER: Let's focus on the question and answer the question, please, Minister.

MS STEPHEN-SMITH: I have to remember what the question actually was. To the point, I actually had a conversation with the Education Directorate about this yesterday. I have both taken responsibility and thanked the principals and school leaders for their collaborative work with the Education Directorate. The Education Directorate and I have heard that feedback from principals, and the Education Directorate is now working with principals to ensure that the messaging is very much shared. The directorate is taking responsibility for the messaging and not leaving that work to principals.

MS LEE: Minister, how on earth are you taking responsibility, given that you continue to claim that there are no cuts, despite the Education Union, principals, teachers, parents and students all expressing the same concerns?

MS STEPHEN-SMITH: At the risk of boring the other members of the Assembly, I will repeat what I said multiple times last week. There has not been a cut to education funding. There was a 7.3 per cent increase in public education funding from the 2025-26 budget to the 2026-27 budget. At the same time, changing the way that we are doing budgeting to make it more equitable, to make it fairer in line with the school system resourcing review, has meant that some schools will see a reduction in their funding between 2026 and 2027. I have been saying that the whole way along. I have been available, I have talked to the media, I have been on radio, and I have answered questions in this place numerous times—the same question over and over and over again—taking responsibility for the fact that we are implementing the recommendations of the public school system resourcing review, which this place called for and, I thought, supported, but apparently some in this place do not.

MR COCKS: Minister, isn't the reason that principals, teachers and parents are angry about these cuts that they have to live with the consequences of your decisions?

MS STEPHEN-SMITH: I again say that school budgets for 2027 have not been finalised. There is a process underway. Principals received their student resource allocation preliminary budgets for feedback, and there has been a further process in the first week of this term for principals to deliver a school budgeting tool to the Education Directorate, to work through with the directorate. The assessment of that feedback has been underway. There is a small team of people in the directorate working extremely hard and engaging very closely with principals about this to ensure that we can deliver on the recommendation of the public school resourcing review to be more equitable and fair in the way that our resourcing is distributed among our schools, but also to ensure that every school can manage the impact if there is a reduction in funding between 2026 and 2027, which we were clear would be the case for some schools.

But I think it is important to understand that school resourcing goes up and down year by year and most principles are used to managing their budget year by year. I recognise that this particular process is the first time we have done budgets this way and it has caused distress for a significant number of principals, school leaders and school communities. The distress of the school communities has been exacerbated by the opposition's scaremongering.

Public schools—staff and student safety

MS LEE: My questions to the Minister for Education. Minister, successive Education Directorate annual reports show rising incidents of occupational violence in ACT schools. Reported bullying incidents have increased significantly between 2021 and 2025, and teachers told the ACT Public School System Resourcing Review that they increasingly feel like "bodyguards" or "punching bags". The Centre for Independent Studies has also found that teachers lose an average of nine minutes of every 30-minute lesson managing student misbehaviour. It was revealed that even your own department has developed an internal, multi-hazard risk assessment document and created a crisis management team to deal with the fallout from the school budgets debacle.

Minister, given the rising rates of violence, bullying and classroom disruption, isn't it clear that your current approach to these issues is failing our students and teachers?

MS STEPHEN-SMITH: Well, the current budgets have not been implemented. In fact, the budgets for 2027 have not even been finalised, and the data that Ms Lee is referring to is old lag data—

Ms Lee: A point of order: the question was very clear and on the rising rates of violence, and I did quote their own directorate's annual report data from 2021 through to 2025.

MS STEPHEN-SMITH: What is the question Ms Lee? Repeat the question, because I was actually answering it—

MR SPEAKER: Minister, she is on her feet raising a point of order. You can respond to that if you wish to. Ms Lee?

Ms Lee: Thank you, Mr Speaker. The question was very clear, so I don't know if she needs to take her own advice, which she gave to me, and open her ears—

MR SPEAKER: Ms Lee!

Ms Lee: The question is: given the rising rates of violence and classroom disruption, isn't it clear that the current approach to these issues is failing our students and teachers?

MS STEPHEN-SMITH: If Ms Lee was not trying to draw a bow between the current approach to budgeting, which she did talk about in the preamble to her question, and the issue of occupational violence, then that is fair, but she did have a very long preamble that did conflate quite a number of issues, Mr Speaker.

On the issue of occupational violence, it is one of the things that the directorate has been specifically focused on—changing that approach to ensure schools are better supported to manage the risk of occupational violence. One of the things I have been talking about to principals, to the unions and to the directorate is in relation to ensuring that risks are identified earlier and intervention is put in place earlier so that the actual incidents of violence reduce. That is the approach that Kingsford Smith School has been taking, and it has been working.

MS LEE: Minister, what programs to manage behaviour are currently being used at which schools, and does the directorate have evidence about what is working?

MS STEPHEN-SMITH: I am not sure which question I am supposed to answer in that supplementary, Mr Speaker. Ms Berry has previously talked a lot in this place about Positive Behaviours for Learning and the Positive Behaviours for Learning framework that is the universal framework across all of our public schools.

I have previously responded to a question on notice from Ms Lee identifying which programs are used in specific schools. There are a number of number of schools that use programs like the Berry Street program and other programs that support restorative practices within schools. They are specifically focused on building a better school culture to reduce the incidents of violence and bullying and to build a positive behaviour framework to ensure that students are behaving in a way that is appropriate in school.

So Positive Behaviours for Learning is the framework across all of our ACT public schools, and within that a number of schools have specific programs in place. That is one of the issues that we need to look at—in terms of how we are more consistent across our school environment. We know that teachers move from school to school, so having a number of different schools using a range of different methodologies is potentially one of the challenges that we face. At the same time, innovation at the school level is really important and commitment from principals to Positive Behaviours for Learning and restorative school environments is also really important. So the balance we need to strike is consistency but also allowing schools to be

themselves as well.

MR CAIN: Minister, how many qualified teachers have left classroom-based positions in ACT schools to take roles within the Education Directorate citing increasing occupational violence and workload pressures as contributing factors?

MS STEPHEN-SMITH: I will take that question on notice. There is no way that I could answer it here, and I will give advice to the Assembly that it is quite likely that we will not be able to provide a specific response to that question. What I would say is that the directorate has done a good job in reducing the number of teacher vacancies. In fact, part of the work on the "one public education system" is ensuring that schools can be supported to address teacher vacancies in a more structured way. We are very conscious of the fact that we need to attract and retain excellent teachers in the ACT. There are a range of programs in place to do that. But for the detail of the question, I will come back on notice.

Government procurement—Whitlam school

MR BRADDOCK: The Education Directorate desktop review of tier 1 and tier 2 education capital projects identified that the then director-general for education was the decision-maker for the Whitlam School project and twice made qualifications on her approvals for the project, including requesting a revised evaluation report. Minister, how extensively were the former director-general's conditions on her approvals examined in the desktop review? And what gives you confidence that the Whitlam School project has not suffered similar issues as in Operation Kingfisher?

MS STEPHEN-SMITH: My understanding is that in all of the projects that were considered through the desktop review, as I said earlier, the recommendation of the tender evaluation panel was taken in terms of who would be delivering that project. It is not unusual that there are some additional requirements that are put in place. I will take the detail of the question on notice in relation to how much additional examination was given to the Whitlam School project in particular, as the directorate undertook this desktop review. But, again, I think on the basis of the work that they did I am clearly advised that there were no red flags associated with that.

MR BRADDOCK: Minister, why was the former director-general of education chosen to be the decision-maker and continued to hold that responsibility in 2024 despite the public airing of the issues from the Operation Kingfisher public hearings?

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

MS CLAY: Minister, what further investigations do you intend to make through your directorate or otherwise regarding the integrity of the procurement for the Whitlam School?

MS STEPHEN-SMITH: I have no indication. As far as I am aware, no-one has written to me indicating that there are integrity issues with the procurement of the Whitlam School project. I am not sure if the Greens have further information. If they do, I would encourage them to provide that information to me and my office. I will certainly have another conversation with the director-general in relation to the work

that was done through this review. More broadly, in relation to Operation Kingfisher, the work is continuing in relation to understanding the background to procurement.

I would say it is really important to understand that between 2021 and 2024 significant work was undertaken in relation to infrastructure procurement and procurement more broadly—a significant program of procurement reform. The establishment of Infrastructure Canberra has meant that we now have a specialised agency, a specialised directorate, to undertake major projects. I will take the detail of the question on notice.

I would also note in relation to the earlier question that ministers do not get involved in procurement processes. Expecting us to know the detail of why particular decisions were made during a procurement process is quite challenging, noting that, of course, I was not the minister at the time either, but the minister at the time would not have necessarily been advised, because ministers are not involved in procurement processes.

Housing—Canberra house pattern book

MR WERNER-GIBBINGS: My question is to the Minister for Planning and Sustainable Development. Minister, yesterday you announced an expression of interest process has commenced for a national design competition to develop the Canberra House Pattern Book for missing middle designs. How will you ensure that homes in the Canberra House Pattern Book are suitable for Canberra?

MR STEEL: I thank Mr Werner-Gibbings for his question. I note that the missing middle housing reforms and the pattern book are a significant opportunity for his electorate of Brindabella.

The concept of a pattern book of pre-designed homes is not a new one for Canberra. Canberra was built on pattern books. In the post-war years when thousands of people were moving to Canberra for jobs, opportunities and for a new way of life, pre-designed homes were turned to. It was a practical way to build more homes at scale and make sure that we could house the booming population. Many of these homes, including those that we know today as guvvies or ex-guvvies, remain today as an iconic part of our older suburbs. Then, of course, they were followed by a range of other pattern book designs and project homes.

The Canberra house pattern book is taking this classic Canberra idea and reimagining it for our city today. We are inviting Canberra's best architects and design teams, as well as those across Australia, to contribute their ideas and innovation to a new generation of housing pattern designs tailored specifically to Canberra's unique climate, character and lifestyle. Through the expression of interest process, we are calling on these design professionals to demonstrate their credentials, their capability and experience to deliver high quality, medium density housing pattern designs including dual occupancies, tri-occupancies, townhouses and terraces.

Shortlisted entrants from the EOI process will then be selected to further develop their concepts into housing patterns through the design competition. The ACT Government Architect, Catherine Townsend, will be leading the jury in considering the suitability

of the proposals and progressed designs and their ability to demonstrate, among other things, that they are unmistakably of Canberra, responding to Country, climate, landscape systems and Canberra's distinctive settings. These homes will be a good neighbour which contribute positively to our streets, neighbourhoods and community life. I would encourage members to visit the planning website to see further details.

MR WERNER-GIBBINGS: Minister, who is eligible to enter the design competition?

MR STEEL: Entry in the design competition is open to architects and building designers across Australia to participate as individuals or a team. We are also inviting architecture students to participate in a design exercise as part of the competition. For professional designers, the design competition presents an opportunity to see their concepts evolve into housing patterns that could be incorporated into the pattern book, and one that may be built right across Canberra.

For students, it gives them a great opportunity to test their ideas and innovation for dual occupancies and tri-occupancy homes against a real world brief and gain recognition for their work as part of the process. As part of the student category, the two student winners will also receive about a $5,000 prize which recognises innovative ideas for Canberra's future housing.

Details of eligibility are available in the expression of interest terms and conditions on the Canberra house pattern book page of the ACT Planning website. I would encourage all interested architects in the ACT, building designers or architecture students to check this out and I look forward to seeing their ideas, creativity and visions for Canberra's future homes that come forward in their submissions.

MS BERRY: Minister, when can Canberrans expect designs in the Canberra House Pattern Book to be available to build?

MR STEEL: I thank Ms Berry for her question and note her longstanding interest in work in the housing space.

Expression of interest registrations are open now and will close on Wednesday, 3 December, and following consideration by our competition jury, shortlisted professional and student entrants should be announced soon after. We then expect stage 2, being the design competition itself, to be undertaken and winning designs selected by mid next year. The winning professional designs will then undertake design development which will advance and refine their concepts into fully developed design exemplars, which can then be featured in the Canberra house pattern book.

The Canberra house pattern book will provide Canberrans with a library of exemplary pre-qualified, sustainable and affordable medium density home designs from 2028. These designs will be paired with a streamlined approvals pathway so that proven high quality designs can be built through a more efficient and simpler planning approvals process.

We have seen the benefit of this approach in New South Wales, where they have a pattern book in place and whole businesses are setting up just to deliver the pattern

book designs. They can do so efficiently with the same materials being used again and again across different blocks, which, of course, our government has enabled for the first time through the missing middle housing reforms. The pattern book builds on those reforms, which are a landmark planning change that our government has made to support more housing in this city.

Access Canberra—customer credits

MR CAIN: My question is to the Minister for City and Government Services. Minister, at 30 June 2026, Access Canberra held credits across over 84,000 individual accounts, but customers cannot check their balances online and those credits are not automatically applied to their next registration payment. Minister, why can customers not see their available credit online, and authorise its use as part of the online registration renewal process?

MS CHEYNE: I am going to take that on notice because Mr Cain has asked a series of questions about this, both in this place and on notice, and am pretty sure I have answered this. But I am going to have to double check, due to the volume.

MR CAIN: Minister, do registration renewal notices tell customers how much credit is held in their account?

MS CHEYNE: I will take it on notice, Mr Speaker.

MS BARRY: Minister, what prevents Access Canberra from applying a customer's credit during renewal, when they already know the credit exists?

MS CHEYNE: I also think I have answered this question, but if I have not, I will come back to the Assembly. I will clarify the whole set of answers, Mr Speaker. Mr Cain may wish to wait for all of the questions that he has asked to be responded to before following up, which has become a pattern.

Taxation and levies—commercial land rates

MR MILLIGAN: My question is to the Treasurer. Treasurer, commercial rates are increasing by an average of eight per cent, despite commercial land valuations falling by 0.3 per cent. What modelling did your government undertake on how much of these additional rates will be passed on to commercial tenants through their leases?

MR STEEL: I thank the member for his question. As he knows, when the government sets rates, that is not based on the valuation of blocks across the territory. The government sets the amount of rates take in the budget every year. We certainly recognise the pressure that is faced by both businesses and households at the moment when setting rates. But, while the valuation methodology of course affects an individual rates assessment for a particular block, the government's increase to rates is not based on valuation.

MR MILLIGAN: What modelling did the government undertake to consider the impact to business confidence, commercial property values and the cost of doing business in Canberra?

MR STEEL: No specific detailed modelling, but we certainly consider those issues when setting rates annually as part of the budget process, recognising the particular pressures that are faced by businesses at the moment in the inflationary environment that we have in the economy, largely driven by the war in the Middle East. That is, of course, also affecting government costs and the cost of delivering government services as well. That was also taken into account in the rates decisions that we made in the budget process.

MR COCKS: Treasurer, will you release any analysis that you relied on to justify these rates increases?

MR STEEL: The government has released the budget in some level of detail, and that is available for everyone in the chamber to view. We have gone through an estimates process. Those sorts of questions could have been asked during the process. I do not think they were. We have now passed the budget and we are looking forward to the next budget. In every budget we will consider the circumstances that we face at that time, the conditions for business and the broader economy as well as the conditions for government, in making sure that we can continue to fund the services that Canberrans rely on.

Mr Cocks: I raise a point of order under 118AA. Mr Speaker, the question was about analysis that was relied on to justify the rates increases. It was not a question about the budget, nor about questions asked during budget estimates. The Treasurer has not been responsive to the question, and I would ask that you direct him to come back under standing order 118AA.

Mr Steel: On the point of order, I clearly, in the previous answer, said that there was not a detailed set of modelling that was undertaken. This was a supplementary question, and so it follows from the earlier—

MR SPEAKER: I think the minister was responsive. He has provided the answer to what the government relied on, which was the budget process, which has been tabled in this place. So I think that he has been responsive.

Strathnairn School—funding

MISS NUTTALL: My question is to the Minister for Education. In question on notice No 1540, Ms Clay asked the Minister for Education how many homes the Strathnairn School currently serves and how many it is expected to serve in 10 years. The minister could not provide an answer, indicating that the Education Directorate designs allocations based on current and anticipated future populations but does not hold data on dwelling counts or projections. Who did your directorate consult with to determine how many school places it needs to offer both now and in a decade's time at Strathnairn School?

MS STEPHEN-SMITH: It does not seem like rocket science to me that school building would be based on population projections rather than the number of buildings in which the population lives. Populations can live in different configurations. The real question is how many children and young people are

expected to be in a particular population or a particular catchment to design the school. I will take the question on notice, in relation to whom the directorate consulted with, but the basis of the original question was incorrect in that schools are not designed to serve a particular number of dwellings; they are designed to serve a particular population.

MISS NUTTALL: Noting this area of West Belconnen is one of our fastest-growing regions, how many families have been turned away for enrolment so far?

MS STEPHEN-SMITH: I will take the question on notice.

MS CLAY: Minister, what work is the directorate doing to ensure Strathnairn School and schools in West Belconnen can provide a place for every child that needs one?

MS STEPHEN-SMITH: Every child and young person in our city will have a place in a public school. I will take on notice the detail of the question for Ms Clay in relation to West Belconnen. The intention of developing Strathnairn School was obviously to meet the needs of that local community. As was discussed earlier, there is a second stage of the Strathnairn School project. There are also, of course, other developments and projects underway in relation to ensuring that our schools, new and existing, are there to meet the needs of the local community.

I was really pleased yesterday to tour again the new Whitlam School, including the site for the new early childhood education and care centre, with the federal minister. That school is coming along really well to serve the people of the Molonglo Valley and particularly Whitlam.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples—Our Booris, Our Way

MR EMERSON: My question is to the Minister for Children, Youth and Families. The aim of the Our Booris, Our Way partnership agreement is "to bring about tangible change for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families by implementing the Our Booris, Our Way recommendations which improve cultural, physical and socio-emotional health and wellbeing outcomes for families within the child protection system".

I understand that the Our Booris, Our Way Implementation Oversight Committee, which signed this partnership agreement with the ACT government in March 2025, has been informed there is no funding for them beyond December 2026.

Minister, how does this decision align with the ACT government's commitments to reduce the over-representation of First Nations children in the child protection system and to shared decision-making under the National Agreement on Closing the Gap?

MR PETTERSSON: I would like to thank Mr Emerson for the question. There is funding available until the end of the financial year, not the calendar year. Any future funding would be the decision of government.

MR EMERSON: Minister, why doesn't the Our Booris, Our Way Implementation Oversight Committee currently have secretariat support and since when has this been

the case?

MR PETTERSSON: I would like to thank Mr Emerson for the supplementary question. It is an interesting question. There have been a range of secretariat supports provided to the committee in recent times. There are a range of factors behind the changes of secretariat support, and I am happy to write with further information to Mr Emerson outside of this place as to the nature of those challenges.

There is not currently secretariat support. That is something that is being addressed. Is there a part of the question I have missed, Mr Emerson?

Mr Emerson: And since when has that been the case?

MR PETTERSSON: I will take on notice what the date of those changes in secretariat support have been.

MS VASSAROTTI: How will the Our Booris, Our Way implementation plan continue to be progressed, given there seems to be a walking away from some of the governance mechanisms and support processes?

MR PETTERSSON: I would like to thank Ms Vassarotti for the question. The government is committed to reducing the over-representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in the out of home care system and the Our Booris, Our Way recommendations and the committee are foundational in that work and guide us to this day in how we go about doing that work.

The recommendations are progressing well. They are not fully implemented yet, but the committee's work has progressed well since 2019, and we are in a position where we are closer to the recommendations being completed than the beginning—that I am very confident of. There is ongoing work between the committee and government as to the status of each particular recommendation, but I am very confident that we are in a very good position to make good on the commitment this government made to the local Indigenous community to reduce the over-representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children.

Access Canberra—Woden shopfront

MS CARRICK: My question is to the Minister for City and Government Services about the Woden Library Access Canberra collocation project. Infrastructure Canberra's note to your office on 1 September 2026 for input into your budget speech said:

> We expect consultation to commence alongside the procurement process. This will provide an opportunity for community feedback to be considered early, allowing the successful contractor to incorporate relevant feedback as the design progresses.

Last week you said, "Our intention is to consult with the community. We can do both. It is not one or the other." Minister, why isn't community consultation on this project occurring now?

MS CHEYNE: I think the distinction here is that there is a difference between the design and construction tender going out compared to the detailed design. We have been clear that community engagement will inform the detailed design, particularly accessibility, the arrangement of library spaces and the customer experience. The objective—I have been clear—is to preserve the library's functions while providing a separate purpose-designed Access Canberra service centre.

MS CARRICK: Minister, what are the security risks to the Woden Library that are being mitigated by withholding from public scrutiny the tender documents for the Access Canberra relocation?

MS CHEYNE: I think to disclose those would probably be revealing the security risks themselves, which I do not want to make public. With respect to Ms Carrick's question, I am happy to discuss it with her directly or privately, but I do not think this is something that is in the public interest to be airing if the directorate has made the decision that it has.

MR EMERSON: Minister, where will people who currently use the workspaces on the first floor of the Woden Library go when the Access Canberra shopfront is moved in?

MS CHEYNE: The plan is to reconfigure library spaces that are on level 1 primarily into the ground floor area. Community rooms are not expected to be affected. The detailed design does need to address how people use the library, including quiet spaces, acoustics, accessibility and movement through the building. As I said, the objective is to preserve the library's functions.

Canberra Health Services—ophthalmology

MS VASSAROTTI: My question is to the minister representing the Minister for Health.

As we have been talking about a lot in recent days, we know that the waitlists for specialists in the ACT are exceedingly long, especially for specialties such as cardiology, paediatrics and ophthalmology. The Canberra Health Services ophthalmology clinic no longer even accepts referrals for 11 eye conditions and it seems that emergency services are a problem. One patient has reported to us that when they presented at CHS in need of emergency macula reattachment surgery, they were told to get someone to drive them to Sydney as that emergency surgery could not be provided here. That travel time has had a permanent impact on this person's eyesight. Is there an emergency ophthalmologist available in CHS at all times?

MS STEPHEN-SMITH: My understanding is that the answer to that question is no, there is not. I have actually had a personal experience of having to present for an issue that required an ophthalmologist and there was a reasonable chance that there would not be someone available at short notice on call. So I will take the detail of the question on notice, but my understanding is the answer is there is not always an on-call ophthalmologist available.

MS VASSAROTTI: Under CHS policy, are there circumstances in which a patient requiring emergency surgery would be told to get someone to drive them to Sydney?

MS STEPHEN-SMITH: Yes, I have also heard from that constituent as well. My understanding is there would be circumstances where the quickest access to treatment would be to drive to the Eye Hospital in Sydney.

MR BRADDOCK: Minister, what measures is the government currently taking to bring more ophthalmologists to Canberra to rectify the situation?

MS STEPHEN-SMITH: I will take the question on notice, Mr Speaker, but work has been underway and so I am sure the minister will come back with detail on that.

Free period products rollout

MS BERRY: My question is for the Minister for Education. Minister, could you please update the Assembly on the progress of the free period product rollout?

MS TOUGH: I can take this one; it is broader than education. But I would like to thank the member for her question and the work she has done on the free period product rollout, to date.

I am very pleased to update the chamber about the important program to end period poverty in the ACT. And I am proud that we are leading the way nationally to support women and girls. I would also like to thank my colleague, Minister Orr, for introducing the legislation around period products and her leadership and advocacy in this area.

Following the commencement of the Period Products and Facilities (Access) Act 2023, the ACT government has been progressively expanding access to these products and ensuring these can be accessed with privacy and dignity. The ACT government has provided free period products to student in need, for many years, but they were commonly available through schools' front offices. Following a trial in 2025, period product dispensers have been installed in all ACT public schools, with the type and location of dispensers tailored to each school setting.

Dispensers will be installed in student-friendly locations including in girls', gender-neutral and accessible bathrooms. In primary schools, the dispensers contain pads; in high schools, preschool-to-year-10 schools and colleges, they contain pads and tampons. Students can still access free period products in other parts of schools such as wellbeing spaces, classrooms and front offices.

The rollout of dispensers to make period products available for free forms part of the ACT government's efforts to support the health and wellbeing of women, girls and all people who menstruate, in the ACT.

MS BERRY: Minister, why were ACT public schools chosen as the first locations for the rollout?

MS TOUGH: I thank the member for the question and for her previous work in this

area. I firstly want to pay tribute to the students at Canberra High School who delivered a pitch to improve access to period products, in March 2021 as part of International Women's Day. From this pitch, the ACT government commenced the period products project pilot in term three of 2025, which provided free period products to student across 31 ACT public schools. The schools selected included a mix of primary, P-to-10, high school and college settings across the ACT region.

Prior to that trial, period poverty represented a critical barrier to education and wellbeing, with up to 26% of students having missed school due to lack of access to period products; and more than 60% having worn products for extended time periods. By the conclusion of the trial, survey feedback from over 1100 students confirmed strong support for the program, with most respondents reporting easier access to products and greater comfort discussing their menstrual health—which, personally, I think is something wonderful. Furthermore, the evaluation found perceived improvements in student wellbeing, reduced absenteeism and enhanced dignity in school environments.

Having shown a real difference to reduce stigma, improve understanding of menstrual health, and ease some cost-of-living pressures for families, the pilot is now being rolled out across all ACT public schools. It ensures no student across the region will miss out on learning due to period poverty and a lack of access to period products.

MR WERNER-GIBBINGS: Minister, what are the next steps to improve access to free period products and end period poverty?

MS TOUGH: I thank the member for his question. I am pleased to speak to the next phase of this important program, which is centred on strengthening partnerships to build on progress already made, and move to a future where period poverty becomes a thing of the past.

Our government understands that access to essential period products is a fundamental human right, not a luxury. This government understands that menstruation is a normal part of life and access to period products is a matter of equity, dignity and participation. We also recognise the importance of listening to the experiences of people who menstruate, and ensuring their voices inform future initiatives.

Our commitment is clear: reduce barriers to participation in education, employment and community life, and ensure that no person is disadvantaged because they cannot afford essential period products. As it currently stands, period product dispensers are now available in the Child and Family Centres, the Child Development Service, the Housing ACT service centre, all ACT libraries, the ACT courts, the ACT Civil and Administrative Tribunal, and even here in the Legislative Assembly.

Ending period poverty will require sustained effort and collaboration across governments, schools, community organisations and our broader community. Our government remains committed to doing that work. Together, we can continue building a Canberra where everyone can manage their period with dignity, where support is available where needed, and when period poverty becomes a thing of the past.

Government procurement—conduct in procurement

MRS MORRIS: My question is to the Chief Minister. Chief Minister, I refer to your response last week regarding CFMEU influence on ACT government procurement, the findings of Operation Kingfisher concerning the CFMEU's lobbying and its involvement in the implementation of the Secure Local Jobs Code and the broader question of how your government considers representations from the union when making policy and procurement decisions. Chief Minister, is it still your position that the government has never been influenced by the CFMEU, despite the findings associated with Operation Kingfisher?

MR BARR: Yes, the question of me was broader than Kingfisher, and those individuals do not represent the government in its totality. The point that I have made is that stakeholders of all kinds will seek to influence this place. In reference to government, for 12 years certainly—from the period 2012 to 2024—the definition of "government" includes multi parties—it includes the Greens as well. Any decision in relation to legislation in this place, with the exception of one full-year term, this century has required other parties to agree—not just the government or the Labor Party.

It is highly likely that there have been circumstances where the Liberal Party and the CFMEU have reached the same conclusion on a particular issue.

Mr Parton interjecting—

MR BARR: Reaching the same policy conclusion on a particular issue before the parliament does not indicate influence. By the same logic, if the government agrees with the position of the Business Chamber, the Property Council, the *Canberra Times* or Ross Solly's *Breakfast* program, does that suggest that we are influenced by their views? No. We will listen to a wide variety of stakeholders and reach our own conclusions. That sometimes those conclusions would be the same as the CFMEU would be a position where every single member in this place will have at one point in their career, I imagine, found themselves agreeing with the position the CFMEU have put or that the CFMEU would agree with the position that they have put. Yes, it is quite clear— *(Time expired.)*

MRS MORRIS: Chief Minister, will you concede that the CFMEU has in fact sought to influence government policy, regardless of whether you accept that its lobbying was successful?

MR BARR: As I answered in answer to the earlier question, every organisation, media, individuals, community groups and other members of parliament all seek to influence decisions of this place. That happens every single day on every single issue. The insinuation of the question last week was that that influence was somehow improper. It is not. They are welcome to express a view on particular issues and there will be occasions—as I mentioned in my last answer—where people will agree with that. People will often arrive at the same position, possibly for different reasons or through different processes.

Simply because the CFMEU put forward a proposition, does not mean that it must

automatically be rejected. I am aware of situations where the Liberal Party has supported a CFMEU position—for example, in response to asbestos or silica dust or a range of issues. So this exercise here in attempting to suggest that, if you ever find yourself agreeing with a position of the CFMEU, you are therefore influenced by them would work and everyone would be accountable against that metric.

MR PARTON: Chief Minister, can you identify one occasion on which your government took a decision contrary to the CFMEU's stated interests because it was the right thing to do for the ACT community?

MR BARR: Yes, numerous. I am happy to take on notice and provide a comprehensive list over this century. There are plenty of examples where the CFMEU have argued for particular positions that have not been adopted by the government or only adopted in part or where the Assembly has sought to agree with a CFMEU position and the Labor Party has not. There are examples of all of those things over the years. But the fundamental point here is that they are entitled to put a view, like every other stakeholder organisation—every community group, every individual, every media outlet. Everyone every day seeks to influence decisions of this place. To suggest that they alone are not allowed to and everyone else is is not fair, and to suggest that no-one else in this parliament is ever influenced by the position of stakeholders is also absurd.

Mr Speaker, all further questions can be placed on the notice paper.