



**LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY FOR THE  
AUSTRALIAN CAPITAL TERRITORY**

**STANDING COMMITTEE ON SOCIAL POLICY**

(Reference: [Inquiry into Annual and Financial Reports 2023-24](#))

**Members:**

**MR T EMERSON (Chair)  
MS C BARRY (Deputy Chair)  
MR J HANSON  
MISS L NUTTALL  
MS C TOUGH**

**PROOF TRANSCRIPT OF EVIDENCE**

**CANBERRA**

**MONDAY, 10 FEBRUARY 2025**

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**Secretary to the committee:  
Ms K Langham (Ph: 620 75498)**

**By authority of the Legislative Assembly for the Australian Capital Territory**

Submissions, answers to questions on notice and other documents, including requests for clarification of the transcript of evidence, relevant to this inquiry that have been authorised for publication by the committee may be obtained from the Legislative Assembly website.

## APPEARANCES

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## **Privilege statement**

The Assembly has authorised the recording, broadcasting and re-broadcasting of these proceedings.

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*Amended 20 May 2013*

## The committee met at 10.24 am

### Appearances:

Paterson, Dr Marisa, Minister for Police, Fire and Emergency Services, Minister for Women, Minister for the Prevention of Family and Domestic Violence, Minister for Corrections and Minister for Gaming Reform

### Community Services Directorate

Rule, Ms Catherine, Director-General

Bogiatzis, Ms Vasiliki, Executive Branch Manager, Domestic, Family and Sexual Violence Office, Inclusion Division

Windeyer, Ms Kirsty, Deputy Director-General, Housing and Inclusion, and Domestic, Family and Sexual Violence Coordinator-General

**THE CHAIR:** Thank you everyone for being here. Good morning, and welcome to the Public Hearings of the Standing Committee on Social Policy for its inquiry into the annual and financial reports 2023-24. The committee this morning will hear from the Minister for the Prevention of Family and Domestic Violence. The committee wishes to acknowledge the traditional custodians of the land we are meeting on, the Ngunnawal people. We wish to acknowledge and respect their continuing culture and the contribution they make to the life of this city and this region. We would also like to acknowledge and welcome other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people that may be attending today's event.

The proceedings today are being recorded and transcribed by Hansard and will be published. The proceedings are also being broadcast and webstreamed live. When taking a question on notice, it will be useful if witnesses use the words, "I will take that question on notice." This will help the committee and witnesses to confirm questions taken on notice from the transcript.

We welcome Dr Marisa Paterson MLA, Minister for the Prevention of Family Domestic Violence and officials. I remind witnesses of the protections and obligations afforded by parliamentary privilege and draw your attention to the privilege statement. Witnesses must tell the truth. Giving false or misleading evidence will be treated as a serious matter and may be considered contempt of the Assembly. When you first speak, please confirm that you understand the implications of the statement and that you agree to comply with it.

As we are not inviting opening statements, we will now proceed to questions. I will begin. The Safer Families Levy was increased in 2021-22 to provide, "More funding to critical frontline workers." How much of this money goes to ACT public service salaried employees, how much goes to the community sector, and how is that distribution determined?

**Dr Paterson:** My name is Marisa Paterson, Member for Murrumbidgee, and I acknowledge the privilege statement. The Safer Families Levy was established in 2016-17. It was established at a rate of \$30 per household in the ACT. That has increased over time to what it is now, \$50 per year for each household. The levy is designed to raise awareness of the issue of domestic and family violence in the ACT as well as

prevention and addressing, and supporting, community services in the frontline response.

At the last ACT budget it was determined that the full scope of the levy would be put to frontline service provision. That includes a range of government frontline services as well as non-government frontline services. The levy, I believe—I will get confirmation in a minute—is around \$8 million in the last year. It forms a part of the overall government funding to address domestic and family violence, which is much more significant than that. I will hand over to Ms Rule, for—

**Ms Rule:** Are you looking to get a breakdown on the levy? I might get Ms Bogiatzis to do that. She is the expert on where all of the money in the levy goes to. Sorry, my apologies. I acknowledge the privilege statement.

**Ms Bogiatzis:** I also acknowledge the privilege statement. As the minister indicated, in the 2024-25 budget, the Safer Families Package, of which the levy provides a partial offset, totalled \$16.146 million. The Safer Families Levy contributed \$9.535 million to that total amount. In that year, 9.5 government FTE were taken out of the Safer Families Levy. So to that point the levy had partially offset those FTE. In that budget those FTE were taken out of the budget and that funding was made available in the levy to redirect to frontline services. In the 2024-25 year, that \$9.5 million went directly to frontline services, completely.

**THE CHAIR:** The minister mentioned a range of different frontline services within the ACT government. What are they? What other services are provided from within government that would be described as frontline services in the FDSV area?

**Ms Bogiatzis:** Sure. The government provides a range of frontline services, as you know. Services specifically that are delivered, which are offset by the Safer Families Levy, are services like the Family Violence Safety Action Program, which is a partnership program delivered by Victim Support ACT. It does embed two domestic violence crisis service workers within that program. The program monitors perpetrator behaviour and receives a range of referrals from supporting organisations. That program is critical at managing really high-risk perpetrators and supporting victims when there is a really high risk of lethality. It is a high-risk program. So that is the type of program the government delivers that is offset by the levy.

**THE CHAIR:** How many ACT public servants are currently working on family domestic and sexual violence, whether it is in the policy space or in terms of frontline service provision?

**Ms Bogiatzis:** In my team there is 32 staff, myself included in that. I do not have figures of people who are delivering frontline services. The reason for that is that, as I am sure you can imagine, domestic family and sexual violence services sit across—health plays a role, schools play a role, and a range of support services receive disclosures around domestic and sexual violence. Those services have a role in supporting those people to recognise that what they are experiencing is violence, refer them to the right and appropriate services, and support them on their journey to seek help and healing. So I would not be able to provide a breakdown of all the people involved in responding directly to domestic and sexual violence.

**MS MORRIS:** I will follow up on some of Mr Emerson's questions. The Safer Families Levy was introduced in 2016, and the government made a policy decision in the last budget to direct the funding to frontline services. What inspired that policy decision and change?

**Dr Paterson:** Calls from the community sector, a recognition of the importance of this money going to frontline service provision; that was key to clarifying that the levy funding should go directly to frontline service provision.

**Ms Rule:** It has been due to all of those things that the minister said; also, we have had time to embed the ways of working and to get the teams that work, for example, within the office of the coordinator-general established and set up. A lot of this work has been evolving over the last number of years. As that work has matured, it has been easier to get a handle on what we actually need in order to deliver all of this, and to have conversations with government about how we fund those things.

**MS MORRIS:** The community sector have been calling for it for a number of years, and the levy has been withdrawn for a number of years as well. Some people are saying that perhaps it was to pre-empt the Auditor-General's report. Would you agree with those assertions that are being thrown around in the sector?

**Ms Rule:** No. I do not think it is up to us to agree or disagree. What I can say is that the Auditor-General's report had not been handed down at the time the decision was taken.

**MS MORRIS:** When did the Community Services Directorate receive a copy of the Auditor-General's report—the preliminary?

**Ms Rule:** I will have to take that on notice. I do not have the specific example. We have a range of policy discussions with government all the time, in every budget cycle, about how things are funded and what money goes where. I do not think it is reasonable for us to speculate on whether or not that is related to the Auditor-General's report.

**Ms Bogiatzis:** Further to what Ms Rule said, on 22 November 2024, the ACT government received the Auditor-General's report.

**MS MORRIS:** On 2 November?

**Ms Bogiatzis:** On 22 November 2024.

**MS MORRIS:** The ACT government; they did not receive a preliminary report before then?

**Ms Bogiatzis:** Yes, we did. There is a process where the Auditor-General provides the director-general with a copy of the draft report. That is approximately five weeks prior to the report being provided to the Speaker.

**THE CHAIR:** Do you recall when that inquiry commenced? Presumably, you would become aware of that and have conversations about what the Auditor-General might be looking into?

**Ms Bogiatzis:** Yes.

**Ms Rule:** Questions about the audit process are really questions for the Auditor-General. Normally, when an audit is initiated, we have a preliminary discussion with the Auditor-General about the scope of their audit so that we can prepare background information and have the staff available to talk to the audit team. But we do not really get an insight into the types of findings that they will make until we receive that preliminary report, as was stated earlier, about five weeks before it is provided to the Speaker.

**MS MORRIS:** I want to unpick that a little bit more, to try and understand it. Was the preliminary report that was handed to the government the same that was handed to cabinet?

**Ms Rule:** No. The audit process is that we get a preliminary report, so I get a preliminary report. The purpose of that is for fact checking. We get asked to comment on any—what they call—red-line issues. If they got any of their findings wrong, they need some data or we need to have further discussion about a particular issue, that is where that process is undertaken. There is then a process where the report is given to the Speaker. There is a process that happens after that, about responding to the audit findings. It would go to cabinet at that point; the minister will take a submission to cabinet about the proposed government response to the audit findings. Once that response is agreed, that gets made public.

**MS MORRIS:** It says in the report that the cabinet secretary provided feedback on the draft submission on 2 October.

**Ms Rule:** Which draft submission?

**MS MORRIS:** On the draft cabinet submission. Minister, are you able to take on notice when cabinet was provided with the report?

**Dr Paterson:** That was in the previous Assembly. That was before the last election.

**MS MORRIS:** It was before the last election that the ACT government received a copy of the Auditor-General's report?

**Ms Bogiatzis:** No.

**Dr Paterson:** No.

**Ms Bogiatzis:** Just to clarify, Auditor-General reports do not go to cabinet prior to being released. The Auditor-General is, of course, independent. The Auditor-General provides their reports directly to the Speaker, which then get published within a 24-hour period. Cabinet do not see the report prior to the release of the report.

**MS MORRIS:** But they are made aware of the contents of the report prior to that?

**Ms Rule:** No.

**Ms Bogiatzis:** No.

**MS MORRIS:** No?

**Ms Rule:** No. It does not go to cabinet prior.

**Dr Paterson:** The first time I saw the report was when the Auditor-General released it.

**MS MORRIS:** Okay. Are you able to take on notice whether the previous minister—

**Dr Paterson:** No.

**MS MORRIS:** No?

**Ms Rule:** We would not typically take questions on notice regarding cabinet business—when advice was provided to government. The cabinet process is a confidential process between the directorate, the relative ministers and cabinet.

**MS MORRIS:** Minister, you became aware of it when the Auditor-General handed down their report?

**Dr Paterson:** Yes.

**MS TOUGH:** My question is about coercive control. Coercive control is at the heart of family and domestic violence. It is present in almost every homicide related to family and domestic violence. I know the minister outlined in her statement to the Assembly last week that coercive control is a priority for this term. What progress has been made on addressing coercive control, particularly since the death review biennial report in 2023, which found that clear link between coercive control and homicides?

**Dr Paterson:** Coercive control has been identified in the death review and multiple reviews around Australia as a key factor in domestic violence homicide. It is absolutely a priority of this government to look at addressing and responding to coercive control.

Coercion is currently within the Family Violence Act. We are one of a few jurisdictions that has had coercion in the act since 2016. This is rarely charged, which I think speaks to the importance of training and education within the community, within our courts and police. That is why, in the last budget, there was an allocation of a \$375,000 package, which includes education for police, courts and community around coercive control. That has been a priority over the past year, and will continue to be so.

**MS TOUGH:** Following up on that, does the training for police include frontline police, and not just the family and domestic violence units? Does it include all first responders who may turn up at a family and domestic violence situation?

**Ms Bogiatzis:** The \$200,000 that has been allocated to train ACT Policing and the courts, to build that awareness and understanding of coercive control, is still being worked through with those parties. It will depend on how far that funding will go, but we do intend making sure that it can reach as many police officers as possible. As you know, it is really important that they are trained in understanding that coercive control



is a key risk factor of domestic and family violence.

It is likely that the FV unit already understand that coercive control is a risk factor. In our discussions with ACT Policing, they may preference that the training go to general duties instead. We are still having those discussions and working through that new initiative to implement it.

**MS TOUGH:** You have mentioned the courts, as well as police. With education on coercive control, is there a view to extend into education and health as well, and other frontline services, or in general interactions with families, so that people might notice coercive control and not just other, more obvious expressions of family and domestic violence?

**Ms Bogiatzis:** The ACT government has provided training to ACT public servants who are frontline workers. In particular, for health workers, we have provided the Strengthening Health Responses to Family Violence. We affectionately call it SHRFV. It is a training model that has been developed in Victoria, and it is used to build the capability of frontline health staff to recognise and respond to domestic violence, specifically in the health context.

Health is a space where there are a lot of disclosures of violence, and many victim-survivors choose to disclose to those trusted services. By enhancing frontline workers' capability to respond to such presentations of domestic and sexual violence, it has had a really positive impact. As at 31 May 2024, 7,817 Canberra Health Services staff were trained in SHRFV. I understand that that training will be ongoing to the end of the financial year.

**Ms Rule:** One of the hallmarks of our response across ACT government to family violence—it is one of the key roles of the coordinator-general—is to work across government to make sure that we are sharing resources and capability to uplift everybody's understanding.

**MISS NUTTALL:** You mentioned that the funding for SHRFV was ongoing until the end of the financial year. Is that because at that point you expect that most health workers will be supported or is there potential to continue that funding past the end of the financial year?

**Ms Bogiatzis:** Funding decisions are always a matter for cabinet consideration, but funding is currently in place until the end of the financial year. Part of that decision-making was informed by the fact that SHRFV has been funded for some years now. There are 9,000 health workers; we have reached 7,800. It will depend on the analysis that comes forward at the end of the financial year and the government's priorities at that time.

**MS BARRY:** Is there a time line for the development of this package?

**Ms Rule:** Which package in particular?

**MS BARRY:** The coercive control response package.

**Ms Bogiatzis:** The coercive control package was funded in the 2024-25 budget. We are working to get the funding contracted out by the end of this financial year, and implementation will take place over this financial year and into the next.

**MS MORRIS:** Is any of the Safer Families Levy being used to fund the education programs for coercive control?

**Ms Bogiatzis:** Yes. The \$375,000 for the coercive control package is partially offset by the Safer Families Levy.

**MS MORRIS:** Are you able to take on notice a breakdown of that?

**Ms Bogiatzis:** A breakdown of—

**MS MORRIS:** Of how much it is offset by.

**Ms Bogiatzis:** With the way that the Safer Families Levy works, the whole package was that \$16 million that I mentioned earlier; \$9 million of that is the levy. I am unable to say which parts of that are levy funded and which parts of that are not, based on the tables that are provided to us by Treasury.

**MS BARRY:** Minister, do you anticipate that you would include coercive control in the Crimes Act?

**DR PATERSON:** That is probably a question for the Attorney-General, who has responsibility for that.

**THE CHAIR:** I have a question about evaluation. My understanding is that FDV incidents attended by ACT Policing have increased by 35 per cent since 2019. What evidence do we have that the—

**MR HANSON:** Chair, is this a new question?

**THE CHAIR:** This is a new question. My apologies; I skipped you, Mr Hanson. Go ahead.

**MR HANSON:** That is all right. I will defer to Ms Morris to ask a question.

**MS MORRIS:** Let us turn to the Domestic, Family and Sexual Violence Office. When was this office established?

**Ms Bogiatzis:** The office was established in 2016, with the appointment of the coordinator-general.

**MS MORRIS:** Is the office primarily responsible for administering the funds generated from the levy?

**Ms Rule:** No. As has been explained previously, the levy gets used to offset a package of measures. The office, amongst other things, is responsible for overseeing the delivery of most of those measures, but not all of them. Some of them are for other agencies like

ACT Policing or other parts of the frontline service delivery system.

Things like grant funding, arrangements with frontline service providers and the funding of those providers, and a range of other policy measures are the responsibility of the office of the coordinator-general. It has a range of functions, but administering the funds from the levy is not really how it works. Those decisions get made in the budget. Through the budget process, government decides which measures will be offset by the levy, and we then deliver those measures that government has decided to progress with.

**MS MORRIS:** Was the office ever funded by the levy?

**Ms Rule:** Yes, but it no longer is.

**MS MORRIS:** Is that the policy change that was made in the recent budget, that it is no longer funded—

**Ms Rule:** Yes.

**Ms Windeyer:** I have read and acknowledge the privilege statement. The whole of the office was not ever funded by the levy.

**MS MORRIS:** What is the annual office budget?

**Ms Bogiatzis:** I would need to take that on notice, but when I last checked it was approximately \$20 million. That includes all of the funding that comes through us and then gets passed on to providers. Because we manage a number of core contracts with providers, our budget is quite large. The full \$20 million is not for staff.

**THE CHAIR:** You said there were 32 staff in the office. Has that number changed since the change in policy, regarding the use of the levy?

**Ms Bogiatzis:** The office has grown and shrunk over time. Sometimes when we are funded for a budget initiative, that has staffing tied to it for a short period of time. Sometimes that might be one FTE for two years to help deliver a particular thing. Because of that, our staffing levels have fluctuated.

When the office was established in 2016, there were just four staff; now, as I mentioned earlier, we have 32 staff. We are a whole branch. I think that is reflective of the significant investment in family, domestic and sexual violence services that has increased over time, as well as the large contracts that we administer and manage, and the program delivery that happens from the office.

**MS MORRIS:** Are you able to take on notice the staffing profiles since the introduction of the levy in 2016 to date?

**Ms Bogiatzis:** In 2016 there were four FTE.

**MS MORRIS:** For each year? Perhaps come back to the committee with the staffing profile.

**Ms Bogiatzis:** Yes.

**Ms Rule:** That will be published in our directorate annual reports year by year, but we can compile that in one place, if that is what you require.

**MS MORRIS:** Yes; thank you. I would also be interested to know how much of the office was funded by the levy prior to the change of policy.

**Ms Rule:** Again, I will remind you that the levy is only part of a contribution to funding the whole package. It will not be possible for us to determine how many staff were funded by the levy.

**MS MORRIS:** How many positions it provided.

**Ms Rule:** It does not work like that, because there is a complete package, some of which is staffing and some of which is funding for the sector and other things. It adds up to a total expenditure; then there is a total offset, some of which is consolidated revenue and some of which is family safety levy. But there is not a decision in budget that says, “\$10 from the levy will go to fund staff and \$10 will go to the sector.” It is all done across the bottom line of the whole package. We will not be able to break down the number of staff that were funded by the levy, because that is not quite how the budgeting process works.

**THE CHAIR:** Given that is the case, what does it mean to say that now all of the levy is going to frontline services?

**Ms Rule:** When we take forward a proposal to government, to expenditure review committee, we say, “Here’s how much this thing will cost, here are all the elements of that costing,” and we include, again, money that might go to the sector, and staffing dollars, but it no longer includes staffing dollars. That gets funded elsewhere, so it is really about how those budget decisions get made.

**MS MORRIS:** You mentioned that the office is not responsible for administering it, but it is responsible for delivering initiatives of the levy.

**Ms Rule:** Initiatives that may be partly funded or wholly funded sometimes by the levy, yes.

**MS MORRIS:** The Auditor-General’s report found that there were issues with the way the office tried to discover domestic and family violence initiatives to be funded through the levy, and that there was a lack of system-wide evidence to demonstrate the needs of the community. Is that concerning, and what steps have you taken now to make sure that the community is actually being listened to, when developing Safer Family funded initiatives?

**Ms Rule:** We can go to the specifics of recommendations in a moment, but I will start by saying that we have accepted the recommendations made by the Auditor-General. This has been an emerging area of policy and program across government in recent times. We have increased expenditure in this area substantially, and we accept that there

are things to learn about how to do it better. We have accepted the findings of the Auditor-General and we are working our way through those now.

**MS MORRIS:** I am trying to understand how—

**Ms Rule:** Again, to be clear about process, the government still has to finalise its response to the audit. Government have not yet issued its response to the Auditor-General's report. They will do that in time. But we will work through the recommendations that the Auditor-General has made, once cabinet has had time to consider that.

**MS MORRIS:** I am just trying to understand why the ACT government has said they are now directing it all to frontline services based on the community's needs, but the Auditor-General has said there is actually no process, system or wide evidence base to demonstrate that the office knows what the community need actually is. You are saying you base it on the community's needs, but the Auditor-General is saying there is no evidence of that. It is now entirely being delivered to the community's needs, but what is that based on?

**Dr Paterson:** One of the recommendations of the Auditor's report was around the strategy and development of the strategy. That is key work that has been undertaken this year in consultation with the sector around the priorities. Again, this will form some of our response to the Auditor-General's report in due course.

**Ms Bogiatzis:** In addition, there is consultation taking place on draft Safer Families Levy principles. The minister wrote to stakeholders earlier this year, requesting feedback on some draft levy principles shortly.

**Dr Paterson:** I could add a little bit more detail. You asked a question around how we know the full amount of the levy is currently directed to frontline services. In the 2024-25 financial year, I indicated that the whole package was \$16 million but that \$9 million of that was made up of the levy offset. When I look through the list of initiatives that are funded in that package, over \$9 million goes to frontline services. That is why we are saying the full amount of the levy is directed to frontline services in 2024-25.

**THE CHAIR:** Even though we cannot separate what is levy from what is not levy?

**Ms Bogiatzis:** Correct. But over \$9 million of the package is going to frontline services.

**THE CHAIR:** It feels a little bit misleading to say, "We don't know which portion of this funding is levy funding."

**Ms Rule:** I reject the notion that it is misleading. We are trying to be helpful here by saying that more than the amount—

**THE CHAIR:** Sorry—I did not mean to say that you were being misleading, but this is something that we have heard publicly.

**Ms Rule:** More than the amount we collect in the levy goes to frontline services. You can draw the assertion, then, that all of the levy goes to frontline services, because more

than the amount that is collected by the levy goes directly to frontline services.

**MS MORRIS:** But how much goes to frontline services?

**MS MORRIS:** We will take the specific amount on notice, but it is more than \$9 million out of the \$16 million.

**THE CHAIR:** I have a question along similar lines but regarding effectiveness. We have spoken a little bit about a plan. I understand the office was established in 2016, as you said. Now we are developing a plan to make Canberra a place where we are not telling women to wait it out, which I understand is currently the case, based on what I am hearing from a lot of service providers and the community. What metrics are you using, given we have seen an increase of 35 per cent in incidents since 2019, to indicate whether the work of the 32 staff currently in that office is actually putting downward pressure on FDSV in the ACT?

**Ms Rule:** It is a very difficult question, to draw cause and effect in the work of the 32 staff. What you can see over time is a much more significant investment from government in measures around family and domestic violence that was not there previously. There is increased capacity in frontline service providers, both government and non-government, as a result of that investment. That investment has initially been based on a range of reports from a range of expert bodies, and we continue to evolve and mature the work. The strategy will help to guide that, but there are so many factors that lead to changes in the rates of family and domestic violence.

One of the things you could suppose is that there is a greater degree of reporting, rather than a greater degree of domestic and family violence. We do not really know the answer to that question. We do not know of other jurisdictions that can easily answer that question. What we can say is there is much more investment going into that work than there has ever been before.

**THE CHAIR:** I heard from a specialist sexual violence service provider who said that only three per cent of the people who come to them report to police, so the issue is probably much larger than what we are getting in our policing figures, which I am sure you are aware of. The question I am asking is: are we measuring outcomes in some way? I am not saying it is on the office to prevent. Maybe it is to an extent, but, if the measurement is scale of investment, this is one of the mistakes that we often seem to make in government: just measuring how much we are spending rather than actually looking at the outcomes we are seeing through that expenditure. Is there some framework for evaluating the effectiveness of the office?

**Ms Rule:** That will absolutely be part of the strategy. On a measure-by-measure basis, we have had discussions with the sector and others about how to evaluate an individual program or a thing that we deliver. At a systemic level, that will absolutely be part of the work of the strategy: to think about how we can work with the sector to evaluate the effectiveness of the things that we are doing. At the moment, we are pretty good at counting things. We can tell you how much money was spent, how many instances of service might have happened at times, but we cannot necessarily go to how effective all of those things are. We do not have a handle on under-reporting, other than to understand the broader research that exists in the sector. That will absolutely be part of

the work of the strategy.

**THE CHAIR:** Can you understand some of the frustration of community service providers who are on the ground, having direct contact with women and telling them, “We actually have to triage you out. We have to wait until this gets worse before we can provide the service,” and knowing that the office—and I am sure your many dedicated staff are really passionate about this issue and I am sure you get people working in this area for that reason—has not had a strategy or an evaluation framework, despite being established more than eight years ago?

**Ms Rule:** We have been through where the officers come from and the trajectory of the office. We delivered the measures that have been before us. We work really closely with the sector. We really value the relationships. We absolutely understand the pressure that is facing the sector and are working hard to try to address some of those pressures. But it is a limited bucket of investment, both from the ACT government and the commonwealth government. There is, as I said, more investment than ever before, but is it enough? The sector will always say that they need more, and we work with them to try to target that investment to absolute best effect.

**MS MORRIS:** Is there a time frame for the evaluation of the framework? My understanding is that you said you are working on one.

**Ms Rule:** I think we have already covered the development of the strategy. That evaluation work will be part of the strategy.

**MISS NUTTALL:** What support is provided by government for people experiencing family and domestic violence to stay in their homes, if that is appropriate, or to move into alternative accommodation?

**Ms Rule:** We know that housing, in general, across the community is an issue, and, particularly in relation to families experiencing domestic violence, housing is a real pressure point. We have done a number of things to bring together the work of ACT Housing and Family Safety. We work closely with Housing to make sure that we have hotel accommodation available in some crisis scenarios. We are looking at options to use vacant Housing properties temporarily for people who need emergency accommodation. There is a part at the crisis end that we are working closely on around hotel accommodation, brokerage for non-government services and use of vacant properties, but then there is the longer term issue about the supply of housing. Government has made commitments about extra housing supply. That takes some time.

But how do you prioritise people? How do you make sure that you are connecting people to longer term housing solutions where they are eligible? Not everybody is eligible for public housing, of course, in these circumstances. But we are looking at making sure that we are accelerating, as much as possible, the placement of eligible people into public housing. The data on how quickly that is happening has come down very substantially. That is for another hearing. I am sure we will get those questions. People experiencing family and domestic violence are definitely a priority group in the housing context. We acknowledge that it is a problem. Vasiliki may be able to talk about some of the work we have done with service providers to connect people to housing.

**Ms Bogiatzis:** We hear that from service providers a lot. Housing is, of course, a key issue for people experiencing domestic and family violence. Recently, the ACT government progressed key legislative changes to allow renters to move without penalty and to break a tenancy. That was really significant. We also have the Safer Families Assistance Program, which is a grants program that provides a small amount of financial assistance to people seeking to leave their home due to domestic violence, to set up a new establishment. Eligible applicants are provided with \$2,000 to assist with the costs associated with moving. I acknowledge that is a small amount of money, but it does go some way to helping. That program was expanded in the 2023-24 budget and is always fully subscribed.

**MISS NUTTALL:** That is good to hear. Often, persons escaping family and domestic violence will have dependents. Is work being done in the housing space to make sure that persons escaping family and domestic violence and their dependents can stay together?

**Ms Rule:** Yes. You need to move as a family unit where that is appropriate, right down to pets. Where do we house the dog or the cat or whatever might come with the family unit? We acknowledge that it is absolutely a priority to keep family units together in accommodation that is suitable to meet the needs of the family in the short term, at the crisis end, but then also into the longer term.

**MISS NUTTALL:** Do you have to report to police to access that small grant funding?

**Ms Bogiatzis:** No.

**MISS NUTTALL:** In that case, do you mind me asking who administers it?

**Ms Bogiatzis:** That is not problem. It is administered by the Community Services Directorate through the housing area of the directorate. We do not take any of the funding to administer the grants. The full amount of the funding goes directly to people seeking the grant funding.

**MISS NUTTALL:** That is good to hear. How many housing properties are currently being used to house people fleeing family and domestic violence, or are considered to be used for that?

**Ms Rule:** I think that is a question for Housing in hearings which I think are tomorrow. We will have the relevant officials. I am not sure that we will have quite that breakdown available, but we will certainly have some additional information we can give you.

**MS BARRY:** You said the grants scheme is fully subscribed. What are the stats for that? How many are we talking about?

**Ms Bogiatzis:** In the annual report period, in the 2023-24 financial year, a total of \$452,000 was provided in funding, which meant that 228 applicants were able to access the grant funding.

**THE CHAIR:** Is that over-subscribed? Just last week, I heard from a community



housing provider that they had heard about it not being administered, and they were concerned about whether it had been pulled completely. This could be a good opportunity to clear that up. Are people applying and not getting it?

**Ms Rule:** As we said earlier, this is administered by Housing ACT. These questions need to be asked in the housing and homelessness—

**THE CHAIR:** The \$2,000 Safer Families payment?

**Ms Rule:** Yes; but, as we have said, it is administered by Housing ACT, so therefore numbers of applications, the level of over-subscription—all of those questions—are questions for Housing ACT. I just do not have the —

**MS MORRIS:** But wouldn't that have a correlation to the amount of funding that—

**Ms Rule:** But the officials here do not have the detail that the committee is seeking. The officials who have that detail will be here in the housing and homelessness hearing.

**MS MORRIS:** But, when you provide that funding, is that not based on that sort of detail?

**Ms Bogiatzis:** As we talked about for the Safer Families package, not all of the initiatives are administered by my team. Some are administered by different areas of government, and this is one of them.

**Ms Rule:** The amount of funding that is administered in this program is appropriated to Housing ACT for delivery, so Housing ACT has the detail on how that appropriation is spent.

**MS MORRIS:** You are saying you do not have any oversight over that information—when the funding is coming?

**Ms Rule:** I do, because I am also the Social Housing Commissioner, but the officials here, and I personally, do not have the detail right now that the committee is asking for about that particular—

**MS MORRIS:** But you do have that detail when you are making those funding allocations?

**Ms Rule:** I do not make the funding allocations.

**MS MORRIS:** The decisions?

**Ms Rule:** Yes. When we take a business case to budget, we detail to government what is proposed to be delivered, how many, and how many clients we think it will service, depending on what the measure is. But a full and detailed Expenditure Review Committee proposal has to be considered. Government then makes decisions. That includes agreement on what we will report on. Then, once the money is appropriated, we deliver, and the annual report process is where we detail the numbers and some of the issues related to the appropriation.

**THE CHAIR:** We can ask about the specifics when we get to Housing, but is there a sense of whether that is ever over-subscribed, with people being told, “You cannot access that”? I imagine you have that —

**Ms Rule:** I do not want to get into: “Is there a sense?” The community sector is always over-subscribed. There is often demand that we cannot meet, but I do not want to start speculating. I would rather we keep those questions for—

**MS MORRIS:** You can see a trajectory—right?

**Ms Rule:** You are asking me to give an opinion. What I am saying to you is that, when we have the housing officials at the table, we can give you the facts, and I would rather we do that.

**MS BARRY:** I will pivot a little bit to some inconsistencies in reporting of civil liabilities associated with child sexual abuse outside the National Redress Scheme. At page 211 of the report, it says \$29.6 million, and then at page 212 it says \$13.1 million, and then page 215 it says \$29.5 million. Can you please clarify the actual amount?

**Ms Rule:** That is in the children, youth and families portfolio. That is for Minister Pettersson. I do not know what day that is on. It is helpful that we now know that you want that. We can have a look at it, but, again, it is for a different hearing.

**MS BARRY:** Thank you for that. I have another question. This relates to the independent sexual violence advisors. I know there is a proposal to implement independent sexual advisors. What are the objectives of this initiative?

**Dr Paterson:** These advisors will form a very important role in terms of the multidisciplinary centre and the ACT’s ongoing response to sexual violence. These advisors will be trained to work with victim-survivors within the multidisciplinary centre and they will be advocates for victim-survivors.

**MS BARRY:** Could you please tell me more about what the multidisciplinary centre would look like?

**Dr Paterson:** Yes. The government has committed, through the Sexual Assault Prevention and Response Program, to a multidisciplinary centre. This is to establish and pilot the centre. This was a recommendation of the report a couple of years ago, in 2021. It is a significant government and community sector commitment. We will see a place where victim-survivors can go—a one-stop shop where there will be a range of supports and an advocate who will work with them around which supports they need to access.

**MS BARRY:** Thank you. What qualifications would the advisors be required to hold?

**Ms Bogiatzis:** Typically, we see specialists in the domestic and sexual violence sector holding social work degrees. Then they tend to do further training in responding to domestic and sexual violence. It will depend, at the time, if that is a requirement. We are not at the point where we are drafting position descriptions for those positions. Typically, we would want to see relevant qualifications in those fields and also a

relevant amount of experience.

**MS BARRY:** Thank you. How would you evaluate the effectiveness of this proposal?

**Dr Paterson:** As a starting point, it is best practice to have these advocates working with victim-survivors. That has come out of a whole range of national research, which is why that was a recommendation of the Sexual Assault Prevention and Response Program and report. Now there will be the implementation of those positions. I imagine that, once the multidisciplinary centre has progressed more, some sort of evaluation framework will be put in place.

**MS BARRY:** Thank you.

**MS TOUGH:** In relation to perpetrators of family and domestic violence in the ACT, with funding from the National Partnership Agreement on Family, Domestic and Sexual Violence Responses, the government initiated the Innovative Perpetrator Response project. A scoping study was undertaken in the second half of last year. What are the next steps for perpetrators, and how does that fit with funding for DVCS and other services that run programs for perpetrators and to prevent people perpetrating?

**Dr Paterson:** Thank you for the question. Broadly, there has been a shift over the last few years to see a focus on the perpetrators and people who use violence and holding them accountable for their use of violence. There has been a whole range of research projects and also a number of funded projects, such as the Room4Change program, which is delivered through the Domestic Violence Crisis Service, and also the Family Violence Safety Action Program, which we talked about before, which is designed to monitor high-risk perpetrators of violence.

**Ms Bogiatzis:** In the 2024-25 budget, in addition to the measures the minister already spoke to, an additional \$1.6 million was also allocated to EveryMan over three years to bolster their violence prevention program which works directly with men who use violence. Specifically in relation to the Commonwealth government initiative that you referred to, the Commonwealth government committed \$25 million over five years, from 2022-23, and the ACT is receiving \$3.3 million of that total allocation. You mentioned the Innovative Perpetrator Response project. I do not know why it is called that. We did a scoping study, and that was independently done by Dr Hayley Boxall and Dr Fitz-Gibbon. They looked at our ACT perpetrator system and identified areas where there are opportunities for new investment—in particular, with cohorts where there are no specialist or tailored supports. That scoping study is now published and publicly available.

One area where we started working in parallel with the scoping study being developed is the culturally and linguistically diverse community. It is really exciting that, following the scoping study being released, our first trial will be an intervention for culturally and linguistically diverse men who are at risk of or are using domestic violence, including sexual violence. The program we have developed in partnership with the Multicultural Hub Canberra will also deliver support to partners and families. That is really important with perpetrator interventions to make sure that the partner and the family are being supported in parallel, to ensure that there is no increased risk to safety or that safety is being monitored, depending on what is happening with the

perpetrator in that context.

This is further informed by the very first ACT Domestic and Family Violence Review bi-annual report on deaths, which identified that the culturally and linguistically diverse community are a priority cohort and face additional barriers to accessing information and services that may need culturally-sensitive, specific and responsive supports in place. We entered into an arrangement with the Multicultural Hub last year and they are taking referrals. That is really exciting.

**MS TOUGH:** Thank you. Have you had any indication of the number of referrals and how successful that has been so far?

**Ms Bogiatzis:** Yes. They started taking referrals this month, in February, and they have one.

**MS BARRY:** You might say that you cannot provide this. Can you provide a bit more information around the scoping study—numbers; who was involved; how it was conducted?

**Ms Bogiatzis:** For the scoping study, the task was specifically to understand our existing system: what do we already have in place for perpetrators, and what are the gaps? That was the brief. We specifically wanted the researchers to tell us: what are the best practice approaches that already exist in other jurisdictions that we could potentially pilot or do here in the ACT? That has informed our thinking about the direction in which we move. We are working closely with the Commonwealth to agree to release a payment to inform our next trial.

**MS BARRY:** Did you involve community organisations or multicultural groups in the scoping study or was it just a desktop—

**Ms Bogiatzis:** It was a pretty short and sharp study. We did not want it to drag on. The researchers did meet with providers. They met with some Aboriginal community controlled organisations and they met with specialist organisations. They were typically meeting with CEOs rather than community members. The study was conducted from June to September. We wanted it to be short and sharp so we could get on with the work of developing the trials with providers, so that we could provide service to the community. It was not a comprehensive exercise where we were engaging community members around co-design. It was not like that. It was: “Let’s look at best practice. Tell us what you think. Can you go out and talk to some providers?” They are really experts in this space and provided us some really useful information.

**MS BARRY:** Thank you.

**MS MORRIS:** I am keen to move to electronic monitoring. On 1 May, the ACT government agreed to and reaffirmed the national cabinet position to include the introduction of electric monitoring of violent perpetrators. Are you able to give us an update on where that is up to? We are now approaching almost a year since—

**Dr Paterson:** That question is more directed at my role as corrections minister.

**MS MORRIS:** I note that it was actually mentioned in the Community Services Directorate's annual report. There is direct reference to it there.

**Dr Paterson:** It has been agreed to progress that work, and it is now progressing under the corrections portfolio space.

**Ms Rule:** The implementation of that work is the responsibility of the Justice and Community Safety Directorate, and therefore it is a question for them.

**MS MORRIS:** Perhaps from your perspective, then, I am interested to know whether any structural reforms might be required to complement the introduction of electronic monitoring. We talked about coercive control. Are there any other areas that you have identified that would be needed to facilitate the pilot program of electronic monitoring?

**Dr Paterson:** Significant reform is needed around the implementation of electronic monitoring. I will have the officials that have been working on that in the corrections hearings and they will be able to answer those questions.

**MS MORRIS:** Will any Safer Families levy funding contribute to the rollout of electronic monitoring, or is any revenue coming from CSD, or is that entirely within the—

**Dr Paterson:** That is a project that will be implemented under the Justice and Community Safety Directorate and my role as Minister for Corrections.

**Ms Rule:** JACS has been directly appropriated by government to deliver that work.

**MS MORRIS:** So it is entirely independent of CSD? There is no involvement of CSD?

**Ms Rule:** No; there is not. Government has made the decision to implement it, and the implementation is the responsibility of JACS.

**MS MORRIS:** I am happy for you to go on to something else.

**MISS NUTTALL:** I have another substantive question. How are young people exhibiting harmful sexual behaviours in the ACT currently supported to make safer choices?

**Ms Bogiatzis:** Thank you, Miss Nuttall, for the question. Children and young people using sexualised behaviours is a concern across Australia. The commonwealth government have spoken to what they are doing in this space, but in the ACT we fund a program called the Solid Ground program. The Solid Ground program is delivered by the PCYC. The PCYC work with young people aged 11 to 18 years who have experienced domestic and sexual violence or are at risk of using it and perpetrating violence themselves—not just sexual violence but family violence as well.

That program has been running for a couple of years now, and it is seeing some really great results. We have recently evaluated that program, and it has shown that it is effective in working with young people and providing them with that therapeutic support. Enhanced Child Health Services in Canberra Health Services provide

therapeutic intervention not only for young people using harmful sexual behaviours but also children and young people who are victims of those behaviours. They have a range of specialists and clinicians that provide support to those children and young people. That is about the extent of my knowledge on that.

**MISS NUTTALL:** How many young people are the PCYC currently supporting in this program? Is it at capacity?

**Ms Bogiatzis:** Currently, there are 33 participants. There are 14 males, 18 females and one non-binary participant. Participation rates have increased over time. I think that, with that number of 33, we are at capacity for that program.

**MISS NUTTALL:** Is this meeting the need, or is there scope for the program to be expanded? Is there a waiting list or evidence of more demand for it?

**Ms Bogiatzis:** There is not a waiting list, to my knowledge, but I think that the PCYC are a really well-subscribed service. They have a great reputation. They do a lot of impressive work with young people. They receive referrals directly from police and other specialist providers. I understand that the Solid Ground program is fully subscribed.

**MS BARRY:** You talked about evaluation. Can you talk more about that, and what your key measures of success were?

**Ms Bogiatzis:** Last year, we engaged ARTD Consultants to do an independent evaluation of the Solid Ground program. They completed that evaluation in December last year. It recommended continuing the program, that it was a great program, and that it provided positive outcomes for young people, and value for money. When we do these independent evaluations, those are our measures of success.

It is important that independent evaluators engage with the participants to understand their experience of the program and whether it benefited them. There was direct engagement with young people who had been previous participants and who consented to engage in that evaluation process. They gave clear evidence of their positive experience and their willingness to change their behaviour. Also, we always consider value for money as a metric when we do these types of evaluations.

**THE CHAIR:** We might have to leave it there. If there are any further questions, please submit them on notice. If you have taken any questions on notice, please provide your answers to the committee secretary within five business days of receiving the uncorrected proof *Hansard*. Thank you all so much for being here.

**Hearing suspended from 11.27 am to 1.30 pm.**

Appearances:

Paterson, Dr Marisa, Minister for Police, Fire and Emergency Services, Minister for Women, Minister for the Prevention of Family and Domestic Violence, Minister for Corrections and Minister for Gaming Reform

Community Services Directorate

Rule, Ms Catherine, Director-General

Perkins, Ms Anita, Executive Group Manager, Inclusion Division

Akhter, Ms Sanzida Executive Branch Manager, Women, Youth Engagement and Multicultural Affairs

**THE CHAIR:** Welcome back to the public hearing of the Standing Committee on Social Policy for its inquiry into annual and financial reports 2023-24. The committee will now hear from the Minister for Women.

The proceedings today are being recorded and transcribed by Hansard and will be published, and the proceedings are also being broadcast and webstreamed live. If you are taking a question on notice, please use the words, “I will take that question on notice,” which will help the committee and witnesses to confirm questions taken on notice from the transcript.

We again welcome Dr Marisa Paterson MLA, the Minister for Women, and officials. There are several witnesses for this session. I remind witnesses of the protections and obligations afforded by parliamentary privilege and draw your attention to the privilege statement. Witnesses must tell the truth. Giving false or misleading evidence will be treated as a serious matter and may be considered a contempt of the Assembly. When you first speak, please confirm that you understand the implications of the statement and that you agree to comply with it.

I will start with a broad question. Given the issues that we know exist when it comes to self-esteem for girls and young women, especially in relation to social media, I have a question about what policy work is being done to increase or boost self-esteem, support self-esteem, which might be through measures like boosting participation of girls and women in sport. Obviously, I understand that we are not here with sport and recreation, but this is an important matter for many girls and women.

**Dr Paterson:** Thank you for the question. I acknowledge and accept the privilege statement. The ACT Women’s Plan is a 10-year plan which sets a vision for ongoing commitment to gender equality. This is a commitment that is broad ranging in terms of within government, non-government organisations, businesses and the community sector in the ACT.

This Women’s Plan has three-year action plans underneath it, and we are currently within the third action plan. That is being delivered between 2023 and 2026. This action plan has a range of measures that fall under a whole raft of themes—for example, health and wellbeing, safety and inclusion, leadership and workforce participation, housing and homelessness, and appropriate and accessible services.

Under those themes, there is a whole raft of government priorities that fall within the different directorates. For example, the first action is to investigate and coordinate the development of a guide for women and girls in the ACT on health and wellbeing, informed by the ministerial council and in collaboration with directorates. I think that speaks to the importance of health and wellbeing of women and girls being paramount. There is a range of different measures within the health portfolio, as well as within the sporting portfolio. Ms Rule will be able to speak to some of those measures.

**Ms Rule:** I acknowledge the privilege statement. We can talk about the specifics that are administered by the Community Services Directorate. Chair, as you have acknowledged, some of these grant programs sit in other directorates. Certainly, within the Community Services Directorate, we have a range of grant programs that aid women and girls to achieve a range of things. We can go into some of the specifics, but I will give you some of the headlines.

We have, for example, the Audrey Fagan Enrichment Grants, which involve \$2,000 going to women and girls aged above 12 to achieve their goals in a range of ways. That is a regular grants program. We have women's safety grants. We have our Women in Construction program. There is a whole range of different initiatives, as well as funding that we provide to community sector organisations to deliver specific programs. Those are detailed in the annual report, but we can go to the specifics of any of those, if you would like us to.

**THE CHAIR:** I will ask a quick follow-up on the Women's Plan. That ends in 2026, so we are not that far off. Has work commenced on development of the follow-up for the new plan?

**Dr Paterson:** Work is well underway on all of the measures involved in this plan. Work will commence on a further action plan. Ms Akhter will speak to how work is progressing on this plan.

**Ms Akhter:** I have read and acknowledge the privilege statement. The third action plan is the final action plan under the current ACT Women's Plan, which was launched in 2016, and it is live until 2026. The third action plan was launched on 9 October 2023. The Minister for Women at the time reported the first-year progress in March 2024, showing that, of the 30 actions, 29 were underway at the time and one was complete.

We are preparing for the second-year reporting, which we are hoping to release in March this year, and we will show where we are in terms of progress. I am happy to report that five actions have been completed and 23 of them are underway. On two of them, we are working with a specific directorate which is leading those actions, to understand where they are and how progress will be made.

That is where we are at with the third action plan. Following the delivery of the final action plan, we will commence working on the new Women's Plan, towards the end of this year or early into the next year.

**Dr Paterson:** Point 2.8 of the action plan is about improving access to and sustainability of amenities for women and girls at ACT government sportsgrounds. You could ask the minister for sport about the progress on that.



**MS BARRY:** You mentioned the third action plan. I note that, in the report on the third action plan, it was identified that scoping work would be done to identify further work around the women's health and wellbeing area. Has that work commenced? I think it said further work would be done in 2024 to identify further areas of need. Has that scoping work been done? If so, what is it?

**Ms Akhter:** That particular piece of action is sitting with the Health Directorate. Our understanding is that we would have started that scoping work. I am looking for the details. If you can give me the number of the action, that would help.

**MS BARRY:** It is in the third action plan; it is the first action, in the last sentence on the first page of the action plan.

**Ms Akhter:** The first action—action 1.1?

**MS BARRY:** The report on the third action plan. It is the last paragraph on the first page.

**Dr Paterson:** There are a few actions. Action 1.2 is mandating improvement for minimum nursing and midwifery patient ratios across the public health sector. There is also commencing implementation of the Maternity in Focus action plan and supporting the mental health and wellbeing of girls through a range of initiatives. Those are 1.4 and 1.5 of the action plan, which relate specifically to the Health Directorate. All of that work is progressing.

**MS BARRY:** I think it is more about the report on the action plan.

**Ms Akhter:** You are perhaps referring to action 1.1, which sits with the Community Services Directorate.

**MS BARRY:** That is correct.

**Ms Akhter:** The answer is that, yes, the work is underway. The action says, "Investigate options and coordinate development of a guide for women and girls in the ACT on health and wellbeing, informed by the Ministerial Advisory Council on Women and in collaboration with ACT government directorates and non-government partners."

The Office for Women in the Community Services Directorate is leading that piece of work. We are working with Women's Health Matters to understand and determine how existing information and resources can guide women and girls in the ACT in relation to their health and wellbeing. The information and resources include the ACT government's period products website and Women's Health Matters' findings on the survey on the health and wellbeing of women in the ACT, help for your health resources, and the My Pregnancy Options ACT website.

Yes, the work has commenced. We are also working on the same task as Women's Health Matters, as the non-government partner, and the Office for Women, and seeking advice from the Ministerial Advisory Council on Women.

**MISS NUTTALL:** With respect to that first action, item 1.1, it listed the development of a guide on women's health and wellbeing as "if appropriate". Are there any particular reasons that it would not be appropriate? Why use that particular wording?

**Ms Akhter:** At the time we were providing that reporting, as I have just advised, the action plan was launched on 9 October 2023, and we provided the first-year reporting in March 2024. It was not a huge gap between the planned launch and the first reporting. In that phase, we were still exploring what was going on, and how we could approach specific actions. The wording was couched accordingly, with respect to the way we were picking it up. We have now progressed those further. The second-year reporting will have further updates, and we will be able to demonstrate where we have explored the appropriateness, exactly what we will be doing, and what further progress remains in order to complete that action.

**MISS NUTTALL:** Thank you; I am looking forward to that information.

**MS BARRY:** I am interested in the Women's Return to Work program. I note that only 158 grants were provided in 2023. Can you please provide more information or figures around how many applications were made, and how many were declined?

**Dr Paterson:** Yes. The Return to Work program consists of grants of up to \$1,000 for women on low incomes who have been absent from the workforce for a period of time. It is a series of workshops with information on developing job applications and interview skills. Ms Akhter will give more detail.

**Ms Akhter:** The Return to Work program has two components. One is the grant funding; the other one is the wraparound support for mentoring and workshop provision. The funding component includes \$160,000 annual funding, which involves, as the minister mentioned, \$1,000 grants to support women who are trying to return to work after a significant break—at least six months. A \$2,000 grant is available for eligible women in the AMC who are also, on exit, trying to return to work.

The Return to Work grant funding supports eligible women on their pathway to employment. With respect to the key way that we provide support, through this grant funding they may be able to fund activities that directly contribute to their employment opportunities. For example, they can choose to attend short courses or formal education, fund materials associated with their study, pay for child care in order to attend interviews, and purchase equipment or clothing directly related to the woman's return to work. That is the grant component.

Through the workshop component, we provide mentorship and guidance to the eligible participants so that they are equipped to learn how to interpret a job application, how to write applications, and how to make their pitch effective, so that they can get an interview. Once they are interviewed, they learn how they can face an interview more efficiently and effectively. We try to provide hands-on training through those workshops. That is broadly the program.

From July 2023 to 30 June 2024, as you have seen in the annual report, we have provided a total of \$155,516 for 158 grants. Of those, 141 grant recipients received \$1,000 each. Thirteen grant recipients received less than \$1,000, because it is up to

\$1,000, and three grant recipients from the AMC received \$2,000 each.

**MS BARRY:** How many applications were declined during that process?

**Ms Akhter:** It depends on the eligibility requirements. I am happy to talk to the eligibility.

**MS BARRY:** The number of applications; that is what I am asking for.

**Ms Rule:** We might have to take that on notice. We probably do not have that date here about how many were declined.

**MS BARRY:** Okay.

**Ms Rule:** The grants are all assessed in terms of the eligibility guidelines, and therefore some are declined on the basis that they are ineligible for grant funding under that program.

**MS BARRY:** Thank you for taking that on notice. I notice that the CSD media update revealed a higher than expected number of participants withdrawing from the work experience support program. I think you have mentioned that program. The planning figure is 90 per cent successful completion grades, but only 84 per cent completed the first of the two rounds. I know that the roll-out numbers are low, but I wonder if you could reflect on the reasons for the higher than expected drop-out rates?

**Ms Akhter:** Sorry, I actually missed the name of the program.

**MS BARRY:** It is the work experience—

**Ms Perkins:** Ms Barry, I can speak to that. I have read and acknowledge the privilege statement. I think the program that you are referring to is the Work Experience and Support Program, which is a program that is run through the Multicultural Affairs portfolio, so that will be a question for Minister Pettersson, in the Multicultural Affairs portfolio.

**MS BARRY:** Okay; not the women's—thank you.

**THE CHAIR:** Ms Tough?

**MS TOUGH:** Yes, thank you. My question is a follow-on from the Return to Work program, because I am also interested in that program. Do you track the number of women who engage either in the workshops, that wraparound support, or who receive a grant and then go on to find employment in that time period after engaging with the program or receiving the grant?

**Ms Akhter:** What we do is we undertake evaluation, and we offer them that opportunity to be in touch with us if they would like to have any follow-up conversation and need any support. For example, the Return to Work program was evaluated—it was the 2024 program, actually, that was evaluated. The final evaluation report found that the program was effective in supporting recipients in employment following participation

in the program; 100 per cent of the respondents would recommend the program to other women in the ACT. All respondents that attended the workshops agreed that the workshops increased their confidence and helped them develop skills that they can use when applying for work. And 61 per cent of the respondents advised that they gained employment following participation in the Return to Work program.

**Dr Paterson:** Anecdotally, I spoke to some of the participants who finished the course last year, and I think many of them had come from different backgrounds—in terms of people with parenting responsibility, who had left work, and caring responsibility. People had experienced a vast range of challenges, who were returning to work. Their expression of how valuable the course had been was really welcome.

**MS TOUGH:** Thank you. And do you stay in contact with participants? You said 61 per cent gained employment, which is wonderful—especially if 100 per cent have said it has increased their confidence and now they have got that confidence to go and apply for jobs when they might be ready to do so. Do you stay in contact or allow the participants to contact you again? Say they did get a job, but it was not for them, and they did not last long. Do they come back again and talk to the mentor, or something like that, going forward, or is it once they have done the program that is kind of it?

**Ms Akhter:** It is not like that. We do offer for them to stay in touch. Where we have capacity, we definitely continue to support them, but, obviously, we have to be mindful of the resourcing impact that we have. It is called Office for Women, but it is not a huge team, so we try where we can.

**MS TOUGH:** Thank you.

**MS BARRY:** Thank you, very much. Just to pivot a little bit to talk about gender equality—some outcomes there. The gender equality outcomes across the ACT reveal that the overall gender equality outcomes are approaching parity; however, when I drill down into the details in both the *ACTPS State of the Service Report* and the CSD staffing profile, I see that there remains a significant gender imbalance in particular, in employment streams. For example, the IT sector continues to be male dominated, and the social and care sector are female dominated. What areas would the women's affairs policy team be targeting to address employment streams where gender imbalance remains?

**Ms Rule:** Issues related to employment of public servants are questions for the Chief Minister, Treasury and Economic Development Directorate. They have responsibility for that *State of the Service Report* you are referring to and for the employment initiatives related to public servants. I can talk about staffing in the Community Services Directorate, but I think your question is more broad than that.

**MS BARRY:** My question was about the women's affairs policy team.

**Ms Rule:** We have responsibility for women's affairs in the community. We do not have responsibility for women—

**MS BARRY:** Workforce.

**Ms Rule:** as related to the employment of public servants. That is a matter for the Chief Minister's Directorate.

**MS BARRY:** Okay; thank you.

**Ms Akhter:** Ms Barry, I can add to that. Under the ACT Women's Plan and the third action plan, in those five thematic areas, we do have "leadership and workforce participation" as one of the themes, and we have a number of actions underneath that. One of the actions that the government has delivered underneath that theme is the delivery of the ACTPS Workforce Gender Equity Strategy, which directly affects five per cent of the ACT population. So I just wanted to put that out there as something that CSD, Office for Women and women's affairs policy directly contribute to in coordinating that action with other directorates, including the Chief Minister's directorate.

**MS BARRY:** Thank you. I know you mentioned the work that you are currently doing; is there any additional work that you are currently undertaking in women's participation and employment? Is there any further work that you are currently undertaking?

**Ms Akhter:** We do have one of the programs that the Community Services Directorate run—again, under the ACT Women's Plan—and that is to deliver a yearly ACTPS women's mentoring program, where we target women, and officers who identify themselves as women, to support them in that general equality space so that they feel more confident to take on further responsibilities and go up with higher duties and that sort of confidence boosting. That is an annual mentoring program, where the ACTPS workforce participates both as mentors and mentees. That is targeted to that sort of workforce development and gender equity.

**MS BARRY:** Thank you; that is useful.

**MISS NUTTALL:** I am happy to see that the government has announced a gender equity strategy. Can I ask why this is happening, and why now in particular? Is there any particular reason?

**Ms Rule:** Which gender equity strategy are you referring to?

**MISS NUTTALL:** The one that we have just been talking about. It would be the ACTPS workforce gender equity—

**Ms Rule:** That is a question for the Chief Minister's directorate; I am sorry.

**MISS NUTTALL:** In the ACT Women's Plan, again, under the third action plan, the first-year reporting—action item 3.6, on page 12—in phase 2, Icon has noted that all subcontractors will be required to meet minimum on-site female subcontractor representation, based on the total subcontract value of works. It looks like a subcontract under \$1 million has a minimum requirement of one woman on site. May I ask how these minimum targets were decided?

**Ms Rule:** By way of a general comment, usually, we work with other parts of the ACT public service and other stakeholders to put the meat on the bones, if you like, of those

plans. Others would advise us of what they think is a reasonable target for them to advance to meet the actions that have been agreed with government, and to get a sense of what they think that target is and what the time frame is. I suspect that is the case in this instance. Everyone is nodding.

**Ms Perkins:** Yes. That project is led by Infrastructure Canberra, formerly Major Projects Canberra.

**MISS NUTTALL:** In the development of this policy, did you or Infrastructure Canberra identify any evidence suggesting risks to safety and wellbeing—for example, harassment and discrimination—when one woman is on site? I am bringing that up because it is referenced in the strategic review of the Australian apprenticeship program—any risks of having only one woman on site as a minimum target.

**Ms Perkins:** Again, we would refer back to Infrastructure Canberra, as the owners of that initiative.

**MS CARRICK:** How has the budget been allocated across the directorates and across the themes to ensure that all of the commitments under the ACT Women’s Plan and the third action plan are met? We have the performance here, but we do not have the financial progress.

**Ms Rule:** The financials are the responsibility of each directorate. There is not a central allocation for the actions; it is in each directorate’s appropriation. It is from within your existing resources that you would make those initiatives come to life. I cannot answer on behalf of other directorates. There is not a centralised reporting on a line-by-line budget basis.

**MS CARRICK:** Is it possible to get a centralised one, to follow the measure?

**Ms Rule:** No, because there is not a specific appropriation for the plan. Bits and pieces may be funded under different appropriations.

**MS CARRICK:** I appreciate that, but there could be a document that says “health” and their ones, “libraries” and their ones and “Infrastructure Canberra” and their—

**Ms Rule:** In theory, there could be, but that is not the way in which the budget has been allocated, to enable that reporting to happen. It would require something specific to be produced and it depends, with each directorate, on what resources have been allocated and how they are therefore monitoring them. But it is not reported generally on a line-by-line basis.

**MS CARRICK:** Can you tell how much is going to administer the programs as opposed to the delivery side of it?

**Ms Rule:** Only as it relates to the work done by the Community Services Directorate. I cannot speculate on that for other directorates.

**Dr Paterson:** It is a whole-of-government plan.

**MS CARRICK:** I appreciate that, but it does not mean you cannot report the whole-of-government measure for the Women's Plan—for the the ACT Women's Plan not to have holistic reporting.

**Ms Rule:** It does not have financial reporting in that sense that you are asking for, because that is not how the money has been appropriated. There is not a specific bucket of money for the set of actions; therefore we cannot report against a specific bucket of money.

**MS CARRICK:** It is not that it cannot be. It just takes somebody to go through all the different directorates and pull it all together.

**Ms Rule:** No, even that may not be possible. For example, in the Community Services Directorate, we have a number of staff in the Office for Women. Part of the work that they do is related to the Women's Plan, but they do other things as well. Short of doing a time and motion study about how much of their workload is on this plan and how much is on other programs, I cannot actually disaggregate the expenditure in that way.

**MS CARRICK:** Presumably, some money was appropriated for the ACT Women's Plan.

**Dr Paterson:** It is based on the outcomes, though—delivering on establishing training programs, delivering on developing a guide on actions to prevent domestic and family violence, for example. Progress on the action plan is assessed by delivering on those actions.

**THE CHAIR:** I have a question on action 2.10, in the third action plan, which is on gender-sensitive urban design. We know there are economic and health benefits regarding active travel. I have a question about separated bike lanes and whether that is something that is being looked at and prioritised. I note a recent Monash University study which showed that, despite 92 per cent of young women being interested in riding a bike, they were four times less likely to ride one than men of the same age, and that one of the top barriers for young women was not wanting to ride on the road, with 70 per cent of women reporting that as being a barrier.

Sadly, one in five surveyed also reported concern about sexual harassment as a barrier to bike riding. The study found a high preference for bike paths or lanes that were physically separated from motor vehicle traffic. Is the office advocating for more consideration of this? It is something that I have heard from constituents is a concern.

**Ms Rule:** Chair, our job is not to advocate; we are public servants. We implement the policies of the government of the day. I think you will appreciate that it is actually not the role of the Office for Women to advocate a particular position. We can advise government, to help them make decisions, and government will take advice from a range of sources, including the public service. In terms of policy on active travel, bike lanes and the like, that is a question for Transport and City Services.

**THE CHAIR:** The question is: is that included in this gender-sensitive urban design? It is listed as a priority, as an action item.

**Ms Rule:** That piece of work is not our responsibility. That is the responsibility of Transport Canberra and City Services.

**MISS NUTTALL:** Is there scope for it to be included in one of the upcoming action plans or the next strategy? Is women in urban design something that is considered as part of that scope?

**Ms Rule:** With respect to how we would expect the next strategy to be developed, all of the ideas are on the table. We will work with the minister and the government to decide which things get included in the strategy.

**THE CHAIR:** Would you be able to provide an update on where that particular action item is up to—specifically, the item that is to commence piloting?

**Ms Rule:** No, it is for a different directorate. I cannot update you on what is happening in a different directorate. That is for Transport Canberra and City Services.

**THE CHAIR:** Okay. I feel like we have been receiving updates—

**Ms Akhter:** An update will be provided as part of the second annual report for the third action plan, so there will be updates reported in March.

**Ms Rule:** With the reporting work, we go out to all the other directorates who are responsible for bits; we consolidate it into a single report which is then given to government. We do not have all of that input yet from the other directorates, so a point-in-time update now is really for the other directorates to provide on their individual actions under the plan.

**THE CHAIR:** Okay, that is helpful clarification; thank you.

**MS CARRICK:** Can you do that on the financial side—once a year, when you go and collect everything from all the other directorates?

**Ms Rule:** No, we cannot, because that is not how the money to fund the plan is appropriated.

**MS CARRICK:** It is just reporting. It is not an appropriation.

**Ms Rule:** It is how the money is appropriated. I have tried to explain this the best way I can. It is perhaps a question for Treasury about how the financials are broken down. But it is not broken down on the basis of individual action. We are not funded necessarily for individual actions under the plan; therefore I cannot report against the finances on those individual actions.

**MS CARRICK:** What about reporting against the appropriations for each directorate—their part of it?

**Ms Rule:** Again, I cannot talk to the individual appropriations of other directorates, but, as I have already explained, some of the appropriation—for example, in CSD—is spent on multiple things. We do not break it down to that next level of detail, with 10 per cent



of our staffing budget being spent on this plan or being able to go dollar for dollar.

You get appropriated an amount of money and, within that money, you have to deliver everything that is on your plate. We prioritise our expenditure. There is some that is specifically allocated to grants and other things. Certainly, one of the biggest factors in some of this work is staff time, and that time is not broken down to an individual level, such as the delivery of this plan.

**Dr Paterson:** This is core government business, carried out in the directorates as part of their daily business.

**MS BARRY:** Staying on the topic of women's safety for a moment, the data currently shows that there is a deterioration in the percentage of women who feel safe walking around at night-time alone. Why do you think that your activities have not made any measurable change to women's participation?

**Ms Rule:** I might ask the team to address how that data is arrived at, where we get that data from, because I think it helps to understand that. In terms of what we think about what it means, I am not sure that we will offer an opinion on the interpretation of the data, but we can certainly talk a bit more about the data and where it comes from.

**MS BARRY:** Okay, that will be useful.

**Ms Akhter:** The data is based on the National Survey of Community Satisfaction with Policing, which is administered by the Australian Federal Police as a proxy for understanding how women in their city—and, of course, in other jurisdictions—perceive their safety. This data relates to women's perception, and they advised us that that can be influenced by events and incidents in other jurisdictions, including overseas. That is a national survey, essentially—where we get this data from.

**MS BARRY:** Has there been any work done on using that data to inform policy, to use the outcomes of that data to inform policies around women's safety?

**Ms Rule:** It is one of the inputs. Certainly, through the Ministerial Advisory Council on Women, we seek a whole range of views. We work with sector stakeholders. We talk to other parts of government, like the Health Directorate, as we have already talked about, Transport and City Services and Justice and Community Safety. There is a whole series of discussions that we have. Again, our role is to advise government on what the policy options are in this space, and for government to make choices about which of those policy priorities become government policy. So it is one input.

**Ms Akhter:** The work that we do under the ACT Women's Plan is mainly targeted at increasing awareness and education around appropriate behaviours and expectations. Under the third action plan, theme 2 talks about safety and inclusion, as I have previously mentioned. This theme is focused on actions for women and girls to participate in and contribute to the community when they feel safe at home, in workplaces and in public places. There are 10 actions across gender equality and respectful relationships in school, risk assessment and prevention in the domestic, family and sexual violence space, prevention of sexual harassment, and improving access and amenities for women and girls in sport.

As an example, there is a pilot, which we talked about a little bit earlier, on gender-sensitive urban design guidelines by Transport Canberra and City Services to inform future urban infrastructure decision-making. That is a piece of framework that has been developed by TCCS, and it has been an action under the Women's Plan—the second action plan, in effect. Implementation is an action under the third action plan.

I am just trying to show how women's safety has been a theme, and we have been working through the strategy, the plan and the action plans. We developed the framework under the second action plan. The implementation is an action under the third action plan, and we will provide updates through to the second-year reporting.

It is instinctively linked to safety—in particular, the perception of safety. Of course, this is particularly important, as feeling safe is ranked by Australians as the most important attribute of what makes somewhere a good place to live. Both perceived safety and statistical safety play a decisive role in whether people choose to use a public space or not, and the extent to which they engage in defensive behaviour. The guideline and implementation, to an extent, will provide further guidance around safety.

**MS BARRY:** Thank you. Picking up on what you said around increased awareness and education, can you tell me a bit more about that and what you are doing in that space?

**Ms Akhter:** I have essentially just explained it. We have a broader ACT Women's Plan which provides the direction—2016 to 2026, as a 10-year plan—where the government would like to take gender equality. Under the plan, we have three action plans. We have closed the First Action Plan. We have also delivered on the Second Action Plan. The Third Action Plan carries through the two plans and continues to implement the ACT Women's Plan through 30 actions that are live now. Five of them have been completed. In a nutshell, we work across the government, with our community partners and with the Ministerial Advisory Council on Women to make sure that our community is aware of how we are impacting and balancing gender equality in the ACT.

**Dr Paterson:** In the Third Action Plan is:

2.1 Implement the Gender Equality in Schools Initiative in ACT Public schools ...

and:

2.2 Establish a training program to assist educators to use the Early Years Learning Framework ...

The measures that fall under the Education Directorate speak a lot to the work that is going on to improve gender equality through education.

**MS BARRY:** Thank you, Minister.

**MISS NUTTALL:** More broadly on the action plans, does the Office for Women review and analyse the advice from departments that are involved with or leading projects under the Women's Plan?

**Dr Paterson:** Yes. That is what I will report on. The progress of those initiatives will be compiled over the next month and I will report that.

**MISS NUTTALL:** Thank you.

**THE CHAIR:** Could I ask a question on notice. Is there a mechanism—and you said you do not advocate but can advise—for them to say, “Actually, this is not good enough,” or is it our job to do the accountability piece when you go back to all of the directorates, if they are underperforming in something in an action item?

**Dr Paterson:** There is an expectation that these actions will be completed. Work is well underway on all of them. Yes, there is an expectation that they will be completed.

**MS TOUGH:** My question is about the free period products in public places. It has been a bit over a year since the act commenced, and originally it was as a trial. Could you provide an update of where those free period products are currently available and provided by government?

**Dr Paterson:** Yes. Thank you for the question. The ACT is the first jurisdiction to legislate making free period products available. This came through Ms Orr’s bill in the last Assembly and it commenced in December 2023. Period products are now dispensed and installed in three child and family centres, the Child Development Service in Holder, the Housing ACT service centre, ACT libraries, ACT courts, and the ACT Civil and Administrative Tribunal. Procurement is also underway for a rollout of dispensers more widely in public schools. While period products are available in public schools, dispensers will be installed. Work is progressing on this.

**MS TOUGH:** Do you have a timeline of when those dispensers will be in schools so that students will be able to access the products without having to go to an office or a staff member and ask?

**Ms Akhter:** Schools do provide the products.

**MS TOUGH:** Yes, but when will the dispensers be available in all the schools?

**Ms Akhter:** As the minister mentioned, we are currently going through the procurement process. Once the outcome is known, we would be in a position to roll that out. It is a cross-government project. We work with the Education Directorate and the Health Directorate.

**MS TOUGH:** Wonderful. Do you get much interest from organisations that are providing free period products already to get listed on the government website, to say they are providing them?

**Ms Akhter:** We do. We have a list on the website. They can register their interest and can talk to us, and we will be able to publish the locations where free period products are available.

**MS TOUGH:** Thank you.

**MS BARRY:** You probably cannot comment on the procurement process itself, but at what stage is the procurement process? Is it at the evaluation stage or at the grant rounds?

**Ms Akhter:** I am not sure that we can talk too much about the procurement because there are probity requirements. We are currently in the procurement phase. Due to probity, I really cannot share a lot more information.

**MS BARRY:** So there are no updates on whether it is at the evaluation stage?

**Ms Akhter:** We hope that we will be able to finalise the procurement process in the coming months.

**Dr Paterson:** This is to get the dispensers.

**MS BARRY:** I am interested in how the government is able to progress gender equality in the private sector and what steps you are taking, if any, to progress that work in the private sector. I guess you are working with the private sector to ensure that there is a streamlined service. They are obviously doing work in that area.

**Dr Paterson:** The government is focused on the government sector and being a model employer in terms of gender equality. As Ms Akhter said before, it affects five per cent of the ACT workforce. As the government, we take our role in addressing gender equality very seriously.

**Ms Rule:** We have some targeted programs, like the Women in Construction program, where we know there is under-representation. We work closely with the sector and with young women who are interested in working in the construction sector. That has been a really successful program to increase the number of women, and young women in particular, going into that sector. There are some targeted programs around specific sectors that have shown very promising results.

**MS BARRY:** You may have answered my next questions, which are: what are the percentages, and what role do you think businesses can play, if any, in the space of gender equality?

**Dr Paterson:** There is a whole-of-community role to play. Everyone has a role to play in gender equality. That goes from who you employ to how you treat people on the street, on public transport, and that type of thing. Gender equality is a whole-of-community issue that we can address through structural issues in workplaces. The ACT government has been a leader. Our parliament is a leader in that as well. There are lots of ways we can show leadership, but it is definitely something that is a broad community issue.

**MISS NUTTALL:** You mentioned the Understanding Building and Construction Program with in-school support. Is there any evaluation of how many students do those subjects in school and then go on to work in construction?

**Ms Akhter:** Responsibility for the program moved across to the Education Directorate from August last year. When we were in that space, we were planning for an evaluation.

It will happen at some stage, but it is a question for the Education Directorate.

**Ms Rule:** Just to reflect a bit on the positive view of that program, feedback from employers is really positive. In an environment where there are significant workforce shortages, employers are very keen to get involved in that program. It started as a small pilot. It will continue in the Education Directorate, and, as Ms Akhter said, there will be an evaluation as time goes on. But certainly, by all reports, it has been a very successful initiative.

**THE CHAIR:** Do you know whether that has been committed as an ongoing program? You said it was a pilot.

**Ms Rule:** Again, that is a question for Education as how that is resourced. I am really sorry.

**THE CHAIR:** No worries.

**MISS NUTTALL:** My memory might be hazy, but I believe that last term Ms Orr moved a private member's motion and one of the calls was that the ACT government would provide leadership to the private sector in terms of menstrual products and things like that. Is that something that has been actioned since?

**Ms Akhter:** Yes. We have made information available for public sector use through our website, and we have actually worked with them directly. So, yes, it has been actioned. That is the short answer.

**MISS NUTTALL:** Thank you.

**THE CHAIR:** Do you have another substantive?

**MISS NUTTALL:** I do, indeed. I hope that it fits under this session. It is about the sportsgrounds. I wonder whether you have the metrics at hand about the percentage of upgrades for female-friendly sporting facilities?

**Ms Rule:** Sorry—that is for Transport Canberra and City Services.

**MISS NUTTALL:** That is all right. I will table that question for them.

**Dr Paterson:** Or it is under Economic Development.

**Ms Rule:** But aren't sportsgrounds in City Services?

**Dr Paterson:** I think the policy sits with Sport and Recreation in Economic Development and the actual assets are under Transport Canberra and City Services.

**Ms Rule:** We cannot work it out sometimes either!

**MISS NUTTALL:** I may seek advice on which session to bring that up next time. In that case, circling back to the construction question, we talked about the fact that the Office for Women reviews advice from other departments. Would you be able to walk

me through the process of how the Office for Women reviews evidence from other departments or directorates for the programs you are involved in, and how you evaluate the efficacy of that?

**Ms Rule:** I can make some opening comments and then we can go to some more detail. In terms of the plan, there is a series of actions to which government has committed and those actions are allocated to different directorates. Our role is in coordination, to seek advice from each directorate on how they are going on their actions. That then informs the report that we provide for government about overall progress on the plan. It is a coordination effort for other directorates to give us advice on the actions that they have under the plan.

**Ms Akhter:** In addition to that, we have a governance structure to ensure that the actions are delivered under the plan. There is an executive sponsor committee where we have senior executives from across the government with lead responsibilities for various actions under the action plan. They meet regularly to talk about progress updates, whether there are any issues and where collaboration and support is needed from each other. After that, at an officer level, the Office for Women coordinates and keeps an eye on progress, looking at where we are up to with each action and where we need to increase our coordination efforts. That is how we manage it.

**MISS NUTTALL:** Is that all back-facing infrastructure, or how much of that information is available and collated for public knowledge at point in time?

**Ms Akhter:** Only through the reporting.

**Dr Paterson:** I could add another extension of that. In developing the Third Action Plan, or any action plans or indeed the overarching plan and strategy, our responsibility is to undertake consultation in the first instance, to gather the insights, the data and the issues that are facing women across Canberra. We have a role in the consultation mechanism at the start, before the actions are then determined, to support the key issues and themes that have come through from that consultation about what the community is facing at that point in time. We publish listening reports on consultations.

**MISS NUTTALL:** Excellent. Thank you.

**THE CHAIR:** I have a question around the ACT government's new INFANT program. Health and wellbeing is one of the pillars. The program helps support first-time parents with feeding and playing with their babies. It is only being delivered in Belconnen, Gungahlin, the Molonglo Valley and Tuggeranong. I am a member for Kurrajong and I have had people raising concerns to me about it not being delivered in our electorate. They are not able to access this. You are probably going to say that it is a matter for whomever it sits with, but, in terms of equitable access to your programs, is that part of what you look at? And would this be the kind of thing that you might raise a concern about—that this looks really good but is not being delivered across the ACT equitably?

**Ms Rule:** Again, that is a question for the Health Directorate. It is a Health Directorate program. I would just stress that it is not our job to advocate across government. The government has made a series of decisions about measures that will be delivered, and various parts of government are responsible for delivering those things. The Health

Directorate is responsible to the Minister for Health for the delivery of that aspect of the program.

**THE CHAIR:** There is no kind of tension or back and forth when you are collating what you have heard from the directorates about what is being delivered and the extent of that delivery, when you are evaluating the effectiveness of these action plans?

**Ms Rule:** It is fair to say that there are always robust discussions across government about the best way to deliver the policies that government has decided and asked us to implement. Again, it is not our job; we are not a regulator, if you like, of what other public sector bodies have done in relation to the delivery of their responsibilities. They are responsible, through their own portfolio, to their own minister for the delivery of those initiatives.

**Dr Paterson:** As was said before, the executive group has representatives of each directorate, and it meets to discuss progress on these initiatives.

**Ms Akhter:** There have been instances where we would carry through a particular action if it has not been delivered in full, where possible. Noting that the third action plan is the last one, we will have an option where we will look at evaluating the whole Women's Plan before we embark on the next Women's Plan journey. We will have an opportunity for the whole of the community, through the consultation, to provide their ideas and feedback, to feed into the new women's action plan.

**THE CHAIR:** I suppose the broader question is: through that process, would you be considering equitable access across the territory? Going to Miss Nuttall's question about community sport facilities, we could say, "Maybe it's the inverse in Kurrajong; they've all been upgraded. They're all perfectly suitable for women, but not in other electorates." Do you see the point I am making?

**Dr Paterson:** Yes. Mr Emerson, if you put that question to the health minister, she will be able to explain how they have determined access to that particular program. It may well be equitable, and it may be based on a whole raft of data they have. I suggest that you put that to the health minister.

**THE CHAIR:** Okay, I am happy to do so.

**MS BARRY:** I have a question on the Audrey Fagan program. Can you please talk a bit more about that program and about plans for participation, if any, in 2025, when it is concluded? Is there a plan for it to continue beyond 2025?

**Ms Akhter:** The Audrey Fagan suite of programs has three components. One is the enrichment grants, one is a leadership and communication program, and the other one is the Audrey Fagan Board Mentor Program. Under these three streams, we have enrichment grants targeted to young women between 12 and 18 years old—the one that the Director-General and the minister spoke about. It provides up to \$2,000 for 12- to 18-year-old girls, young women, non-binary and gender-diverse young people to develop or enhance their skills in supporting them to achieve their goals. Under that program, we have total funding of \$10,000 available. In 2024, we have awarded that to seven individuals. That is the enrichment program.

The Audrey Fagan Leadership and Communication Program is a program targeted to improve communication, self-assertiveness and public speaking skills for women and girls, so that they feel confident to put themselves forward for positions of leadership and promotion. It is made up of a series of workshops and coaching sessions for women who are looking to enhance their leadership and communication skills. Twenty-three individual participants in 2024 received this support. The program has been evaluated, and it found that the program is very effective.

Under the third element, we have the board mentorship program, which has funding of up to \$25,000. The objective of this program is to develop the skills and expertise of women and girls in order to increase their participation in decision-making leadership roles. They get to experience hands-on mentorship through a board mentor. They can attend board meetings as observers and learn how board meetings are conducted. In 2024, 10 mentees and eight mentors participated in our program.

To answer your question, with the future programs, we would be looking at the 2025 program opening from midyear onwards, under all of these programs.

**MS BARRY:** This is more of a clarification than a question: you said \$10,000 was awarded for the enrichment program. That is through a grant process; is that right?

**Ms Akhter:** Correct, yes.

**MS BARRY:** You will probably want to take this notice: can you provide how many applications there were, against awarded grants? Can you provide those numbers?

**Ms Akhter:** Yes; seven individuals received grant funding in 2024.

**MS BARRY:** What about the number of applicants?

**Ms Akhter:** How many applications were submitted?

**MS BARRY:** Yes.

**Ms Akhter:** We had 13 applications in 2024 and we have funded seven of them.

**MS BARRY:** Seven out of the 13?

**Ms Akhter:** Following the assessment of the applications.

**MS BARRY:** That is useful; thank you. With the leadership, again, there is a grant process; is that right?

**Ms Akhter:** It is not a grant program; it is a program that we deliver through external consultants. Twenty-three individuals participated in the 2024 program, and the program is available to up to—I will have to confirm—30 or 25.

**MS BARRY:** How are participants chosen for that program?



**Ms Akhter:** We have criteria that we follow. Obviously, these are targeted to women who are looking to develop their skills—largely, vulnerable women. The support is targeted to them.

**MS BARRY:** They apply to the program; is that right?

**Ms Akhter:** That is right, yes.

**MS BARRY:** For the last program, I think you said that one is \$25,000.

**Ms Akhter:** Correct. Both of these, leadership and communication and the board mentorship, are \$25,000 each—annual funding.

**THE CHAIR:** We will have to leave it there. I actually think this is an area that Canberrans are really proud of, so thank you for your work. Obviously, we are here to try to ask questions, to get to the bottom of what is happening and opportunities for more growth. Thank you for what you are doing, because we are leading in this space, and I think most people are very happy about that. I have only asked questions of women this morning, which is a fantastic sign. Thank you for your time. If you have taken any questions on notice, please provide your answers to the committee secretary within five business days of receiving the uncorrected proof *Hansard*. The committee will now suspend the proceedings and reconvene at 2.45 pm.

**Hearing suspended from 2.30 to 2.45 pm.**

Appearances:

Orr, Ms Suzanne, Minister for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs, Minister for Climate Change, Environment, Energy and Water, Minister for Disability, Carers and Community Services and Minister for Seniors and Veterans

Community Services Directorate

Rule, Ms Catherine, Director-General

Perkins, Ms Anita, Executive Group Manager, Inclusion Division

Evans, Ms Jacinta, Executive Group Manager, Strategic Policy

Harkness, Ms Tracey, Senior Practitioner, Office of the Senior Practitioner

Justice and Community Safety Directorate

Ng, Mr Daniel, Acting Executive Group Manager, Legislation, Policy and Programs

**THE CHAIR:** Welcome back to the public hearing of the Standing Committee on Social Policy for its inquiry into annual and financial reports 2023-24. The committee will now hear from the Minister for Disability, Carers and Community Services.

The proceedings today are being recorded and transcribed by Hansard and will be published. The proceedings are also being broadcast and webstreamed live. When taking a question on notice, it would be very helpful if witnesses used the words, “I will take that question on notice,” which will help the committee and witnesses to confirm those questions taken on notice from the transcript.

We welcome Ms Suzanne Orr MLA, the Minister for Disability, Carers and Community Services, and officials. We have several witnesses for this session. I remind witnesses of the protections and obligations afforded by parliamentary privilege and draw your attention to the privilege statement. Witnesses must tell the truth. Giving false or misleading evidence will be treated as a serious matter and may be considered a contempt of the Assembly. When you first speak, please confirm that you understand the implications of the privilege statement and that you agree with it.

Let us go straight to questions. I will start with a general question about community sector funding. I have seen data suggesting that only four per cent of community sector organisations report being able to meet current levels of demand and that less than 10 per cent in the ACT believe their funding actually covers the full cost of service delivery, which is pretty alarming. What proportion of the 2024-25 budget was invested in and through the community sector, and how has that proportion changed over the past decade?

**Ms Rule:** I have read and acknowledge the privilege statement. I am really sorry to say this, but that actually is a question for Treasury. Funding to the community sector goes partly through CSD, but other directorates, such as Health and the Justice and Community Safety Directorate, also get funding that is then administered through the community sector. Certainly, budget trends and proportionality of various budget items are matters for Treasury.

**THE CHAIR:** Is there any evidence that commissioning—which, of course, we have

heard a lot about; it has been going on—has increased the effectiveness or the sustainability of the community sector?

**Ms Rule:** I think it is too early to say. We are in the early days of commissioning, and we are learning a lot as we go. In some instances, I think we have seen it being quite successful, but it is still too early to tell how it influences outcomes. For example, in the housing and homelessness sector, we have completed some commissioning work in terms of delivering funds to the community sector through a commissioning process, but it is early days in terms of their going on to deliver outcomes.

We get a lot of feedback from the sector about the process of commissioning; frankly, I think it is fair to say that we are learning as we go, and so are they. Sometimes the sector tells us that it is too resource intensive; it is taking too long. I think there is some merit in that. We are having a look at what we have done so far, what has worked, what has not worked and how we can engage with the sector more on the best way to move towards a model of commissioning—a model that actually works in the ACT context, that is not just a theoretical, research-based good model of commissioning, but one that is also a really practical model of commissioning that works for the sector here.

**Ms Orr:** I have read and acknowledge the privilege statement. Certainly, since coming into the role, I have met with several community groups who have been through commissioning processes and heard their feedback. I would say that this is varied. People have had different experiences, depending on which commissioning stream they have gone through, what their exact needs are, and the particular focus of the sector that they are working in. The directorate is taking all of that feedback on board and having a look at how we continue to evaluate and improve that process.

**THE CHAIR:** What is the aim of the commissioning? I imagine there are multiple aims, but is there a primary aim of changing to a commissioning model?

**Ms Rule:** It is basically to give us more flexibility in the way that we use the funding that we give to the community sector, which is in line with views about best practice in the sector.

Traditionally, the model has been that we have a funding agreement with a community sector organisation that says, “We will give you X amount of money and you will deliver Y widgets or outputs.” But, as we know, the work of community sector organisations is complex; people’s needs are complex. When they present to a service, it may be that they need a number of things, not just one thing. Giving those community sector organisations more flexibility in how they use the money that we have available to deliver outcomes, rather than what we would describe as outputs, is certainly what the sector tells us they want and need, and it reflects research on best practice around community sector funding. That, in its broader sense, is the aim of the commissioning process.

**THE CHAIR:** My understanding is that the commissioning process has been going area by area. Where are we up to? Who is next? Do you know what I mean? Which areas has that covered? I understand obviously the scope reaches beyond CSD.

**Ms Rule:** Yes. Ms Evans can probably talk to some of the specifics. We have completed

a cycle with housing and homelessness, but I do think we have kind of taken a deep breath and are pausing to see what we have learnt and how we can improve and based on the feedback—as the minister said, we have had plenty of feedback, good and bad, from various parts of the sector. Ms Evans might be able to give a bit more detail about that.

**Ms Evans:** I have read and acknowledge the privilege statement. Yes, we have been working on a commissioning road map that is publicly available on our website. It sets out the next steps we were hoping to move through in terms of commissioning. I think, as the Director-General has pointed out, we have taken that pause to better understand from the sector’s perspective just how the work we have done to date has both benefited or had challenges for them in terms of commissioning. Certainly in terms of the work that we are doing, we do want to move from those kind of delineated, I guess, pillars of work, to a broader encompassing way of commissioning to give that flexibility that, as the Director-General has pointed out, is the actual aim. If we continue to move down the path of “We are going to just do this piece of commissioning around this particular kind of service,” it does not allow us to think more broadly. So we are putting some thinking into what that looks like going forward. The road map would give some indication, and other than that, I think it is probably more that we are thinking through the next steps with the sector.

**MISS NUTTALL:** As you are having this pause, have you been able to make guarantees to community sector organisations that they get interim funding and top up funding, mindful that often the community sector’s funding arrangements will expire? Have you been able to provide that certainty?

**Ms Evans:** We have been working through wherever an extension is required on a contract in the case where a commissioning cycle has not been finalised in the time that we expected and those arrangements are in place, Miss Nuttall.

**MISS NUTTALL:** I know there was talk of establishing a unit in the ACT public service to be the point of contact for the community services sector and continue work to improve sector sustainability. Has there been any progress on that action item?

**Ms Rule:** That was a commitment of the government during the election, so we are currently working through, with the government, how we implement that.

**Ms Orr:** I would add that these functions do exist within the public service. There are points of contact which the community sector can reach out to. There is also a team that does all the work around the industry policy in the community services. The discussion I have been having with the Director-General, in coming into the portfolio and in realising the election commitment, is how we can make that clearer to the community sector, so they have a better point of contact within the directorate, and how we can make sure the work that we have to do is properly resourced. So that is the sort of stuff we are working through. In making that commitment, we think it is the right way to go to help with some of the feedback that we have received from the sector about working with government. I want to give the assurance that it does not mean that capability is not there and that no one is doing anything in this respect.

**MISS NUTTALL:** I know we have talked about this, and it is, in fact, in the Supply

and Confidence Agreement, but has there been any progress made towards working with the community sector to bring community sector employee pay and conditions, including superannuation and leave arrangements, more in line with similar work in the public service?

**Ms Orr:** Yes. There is a little bit in this. I might throw probably to Ms Evans, if Ms Rule does not want to jump in before that. There is a case before Fair Work at the moment, which is probably the main mechanism for considering the conditions and so forth that you have just put forward. There is a quite a bit actually within there, and that is all going forward. I think if we focus on the MEA one, that is probably the one that goes directly to Miss Nuttall's question.

**Ms Evans:** I am happy to respond, Miss Nuttall, just in terms of the process there. The Fair Work Commission met with those employers from the community sector, representatives of government and the union to discuss that Multi-Employer Agreement. There are, as you probably are aware, 17 organisations who engaged in that agreement. The very preliminary piece of work the Fair Work Commission put before us at that point was to consider what the actual agreement was asking for, in terms of those conditions: so the 14 weeks paid parental leave; two per cent additional superannuation; and 20 days of family and domestic violence leave. The task that was put before us was for the community sector employers to consider what those costs might actually look like, considering the number of employees and the configuration of their staff, and to bring that information to the government for consideration. So it is very early, very early, in that process, but certainly progress is being made in terms of a very respectful conversation.

**Ms Orr:** Another thing I would just add is that, given it is a fair work process, we will have to be guided a little bit by the timeline they take, but certainly we will be engaging as needed.

**MS CARRICK:** One of the main things I hear when I am talking to the community sector is about the insecure funding, and they say that they lose staff because of the insecure nature of the funding. I do not know if that is the commissioning process, or the length of the contracts, or the fact that the budget is not until June, and so by the time of the budget allocation it is very late in the piece when they find out what funding they potentially have for the next financial year. So can you explain what the insecure nature of the funding is and how it can be fixed, because I keep hearing about it all the time?

**Ms Rule:** I will do my best. In reality it is all of those things at different times. So it depends on which funding for which organisations. Certainly we know that many community sector organisations have funding that comes through a range of different programs. It is usually not just one stream of funding. They are great at managing in that kind of environment of insecure funding, but we hear the same feedback, that it does create some problems in terms of staffing and insecurity.

In terms of the government budget process, it is true to a point that the timing of the budget means that sometimes it is reasonably late in the piece before we can be clear on funding, but usually programs have funding for a period of time. We try to be as transparent as we can with those community sector organisations about how long the

funding is available for. We try and keep the lines of communication open with them as much as possible about when decisions are likely to be made, noting we cannot preempt cabinet processes and the like. So that is a regular discussion we are having with the community sector. The community sector budget process, where they put submissions into the budget process is part of that, and it is an issue that community sector organisations always raise in that process. We are constantly monitoring contracts and when they expire and trying to make sure we give as much lead time as possible, but we cannot commit money that we do not have. So those things are outside of the control of the directorate. Sometimes they are Treasury processes, sometimes they are budget processes and sometimes they are related to negotiations with the commonwealth, for example, on National Partnership Agreements.

There is a whole range of complexities there that we appreciate put pressure on the sector, but as I said, we are unable to commit money that we do not have. So until that money is actually kind of locked in, we cannot make those commitments. We do try to be as transparent as we can to give them as much surety as we can, as early as we can. But it is feedback that we hear, and it is part of the thinking around commissioning. Ideally commissioning will lead to longer contract times, which provides greater certainty for a longer period of time. But again, we are just working our way through that and the best way to achieve that with the community sector and with our colleagues in Treasury.

**MS CARRICK:** When you said before about the commissioning process providing more flexibility, how does it provide more flexibility?

**Ms Rule:** In theory, it is less prescriptive about what the organisations have to do with the money. It might be, instead of saying “Deliver one phone call of family violence”, we might say, “You will deliver a service that is accessible for people who need support on family violence.” So being less prescriptive about what they can do with that money.

**MS CARRICK:** Yes, I get it.

**THE CHAIR:** Outcomes based. I have heard about those!

**MS CARRICK:** Yes, I think I have heard about them too!

**MS BARRY:** My question is around disability. The Official Visitors report was very critical of the lack of systemic scrutiny where a person with disability dies in care. I also note recent reports around Valmar Support Services being fined for the negligent death of a man in care. Do you agree with that report that there is a lack of systemic scrutiny and whether that is a concern for you?

**Ms Orr:** I think, Ms Barry, it is a really important question as to how we are looking at scrutiny and visitation within the disability sector as a whole. It is not straight forward. There are different actors, in the sense that there is federal representation as well as state and territory representation, and that does provide a level of complexity that we have to work through. It is something that we are working through, and we are committed to, because it is not an area that we want to see an inadequate response in. I will get Ms Rule to run you through a little bit more of the complexities that are there and what we are looking at.

The other thing I would say is that I have oversight of the official visitor role as well as having the disability official visitors report to me as the line minister. It has been quite good that they have raised a number of issues to flag with me so far for consideration. None of it is straight forward or easy. So we will continue to work through that. We will continue to have a look and find the best response given all the different parameters and considerations that we need to have. As to the detail of the whole system, and some of issues that we have been working through, I think it is fair to say they predate me, and perhaps even predate the last person who was before me and the person before that. As we work through what is a complex policy area, I will let Ms Rule—

**Ms Rule:** Yes thanks, Minister. In terms of the regulation of the disability sector, where it is a support service being funded by the National Disability Insurance Scheme, the regulatory responsibility sits with the commonwealth. So the NDIS Quality and Safeguarding Commission is responsible for the regulation of those services. The Valmar Support Services case that you referred to, Ms Barry, is actually the responsibility of the commonwealth to regulate in that matter. Having said that, the official visitors play an important role in ensuring that feedback and issues that might not be identified by that regulator are flagged. So there are mechanisms whereby the official visitors in the ACT provide feedback to the NDIS regulator to make sure that they are aware of problems as they may arise.

There is a small proportion of the disability sector that is not funded by the NDIS, which is funded through the ACT government. Again, the official visitors have a really important role in making sure those services are effective. I met personally with the official visitors recently so that they could talk with me about some of the issues and problems that they see. As part of the broader reforms around the NDIS, we work closely with other states and territories, and the commonwealth, about improving the regulatory framework of the NDIS, and of the providers who sit outside the NDIS, to make sure vulnerable people with disability are getting the services and supports they need, and that there is appropriate regulation and oversight of those services.

**THE CHAIR:** My understanding is that other jurisdictions have fixed mechanisms for investigating a death in disability care. Is that something that we are considering introducing in the ACT? I think we have kind of a panel for death in care among children.

**Ms Orr:** It has been raised by the OVs in their reports. I can hand to Ms Rule to run through the detail again on that and where consideration is up to, noting that while other states and territories might have it, we need to make sure we are approaching it for the right reasons for our settings.

**Ms Rule:** What you are describing is referred to as a death review function. We have one in the ACT for when a child or a young person dies. We also have one for matters of family violence, which is new. There is some advocacy around a disability death review function. We are in the process of considering that and providing advice to government. It is not something that we are implementing right now because there has not been a decision of government to implement that process. What we do know is that whilst there are some benefits of that work, it requires a range of information sharing. It really depends on the information that you have access to and we do not always have

access to the information that largely sits with the NDIS regulator. So we are just working through some of those complexities. The numbers are actually, we think, quite small here in the ACT. It is also quite a resource intensive function to staff a death review function. So all of those things are considerations for government, but we have not yet put policy advice to government on the specifics of a death review.

**THE CHAIR:** Do you have a timeline on looking into that advice?

**Ms Orr:** In fairness to the directorate, I think it is going to depend a little bit on them working through these issues and being able to put sound advice to government to make a decision. So I think, I would be hesitant to put a timeline on it but I can give you our assurances it is actively being looked at.

**MS BARRY:** Just more for my understanding than anything else: you talked about services that sit outside of the NDIS; can you elaborate a bit more on that?

**Ms Rule:** Yes, so we have in the ACT here a thing called the ISRP, which stands for—

**Ms Orr:** Everyone knows the acronym—

**Ms Evans:** The Individual Service Response.

**Ms Rule:** The Individual Service Response Program is a smaller program where we provide funding to service providers for particular sets of circumstances. For the most part, all of the disability programs that used to be in the ACT have been—the money has been given to the commonwealth to deliver under the NDIS, but a very small portion of non-NDIS participants get some support through that ISRP program.

**MS BARRY:** Are there any reporting obligations—

**Ms Rule:** Under ISRP, do you mean?

**MS BARRY:** On the NDIS as a whole?

**Ms Rule:** There are plenty of reporting obligations on the NDIS.

**MS BARRY:** And oversight arrangements and how that is—

**Ms Rule:** Of the NDIS?

**MS BARRY:** Of the NDIS, yes.

**Ms Orr:** Is this going to the quality and safeguarding?

**Ms Rule:** Yes. As I said, that is a matter for the commonwealth government. There are specific reporting requirements for the NDIS Quality and Safeguards Commission embedded in the legislation that established the NDIS, but those reports are compiled and administered by the commonwealth.

**MS BARRY:** Okay. Do you know what obligations under the commonwealth we are



complying with? Do you have any visibility of what those are?

**Ms Rule:** We are not the regulator of the NDIS, therefore those regulatory arrangements do not place obligations on us. They are things that are delivered by the commonwealth. So it is not quite for us to comply with.

**MS BARRY:** No, no. I am not saying if—I mean, what are they?

**Ms Rule:** What the obligations are? In the NDIS quality and safeguards legislation?

**MS BARRY:** That is correct, yes.

**Ms Orr:** It is not really a piece of legislation that Ms Rule has to implement.

**Ms Rule:** Yes. I mean, I am familiar with it, but not because of the capacity in which I appear today.

**MS BARRY:** That is a fair point, yes, a fair point.

**Ms Orr:** It is all publicly available information on the federal website. So have a look into it and create a bit of reading for yourself, Ms Barry.

**MS BARRY:** That is okay. I can find it. Thank you.

**MISS NUTTALL:** Can I confirm that in the government response to the Disability Royal Commission, the government did agree in principle to establish a disability death review scheme? Can I confirm that is the case and that it is still government policy?

**Ms Rule:** It was one of the recommendations of the royal commission. There are a series of agreements that have been negotiated between governments. I do not have it right in front of me at the moment, but it may have been agreed or agreed in principle—I suspect it was agreed in principle.

**MISS NUTTALL:** Yes, that is what I heard.

**Ms Rule:** Because anything that was agreed in principle means that we have to go back and discuss with the government the parameters of that, the funding that might be available for it and hence why it was not just a straight out agree. It was a recommendation of the royal commission and it was an agreed in principle, subject to all of those considerations of government.

**MS TOUGH:** My question is about the official visitors. You mentioned earlier that not only as the Minister for Disability you get reports from official visitors, but you are also the minister administering the Official Visitors Act. How does that work in practice? We are hearing from the official visitors later in the hearings, so how does that—

**Ms Orr:** Yes. I might get Daniel to pop up so he can run you through the detail of it, because the act sits with JACS, it does not sit with CSD. It is a good question in that it is not necessarily intuitive when you look at it, to say, “Are you not just responsible for all of it?” However, there are very good reasons as to why official visitors can report

directly to their portfolio members and I just get to tidy up the legislation from time to time. I will let Mr Ng speak through the detail of it.

**Mr Ng:** I have read and acknowledge the privilege statement. As to the question around the relationship between the minister and the Justice and Community Safety Directorate and the official visitors scheme, the Official Visitors Board has oversight and provides support for the day-to-day support and administration of the official visitor scheme. So we heard from Mr Muir the other day. In terms of our role, we support the minister and government to consider any opportunities or recommendations around law reform to the Official Visitors Act. Prior to the scheme being brought under the 2012 act, there were a range of operational pieces of legislation which all housed capacity for official visitors to be enabled to conduct their visits, information sharing regimes and the like. In the 2012 reforms, they were all brought together under one operational piece of legislation. In 2017 to 2019, in that region, the Justice and Community Safety Directorate conducted a review of the scheme, after it was introduced as a private member's bill, and a range of changes to the legislative framework to better facilitate the conjoined operations under one piece of legislation were undertaken. So that is the kind of role the Justice and Community Safety Directorate has and the minister has, mostly in terms of responding to law reform opportunities and supporting government to take through pieces of legislation to amend the act.

**Ms Orr:** Just to go a little bit more to the question of what my role is as the minister responsible for the scheme and what my role is as the minister responsible for one area that has OVs that report to it, the scheme is going to look at the systemic parts that are just the operation of the scheme. As the Minister for Disability, I would wear my other hat under the scheme, which is looking at what the issues raised by the OVs for disability are and how we can start to look at those within the portfolio area. So that is the main differential: what is the operation of the overall scheme and then, what are the issues that are raised by the line areas? Those would go to the various ministers depending on the area that the OVs operate within.

**Ms Rule:** Chair, may I just clarify something I said earlier? Just to be clear on the response to the royal commission, the wording was: "Subject to further consideration." So there were a series of kind of technical terms used to respond to the lengthy list of royal commission recommendations. The one related to the death review was "Subject to further consideration," and that is for the same reasons as I referred to earlier in terms of government policy settings and resourcing. I wanted to make sure I corrected that.

**MR HANSON:** My question is regarding the ACT Senior Practitioner for the reduction and elimination of restrictive practices. Is Ms Harkness here or—

**Ms Rule:** I will take the questions in the first instance, Mr Hanson.

**MR HANSON:** Sure. I presume you have seen the article in today's *Canberra Times*?

**Ms Rule:** I have.

**MR HANSON:** I want to follow up on a couple of quotes:

Schools have been allowed to flout laws and regulations regarding restraining and

isolating children without facing any consequences, according to an official from the Senior Practitioner's office.

There is also a bit of kickback from education:

The official also raised concerns the Senior Practitioner had not properly investigated complaints about the education sector, which could lead to "an avoidable and tragic situation". "Children are being locked in bike lockers in ACT schools, and we are allowing the education sector to get away with clear breaches of the legislation with no consequences,"...

I have some specific questions but there is a couple of key areas I want to address. There is clearly a difference of opinion or interpretation about a range of issues between the senior practitioner and directorate officials.

**Ms Rule:** A directorate official.

**MR HANSON:** A directorate—yes. So if you could explain what is going on there and how that has been resolved, and secondly the more substantive issue, which is the issue of children being subject to restrictive practices and the reporting around that, which seems to have dropped off significantly in the last number of years. So two issues: one is the issues raised in the *Canberra Times* report regarding the conflict or disagreement, and the second is the substantive issue regarding restricted practices and the reporting of that.

**Ms Rule:** Yes. So to go to the first issues around the things reported today about differences of views in the Office of the Senior Practitioner, the senior practitioner is appointed under the Senior Practitioner Act and has some staff working in that office. I think those concerns you have seen in the paper today have been raised. They date back to last year and what has been reported in the paper today is as a result of a freedom of information request. I have been fully briefed on all of those matters. I think it is fair to say that there are different views about how and where and why different things should have happened. We are working our way through those. I think we have worked closely with education to make sure that all of the things that need to be complied with in the act are being complied with.

We are working through our own procedures and processes in the Office of the Senior Practitioner. We are implementing a review to make sure that those processes and procedures are consistent with the requirements of the act. We need to be mindful of these sorts of views, but I think there is two sets of opinions. We will work our way through it in a sensible and measured way to make sure that the—my primary interest is making sure that the intent of the act is being delivered. At the moment, my view is that is the case, but I accept that it is the right time to review and make sure we can be assured of that.

**MR HANSON:** And that review, will that be publicly available?

**Ms Rule:** We are working with our independent audit and assurance committee to discuss this with them—well, we discussed this with them last week—to implement a review. So we are seeking an independent person to come and do that review at the moment. It does not necessarily have to be public. It depends on how much it goes to

individual matters about staff and so we will wait and see how that pans out.

**MR HANSON:** Yes, but in terms of the outcomes of the review?

**Ms Rule:** Certainly, the outcomes of the review, yes.

**MR HANSON:** It is not necessarily looking at the nitty-gritty, but there seems to be a dispute here, at a relatively senior level, about the way the legislation is being enacted. I would have thought that needs to be resolved one way or another with a degree of urgency.

**Ms Rule:** It is the responsibility of the senior practitioner to implement the act; the senior practitioner is the accountable officer. From my point of view, those accountabilities have been exercised in an appropriate way. But there are differences of opinion, and we are undertaking a review to look through those and see whether there is any further information that needs to be considered or changes that need to be made.

**MR HANSON:** Can I make sure that you will then provide that to the committee, if not to the Assembly—the outcome of that review, Minister?

**Ms Orr:** As Ms Rule said, providing the review in a public forum, particularly if it has a lot of sensitive and personal information, would not be appropriate. Mr Hanson, what I can do is note that your preference would be to hear the outcomes of the review, particularly where they go to systemic practice.

**MR HANSON:** As I just said, it is the outcome. I do not need, particularly if there are some dispute resolutions to happen—

**Ms Orr:** Mr Hanson, I am happy to note that you are very keen, and we will keep you informed, to the best of our ability, as things progress.

**MR HANSON:** Going to the substantive issue about restrictive practices within the Education Directorate and what is going on there, the reporting certainly dropped off. Is it a reporting issue, less restrictive practices or what is happening there?

**Ms Rule:** One of the key functions of the Senior Practitioner Act is to reduce and, as much as possible, eliminate the use of restrictive practices. That is clearly stated in the act, and to ensure that those restrictive practices are used only in very limited circumstances. I think it is reasonable to assert that everyone who is subject to the act has become more aware of what a restrictive practice is. It has become less of a feature in working with people with disability. In terms of the individual practices within the education sector, those will be questions for the Education Directorate and other providers.

**MR HANSON:** Sure, but will your review, as part of this, look into that as an issue, as to whether this is a change in behaviour or a change in reporting?

**Ms Rule:** No, I do not think that is the role of the review. The review is actually about those individual matters and whether we are sticking to the kind of processes and procedures that are outlined in the act.

**MR HANSON:** Okay.

**Ms Rule:** I think that is more getting to a kind of policy consideration.

**MR HANSON:** In terms of that, is there someone that can answer that question? Has there been a change in behaviour that has led to less restrictive practices or is it changes in behaviour in terms of the reporting and people are reporting less?

**Ms Rule:** No, I do not think people are reporting less, because the requirements of the act are clear in terms of when reporting is required. We have worked extensively with the Education Directorate and other providers about when reporting is required. There is no evidence to suggest that it is due to a lack of reporting. I think it is because there is a reduction in the use of restrictive practices. It is not for me to speculate on the practices implemented in the education sector, but there is no evidence to suggest it is because of less reporting.

**MR HANSON:** Can you explain what the conflict is between the two individuals, not in terms of personal issues, but in terms of what the substantive debate is between the two? Is it an interpretation about what is happening in the directorate or is it a matter of how the legislation should be implemented? What is the actual dispute here?

**Ms Rule:** I will leave that for the review to determine. There are a couple of things in the paper that I think reflect on some of the differences of opinion. They are sometimes at a kind of procedural level. I think there is opportunity to be clear on what the procedural processes are. For example, one of the mentions in the paper is about “five days” versus “five business days”. It is those sorts of detail things that I think we can be much clearer on, to ensure there is a consistent view of what those requirements are. But some of those are about interpretation of legislation rather than—

**MR HANSON:** But there are concerns that the complaints were not being handled in a standard way. There is a whole bunch of complaints being made. I wonder why we cannot hear from the senior practitioner about these issues.

**Ms Rule:** We can. I just said I would take the questions in the first instance.

**MR HANSON:** Sure.

**Ms Rule:** With respect to getting into issues of one person said one thing and one person said another, that is not really a debate that I would like to get into with the committee at this point in time, given that we have instigated a review to look at these matters in an independent way and really work through the evidence, rather than having a discussion about it in the media and at the committee hearing.

**MR HANSON:** With the independent review, did you say that it would be someone external?

**Ms Rule:** Yes.

**MR HANSON:** Have you identified who that is?

**Ms Rule:** No, we are working through that at the moment.

**MR HANSON:** Will you provide that advice to the committee, once you have identified who the person is that will be doing the review, and potentially the terms of reference and a time line for reporting as well?

**Ms Rule:** I will certainly provide that to the minister. I cannot see a reason why we would not be able to provide that to the committee.

**THE CHAIR:** Would the minister be happy to provide that to the committee?

**Ms Orr:** Again, I am happy to note Mr Hanson's interest in this. Once I have seen the advice and know what I am dealing with, I can make a conclusive decision as to whether there are any sensitivities that we have to take into account before I release the information.

**MR HANSON:** I am just asking what the terms of reference are, the name of the reviewer, and when the review will be completed. It is a reasonable request, isn't it?

**Ms Orr:** Mr Hanson, you are asking me to make a commitment on something that has not come before me yet. I am saying that I am happy to work cooperatively with you. I just do not want to give you a blanket response to something when I do not quite know what is coming my way, and whether there will be any considerations that I need to take into account, such as the name of a particular individual. It might be more appropriate to give you a company name.

**MR HANSON:** Substantively, what evidence can you present, other than you think, or you are making assumptions, that there has actually been a reduction in incidents in the Education Directorate. What evidence do you have to back that up?

**Ms Rule:** Because there is nothing to suggest that the Education Directorate are not meeting their obligations. The act lays out clear obligations in terms of reporting these instances. But the act also requires the senior practitioner to undertake educative functions, to build awareness and to help organisations comply with the requirements of the act. Our experience of working with the Education Directorate has been very positive. They are very receptive to that work and to the principles that underlie the act.

**MR HANSON:** Going to previous reporting, it says in the directorate's data, which quoted the September 2024 reporting, that, in 2021, all but four cases were reported to the senior practitioner; but, in the following years, fewer cases made it to the regulator. In 2022, 126 cases were not reported. In 2023, 221 cases never made it to the senior practitioner. Wouldn't that indicate that that is a change in reporting rather than a change in the number of incidents?

**Ms Rule:** I am not prepared to speculate either way. I am not quite sure what the source of your data is, Mr Hanson. I am happy to be directed by that; I am happy to have a look at the data trends over time and to provide any further information that the directorate can provide on that on notice.

**MR HANSON:** Am I able to ask the senior practitioner questions about whether, in her view, there is a change in reporting behaviour or whether there is a change in the number of incidents?

**Ms Rule:** I think it is fine to ask those questions. As I said, we do not want to get drawn into the individual ups and downs on the matters in the media.

**MR HANSON:** You may not wish to, but the committee might be interested in that.

**Ms Rule:** In terms of the matters mentioned in the media, we need to be able to let the investigation run its course. In terms of the trends of the data over time, again, I am happy to take on notice that we will do some analysis of the data over time and offer any further information that we can to assist the committee.

**MR HANSON:** I am asking, as a committee member, to speak to the senior practitioner, to ask those questions and to get her view on it.

**Ms Rule:** I do not think it is reasonable to ask for an opinion. I have said that we will take it on notice to go away and—

**MR HANSON:** My understanding, based on media reporting, is that there has been a reduction in incidents being reported to the senior practitioner. I want to confirm whether that is the case. It is a reasonable position for me to be able to ask.

**Ms Rule:** I agree; I am not suggesting it is not. I have said that we will take it on notice to do some analysis of the trends over time and to offer any further information we can to the committee to assist with that.

**MR HANSON:** I think that is unacceptable, to be frank. We have a witness here—

**THE CHAIR:** Would it be okay if he asked one question of the senior practitioner?

**MR HANSON:** that is available to answer questions. It is a reasonable question to ask, about whether there has been a reduction in reporting or a change in incidents. They are here to provide evidence to the committee about that.

**Ms Rule:** All of that data is already on the public record, Mr Hanson. The senior practitioner does an annual report that is an addendum to the CSD annual report.

**MR HANSON:** Sure, and that is what we are inquiring about.

**Ms Rule:** I am happy for Ms Harkness to answer those questions, in relation to the data that is already on the public record.

**MR HANSON:** Great; thanks.

**Ms Orr:** Mr Hanson, it might help if there is a particular form of data. Could you give us the reference within the report, so that we know what it is specifically—

**MR HANSON:** I have directorate data quoted in the September 2024 reporting. I do

not have a page number. Ms Harkness might be aware of this. This relates to reporting from the Education Directorate that has evolved or changed over the years. The advice I have here is that, in 2021, all but four cases were reported to the senior practitioner, but in the following years far fewer cases made it to the senior practitioner. I am wondering whether you could speak to that, and to whether you have looked into that issue, and looked to see whether it is a change in reporting behaviour, whether there has been a change in the number of incidents or what might have been happening there.

**Ms Rule:** Mr Hanson, I am not trying to run interference here, but, to be clear, I think that some of your questioning is the responsibility of the Education Directorate. Ms Harkness can talk to the data that she sees as the senior practitioner, but, in terms of what is actually happening in the Education Directorate, in terms of what is leading to that data, that may be a question for them.

**MR HANSON:** Sure, it may be; but I understand that this is information that is in a CSD report, in your own report, not in the Education Directorate report.

**Ms Orr:** I think we are all a little bit confused as to exactly which data you are referencing, Mr Hanson. You have not been able to give us a page number. Please bear with us while we try and assist you as best we can, with the limited reference to what it is we are actually specifically referencing.

**Ms Harkness:** I have read and acknowledge the privilege statement. I have the data from the 2023-24 annual report in front of me. I do not have the data that you are referring to, in terms of 2021-22, so I cannot comment on whether it has gone up or down for those matters. I cannot do that today. I can take that on notice, as Ms Rule indicated, to look at the trends. I can only say that, over the last 12 months, we did an audit. We do regular audits on people's reporting requirements, to make sure that they are fulfilling their requirements.

We did an audit with Education about a year ago, and they have increased their reporting since then, because we provided data back to them about making sure they were working within the five-day time frame. In fact, their reporting has increased significantly over the last year, in terms of actually reporting what is happening—not meaning restrictive practices are increasing but reporting what is happening. I understand from my interactions with Education that there is a team that regularly works with teachers and supports teachers to try and reduce their use of restrictive practices.

**MR HANSON:** In terms of the restrictive practices within Education, a couple of specific incidents have been reported, including kids being locked in bike cages and so on. Is that a pattern of behaviour or are these very isolated incidents?

**Ms Harkness:** My understanding is that it is an isolated incident.

**Ms Rule:** Can I be really clear: it is an incident. There is one incident that we have investigated, as you described, in the Education sector, so it is not multiple incidents. It is one.

**MR HANSON:** That was the question I just asked.



**Ms Harkness:** It is one incident.

**Ms Rule:** Yes, just being clear.

**MS BARRY:** Just for clarification, section 26(h) of the Senior Practitioner Act allows you to give directions to providers about the use of restricted practices. Have you used that power recently? And under what circumstances have you used that power?

**Ms Harkness:** As part of an investigation, some of the outcomes are legally binding directions. When I give directions as part of the outcome of an investigation, they are legally binding. I have done that once. Not within this reporting period, but, in the last six months, I have done that once. I am not at liberty to discuss the personal circumstances around the use of it.

**MS BARRY:** I understand.

**Ms Orr:** Given we have a number of new members of the Assembly on the committee, maybe you could run through how you approach and work with groups to provide feedback and information to improve their processes.

**Ms Harkness:** Sure. As you can probably imagine, providers are defined in the Senior Practitioner Act as those that provide disability services, those that provide education and care, and those in child protection as well. It is a broader act than what exists in other states and territories to make sure that we cover all the people with disability and vulnerable people in the Canberra community, in terms of regulation.

The risk-responsive regulation approach that I take is about spending the majority of our time, where possible, in the education space. You can think about a compliance and enforcement pyramid system where you have compliance and education at the bottom, you have fines and penalties right at the top, and there are a number of different steps in-between. The bulk of our work is about supporting providers to comply with the regulations that require them to report their use of restrictive practices to my office, engaging a behaviour support practitioner, getting a behaviour support plan—because we know that behaviour support plans really help to address the unmet need of a person—and making sure that they can reduce the need to use restrictive practices. There are requirements around reporting and there are requirements to get a behaviour support plan for an individual person or student. We can provide a lot of education and guidance to the education sector, including Catholic and independent schools; the early childhood sector, in terms of preschools; and certainly disability service providers as well.

You get to understand how much people wish to comply when you do a regulation. The majority of providers in this space are really in it for the right reasons, and hopefully you can support them to comply with the regulations. Hopefully the stuff around compliance and other things—the measures and powers that I have—only have to be used for a small group of people.

**MISS NUTTALL:** My question is about carers and carers' respite. Minister, could you please provide an update on whether you have managed to secure land for a

purpose-built carer wellbeing and respite hub?

**Ms Orr:** Ms Nuttall, thank you for the question. I wish I could sit here and say yes, but, being so new in this term of government and given all of the considerations that go into that, it is fair to say we are still exploring options and working through that particular commitment that we have as a government. It is also a commitment we said we would undertake with Carers ACT. I note their current CEO has gone on to try some new things and they will put a new CEO in place. Certainly, once they have that person in place, I will have a good chat with them about where we go next on this. So I cannot give you a definitive answer right now, but we will certainly continue to work through it, and I am happy to update you as the term progresses.

**MISS NUTTALL:** Thank you very much. I have a supplementary on that. Have you been exploring the feasibility of a carer recognition card? Is it a similar situation?

**Ms Orr:** Yes. It is fair to say it is early days. It is also one for which we need to get feedback from the sector and advocates within the sector. We will continue to work with the changes that we need to work with while we get on top of that.

**MISS NUTTALL:** Are there pending action items in the next little while that you might be able to point to?

**Ms Orr:** I am not sure I quite understand what you are going to.

**MISS NUTTALL:** In terms of an indicative time frame of when government might reach out to community stakeholders or undertake the next phase of exploring the feasibility.

**Ms Orr:** All of that is being scoped. We have a range of commitments that were made through the election that will now form the government's work program. While it would be very nice, I do not think any government has ever done all of those from day one and finished them within six months. We are looking at how we can pace ourselves across the course of the term—what fits where and what is appropriate to be prioritised—depending on a whole range of considerations, including changes in the CEOs of organisations.

**MISS NUTTALL:** Thank you very much. When should we ask you for an update?

**Ms Orr:** You are welcome to ask me for an update at any time. I will answer to the best of my knowledge at the time as to where it is up to. Feel free. You are welcome to ask me between annual reports hearings, estimates and whatnot.

**MISS NUTTALL:** Thank you.

**THE CHAIR:** I have a quick supplementary along those lines. It has been put to me that Carers ACT has been pretty involved in policy development with the government, which is fantastic. Is there an area or an individual within the directorate who is leading the carers work, policy development more broadly, provision of respite options for carers, and that sort of thing?

**Ms Rule:** It is one of the portfolio responsibilities where the directorate supports the minister. We have the relevant people at the table. It is one of our policy and program responsibilities.

**THE CHAIR:** Okay. I am just trying to understand whether there is a team that is responsible for carers policy.

**Ms Rule:** There are a couple of people who have carers as part of their broader roles and responsibilities, in terms of advice to government on a range of community sector programs.

**MS CARRICK:** My question is about recurrent funding. I notice that on page 166 of the annual report—this is just an example for the Office for Disability—there is recurrent grant funding for Office for Disability recipients in 2023-24. For Carers ACT, to keep on the theme, it is for six years. It has a given amount: \$175,000. Is any indexation applied to those grants? They go for periods. When the commissioning comes and they are for longer periods to provide certainty, is there any indexation that can flow through to the salaries, so that there is indexation on the salaries?

**Ms Rule:** Yes. Different grants programs have different indexation rates applied to them, depending on the parameters agreed with government. The Treasury advises government on what kind of indexation should be applied to those funding amounts. The answer is yes; many of those programs have indexation applied to them. That will be specified in the grant agreements that we have with those organisations.

**MS CARRICK:** While you cannot give an amount, the actual agreement with them will set it out?

**Ms Rule:** That amount is for the financial year of this annual report. It is the 2023-24 amount. The amounts are different, depending on what is being delivered in any particular year.

**THE CHAIR:** I have a question that touches on something we have discussed earlier. Many community service providers that I speak with have contracts with multiple areas of government—the Community Services Directorate being one of them—and they feel kind of encumbered by the range of reporting and acquittal requirements across those different contracts. Will the merger of the Community Services Directorate with ACT Health lead to a consolidation of community sector contracts, at least within those two areas?

**Ms Rule:** I hope so. Certainly, as has been said publicly, there is a taskforce advising government on machinery of government changes, led by Caroline Edwards. In the discussions that I have had with Caroline, I have identified that this is what I think is an opportunity to consolidate the relationships that we have with various community sector organisations, so that we can relieve some of that burden for them but also make it more efficient for government by having one part of government that faces a particular organisation and has those negotiations and discussions with them versus two or three or sometimes more. I think there is an opportunity, and we hope that that can be progressed as part of those machinery of government changes.

**THE CHAIR:** Since those machinery of government changes were announced, has the work of the directorate decelerated also in relation to what we have heard about the pause on hiring non-essential workers in the public service? I am hearing about anxiety within some areas and maybe a bit of a tools-down approach while people figure out where their—

**Ms Orr:** Based on the briefing coming to me on the commissioning framework, I would say there has been no pause. It is still happening.

**Ms Rule:** There are definitely no tools down. I appreciate that it is an anxious time for staff while they speculate about where that may go. As I said, there is a taskforce whose responsibility is to sort through these issues. They are undertaking their work. There is a lot of consultation being led by Caroline Edwards and her team on those machinery of government changes. Certainly, the messaging I have given to Community Services Directorate staff, and I think it has been heard loud and clear, is that the best thing we can do during this period is to work hard and get our jobs done. Everyone is really clear on what we have to do. There is a really big program of work, and I have no doubt that people are working hard because they are actually dedicated to serving the Canberra community. Those processes of government will happen, but, in the meantime, I do not think there are many people sitting idle and waiting to see what happens. There is too much to do for that.

**THE CHAIR:** On that forward work program, how are items within that prioritised? It is the start with the government's election commitments. Earlier, Ms Nuttall mentioned supply and confidence agreements. Is there a hierarchy between those two in how you are determining a forward work program and what is happening immediately?

**Ms Rule:** We go through what most organisations go through in business planning processes. We have a clear set of things that we need to deliver. The Community Services Directorate is responsible for nine different portfolios across four ministers. We are in the process of discussing all of those priorities with ministers, including the implementation of the things arising from the election. We will continue to prioritise the work, depending on a whole range of factors, including our resources, the priorities of the government and the feedback we are getting from the community and the sector. That is a constant juggling challenge, but a key role of the executive in the directorate to make sure that we are prioritising work appropriately and continuing to discuss delivery of those priorities with the government.

**Ms Orr:** Mr Emerson, just to add to Ms Rule's answer, it would not be a case of one thing happens and then something else is picked up. It is more about the concurrent needs and meeting a range of commitments and other things. You mentioned the supply and confidence agreements. As a politician, I am the one who is probably a little bit better placed to comment on those than the directorate officials. You and I have had conversations—and you have a supply and confidence agreement with the government around commitments in my areas—as to what your thinking is on those. That is certainly very valuable because, when I have an understanding of what the expectations are and what is going on, it gives us a chance to talk through where there might be any differences of opinions or differences of views, and then I can feed that back into the process.

Certainly, while Ms Rule continues to balance all the different bits and pieces and make sure the work program is setting off, if there are concerns around the supply and confidence agreement, I would ask that you come and speak to me as soon as possible so that we can address them.

**THE CHAIR:** I am thinking about the situation, on your side, Ms Rule, and also on the side of the minister, and I might be inclined to focus on what the government has committed to, what the government really wants to deliver, and the level of contact. It could be easy to forget those other agreements until later in the term. I am curious to understand whether there is a rank order of government election commitments as opposed to supply and confidence commitments—if those are rank ordered within the directorate as to what is prioritised first.

**Ms Orr:** When it comes to the supply and confidence agreements, you might want to have a chat to the Chief Minister as to how he is coordinating all of them. In the past, the parliamentary agreement has had a level of reporting against it. That is probably a question best placed to him. On the direction that I give the directorate, I am very aware of the different agreements that the government has signed up for, so it would factor in through the decisions and the directions that I give to the directorate. It would be one component, I would say. There are many things to balance, but it is not being forgotten, if that is your concern.

**THE CHAIR:** I heard some feedback that things get prioritised in a certain way, which is understandable, but it raised concern with me. We can chat further about that offline.

**Ms Orr:** Yes. Mr Emerson, I would encourage you, if you have concerns, to come and speak to me. They are not concerns that I have heard, to be honest. It has not made its way back to me. This is the first I am hearing about it. In that regard, if there are concerns, if you come to me earlier we can get a handle on what is happening and we can address the issue.

**THE CHAIR:** I am raising it because it is a new structure. It is a new Assembly this term compared to last, so I am curious to know whether that is being reflected within the public service.

**Ms Orr:** I think that is a good point. It is a new approach. It is not one that we necessarily have a huge amount of experience in working through. I think all of us will continue to learn a little bit as we go. But certainly, from my perspective, I am happy to act in good faith. Come to me earlier rather than not and you will give us more options for responding.

**THE CHAIR:** I have one last question along those lines. I am new here, so I am asking questions out of curiosity. When motions pass through the Assembly—last week I had a motion about establishing an ACT food relief action plan—how are they actioned and implemented? Does the directorate immediately kick into gear and start working on that? What is the process that would typically exist? You do not have to use that specific example. Just generally, I am more interested in how the Assembly engages with directorates.

**Ms Orr:** The question you have asked is a really interesting one, and, depending on

who you ask, you might get a different view. As a private member, I have had many discussions with the Clerk as to the scope and limitation of private members' motions, and they tend to differ, depending on who you speak to. In answering your question, it is probably not my place to speak about everything in general. I can speak to the stuff within my experience. For a motion within a minister's area, it will be up to them to respond, so I cannot answer on their behalf and pre-empt what they would or would not say. But, if you have questions specifically about your motion from last week, which I think is partly what is motivating this line of questioning, we can certainly have a discussion about that, noting that it was last Thursday, so some of the thinking might still be going on.

**THE CHAIR:** I am wondering whether directorate officials are watching and saying, "We need to start mobilising," or are they waiting for direction from the relevant minister when something comes up in their area? The same goes for when the Assembly asks to report back on a certain piece of work that you are already doing. We might ask for you to report on what Ms Nuttall touched on earlier.

**Ms Orr:** Would the directorate like to say how closely they watch the TV?

**Ms Rule:** Very. Given we have new Assembly members, I personally watched every session of question time last week to get a sense of the types of issues that might come up. We certainly have staff watching the proceedings of the Assembly. We get regular reporting on what is coming up and what is on the motion paper for the day ahead, but also a summary of debates that may have happened in the chamber during that sitting day. Depending on what the motion is and exactly the nuts and bolts of it, I will often get a letter from the Assembly saying, "This motion has been passed. Here are the terms of it. Be aware." There are set time frames for when those things have to be responded to. Generally, our role is to advise the minister responsible of what some options could be for responding to business in the Assembly or preparing the minister for the debate on a particular item in the Assembly. Once a decision has been made in the Assembly—a motion is passed—our job is to advise the minister responsible of how we would implement it.

**Ms Orr:** Mr Emerson, one of the really important things to note here is that a decision made by the Assembly through a vote on a private member's motion does not mean that any action that comes out of that suddenly bypasses the standard government processes. It is probably quite helpful—and this is something that I had to get my head around when I was new and was thinking about the best way I can use this mechanism to effect change and progress my agenda—to keep in mind, when you are scoping a motion and whatnot, how it will go in the implementation through those standard processes. It is helpful to have a good understanding of what they are. What I am talking about are the usual cabinet consideration processes, the usual budgetary processes, and the flow-on decisions that will come from that. It all feeds into what government is in a position to deliver in response to a motion, particularly with certain time frames that are put before it.

**THE CHAIR:** Thank you. Ms Barry.

**MS BARRY:** My question is around the Disability Advisory Council. In August 2024, the Legislative Assembly passed the Disability Inclusion Bill. A key aspect of that bill

was the establishment of the council. Can you please advise whether this council has been established and who has been appointed as a member of the council?

**Ms Orr:** I will pass to Ms Evans for more detail on this. But the bill has not come into effect yet. It is still progressing. We are looking at the options of the best way. Also, given that we have the DRG, we need to see which members of the DRG actually want to continue. Some of them are coming to the end of their term and have been very happy with the contribution they have made and might want to do some other things. We are working through all the detail and are making sure that we transition the DRG to the council in the best way we can.

**Ms Evans:** Thank you for the question. The act is due to commence on 18 March. We are about a month out now. Since the bill was introduced, we have been thinking about the mechanisms to change from the current arrangements, from the Disability Reference Group to a council. It is a process that requires cabinet approval of appointments, so there will be a full expression of interest process. Cabinet will endorse those nominees. Certainly, the current Disability Reference Group is very aware that we are working through those processes, and they are considering, as the minister said, whether they have an interest to continue in the new governance mechanism. We will also be looking at getting broader representation and probably new members. We expect that process, which usually takes a number of months—

**Ms Orr:** We are still looking at it. I am sorry to cut Ms Evans off, but Ms Evans is saying that it is not like we are starting from scratch and that this is a brand new council. We are in a situation where we have had a representative group. Through feedback and the development of the bill, there were a lot of requests. I can say, as a private member, that the feedback was: “Can we please elevate the DRG to a ministerial council?” That means that, unlike previous ministerial councils we established and made appointments to, we also have to reconcile how we make sure that we are recognising the good work of the predecessor and how we transition that.

Given that there is still a bit of process and there are still a few decisions before government, we might update you at a later date. For clarity, we will not take that on notice, because I am not sure the answers will come by the notice period, but we are certainly happy to note, Ms Barry, that you would like to be kept updated on this topic.

**MS BARRY:** Thank you. It would be useful to be kept updated. Thanks.

**MISS NUTTALL:** What proportion of the seats on the advisory council will be dedicated positions for people with a disability? Have you been able to get into that level of detail yet or are you still working through that process?

**Ms Orr:** The act sets out some considerations of that, but it will depend on who wants to continue and who wants to apply. We will just have to see what comes. But there are requirements around the representation on the council and how that should reflect the diversity of the disability community.

**MISS NUTTALL:** Thank you.

**THE CHAIR:** Ms Tough?

**MS TOUGH:** My question is about the Carers Recognition Act. With the passing of the Carers Recognition Act, what other parts of the government are going to be involved in its implementation and working with CSD?

**Ms Orr:** That one actually came into effect and pre-dates me; it is already in effect. I think there is a bit of history there, but I might pass over to Ms Rule to run through what happened before I got the hot seat!

**Ms Rule:** I think that is a Ms Evans question.

**Ms Evans:** Thank you, Ms Tough, for the question. As you allude to, the act does actually extend to all care and carer support agencies, which are the entities that manage or provide support services, programs or policies in relation to people in care relationships. That care and carer support agency can be an ACT government directorate or agency, or a support agency funded by the ACT government, that delivers a particular program for people in care relationships. The ACT government directorates that have obligations under the act to report include all of those that develop and manage policies, programs and services with a direct impact on people in a care relationship, those that fund other organisations to provide that kind of support, or those that have staff who are carers. So, basically, all the directorates are required to report, their reporting must be annual, and the sort of reporting they need to do is to indicate how they promote and uphold the care relationship principles with their staff and with service users, how they consult with people in care relationships and carer relationship agencies, and how they include care relationship principles in internal human resource policies when they are doing their reporting.

**MS TOUGH:** Wonderful; thank you. And forgive me for being new, but have we had the first application and reporting of the act?

**Ms Evans:** I believe we did not meet the requirement for this annual report that has just gone, so it will be in the next annual reporting period.

**MS TOUGH:** Awesome; I was checking I had not missed it.

**Ms Orr:** Ms Tough, for your benefit, I can probably elaborate on the detail and what went into thinking of that, because it was also my private members' bill, and I have a very intimate working knowledge of how we got to where we got.

The reporting obligations in this bill are actually more significant than what you would see in any of the other bills in any jurisdiction. That came from the fact that we were the last jurisdiction to put an act in place, and we could learn from what the other jurisdictions had experienced, and that was that there was a higher level of reporting required in order to make sure that the obligations of the act were being met.

In putting that forward, it came up with, I think, quite a healthy discussion between what is an adequate amount of reporting and what is a burdensome amount of reporting. In the first instance, it was a very light touch, as opposed to nothing; it was a very light-touch level of reporting. But it is certainly something I think everyone at the time said that, given we are the first jurisdiction to take this approach and we are going to be the



ones paving the way on that and learning all the lessons for everyone else, when we come up to the statutory review at the five-year point, I think it is fair to say, there will be a clear focus on that and whether it is realising the intentions that were there or whether it needs more or less, depending on which side of the argument you sat on in shaping where we got to with the bill.

But those are all things where, at this point in time, we are unique in that we have the reporting to the extent that we have it. How that achieves the objectives is a question, I think, for the future under the statutory review.

**MS TOUGH:** Thank you. And when is that five-year mark, sorry?

**Ms Orr:** It is later in this term. I cannot remember the exact date off the top of my head; apologies.

**MS TOUGH:** Thank you.

**MS BARRY:** I think I read somewhere, on the carers card, that additional resourcing of an APS 6 was funded for the carers card. Has that recruitment happened?

**Ms Orr:** Ms Barry, the carers recognition card was an election commitment, and any request for additional funding for that would have to go forward in a future budget process. I am not sure what you are reading, but, no, that does not sound quite right to me.

**MS BARRY:** I thought it was in the budget papers somewhere, but okay. I will probably put the question on notice. Sorry, I will put it through the system once I clarify where that information was.

The senior practitioner's report is concerned about the quality of behavioural support plans and intends to target educational programs. I want more information around what educational programs you are looking to complete. Also, how will providers, after the training, determine the effectiveness of the approach?

**Ms Harkness:** Thank you for the question. You will notice in the recently published annual report that we talked about our team providing training in what is called the behaviour support quality evaluation tool, No 2.

We ran two different training sessions in the last 12 months that were attended by a number of different providers who write behaviour support plans. This was one of the programs that we did in terms of educating people on the review, because it is good quality. It is one of the only measures that actually measures the quality of behaviour support plans; so we did that education. We have got to do more education this year around lifting people's capability, because we have noticed a drop in quality across the board in terms of behaviour support plans.

This quality piece is also something we share with the NDIS Quality and Safeguards Commission, because they also do quality evaluations of plans. They do random audits of plans in the ACT as well. We will be doing that piece of work with the commonwealth as well as our other state and territory counterparts and doing some

pieces of work in that space this year.

**MS BARRY:** Thank you. Sorry, I think I asked two questions in one. The second prong of my question was: how will you follow-up with providers after the training to determine the effectiveness of the approach?

**Ms Harkness:** There are a whole range of different things that are happening in this space at the moment. The BSP-QEII that I just talked about is also going through an Australian adaptation at the moment, which is called the BSP—Behaviour Support Plan—A for Australian contexts. The ACT is participating in the pilot of that new assessment so that we can actually test the reliability of the assessment and assist with the research component, through the University of Queensland, of that particular tool.

We will need to do further information and awareness raising with the sector around that new tool, and we will work with our research counterparts to do that as well. We are kind of in a bit of a stage of older tools and newer tools coming through, so we will probably catch back in with those providers in the next few months while we talk through this new tool.

The other thing I can say is that of the people that attended the training, I have noticed in the last few months, in terms of those providers putting in behaviour support plans, they were of higher quality in terms of individuals that attended the training. They had better adherence to the requirements in the act, as well as the guideline that is around what needs to be in a positive behaviour support plan. They had higher rates of me self-registering the plan and lower rates of rejections of the plan. When a behaviour support plan goes through the authorisation process, I can choose to register the plan. If it does not meet all the legislative requirements, I may reject the plan. Those people really have had a big uptick and increase in their plans being authorised and registered successfully.

**MS BARRY:** Thank you. That is really useful. And I also note that the ACT Public Advocate has a role in reviewing the registered positive behaviour plans.

**Ms Harkness:** Yes.

**MS BARRY:** How do you work together?

**Ms Harkness:** That is for the children and young people that come under the Public Advocate's purview. Those are shared on a secure drive that the Public Advocate's team does a further review of. We work together on making sure that it is not a duplication of processes in terms of review—making sure that it can be very much a value-add to look at specific aspects of the plan and that it does not go into the overall quality of the plan. It looks at particular things that we are wanting to be working on.

Some of the things we have focused on the last 12 to 18 months are really about making sure the person who is the subject of that plan—that young person—has their voice really heard and understood in that plan. The Public Advocate looked at that particular aspect of the plan rather than the overall quality, because we have already done that, and made sure that they could value-add to that review. That really articulated and helped us direct our educational activities, where we worked with the Public Advocate

to talk to providers around making sure they consulted appropriately with people and making sure that the voice of the person, or the child or young person, really came through in the plan. That was something extra that we then started looking at and evaluating over the next six months to 12 months as well.

**MS BARRY:** That is very useful. It looks like you anticipated my next question, and then you answered it as well, which is really good. Thank you very much for that. I appreciate that.

**Ms Harkness:** No problem.

**THE CHAIR:** Miss Nuttall?

**MISS NUTTALL:** This is about foundational support services for allied health, therapy and assessment. What foundational support services for assessment and allied health therapy for children and adults who are too old for the Child Development Service will be provided as part of the NDIS review reforms?

**Ms Orr:** Miss Nuttall, I think it is a little bit early to say specifics as to what will and will not be included within the foundational supports. The service design response is still very much something that is before the commonwealth and the states and territories for discussion, negotiation and decision. I think, unfortunately, while I would love to be able to tell you, we are just not at that point in the broader discussion, and I think it is fair to say that no state or territory, or even the commonwealth, would be at the point in the discussion where they could answer such a specific question.

**MISS NUTTALL:** Do you anticipate that there might be a gap in service provision for folks who are older than the Child Development Service? Is that a contingency that you are working towards?

**Ms Orr:** Miss Nuttall, I think there are a lot of things that we could speculate on and take views on, but I would rather continue to operate within where we are up to in the discussion of what we do know, which, unfortunately, in pre-empting your next question of “What do you know?” is that we are still working through that detail and getting to the bits and pieces there.

I think speculating is not necessarily going to help at this point in time. If there are concerns from particular groupings within the community that in this transition they want their needs taken into account and they want assurance that they are on the radar, you are welcome to bring those to me; we can fit them into the process. Certainly, the discussion is ongoing. It is quite complex. It is quite a big discussion. We could sit here and speculate as to every possible outcome, but I dare say we would probably have to add a few more extra days to the annual reports hearings to cover off on all of that.

**MISS NUTTALL:** Super fair; I get that. In the interim period then, while the review is underway and being finalised, are you confident in the assessment and therapeutic services currently available to folks that suspect they might have either ADHD or be autistic?

**Ms Orr:** Is this a question for assessments to diagnose?

**MISS NUTTALL:** Yes. We can narrow the scope and just go with that.

**Ms Orr:** Yes. Because I think—

**Ms Rule:** It is in a different portfolio.

**Ms Orr:** It is in a different portfolio, yes.

**Ms Rule:** There is a couple of components here. The part you might be referring to is that there are some assessments conducted by ACT government through the Child Development Service of children of a certain age. Those are the responsibility of Minister Berry; we can have the officials here to answer those questions at that time. That is part of what the ACT government does. Then there is access to a whole range of other health services where those diagnoses may or may not happen for other age groups, and for children as well, that are the purview Canberra Health Services.

**MISS NUTTALL:** Thank you.

**THE CHAIR:** On that line of questioning, you have noticed that there is a lot of anxiety among people with disability about what is going to happen next. If we do not know what is going to happen next, do we have a sense of when we will know? Is there a timeline that we can provide to people? I am hearing all the time from people who are reaching out as constituents saying, "I am not sure about my eligibility. What is going to be available in terms of foundational supports and when?" Do we know when we will have that information if we do not have it now?

**Ms Orr:** There is a timeline that has been set through the national cabinet decisions as to when various milestones should be met. We will continue to work through those and to that timeline. As to individual questions, I might get Ms Rule to help out with the detail on those. But I think it is probably fair to say that there are a few different questions within that and different ways of approaching and responding to it, and one might not necessarily be dependent on the other.

**Ms Rule:** The NDIS review was conducted by the commonwealth and is completed. There have been many discussions between disability ministers. There is a Disability Reform Ministerial Council, which is chaired by the commonwealth minister, that includes all the state and territory ministers for disability as well. The response to the NDIS review has been a constant and outstanding item for discussion at that ministerial council. People will be aware from public reporting that it was also the subject of a number of discussions at national cabinet last year. National cabinet agreed to develop a foundational supports strategy. The work to develop that strategy and an associated federation funding agreement which has to flow, as I understand, it will be considered by national cabinet sometime during the course of this calendar year. I cannot be more specific than that because it is really in the purview of the commonwealth about when that strategy might be considered.

**MISS NUTTALL:** Can I confirm with you, as the ACT representation on that, whether you have been able to advocate for additional foundational support funding from the commonwealth outside of that Child Development Service bracket?

**Ms Rule:** Those funding agreements have not yet been reached. My understanding is that they will be the responsibility of negotiations between members of national cabinets—so first ministers, not disability ministers—and treasurers. No agreement has been reached on those foundational supports, so funding has not yet flowed for those things. But neither has the work. We are not actually delivering foundational supports yet because it has not been agreed what those foundational supports will be. The autism assessments that you described through the Child Development Service have had ongoing funding through ACT government budget measures for some time.

**MS CARRICK:** On the foundational supports, will some of it be funded by the ACT government as opposed to the commonwealth government?

**Ms Rule:** Those deals have not been made yet. So I do not know yet.

**MS CARRICK:** If the ACT government is funding some—or even the commonwealth—will the local organisations, like disability organisations in the ACT, that are impacted be included in co-design of what the foundational supports will be? If so, will they get any funding to participate?

**Ms Rule:** I do not have a crystal ball, unfortunately, and cannot speculate. We have certainly placed a big emphasis here on engagement with the disability sector. The disability sector here in the ACT is very organised and very vocal, which we really appreciate. So we feel very clear on the things that are priorities for the ACT disability community. They are very quick to talk to ministers and others, I am sure, about what their views are. Whether it will go as far as co-design is not yet clear because it is not yet clear exactly who is going to have responsibility for what part. We are not yet crystalised, if you like, on what those foundational supports are. So we are not yet up to the stage of being able to design, consult and talk about funding and stuff, because the what is not yet agreed let alone the how of some of those negotiations. So they are still to come.

**MS CARRICK:** In the meantime, are there people that are needing foundational support that are not getting it—for example, that are not getting NDIS and are not getting the support they need?

**Ms Rule:** I think that is part of the NDIS review which said that people who sit outside of the NDIS sometimes have trouble accessing services. We have some programs here in the ACT—like the ISRP, the autism assessments and other things that we have already talked about—that help support people with disability. But the actual point of the foundational supports is that the NDIS review found that whilst the NDIS has been very good for those people who are on NDIS packages, there are now some gaps in the system that foundational supports will be needed to fill.

**MS CARRICK:** I understand that there used to be a social section in the government that is no longer there. For inclusion, what work is done around ensuring that people with disability, youth, veterans or people with different backgrounds have multi-use facilities in which to meet and make friends?

**Ms Orr:** Ms Carrick, I think the unit you are referring to has come up a number of times

over previous terms and in different forums, and I think it has always been a question for EPSDD, not for CSD.

**MS CARRICK:** Okay.

**MS BARRY:** I have a supplementary on the ISRP program. Can you advise how many people have accessed the program and how much has been spent on that program?

**Ms Orr:** If you can give Ms Rule a moment just to look up her records, I daresay we can provide you with the information.

**MS BARRY:** Yes. Of course.

**Ms Rule:** Ms Evans might be able to help with the detail here as well. In the last financial year, ISRP actively supported 114 participants through three streams, which included referral for short-term crisis intervention, a memorandum of understanding around young people who are unable to live in the family home due to disability, and funding for individuals with disability who meet the NDIS criteria but are ineligible due to their visa status. Those are the three streams. In terms of the funding amount, I am not sure, Jacinta, whether you have that.

**Ms Evans:** I do. For ISRP, we have ongoing funding for three full-time staff. We also have \$535,000 per annum to support clients. That goes directly to client support across those streams, as the director-general has outlined. To give an approximate breakdown, emergency respite and in-home support is one of the larger categories that we support because it is more expensive. There is support for voluntary out-of-home care participants; support for headlease arrangements—so where someone just needs support to manage a tenancy and that kind of thing; therapeutic assessments; participants who did not meet the eligibility requirements of the NDIS due to residency status—so may have just had some level of support; and connecting participants with support is also a small portion of that funding.

**MS BARRY:** The answer might be, yes, every sector needs additional funding, but is that service oversubscribed? Is there a need? Are you turning people away?

**Ms Evans:** Not turning people away but it is certainly well subscribed, and the funding that we have we have to manage carefully, as we do with all government-funded programs. I think where we will always continue to have pressure is where people are not receiving NDIS supports, which is consistent with the previous conversation where the NDIS review found that people who do not have those NDIS supports will need more from the government. So, as we work through the work on foundational supports, we hope that we will start to meet some needs for people in a different way, not just through ISRP.

**MISS NUTTALL:** I have another supplementary on the foundational supports—and, sorry, if this is crystal-ball gazing, please tell me—for children who do the autism screening have access to NDIS before the age of six. If there is a delay in diagnosis or the diagnosis has not occurred by the age of six, is there a gap in services or is there something that is available for kids before they get that diagnosis and are then able to re-access the NDIS?

**Ms Rule:** I think in the ACT, we are unique in that that we do provide autism screening for younger children to try to address that gap, because research says that, the earlier the interventions, the better the outcomes for those children. So we do have access to those autism assessments, which then allows people to access other services either through the NDIS or through the education sector or other settings.

**MISS NUTTALL:** In terms of the gap though, if they do not get that diagnosis by age six—for example, if a parent has a seven-year-old young person and they suspect that they might have autism—are there services that exist that their parents could access?

**Ms Rule:** In terms of diagnosis?

**MISS NUTTALL:** Yes.

**Ms Rule:** The diagnoses from the Child Development Service is up to age 12. So children up to 12 can access that service that is provided by the ACT government.

**MISS NUTTALL:** And after 12, is there?

**Ms Rule:** Then it moves people into other service systems like the NDIS, the private or public health systems or other—

**THE CHAIR:** Just quickly on foundational supports, there are already changes happening with NDIS eligibility. This is not my area of expertise, but is there a period while we are waiting for that agreement to be landed federally or do we just know that some people who were receiving support under the NDIS now have their hands up in the air saying, “When am I going to get support through a foundational support system”? I am thinking especially about people with psychosocial disabilities. To me, it would have made sense to have made those NDIS changes with foundational supports already in place and a plan there. A concern that I hear about from that community is that there could be a 12-month gap if we are talking about this just sometime this year.

**Ms Orr:** I might get Ms Rule to talk you through a little bit of the foundational supports reform process and maybe some of the other relevant reform processes around the wider NDIS, because foundational supports is one component of what is being put forward. That might help, with a little bit of context for you, when you get these issues raised with you and just sort of contextualising how it all fits together.

**Ms Rule:** There has been a series of decisions as a result of the NDIS review that are the remit of the commonwealth about how they administer the NDIS. There have been at a very high level some changes to regulations around the NDIS that have been the subject of discussion amongst disability ministers. But decisions on those rules and then the application of those rules is the responsibility of the commonwealth. I think part of the response from national cabinet to the review of the NDIS was to accept that the expenditure on the NDIS was growing faster than anyone ever expected and in a manner that needed to be slowed down to make it long-term viable in an economic sense. So many of the discussions have focused on how we can reduce the growth in expenditure on the NDIS whilst making sure that there are other service systems available to help people.

We are still working through what those other service systems look like. But, as I said, I think the commitments are clear. Certainly, the ACT government has been clear on what its commitments are to negotiate through the foundational supports work with the federal government. There is some complexity there, but there is an acknowledgement, I think, that the NDIS has grown faster than is sustainable in the long term in an economic sense. The nature of the legislation around the NDIS is that it is jointly governed by the commonwealth and the states and territories. So the states and territories do get a say about changes to legislation and to regulations. Of course, there is always fine print around all of that stuff, but there is certainly a very active discussion between ministers across jurisdictions on all of this and a lot of work from officials to advise ministers in relation to those discussions.

**THE CHAIR:** So you are hearing from some of the people that I am hearing from who are saying, “I have been supported by an NDIS plan, and that is no longer available to me. I am being told foundational supports would be a territory responsibility but those are not available. Where do I go?” I am getting comments like that.

**Ms Rule:** As I said, the ACT disability sector is pretty organised and vocal, and we do hear those things. Certainly when I have been in the room at various ministerial or officials meeting those concerns are raised and discussed as part of the considerations around the foundational support strategy.

**MS CARRICK:** The ISRP is for people in crisis. So, potentially, there are people that are not necessarily in crisis but are slipping through the cracks with the support they need.

**Ms Rule:** I think one of the interests for the ACT in resolving some of these matters is that those people fall into other service systems which are not the right service systems. For example, we know that there can be some people with disability who stay in hospital longer than they need to. That is a more expensive model for the ACT and, of course, it is not a great outcome for that individual who may be hospitalised longer than they need to be or, as we have already discussed, for children who cannot access early support services as quickly as they may need to or parents are needing to access those services in the private market if they can. There is a real interest and a drive for ACT government to reach agreement on these issues, because those people do end up in different service systems requiring supports that are not necessarily the right supports for that person.

**THE CHAIR:** This is a little bit of a change in direction but is still on people with disability. I am curious about the current statistics for employment of people with disability in the ACT public service and how these numbers have evolved over the past year. I think the nine per cent target was set early last year. Are we tracking against that? Are we reporting on that? Apologies if we are and I have missed it.

**Ms Rule:** ACT public service employment issues are a matter for the Chief Minister, Treasury and Economic Development. That is a public service workforce issue.

**THE CHAIR:** Is the directorate at all involved in developing strategies, initiatives and implementation of those strategies and initiatives?



**Ms Rule:** There are regular discussions amongst directors-general about these matters, and in particular for the Community Services Directorate. I have a very strong personal view that we have an obligation to reflect the nature of the community that we serve. Within Community Services Directorate, we focus very heavily on employment of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff, employment of multicultural staff and employment of people with a disability, and we exceed the targets that have been set for the ACT public service on those things. My personal view is that, if we are not leading the public service on those things, then I have not done my job well enough. So that has been a particular focus for us and something I am pretty proud of because I think it has improved the capability and the capacity of our workforce to understand the lived experience of the communities that we serve. Diversely makes us better at the jobs that we do; so it has been a particular focus for us.

**THE CHAIR:** We are on a similar wavelength. Do you know off the top of your head what those figures look like within your directorate?

**Ms Rule:** It will be in the annual report. I am just trying to find it but, when I search “disability” I get lots of different things. If you bear with me, by the time we go home today I might have found it for you.

**THE CHAIR:** Thank you.

**Ms Rule:** Sorry; I have it now. I can answer your previous question. I knew I would get there.

**THE CHAIR:** Well done, everyone.

**Ms Rule:** As of December 2024, the number of people with disability employed within CSD is six per cent.

**THE CHAIR:** I can ask this of CMTEDD, but are there timelines on that nine per cent target that you have set for yourselves?

**Ms Rule:** CMTEDD? Sorry; what was the question?

**THE CHAIR:** I can ask someone else about that. But, for your specific directorate, do you have timelines on reaching that nine per cent target that is ACTPS wide?

**Ms Rule:** No, we have not set a timeline; we just continue to work through that. It is very hard to set a specific timeline given the relatively small numbers. I do not have a timeframe but we are very focused on the target—and it is heading in the right direction.

**MS BARRY:** I have a question around the new changes to your organisational structure. The recent announcements noted that CSD will become part of the Health Directorate. What impact do you think this will have on the delivery of the services that you currently manage?

**Ms Rule:** I think what has been announced by government is a merger of the Health

Directorate and the Community Services Directorate. As I stated earlier, there is a task force that has been set up to oversee that merger, including providing advice to government on the scope of the merger and on some of the specifics, including timeframes. But the Chief Minister has said it will be implemented no later than the end of this financial year. We continue to do the work that we do. As I said earlier, I think the staff are very focused on a very busy work program. We are, of course, awaiting advice from government and from that task force on some of the specifics of when that merger will occur. But, for most staff, it does not actually affect their day-to-day job. It affects my job and the job of my executive team, and we talk about it regularly in terms of what opportunities might exist to improve. There are some portfolios where we think there is great benefit in bringing together some of the work that we do. For example, the mental health work in the health portfolio touches on the work that we do in housing, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs, child protection and disability. It is pervasive. I really believe that the ability to bring those things together will provide some opportunities to provide better services to vulnerable Canberrans. But, in the meantime, we just get on and do the job that we have got to do whilst we await advice on what will happen. But, as I said, for most people day to day it will not change much in terms of what their work looks and feels like and what some of the structures look like.

**MS BARRY:** Are you able to provide information on the task force like how many people are—

**Ms Rule:** That is a question for the Chief Minister's directorate.

**MS BARRY:** Okay; thank you. You mentioned that there is advice going to the task force on how you can consolidate some of those functions, including health, disability and housing.

**Ms Rule:** The task force are consulting widely. They are seeking ideas from across the ACT public service at all levels of what people think the opportunities might be. Certainly, I provided my input and some ideas to the task force, and I am sure many of our staff will have as well. There is a series of consultation sessions programmed for the next few weeks for the task force to go and talk directly to a whole range of staff across the whole ACT public sector. But, ultimately, those will be decisions of government about where those opportunities might lie and how those might be executed.

**MS BARRY:** You said you have provided advice to the task force. Did it include the merger of the IT infrastructure, or is that beyond the scope of what you can—

**Ms Orr:** I think that is really a discussion for the task force perhaps.

**Ms Rule:** Yes, I think that is right. It is really up to the task force to advise government and then clearly government will make decisions about what changes might get made.

**MS BARRY:** Thank you.

**MS TOUGH:** With the merger, do you see benefits for patient outcomes, particularly the disability space merging with health and—talking about the foundational supports earlier—the autism screening and people being treated as a whole person with one

directorates they are dealing with?

**Ms Rule:** I think part of the Chief Minister's commentary in announcing these changes has been that this is really focused on improving frontline services. So I think those are exactly the kinds of examples where improvements to frontline services by streamlining the number of directorates that people have to deal with is part of the objective. So, absolutely, I think that is well within scope.

**Ms Orr:** Maybe further questions on the task force can be put to the task force. I think Ms Rule has done a very good job in trying to answer your questions without overstepping her remit. But I might just step in and do her a solid and remind you that maybe the task force might be the best place for these ones.

**MS TOUGH:** Thank you.

**THE CHAIR:** Mr Hanson?

**MR HANSON:** I might defer to Ms Barry.

**Ms Orr:** Mr Hanson, I really thought that you would have a question for me on veterans. Is that today or is that a different day?

**MR HANSON:** No, it is not today.

**THE CHAIR:** You will have to wait, I am afraid, Minister, for the appropriate hearing.

**Ms Orr:** I will sit with anticipation for what comes in the future.

**MR HANSON:** It will be exciting.

**Ms Orr:** I will hold you to it.

**MS BARRY:** My question is just pivoting a little bit to the social recovery framework. I note that the policy guides government's response in relation to disaster events and covers a spectrum from before the disaster through to recovery. Can you please tell me when the policy would be initiated in relation to a potential or actual disaster?

**Ms Orr:** If Ms Rule does not have anything, we might just go straight to Ms Evans as the one with the knowledge on this one.

**Ms Evans:** Thank you for the question, Ms Barry. Sorry, was your question: when does the activity commence in relation to social recovery?

**MS BARRY:** That is correct.

**Ms Evans:** Thank you. As soon as we are aware of a major incident, the ACT government stands up its emergency response. Social recovery is always included as part of that response. Sometimes it is necessary. Depending on what the emergency may be, we would straightaway be involved to assess how much of the community has been affected and how they are being affected. So it is immediately part of the social

recovery considerations. Then it really depends on how that particular incident unfolds. If it is an incident that, for instance, means that people are displaced—flooding, fire and that sort of thing—social recovery would have a role in making sure those particular neighbourhoods had places to be safe, places for their pets to be safe and all those kinds of responses that are immediate to people feeling safe and that sort of structure around the recovery. The tail of social recovery is really around how a community comes together to recover well and sort of pushes on from those immediate responses that we would give in the initial emergency.

**MS BARRY:** How often do you work to update the framework? Is there ongoing work to update the framework?

**Ms Evans:** We have a fresh framework, a very contemporary framework, that was developed with our community sector partners and with some advice from external consultants, which was actually recognised at a commonwealth level for how positive that framework is for the ACT. It does go broadly to how the community needs to be supported and how social recovery fits in with the emergency recovery legislation broadly. Having only developed the framework last year, we would probably be looking to review it at a regular sort of cycle. But, at this stage, we are just trying to work out how the framework actually fits into our broader emergency recovery legislation.

**MS BARRY:** Thank you. The answer will probably be yes, but I am anticipating you are working with the Emergency Services Directorate to make sure that you are across—

**Ms Evans:** Yes, we have a range of senior officials working groups. As you can imagine with this kind of thing, there is very comprehensive governance of emergency services activity and how social recovery fits into it.

**MS BARRY:** Are there any identified areas of disaster that you are currently working on?

**Ms Evans:** No; we are mainly responding. Obviously in the past, in the ACT, bushfire has been one of the main things but flood and storm activity with climate change is becoming more prevalent. But we prepare for any kind of disaster that may affect the community.

**MISS NUTTALL:** My question is around housing for people with a disability. We were happy to hear that the Suburban Land Agency has agreed to prioritise housing for people with a disability and to engage with other government agencies as well as community-based groups and people with lived experience of disability to inform the development of options. To the best of your knowledge, do you know if the ACT government engaged with community-based organisations such as Hartley House or the Summer Foundation?

**Ms Orr:** If it is a Suburban Land Agency undertaking, it is probably a question best put to them about their undertakings.

**Ms Rule:** The minister is correct. I can answer, with my housing commissioner hat on, that we have had a wide range of discussions with disability advocates, including the

Summer Foundation and others, about housing requirements for people with a disability.

**Ms Orr:** But, maybe, Miss Nuttall, more detailed questions can go to the relevant officials.

**MISS NUTTALL:** I am concerned that that session might have already elapsed, and I am hoping there might—

**Ms Rule:** It has not.

**THE CHAIR:** We had the SLA up but not—

**Ms Rule:** Today there was housing but it was not Housing ACT. Housing ACT, I think, is tomorrow.

**MISS NUTTALL:** In that case, I reckon it would be better for them. Thank you.

**MS CARRICK:** I have more questions about volunteering policy. How do you increase the number of volunteers—because, over recent years, I think that they have declined? How do you ensure that the people that are engaging volunteers have a safe environment? How do we ensure that our volunteers are not out of pocket and can afford to volunteer—because it costs money to volunteer?

**Ms Orr:** I might ask for Ms Rule on the processes but Ms Evans might have something to add on this, particularly around what the ACT government has in place, the history of how those came to be about and the parameters under which they are operated.

**Ms Rule:** We do have a volunteering strategy that was agreed by government last year. It is a 10-year strategy, which was the first for volunteering in the ACT. We worked on that with Volunteering ACT as the peak body representing hiring to volunteering interests. That strategy sets out a whole range of activities, including some related to some of the matters that you have raised. We will continue to work with Volunteering ACT and other stakeholders on the implementation now of that strategy. Ms Evans can probably provide a little bit more detail on the things that are included within that strategy.

**Ms Evans:** Thanks for the question. There are 26 actions in the first action plan, which was established under the plan last year. Ten of those sit with the ACT government directorates or jointly with Volunteering ACT for implementation and others Volunteering ACT do have the lead on. That range of work is publicly available. I will not read through them all and take up the committee's time, but there is substantial work to particularly increase recognition of volunteers to ensure that volunteering in the ACT region is safe, ethical and sustainable. It also goes to recognising and valuing the contributions of the workforce. I think one of your questions was to do with remuneration of volunteers. Am I correct in saying that?

**MS CARRICK:** Yes; when it costs to volunteer.

**Ms Evans:** I do not have a specific answer for that. I guess, by its nature, volunteers are not receiving remuneration. But I can definitely look into whether there is some

element of that.

**Ms Orr:** I think this has come up in the past in other hearings. I think in maybe three inquiries or so last term there has been a discussion around this. It is not necessarily straightforward or easy because it starts to broach that discussion of what is paid and unpaid work and what is volunteering. There is a difference between them. While there are some stakeholder groups and advocacy groups that have put out an idea that government should provide some sort of money to reimburse volunteers. While I think some would say that this a very well-intentioned proposal, it definitely starts to head off in a lot of those complexities as to are we actually then moving into paid work, how to reconcile what happens when we do it and how it fits with what volunteers themselves expect. I would also note that, while government does have opportunities for people to volunteer, we are certainly not the only group out there—there are a lot of organisations that will have this—and there are a number of considerations where what sounds like a very simple proposition actually becomes quite complex quite quickly and could have some pretty perverse outcomes when you start to look at it.

While the Volunteering Statement, which was endorsed in the last term of government—so one that I am a little less familiar with because I did not write it—is very much on how the government can support the wider service sector in helping to develop their volunteering capacity and support their volunteers that are there, I think it is fair to say—and, officials feel free to correct me if I am wrong—it is not necessarily intended for government to be the primary lead in any of this work or to take on the sole responsibility; it is a recognition that this happens in our community. While government is happy to support that, it is in partnership with a lot of groups, particularly those that do have the responsibility for these functions within the broader community.

**MS CARRICK:** Is there any funding to implement the 10-year strategy to sort of kick it along a bit to help?

**Ms Orr:** These decisions predate me. So I am happy for the directorate to run you through a little bit of the history as to how the strategy came around and the expectations as to how it would be implemented.

**Ms Evans:** Ms Carrick, while I try to find the funding, I wanted to say that the ACT government does offer voluntary leave, which goes somewhere towards people, I guess, being recompensed for the work that they do.

**THE CHAIR:** Do you have figures on the level of use of that leave? Maybe it is one you could take on notice.

**Ms Evans:** CMTEDD would have the—

**THE CHAIR:** Okay. Sorry to interrupt.

**Ms Evans:** I may have to take your question on notice, Ms Carrick, around where the funding went to, because I do not have it right in front of me and I think we are coming to the end of this session.

**THE CHAIR:** Yes; we are almost there.

**Ms Evans:** We got through to the last minute before someone said they would have to take it on notice. So I am sorry about that.

**THE CHAIR:** Very impressive. Just quickly, in terms of ongoing funding, is that something that Volunteering ACT is going to be pushing for or is that something that the directorate takes carriage of putting in a budget bid sort of thing?

**Ms Orr:** My experience—and I do not think I am the first person to make this observation—is that a lot of our community sector partners will come to us and say, “Here are some great opportunities if you are able to fund it.” So we continue to have those discussions. In developing the volunteering strategy—so not the broader question but the particular example of the volunteering strategy—there were a lot of discussions on the document being more focused on clarifying the roles and responsibilities of groupings so that we could get on with responding to and supporting that and it was not necessarily a strategy that would incorporate a lot of new initiatives that the government would then be obligated to fund. Is that correct, Ms Evans?

**Ms Evans:** That is correct. With the chair’s indulgence, I have found the funding information. The ACT government, through CSD, funds Volunteering ACT to deliver three services. They provide peak body services through the Community Development Program, totalling \$804,000; community information services under the Community Development Program to the total of \$643,000; and food security services. So that is the funding for that agency specially. Then, as a peak organisation, we work with them to develop and deliver on the volunteering plan. So there is no specific funding in this particular annual report but that is the ongoing funding in that landscape.

**MS CARRICK:** So, just to clarify, there is no specific funding allocated to the strategy in this current—

**Ms Evans:** No; there was not in this current budget. That is correct.

**MS CARRICK:** Thank you.

**Ms Evans:** Chair, before you wrap up. I am sorry but I need to correct the record. I did say to Ms Tough that there was no reporting on the Carers Recognition Act and I was incorrect. There was in this year. It is on page 59 of CSD’s report and in all the other directorates’ reports as well. Apologies for getting that wrong.

**THE CHAIR:** Thank you, Ms Evans. On behalf of the committee, thank you all for your attendance. If you have taken any questions on notice—which you managed to get away with not doing, Ms Evans; nicely done—please provide those answers to the secretary within five business days of receiving the uncorrected proof *Hansard*. On behalf of the committee, I would also like to thank all of our witnesses who have assisted the committee through your experience and knowledge today. We also thank Broadcasting and Hansard for their support and, of course the secretariat as well. Thank you everyone.

**The committee adjourned at 4.47 pm.**