QUESTION TIME

OF THE

LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY

FOR THE

AUSTRALIAN CAPITAL TERRITORY

HANSARD

Edited proof transcript

Wednesday, 28 October 2026

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Questions without notice
Former Minister for Health—performance

MR PARTON: My question is to the Minister for Health. The former Labor Chief Minister Jon Stanhope has declared that the years of policy decisions under the reign of Rachel Stephen-Smith are directly to blame for the deterioration of the ACT's public health system. Does the minister accept that the state of the system inherited from the previous minister is in significant crisis and in fact is an indictment on the leadership of Minister Stephen-Smith?

DR PATERSON: I thank the member for the question; it is an excellent opportunity to talk about how our health system has been going from strength to strength, particularly under the previous minister's leadership. We have seen significant improvements in our emergency department wait times over the past few years. We have seen significant investment in elective surgeries. And, as we have been very much discussing this week, we are beginning a massive reform project through implementing the Walsh reform recommendations, for which I will come to the chamber with a government response in the not too distant future. So I feel that the health portfolio is in a very strong position and feel very proud to take the leadership position.

MR PARTON: Given the scale of the problems inherited, has the minister sought additional funding or changes to the government's health policy settings to address the underlying causes of the system's decline?

DR PATERSON: I am two months into the role, and we have not yet gone through a budget process with me in this position. I will absolutely, wholeheartedly, embrace that process when it begins.

Mr Cocks: A point of order, under 118AA: the question was specifically about the underlying causes of the system's decline. It wasn't about budget processes.

MR SPEAKER: Mr Cocks, I think it was specific.

Ms Stephen-Smith interjecting—

MR SPEAKER: Minister, there is a point of order. I would ask you to either raise a point of order or let me rule.

The question was: has the minister sought additional funding? She did respond to that. She was responsive. There is no point of order.

MRS MORRIS: Has Minister Stephen-Smith enabled the most significant decline of our public health system since self-government, as per Mr Stanhope's comments?

DR PATERSON: No, not at all. Minister Stephen-Smith, when she held the health portfolio, directed the health system through a major international pandemic. We have seen year on year increases in demand for our health services across the board, including our ambulance service, so we have a health system that is under strain, as the chamber would be aware. There are all sorts of workforce pressures as well. But despite all those things, we continue to have a health system that is improving. We are seeing

emergency department wait times reduce. We are seeing massive investment in elective surgery wait lists. We will continue to invest in our health system to see improvements for the Canberra community.

Economy—cost of living

MS CASTLEY: My question is to the Chief Minister. Today's ABS data confirms a months-long trend where CPI is increasing more in Canberra than the national average, hitting almost five per cent over the past year. Why is the cost of living rising faster in Canberra than the rest of Australia?

MR BARR: I thank Ms Castley for the question. Looking at the data, transport costs, recreation and housing were the main drivers of the increase. I think on an annualised rate, though, the ACT is within 0.1 per cent of the national rate over the course of the last 12 months.

MS CASTLEY: Chief Minister, what are the implications for the ACT budget of inflation that is almost double the government's forecasts?

MR BARR: Well, that is somewhat speculative as we will not be delivering a budget until June next year. We will see where inflation is at that point, noting of course that the Reserve Bank are exercising their monetary policy levers, with the desire to return inflation to the two to three per cent underlying rate.

Waste—soft plastics

MS CLAY: My question is to the Minister for City and Government Services.

Construction has begun on the replacement recycling centre. Infrastructure Canberra said that soft plastics recycling is a problem for all of Australia and that "It's a national thing that is being worked on." But it is not a national thing that is being worked on. A month ago the federal Labor government backflipped on their promise to bring in mandatory federal product stewardship laws nationally. Those laws would have made the big corporations who make and sell plastic packaging responsible for paying to recycle it and for designing it out in the first place. Given this backflip, what was Infrastructure Canberra referring to when they said soft plastics and packaging waste were "A national thing that is being worked on?"

MS ORR: I am going to take that as the policy for waste recycling and the circular economy sits with me as Minister for Environment. In reference to iCBR, they would probably report to Minister Cheyne. I am going take it on notice and come back to the chamber because my computer has an automatic software update going on and I cannot check my notes.

MS CLAY: Since federal Labor abandoned their promise to bring in national packaging laws that would make polluters pay, what has the ACT government done to deal with soft plastics in Canberra?

MS ORR: Mr Speaker, that will cut across a few areas so I will take it on notice and come back with a full answer.

MR BRADDOCK: Minister, when will Canberrans be able to recycle soft plastics in a free and convenient way like other cities such as Albury, Ballarat, Adelaide, Tamworth and the Central Coast?

MS ORR: I will add it to the list of things I am taking on notice and come back with a comprehensive answer.

Phillip Swimming and Ice Skating Centre—lease conditions

MS CARRICK: My question is to the minister for planning, regarding the Phillip pool. The owner of the Phillip Swimming and Ice Skating Centre has erected fences very close to the 50-metre pool. Minister, are the current works, including fencing and decommissioning of the smaller pools, allowable under the current lease?

MR STEEL: I will take that on notice and come back to the Assembly with some information.

MS CARRICK: Minister, has there been a safety assessment relating to the clearance around the pool that is needed to facilitate a rescue operation? If yes, when did this assessment occur and what were the findings? If not, why not?

MR STEEL: I thank the member for the question. I will seek as to whether I can get information from the independent Territory Planning Authority about that, if they hold that information.

MR EMERSON: Minister, when was the last inspection for compliance with the Crown lease conditions, and what were the findings?

MR STEEL: Again, I will seek some information about that from Access Canberra who acts as the delegate for the Territory Planning Authority when it comes to enforcing planning regulation.

Out of home care—Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children

MR EMERSON: My question is to the Minister for Children, Youth and Families. Minister, yesterday during question time you said:

> 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…

If that is the case, Minister, why hasn't the partnership agreement with the Our Booris, Our Way Implementation Oversight Committee been reviewed as was promised? And why hasn't a new partnership agreement been signed, given the existing one expired in March?

MR PETTERSSON: I thank Mr Emerson for the question. There is a disagreement afoot as to whether the review of the partnership agreement has taken place.

I understand the views of the committee on this matter. And there was a second part to the question, Mr Emerson?

Mr Emerson: Why there is no agreement given the existing one expired in March?

MR PETTERSSON: A decision to enter into a partnership agreement has been a decision of the directorate. I am not in a position to provide any further information on any decisions of a future agreement.

Mr Emerson: Mr Speaker, a point of order on responsiveness. The question was on why one has not been signed; it was not whether a new partnership agreement would be signed at some point in the future. If the minister is unable to comment today perhaps he could take that part on notice.

MR SPEAKER: On the point of order, do you have anything—

Mr Pettersson: Why has one not been signed? Yes, one has not been signed. I am not in a position to attribute particular reasons at this point in time as to why that has happened—and it would be a future decision to do so.

Mr Emerson: Well, I seek your ruling then.

MR SPEAKER: I think it is a fine line that one. I will have a look at the *Hansard* and come back with a ruling later on.

MR EMERSON: Minister, is it true that the Our Booris, Our Way implementation team within the directorate has been unstaffed since October 2025?

MR PETTERSSON: I thank Mr Emerson for the question. There have been changes in the staff allocation across the directorate that works to these matters. I would not be able to speak precisely to the time lines; so I will have to take that on notice.

MS VASSAROTTI: Minister, is the ACT government committed to ongoing oversight through the Our Booris, Our Way Implementation Oversight Committee beyond 30 June 2027 when their current funding expires?

MR PETTERSSON: The government is deeply appreciative of all of the work that the committee undertake providing oversight as well as their original work in providing recommendations. The role of the committee is important. The role of the committee takes place in the wider context of the oversight of the children, youth and family service that exist here in the ACT, with a range of independent oversights. The government will meet at some time in the future to consider what the appropriate settings are. That should and will be done in conversation and consultation with community.

Cleaners—long service leave

MR COCKS: My question is to the Minister for Health. Minister, on 1 October, more than 300 Canberra Hospital cleaners transferred into direct government employment from the private sector. What arrangements has the government made to ensure these

workers receive full recognition of their previously accumulated portable long service leave?

DR PATERSON: I will take that on notice.

MR COCKS: Minister, how many of the insourced cleaners had less than five years of accumulated portable service, and how many have had that service recognised towards their public sector long service leave entitlements?

DR PATERSON: I will take that on notice.

MR PARTON: Minister, will an insourced Canberra Hospital cleaner who returns to private sector cleaning after five years lose both their portable and their government long service leave under your scheme's provisions?

DR PATERSON: I will take that on notice.

Small business—impact of federal and territory policies

MR COCKS: My question is to the Minister for Business and Industry. Minister, small businesses are dealing with the ban on credit card surcharges, federal Labor's proposed changes to family trust taxation, and uncertainty over the future of credit card payments for tax bills following the Albanese government's decision to postpone the ATO's proposed ban. The government has also lowered the payroll tax threshold and intends to impose another employment levy on hospitality and hairdressing businesses from January. This comes on top of yet another inflation result that may drive interest rate rises.

Minister, what assessment has the government undertaken of the cumulative impact of these decisions and outcomes on the viability of Canberra small businesses?

MR PETTERSSON: I cannot immediately point to a singular piece of work that would have considered the totality of each of those decisions, many of which were undertaken by entities that are not the ACT government. The government, in considering any policy decision, is cognisant of the wider settings in which a decision is taken. We are very confident the decisions we make are in line with Canberrans' expectations.

MR COCKS: Minister, how many small businesses does your government expect will have to increase prices, cut staff hours or delay hiring because of the additional cost of Labor's higher tax, aggressive compliance, agenda?

MR PETTERSSON: I would like to thank Mr Cocks for the supplementary question. I cannot accept the imputations, inferences and claims contained within the question. There is a range of economic circumstances taking place. We make decisions in the best interest of our city. We will continue to do that. We want Canberra to be a place where business thrives. We are a good place to do business, Mr Speaker.

You might have seen, Mr Speaker, the BCA just recently announced their rankings of the states when it comes to business sentiment and regulations, where the ACT has actually gone up in the rankings. Couple that with the fact that in the ACT we have got

the third-highest growth rate for businesses. This government will continue to support the local business community. We will not talk it down like others.

MR MILLIGAN: Minister, why is the government imposing another cost to employment from January, when the federal Labor government has finally realised the severity of the cash-flow pressures facing small business?

MR PETTERSSON: I would like to thank Mr Milligan for the question and, as always, his strong interest in all matters local business. The ACT government is expanding portable long service leave to services and hospitality because we know these are industries that have high rates of business turnover; they have high rates of casualisation, and in these industries it is nigh impossible for working people to access long service leave, which is why we support portable long service leave.

Now, there are some people that do not support the premise of portable long service leave. They do not think that working people deserve access to this entitlement. But we, on this side of the chamber, do. We believe this is an important workplace entitlement that all working people should be able to access, which is why we support portable schemes, and we will continue to do so.

Business—hospitality businesses—portable long service leave

MR COCKS: My question is to the Minister for Skills, Training and Industrial Relations. Minister, in May this year, following my announcement of legislation to postpone the expansion of portable long service leave pending an independent assessment of its impact on businesses and workers, the government postponed the expansion by six months because of difficult economic conditions and offered substantial introductory levy discounts. Since then CreditorWatch has reported that 12 per cent of Australia's cafes and restaurants closed over the previous year, while Restaurant & Catering Australia has reported that average restaurant and cafe net profit margins had fallen to just 2.5 per cent before further increases in employment and operating costs. Minister, what independent economic evidence demonstrates that proceeding with the expansion on 1 January 2027 is unlikely to have materially adverse effects on employment or business viability in Canberra?

MR PETTERSSON: The government does seek advice when considering changes to these schemes. An analysis, as described in Mr Cocks's question, I do not believe has taken place. This was a decision taken by the government in response to what we were seeing in the community and representations from business. We make decisions cognisant of the wider circumstances that are taking place, which is why the government has delayed the commencement of this scheme, which is why we have sought to structure the introduction of this expansion of the scheme to provide as much support to these industries which are experiencing challenging economic circumstances. We are living in an inflationary time, and many businesses are experiencing that challenge. We know that portable long service leave is a good thing for working people, and it is a good thing for these industries.

When I speak to hospitality businesses, commonly the first thing they talk to me about are their challenges in training and retaining staff. If this industry wants to retain more of their staff, then it is important that schemes like portable long service leave are

implemented.

MR COCKS: Minister, has the government commissioned any independent economic assessment of the expansion's expected impact on business viability, staffing levels and working hours? Or is it all just on the vibes?

MR PETTERSSON: I would like to thank Mr Cocks for the supplementary question. I reject the premise of the question. This is a decision that was considered and was made informed by the representations that were made to us and our understanding of the wider economic circumstances. There are important considerations for government when making this decision. Mr Cocks in his previous questions has gone to some of the record high hospitality business closures in recent times. These are things that are front and central in our decision-making. But, when I cite a statistic like that, it is important to consider why a scheme like portable long service leave is so important, because if portable long service leave had been in place before those businesses had gone under, those entitlements would have been protected. I am cognisant of the challenges that are being experienced by industry, but it is important that this scheme is implemented so that those entitlements for those workers are protected going into the future as soon as possible.

MR CAIN: Minister, what has improved in the hospitality sector since May that makes the government believe businesses can now afford Labor's hospitality tax without cutting staff hours or jobs?

MR PETTERSSON: This government does pay attention to wider economic circumstances. I am confident, as we enter into the summer period, that there will be more Canberrans spending their money locally, supporting hospitality businesses. We have gone through a challenging time in recent years. There has been uncertainty in the local jobs market. There have been challenges in the provision of public spending in the city. We have gone through election periods which have seen a reduction in spending locally. I acknowledge that in recent years, off the back of a pandemic, it has been a challenging time for hospitality, but we need to be very clear that there are bright spots in the local economy and there are lots of ambitious, entrepreneurial Canberrans that see the bright future ahead for hospitality, which is why we are seeing new venues opening up in this city, because Canberrans are optimistic about the future of hospitality, which is why we want to support that workforce, those industries and those employers to make sure that industry continues to thrive.

Canberra Health Services—specialist waiting lists

MS VASSAROTTI: My question is to the Minister for Health. As we know, the government has sent out 1,000 letters to patients who are on outpatient waiting lists telling them that they have been removed from it without explaining why or providing advice to their GP as to where their patient should go or what they should do instead. Yesterday you told the media that each case taken off the waiting list was done by a clinician. We understand that clinicians developed the clinical guidelines for the new waitlist criteria, but what were the qualifications of the person or people who then applied that criteria and made the decision to remove people from the paediatric allergies waitlist?

DR PATERSON: The clinicians there were specialised doctors who made that decision and assessed each of the cases.

MS VASSAROTTI: Can the minister advise whether automated decision-making tools, algorithms, scoring systems or other decision-support systems were used at any time in determining whether or not a patient continued to meet the clinical criteria?

DR PATERSON: No, I can absolutely confirm that was not the case, and, in fact, members who were at the briefing yesterday morning heard the clinician say that each case was reviewed by a highly specialised medical practitioner.

MS CLAY: What administrative safeguards apply when Canberra Health Services removes a patient from a specialist waiting list, including the information provided about reasons for the decision and any rights to seek review or reconsideration?

Dr Paterson: Can you start the question again, sorry?

MS CLAY: What administrative safeguards apply when Canberra Health Services removes a patient from a specialist waitlist, including what information is provided about reasons for the decision and any rights to seek review or reconsideration?

DR PATERSON: The letter that went out to the families had contact details for Canberra Health Services to contact the health services if they did require a review of their situation. And just to correct the record, all referring GPs also received a letter that outlined the changes to the criteria for referral and also outlined the process that was being undertaken. I think, as we have discussed yesterday, there is a process for review. If an individual still believes that they would like their child to see a specialist, it is recommended that they go back to their GP to again have the discussion with the GP to understand whether a referral is necessary at this time. This was a really rigorous process, the clinical guidelines—

Ms Clay: Point of order, and we may be getting there. We have an answer about review or reconsideration. We have not got anything about reasons for the decision in the letter. That was part of the question; reasons for decision, in the letter.

DR PATERSON: It does say in the letter that there has been a clinical review and a revision of the clinical guidelines for access to the service.

Working With Vulnerable People scheme—accessibility

MISS NUTTALL: My question is to the Minister for Community Services. Minister, accessibility issues with our Working With Vulnerable People scheme have been raised in several committee inquiries now in relation to information sharing barriers within the system and how this is negatively impacting the community groups and volunteers who engage with the system and require a Working With Vulnerable People card. The government has said they will 'look into how to improve information sharing and development of resources regarding the Working With Vulnerable People scheme in partnership with Access Canberra in the ACT Volunteering Strategy Action Plan and said they will conduct a review with key stakeholders.

Minister, has this review been conducted and are community sport stakeholders being included in this process?

MS TOUGH: I thank Miss Nuttall for the question. Working With Vulnerable People checks are a really important part of keeping our community safe. And there is work going on, not just here in the ACT, but nationally around working with vulnerable people and working with children checks, as they are known in in a lot of other jurisdictions. The Attorney-General and I are involved in those discussions at a national level. Part of that is we are reviewing how our system works here in the ACT. While I cannot announce government policy in question time, we are undertaking that work to have a review commence soon. I have recently met with Volunteering ACT and a few other stakeholders to discuss what is not working for them at the moment, so we can shape that thinking as things progress into the next steps.

MISS NUTTALL: Minister, if the government is still yet to commence the review, when can volunteers, community organisations and particularly community sports organisations expect to see actual changes rather than just review or further consultation?

MS TOUGH: I thank Miss Nuttall for the question. I know community sport organisations, Volunteering ACT and so many of our amazing volunteers in the community want to see what happens next. It is just important that we take those steps both here in the ACT and nationally so that we get it right as we do it and not have to come back multiple times. I appreciate there is a lot of anticipation in the community on what happens next, but I will keep the Assembly updated as things progress.

MS VASSAROTTI: Minister, how is the government considering how other jurisdictions promote efficiency and accessibility in their working with vulnerable people systems?

MS TOUGH: I thank Ms Vassarotti for the supplementary question. As part of the work that is being undertaken at a national level through the Standing Council of Attorneys-Generals and meetings for officials, states and territories are in discussions around how different schemes work in different jurisdictions and so we can share those learnings with each other. I think there are also some informal discussions that happen between officials in different areas on how schemes work best and how they can be made more efficient.

Disaster Ready Fund—commonwealth funding

MS BERRY: My question is for the Minister for Police, Fire and Emergency Services. Minister, can you please update the Assembly on what the recent Disaster Ready Fund round 4 announcement means for the ACT and how this investment will help to build a more disaster-resilient territory?

DR PATERSON: I thank Ms Berry for the question. The ACT has secured a record investment through round 4 of the Disaster Ready Fund, with seven projects across the territory receiving support and more than $30 million being invested through a partnership between the ACT government, the Australian government and project partners. This includes funding for stormwater infrastructure, nature-based flood

mitigation initiatives and camera-based bushfire detection technologies. This investment recognises a simple reality: that natural disasters are becoming more frequent and severe, and governments have a responsibility to invest in mitigation and preparedness before emergencies occur.

Examples of the successful DRF projects include the renaturalisation of urban waterways for flood mitigation. This is a $15.8 million project which will renaturalise the section of Yarralumla Creek to demonstrate how nature-based solutions can reduce flood risk. We also have the Hall Village stormwater infrastructure improvements, a $5.9 million project; and SmokeBench, a $4.3 million project which will establish Australia's first national capability for independently evaluating camera-based fire detection technologies while enhancing smoke intelligence for camera networks. The funded projects will help strengthen the territory's ability to prepare for and withstand the risk of hazards, including bushfires, storm and flooding. They will reduce risk to lives, homes, businesses and critical infrastructure, while helping communities recover more quickly when disasters occur.

MS BERRY: Minister, how will this record investment complement the ACT government's preparations for the 2026-27 bushfire season?

DR PATERSON: I thank the member for the question. It has been a busy season of preparing for this storm and bushfire season in the territory. The funding from DRF complements a broad program of work underway for this season. Earlier this month, the ACT government launched the Chat. Plan. Act campaign, encouraging Canberrans to take simple steps to prepare for emergencies by understanding their risks, making a plan and knowing what actions to take during an emergency.

While community preparedness remains at the heart of our approach, the Disaster Ready Fund enables us to strengthen the systems and infrastructure that support that preparedness. This includes the investment in bushfire technology and other resilience measures to help us improve identifying risks early and responding effectively. These investments sit alongside recent capability upgrades, including the introduction of new heavy-tanker fire trucks for the ACT Rural Fire Service ahead of this bushfire season. Together, these initiatives strengthen both prevention and response capabilities.

The message to Canberrans is clear: chat, plan, act. Emergency preparedness is a shared responsibility. The government is continuing to invest in capability, technology and infrastructure, and I encourage all Canberrans to take steps to ensure they are prepared for the season ahead.

MR WERNER-GIBBINGS: Minister, why is investing in disaster mitigation and preparedness before an emergency occurs so important for the safety of Canberrans?

DR PATERSON: I thank the member for the question. The evidence is very clear that every dollar invested in disaster mitigation and preparedness can help reduce the social, environmental and economic costs of future disasters. While we cannot necessarily prevent every bushfire, storm or flood, we can reduce the risks they pose and lessen their impact on our community. Investments in mitigation infrastructure, improved planning, early detection technologies and community resilience help protect lives, reduce damage to property and critical infrastructure, and support faster recovery when

disasters do occur.

This is precisely why governments at all levels are investing in initiatives such as the Disaster Ready Fund and the projects it supports. Rather than waiting for disasters to happen, we are taking practical action to identify risks and address them before they become emergencies.

Taxation and levies—commercial land rates

MR MILLIGAN: My question is to the Treasurer. Treasurer, city businesses already pay commercial rates, yet they are charged an additional city centre marketing and improvements levy for services, including cleaning and graffiti removal. Can the Treasurer guarantee that local businesses are not being charged for extra services that should be part of the government's ordinary responsibilities?

MR BARR: The city centre marketing and improvements levy is levied on businesses within the various precincts that the CRA covers. The CRA works with a representative group of businesses to allocate those funds to a range of activities, and that includes the staging of events. It also includes a range of other things that might be described as market failures on private land, where no individual business would have responsibility for the totality of an area but they would have a shared interest in the area being maintained on private land. The answer to the question is that we can guarantee ruling out the issue that Mr Milligan has raised. Of course, this levy has been in place for some time and is broadly supported across the precinct.

MR MILLIGAN: What evidence can the Chief Minister provide property owners and businesses that are funding this levy that the levy is delivering measurable improvements and value for money?

MR BARR: It is reported against in the annual report of the agency and information on each specific event; the increase in footfall in the precinct and the economic impact is also reported.

MR COCKS: Why are local business owners paying for Labor's fiscal failures?

MR BARR: They are not.

Strata properties—electric vehicle charging

MR BRADDOCK: My question is to the Attorney-General. With the rapid uptake of electric vehicles, an issue repeatedly identified by Canberrans is accessibility for charging for those who live in strata communities under the Unit Titles (Management) Act.

Attorney-General, how does the government plan to help existing stratas, owners and residents under that act to access EV charging at home?

MS CHEYNE: I thank Mr Braddock for the question. I think it was in September 2024 that the Unit Titles (Management) Act was amended to make it easier for residents to install sustainability and utility infrastructure, including EV chargers. Effectively, the

way that the legislation works, and the ensuing policy, is that an owners corporation, executive committee or building manager cannot prevent or restrict an installation without good reason. That is the legislative framework that we are operating in for our existing buildings.

Within Minister Orr's remit, there has also been the Residential Strata EV Ready Pilot Study, with some practical guidance to help owners corporations, strata managers and residents assess their buildings, understand the technical options and plan installations safely and equitably. Importantly, that study has found that most participating buildings would not need an upgrade to their incoming power supply if they used a properly designed load management system. So I think that has done some great work in terms of addressing some of the anxiety that some of our executive committees or owners corporations have had.

And of course, for new developments—and this might be what I was referring to with September 2024—the Territory Plan has required that new multi-unit developments include EV-ready infrastructure for every unit's car space, and that complements the National Construction Code.

MR BRADDOCK: Attorney-General, is the ACT government going to implement a right to charge as the New South Wales government has just done?

MS CHEYNE: I thank Mr Braddock for the supplementary. As I flagged, we already do protect residents against EV charging infrastructure being blocked without good reason. Under our act, an executive committee or building manager cannot prevent or restrict the installation of sustainability or utility infrastructure, and that includes EV chargers. They cannot prevent that without good reason. And an owners corporation can also approve infrastructure on common property by ordinary resolutions. So the barriers are not there.

The recently passed New South Wales provisions we will certainly take a look at; from my understanding, they adopt a similar underlying principle, but the process that residents go through has been explicitly prescribed in the legislation. We have got a broader framework that applies to our infrastructure, while New South Wales has introduced a dedicated, individual application process enshrined in legislation, with statutory deadlines, approvals and express remedies.

The principle is the same. We will look at the New South Wales legislation and its implementation, but a right to have a charger should not mean a right to impose an unmanaged or technically unsuitable installation on the rest of the building. If we were to go down the path that New South Wales has taken, any consideration would need to preserve the legitimate role of owners corporations in managing the shared electrical infrastructure, safety load management, billing and equitable access.

Quite honestly, I think the process that we have designed appears to be working, so I am not sure that there is a need to go down the path with New South Wales, but we will certainly keep an eye on how that implementation rolls out.

MISS NUTTALL: Minister, what is the status of the announced plan for interest free

loans for multi-unit buildings to become electric vehicle ready?

MS STEPHEN-SMITH: Mr Speaker, I will take this as the Minister for Finance responsible for the Sustainable Household Scheme, and I thank Miss Nuttall for the supplementary question. Before I get to the specifics of Miss Nuttall's question, I do want to reiterate, as Ms Cheyne has said, that the ACT government has already sought to lower the barriers to sustainability measures like EV charging being implemented in strata communities.

The ACT government has also provided guidance material and made that available to strata and owners corporations on how to approach the installation of EV charging facilities in existing buildings. Owners corporations can already seek tailored advice through the newly established Sustainable Apartments Program, which covers electrification options for their buildings, including EV charging. The service provides a comprehensive assessment at nil cost to the owners corporation. I think that stands them in good stead for the introduction of a program for multi-unit buildings to become EV-ready.

The Sustainable Household Scheme as it is has supported funding for loans for EV charging infrastructure in 185 homes, and it has also provided loans for the purchase of 813 new electric vehicles and 109 used electric vehicles.

The program for multi-unit buildings to become EV-ready is being finalised, with industry consultation currently occurring. We expect that it will be launched in early 2027. This will be one of the first programs of its kind in Australia, so careful design and planning have been required. But the programs I mentioned earlier will place strata owners corporations in a good position to understand whether this is something that they may be able to use and would wish to access.

Economy—National Competition Policy

MR COCKS: My question is to the Treasurer. Treasurer, later this week the Assembly will debate the Competition Legislation Amendment Bill 2026, which gives effect to the revised National Competition Policy agreement. That agreement requires governments to assess the competitive impacts of major policy decisions and includes the principle that government and private businesses should compete on a level playing field. Treasurer, what assessment has the government undertaken of whether imposing portable long service leave levies on private cleaning contractors, while excluding the government's own directly employed cleaners, distorts the choice between contracting and insourcing cleaning services?

MR STEEL: I thank the member for his question. The answer is that the revised National Competition Policy is only in the process of being implemented at the moment. Of course, that decision was taken prior to the implementation of the new policy, which of course our government supports, and we do support that element of undertaking those assessments going forward for major policy decisions.

Certainly, what we know is that the ACT government offers very competitive conditions for its public service employees, and I do not believe that this would have a very significant impact on competition with private contractors. It is certainly within

the government's remit to undertake government work with government employees, and there is that flexibility within the National Competition Policy to make those sorts of decisions.

MR COCKS: Treasurer, when comparing the cost of private cleaning contracts with directly employed government cleaners, does the government ensure that equivalent long service leave costs are included in both cases?

MR STEEL: I thank the member for his question. Certainly the government does take into account what the cost would be for the ACT government to be able to insource employees, and we have undertaken work over the last term on developing an insourcing framework that considers those costs in making a decision.

MRS MORRIS: Can the Treasurer identify any published assessment demonstrating that the government's different treatment of private cleaning contractors and its own directly employed cleaners does not unfairly disadvantage private sector providers?

MR STEEL: This is government work being undertaken by government employees. It is absolutely within the remit of the ACT government to be able to fund our own employees as government employees to undertake this work, and there is nothing in the National Competition Policy that would suggest that we cannot do otherwise.

Education—Future of Education Equity Fund

MR WERNER-GIBBINGS: My question is to the Minister for Education. Minister, can you please update the Assembly on how the ACT government's Future of Education Equity Fund is helping Canberra families with the cost of schooling and ensuring that every child can fully participate in their education regardless of their circumstances?

MS STEPHEN-SMITH: I thank Mr Werner-Gibbings for the question and for his ongoing passion for public education and for equity for all children and young people. I know it was only last week that Mr Werner-Gibbings was engaging with a local P&C in his electorate, hearing and learning about the local experience at one of Tuggeranong's public schools.

The Barr Labor government is committed to ensuring every child and young person has access to high quality education and that ACT public schools can be an excellent first choice for every family. One of the ways we are delivering on that commitment is through the Future of Education Equity Fund. This is a lasting and transformational program that was championed and delivered by Ms Berry, and I want to acknowledge that. By reducing financial barriers, the fund helps students participate fully in school life. Whether it is sporting equipment, uniforms, music lessons or excursions, we know that the cost can add up and sometimes families have to make difficult choices. So the Education Equity Fund takes a bit of pressure off eligible families, supporting the wellbeing of their children and young people and ensuring they can access the same opportunities as their peers.

So far in 2026, more than 3,200 applications have been approved, delivering around $3.7 million in support for Canberra families. Eligible families can receive annual

payments of $400 for preschool students, $500 for primary school students and $750 for high school and college students. Importantly, the fund is available to eligible students attending public and non-government schools, recognising that cost-of-living pressures affect families right across our community.

The equity fund is a practical demonstration of ACT Labor's commitment to equity in education, because all students should have access to enriching learning opportunities.

MR WERNER-GIBBINGS: Minister, how is the equity fund supporting student wellbeing and participation in school life beyond the classroom?

MS STEPHEN-SMITH: I thank Mr Werner-Gibbings for the supplementary. By helping the families with the costs of education, the Labor government is ensuring more students can engage, participate and thrive in school. The government knows that education and school engagement are about more than what happens in the classroom. Students are more likely to succeed when they feel connected to their school community and can participate fully in the opportunities that school provides. The Future of Education Equity Fund supports this broader vision of education by helping eligible families access activities and experiences that contribute to student wellbeing, engagement and inclusion.

As I mentioned, funding can be used for school excursions, it can be used for sporting activities or equipment, it can be used for music lessons, or a myriad of other opportunities that allow students to participate alongside their peers. These experiences help students build confidence, develop social connections, discover new interests and strengthen their sense of belonging. We know that student wellbeing and educational engagement are closely linked and that participation in extracurricular and enrichment activities can have lasting positive impacts.

The fund is not simply financial assistance; it is an investment in ensuring that students can take part in the full life of their school community. It helps create opportunities that might otherwise be out of reach for some families and supports our commitment to ensuring every young person can access the benefits of education. By supporting participation, inclusion and wellbeing, the equity fund helps ensure that all students have the opportunity to learn, connect, grow and thrive throughout their educational journey.

MS BERRY: Minister, who is eligible for the Future of Education Equity Fund, and how can Canberra families access this support?

MS STEPHEN-SMITH: I thank Ms Berry for the supplementary and her absolute commitment to equity for Canberra's children and young people. This program that she delivered is making a real difference for Canberran children and young people. The ACT government wants to ensure that families who need support can easily access the Future of Education Equity Fund and the educational opportunities it provides.

The fund is available to eligible low income families with children enrolled from preschool through to year 12 in either ACT public or non-government schools. It is also available to eligible independent students and young people undertaking other approved forms of education, including home education and certain equivalent courses through

the Canberra Institute of Technology. To be eligible, applicants must live in the ACT, be financially responsible for the student and be able to demonstrate low income status. This is typically done through a means tested Centrelink healthcare card or pensioner concession card, but other evidence of financial hardship may also be considered.

Applying is straightforward. Families can apply online through the ACT government's Education Directorate website and a single application can cover all eligible children in a family, even if those children attend different schools. Applications for the 2026 school year remain open until the end of November 2026, and an announcement will be made about the opening of 2027 applications. So I encourage any who may be eligible to visit the ACT government website and apply for this important support.

Taxation and levies—residential land rates

MR COCKS: My question is to the Treasurer. Treasurer, the government confirmed during estimates that Labor has imposed an average general residential rates increase of eight per cent across Canberra this year, with some suburbs being hit with up to 19 per cent increases. Average residential rates in each and every Canberra suburb now exceed those of Sydney's northern beaches.

Is the Treasurer aware that, despite the government's claim of 20,000 households being better off on rates this year, the total number of properties with a calculated general residential rates reduction—though excluding the expiry of the temporary health levy—is actually seven?

MR STEEL: I thank Mr Cocks for his question. Of course, he well knows that he is not taking into account the fact that we abolished the health levy in the budget, and that is why we have seen around 20,000 households better off, in terms of their rates. And when the health levy abolition is included, the average rates increase is no more than five per cent across the territory.

And of course, rates is an important source of revenue to be able to fund the services and infrastructure that Canberrans rely on. But we certainly recognise that households and businesses are under pressure and that is why we did not increase rates further. But we are seeing massive rate increases in other jurisdictions around us, including Yass Shire Council where I believe they are contemplating rates increases in the vicinity of over 70 per cent.

We have been measured and balanced in the decisions that we have made in the budget, recognising the pressure on families. We have provided cost-of-living support. Minister Stephen-Smith just spoke about the Education Equity Fund, which is one of the measures outlined in the budget, that we have made to support cost of living in a targeted way. But of course, yes, we are continuing to charge rates and of course they are apportioned partially based on valuation.

It always is extraordinary—they say there is no such thing as a dumb question—but sometimes it does reveal something about the questioner. It is worth having a look at the QONs from Mr Cain on this subject for he clearly does not understand the rates system after two terms.

Members interjecting—

Mr Parton: Point of order. Very clearly, the minister is now debating the question.

MR SPEAKER: Yes. I think there is an inference in there as well, Minister, and I would ask that, when you are answering, you not have imputations or inferences as you were leading towards.

Mr Cocks: On the point of order, I ask that you request the minister to withdraw the—

MR SPEAKER: I will do that, Mr Cocks. I would ask that you withdraw those comments.

MR STEEL: I did not say that he was dumb, but I withdraw if there was an inference.

MR COCKS: Treasurer how does the expiry of a temporary levy make a permanent increase in residential general rates of eight per cent, on average, any more affordable for households struggling to pay their bills?

MR STEEL: I thank the member for his question. As I note, again, as I did in the answer to the first question, of course that figure does not take into account the fact that the health levy has been abolished. And so that means that, overall, rates have not increased by more than five per cent on average, across the ACT.

And we have had to be measured about the decisions that we have made; measured because we know that there is pressure on households and businesses at the moment, with the current macroeconomic climate, the war in the Middle East that is driving up transport costs and driving inflation across the economy. But the government also faces those same pressures, Mr Speaker, in terms of the cost of delivering services to the community like free public health care, for example, and that means we need to be able to fund those.

Mr Cocks: Point of order on relevance. The question was actually about how the expiry of a temporary levy makes a permanent increase in general rates of eight per cent any more affordable. It does not go to the pressures on the government's budgets, but households' budgets.

MR SPEAKER: Treasurer?

MR STEEL: I think I have answered it. It goes directly to the question that taking off that levy does result in a reduced increase in the overall rates bill of no more than five per cent, on average, across the ACT. And of course, the government receives that revenue to be able to fund services and infrastructure which is, absolutely, relevant. And the government is under the same pressure that households and businesses are under in terms of the inflation that we are seeing in the economy, and we do to fund services like free public healthcare that help to take pressure off people when they are accessing healthcare services, for example, and a range of other services across the community that, of course, our government prioritises.

MS BARRY: Treasurer, why are Canberra homeowners paying for Labor's fiscal

incompetence?

MR STEEL: I reject the premise of the question, and Mr Speaker, I refer the member to the Business Council of Australia's report today, *Regulation rumble*, and I have to say these gloves remind me of Alistair Coe and the election campaign, Mr Speaker. And the reason it is relevant is—

Mr Parton: Point of order. On relevance, the report (a) is prop, (b) has got nothing to do with the question. There is no relevance whatsoever.

MR SPEAKER: Yes. I think that the question was verging on inference about Labor party incompetence, so a question like that is going to lead to some latitude in the response.

Mr Cocks: On the point of order, Mr Speaker, on relevance: while I acknowledge that the minister is talking more broadly about incompetence, the question was very directly about fiscal incompetence rather than regulations.

MR SPEAKER: There is no point of order. Minister, do you have anything further to add?

MR STEEL: Mr Speaker, they hate this report. They hate this report and the reason why is that it is all about comparing regulations and tax policies across states and territories, to inspire a race to the top. And I am inspired, Mr Speaker. I am inspired because the ACT has not only gone up in our rankings but we are second, in terms of cost and regulation in this report.

Members interjecting—

MR STEEL: And it goes to the fact that we have abolished insurance duties in this territory; we have abolished stamp duty for first home buyers; we are doing better than other jurisdictions; and that is taking pressure off businesses and households.

And we are also improving our regulations across the planning system, to prioritise building new homes—and it has been recognised in this piece of work, as well—providing more affordable options for people to get into a home.

Members interjecting—

MR STEEL: This is a report that the Liberals hate, but it shows that the ACT government's concerted effort, led by Minister Cheyne on the Better Regulation Taskforce, the work we have been doing on planning system reform and tax reform is working— *(Time expired.)*

Education Directorate—conduct in procurement

MR PARTON: My question is to the Chief Minister. Chief Minister, in question time on 16 September, when asked about the review you commenced to look into Education Directorate procurement during the period involving the former director-general and the former chief of staff to the then education minister, you advised the Assembly that

the review is being conducted by the Head of Service. Chief Minister, is this review separate from the desktop review undertaken by the Education Directorate that was tabled earlier this week?

MR BARR: I understand that there are intersecting pieces of work here. The Head of Service, obviously, does not personally undertake every single element of an audit of that size and will task elements to other parts of the bureaucracy. So, perhaps in the interest of getting a fulsome answer to Mr Parton's question, I will take it on notice.

MR PARTON: Chief Minister, are you satisfied that the desktop review that has been tabled is capable of identifying any serious procurement issues, given the Integrity Commissioner found that an earlier desktop review of the Campbell project had significant limitations and would not have "elicited these facts"?

MR BARR: Certainly the desktop review has looked at the fundamental question of whether a delegate or decision-maker varied a decision from that that was recommended by the procurement panel. So that is one of the threshold issues, clearly, that is contained within the Integrity Commissioner's Kingfisher report. There are of course other avenues where issues that might exist from a perspective of tenderers of, indeed, others involved in the process can be brought to the attention of not only the audit committees of each of the directorates but also the Auditor-General, as an independent entity, looking over the entire ACT Public Sector or, of course, the Integrity Commission itself.

MS LEE: Chief Minister, why was the Education Directorate allowed, at least in part, to mark its own homework, given the corrupt conduct identified in Kingfisher was carried out by the then head of the Education Directorate?

MR BARR: I think the answer to the question is partly contained within Ms Lee's question itself. Someone was not marking their own homework; a different group of officials was looking at issues at that time, and just because they happen to work in that directorate does not mean that they are incapable of looking at the work that was undertaken five years ago.

All further questions can be placed on the notice paper.