



**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**

TRANSCRIPT OF EVIDENCE

CANBERRA

WEDNESDAY, 12 FEBRUARY 2025

**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

Community Services Directorate.....	146, 166
-------------------------------------	----------

Privilege statement

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

All witnesses making submissions or giving evidence to committees of the Legislative Assembly for the ACT are protected by parliamentary privilege.

“Parliamentary privilege” means the special rights and immunities which belong to the Assembly, its committees and its members. These rights and immunities enable committees to operate effectively, and enable those involved in committee processes to do so without obstruction, or fear of prosecution.

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.

While the committee prefers to hear all evidence in public, it may take evidence in-camera if requested. Confidential evidence will be recorded and kept securely. It is within the power of the committee at a later date to publish or present all or part of that evidence to the Assembly; but any decision to publish or present in-camera evidence will not be taken without consulting with the person who gave the evidence.

Amended 20 May 2013

The committee met at 11.21 am

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

Sabellico, Ms Anne Maree, Acting Deputy-Director General

Simpson, Mr Chris, Executive Branch Manager, Aboriginal Service Development

Moyle, Mr Brendan, Executive Branch Manager, Office for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs

THE CHAIR: Good morning, and welcome to the public hearing of the Standing Committee on Social Policy for its Inquiries into Annual and Financial Reports 2023-24. The committee will this morning hear from the Minister for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs.

The committee wishes to acknowledge the traditional custodians of the lands 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 any other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who may be attending today's hearing.

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," which will help the committee and witnesses to confirm these questions from the transcript.

We welcome Ms Suzanne Orr MLA, the Minister for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs, 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 contempt of the Assembly. When you first speak, please confirm that you understand the implications of the privilege statement and that you agreed to comply with it.

We will now proceed with questions. I have a question for Mr Moyle on the National Agreement on Closing the Gap. This was agreed in 2020. It is a 10-year agreement, so we are now halfway through. The Productivity Commission's three-year review into the national agreement was published in February last year, 2024. It makes for some pretty rough reading, with a range of damning findings regarding progress on the national agreement.

My understanding of the four priority reforms within that agreement is that they are aimed at securing and accelerating improvements in life outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. The review, though, found that the agreement's reforms

have not been prioritised by governments and, despite thousands of initiatives being listed in government plans, many of these reflect what governments have been doing for many years. It indicated that governments are not consistently adhering to, and are sometimes contravening, the agreement; that there is no independent oversight of the agreement because oversight is managed by the people who are party to the agreement; and that there are no consequences for failure.

The review made four overarching recommendations, with 16 essential actions, and the ACT government, as part of the Joint Council on Closing the Gap, agreed to implement all of those recommendations on 5 July 2024. What has the ACT government done to implement the recommendations and actions from the Productivity Commission report?

Ms Orr: I have read and understood the privilege statement. Mr Emerson, it is quite a big question. While Mr Moyle takes a moment to gather his thoughts, there is quite a lot in that. It is a really good question because it actually starts to show the various components of this whole-of-government change.

I might ask Mr Moyle, with the committee's indulgence, to take a little bit of time to run through how the different components of that agreement are operationalised, noting that it will sit across government, not necessarily all within this particular portfolio area, even though we have a role in oversight and feeding back into the Closing the Gap process. I will also ask Mr Moyle to talk a little bit about how the other components we have here in the ACT, such as the elected body, feed into the work we do.

What is cognisant in my mind, in coming into this portfolio, is that it is one that we really walk with community on. It is not one on which to make unilateral decisions. That means that sometimes, in answering some of the questions that come up, it takes us a little bit longer to get to an answer. I think that, in taking time, we get to a much better answer by allowing that process to happen.

I will leave my comments there, because I am sure Mr Moyle has gathered all of his talking points and is ready to answer your very extensive question.

THE CHAIR: I do have follow-up questions on the elected body. If we start with what has happened to implement those recommendations and actions from that specific report, that would be fantastic, given the amount of time that we have.

Ms Orr: Yes; it is only that the two are not unrelated.

THE CHAIR: Of course, yes.

Mr Moyle: Thank you for the question, Mr Emerson. I would like to acknowledge the privilege statement. I am a Kamilaroi-Gomeroi man. In my language, I would like to say:

Welcome in Kamilaroi-Gomeroi Aboriginal language—

That is: "Hello everyone and welcome here." I would like to pay my respects, firstly, to the traditional custodians of the land on which we are meeting today, the Ngunnawal people, and other families that also have ancestral connection. I also pay my respects to

the very large Aboriginal and Torres Islander community that we have here that has actually migrated to the ACT over the past 40 or 50 years and that makes up the community.

The national agreement, as you said, was signed in 2020. Preceding that we also had the ACT agreement in 2019, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Agreement. There has been a lot of criticism, particularly in terms of the Productivity Commission review, or critiquing of governments and the failure to actually transform.

The agreement itself is set up so that there are four priority reforms. The first priority reform is formal partnerships and shared decision-making. I will park that because the elected body is one of the primary mechanisms for that, that we actually have. But I will flag that we are the only jurisdiction to have an actual, democratically elected body. It is under clause 67 of the national agreement. We are also the only jurisdiction to have an independent mechanism, where the elected body can hold government to account through public hearings under the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Elected Body Act 2008.

The second one is developing or building the Aboriginal community-controlled sector as a frontline delivery agent for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander servicing. That is Mr Simpson's remit. The third one is transforming government organisations. There are six transformational elements. The fourth one is shared access to data at a regional level, which allows government to work in partnership with community to inform decisions around policies, programs and services. We also have 17 outcomes and 19 targets. Out of those 19 targets, 17 are relevant and pertinent to the ACT. The two that are not are remote housing and access to sea rights. Everything else is applicable to us.

We have done a lot of work, particularly with the Productivity Commission and the elected body, in terms of a response to the Productivity Commission's report. It was first tabled in February 2024. We worked with the government to secure agreement on implementation prior to a joint council meeting on 5 July and agreed on 15 of those 16 recommendations. We have been working with the elected body and working across directorates.

There are two priority bodies of work under those essential actions that we are actually focusing on. The first one is linked to the ACT agreement, which is phase 3 of the ACT agreement, which is essential action 1.5. 1.5 requires that—I will try and paraphrase exactly what the Productivity Commission said—implementation plans are no longer to be just a laundry list of things that you are already doing. There are some specific conditions in terms of the strategic uplift. We have been working with the elected body to sell that. We have agreement from the elected body to suspend temporarily at phase 3, so that we can negotiate it now, with implementation to commence, according to the agreement with the elected body, from 1 July.

The second primary action that we are looking at in terms of those essential actions is essential action 3.1, which is the development of a transformation strategy. That transformation strategy is focused particularly around the six transformational elements under the actual priority reform 3, but it flows through and shapes the way government works, which will deliver on the other priority reforms.

Through an Aboriginal lens, if you do not mind me sharing, one of the things I quite often say and I hear my elders say is: the journey is more important than the destination. Part of the problem that we faced with the previous National Indigenous Reform Agreement was that well-intentioned bureaucrats across all governments raced headfirst for targets and achieved two out of seven after 12 years.

The intention of the national agreement, particularly from the Coalition of Peaks and our work with the elected body, is fundamentally to transform the way we work. Since July, OATSIA has been working with the cultural transformation branch and the elected body, particularly to design what the framework would look like in order to be able to actually do that. We brought in skilled expertise late last year. The original architect of the 2008 National Indigenous Reform Agreement, who used to head up Indigenous Affairs for the Australian government, worked with key stakeholders across directorates to help us to distil and identify what the framework for that transformation strategy would do, also flowing through to phase 3 of the ACT agreement.

We are now at the point where we are ready to brief government, but we need to make sure that we have all the directors-general and all the directorates' actual agreement to be able to do that. We need to be mindful, as you identified, that we are now almost halfway through a 10-year agreement, and we are required to report against what the ACT has done in May.

Ms Rule: I have read and acknowledge the privilege statement. One of the key points in this work is that it is a whole-of-government effort. We do work across government. At an operational level, there are some great practices being developed in ACT government. In my own directorate, the response to Our Booris, Our Way and the work that has happened in child protection have transformed the way in which we work with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and children. There is still a way to go, but some pretty exciting things are happening.

It is likewise the case in the world of developing the community-controlled sector. I said frequently last year that there are some real green shoots emerging in that sector, but we are actually going beyond that now. There are some community-controlled organisations who are taking over substantial parts of the service system to provide culturally appropriate services in whatever area it may be. We have other great examples, such as the redevelopment of Boomanulla; there is still some work to do around how we manage that going forward. But the facility itself, if you have been out there, is fantastic, and it is increasingly being used by the community for a range of purposes.

We have the bush healing farm. Again, if anyone has been out there, it is a beautiful facility in a fantastic location. Similarly, there are initiatives in the Education Directorate, JACS, Health—across government. The challenge that Brendan has been describing is: how do we roll that all up into a whole-of-government response where we can monitor, track, see real progress, and understand where progress is not being made as quickly as we need it, and therefore be able to target more effort?

Mr Moyle: In addition to that, the transformation strategy requires how we leverage those good-news stories and we systematise, so that they are not just based on project

by project or activity by activity; it actually fundamentally changes the way that the ACT public sector works. A critical component of that, as Catherine identified, is the partnerships with those organisations that are delivering the services, the partnerships with the community to identify and understand what the needs are, so that our policies and programs can respond to those.

THE CHAIR: Going back to the question about the recommendations from the Productivity Commission, you said you are reporting in May. Is that to joint council or to the Productivity Commission? Who are we actually reporting to?

Mr Moyle: We have been required to provide a formal report back to the partnership working group, which is at the senior officer level with the Coalition of Peaks representatives. In June, the minister will be attending the joint council; so there are expectations.

We are seeing an acceleration nationally of a push to ensure that governments are delivering on their commitments. The challenge that we quite often face is, as has been articulated, how we create the right structures and authorising environment to be able to change the way that the public sector works. It is fundamentally about system reform through those key elements.

THE CHAIR: What is the main barrier that you have experienced to undertaking that system reform?

Mr Moyle: I think system reform always takes time. With the transformation elements under the Productivity Commission, I might quickly go through them. I assume that people have already read them. The first one is identifying and eliminating racism and discrimination. That is not just overt racism, as we have seen in periods of time within community. It is the system discrimination. It is unconscious bias. It is the interaction, not just internally in the public sector, but how the public sector engages and provides services to the community.

The second one is very much about embedding and practising meaningful cultural safety. There is a requirement, particularly in terms of how we look at transparency, in terms of funding allocation, which links to proportion of funding distribution. With the Next Steps program, I will defer to Catherine and Anne-Maree to talk about that. It is about strengthening the development and delivery of services in partnership with the community—the community itself, through representatives like the elected body, the community-controlled organisations and individuals. It is about having improved engagement and looking at how we actually embed culture within our service responses. Part of that is a requirement to look through the lens of truth-telling, to understand not just the historical impact but the contemporary impact that is impacting services.

THE CHAIR: You have mentioned a couple of key actions that have been prioritised currently. Sixteen were recommended by the Productivity Commission and 15 were agreed. What is your sense of how many of those 15 will be delivered by the time we report in May?

Ms Orr: That is asking for an opinion, which—

THE CHAIR: How many of those have been delivered now?

Ms Rule: We are in the process of preparing for government a report against those priority actions. We will work with government on what that report looks like. It will be published at the point in time, but the report is not finalised yet.

THE CHAIR: So, it is three months away, on my read. Can the Office for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs provide an indication of how many of those actions have been completed at this point in time, separate to—

Ms Rule: As I said, we are working through providing advice to government on that. I do not think we are going to pre-empt that advice to government in this committee hearing today.

THE CHAIR: I think that is relevant to the hearing of the committee. I am not asking you to pre-empt what will happen in May. I am asking, at this point in time, on 12 February, which of those 15 actions—

Ms Rule: But we are preparing reporting for the time in which we are required to report, which is not right now, so I do not think it is reasonable to speculate on what that reporting might look like in May.

THE CHAIR: No, I am not asking that. I am asking what we are up to now.

Ms Rule: It is government's report, so it is not a report of the directorate. It is the report of the government, because it is government's commitment under Closing the Gap, not the directorate's, so it needs to go to government for government to make those decisions and provide that report when it is finalised.

THE CHAIR: That is okay. I look forward to seeing the report in May, but at this point in time, how many of those actions have been completed?

Ms Rule: I think I have answered the question, Mr Emerson.

THE CHAIR: No, I do not think you have. You have said that you do not want to pre-empt the report.

Ms Rule: I have answered the question as far as I can answer the question in the hearing today.

THE CHAIR: Would you like to take on notice how many of the 15 agreed actions have been completed?

Ms Rule: I have said already, Mr Emerson, that the report is government's report. When the report is finalised, the report will be made public.

THE CHAIR: Do you have any confidence that we will uphold our end of the national agreement on the current trajectory?

Ms Rule: Again, you are asking us for opinion. It is not our job to have confidence. We are not going to be drawn on opinion on those kinds of matters. There is a formal reporting process that we will see through.

THE CHAIR: Okay, I am happy to—well, I am not happy to leave that, but I will. We are five years into the national agreement; I am struggling to get an answer on the review of that agreement, a three-year review, and whether we will respond to the actions of that review. Separate to that question, on the 10-year agreement, we are five years through: are we on the right trajectory?

Mr Moyle: The ACT government has agreed all of the actions, and as a public service we are required to actually deliver on those. There will be an additional review that is currently being developed, which is the Indigenous or First Nations-led review, which is due this year as well. It will sit alongside the Productivity Commission review. It draws on the lived experience of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, and we are likely to see more recommendations from that, which the joint council will need to consider later this year.

THE CHAIR: That is the national review, is it?

Mr Moyle: That is the national review. It is being held here in the ACT. The Office for Aboriginal Torres Strait Islander Affairs is one of the few jurisdictions that has been working with the design team across the Coalition of Peaks. The elected body is participating within that to support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people with lived experience, whether that be through ACCOs or service recipients, to be part of that process as well and to be able to put forward the views in terms of the intersections with the ACT government.

THE CHAIR: One final supplementary question on this line is about the 17 socio-economic outcomes that you mentioned earlier. The four priority reforms in the agreement were obviously intended to help improve these outcomes. I take your point, which I think is a really important one, that just focusing on outcomes is not the point of the agreement, but in some respects, of course, it is.

Mr Moyle: Absolutely.

THE CHAIR: And in the ACT, we know, for instance, racial prejudice experienced or reported by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in the ACT, according to the Productivity Commission, is the highest in the country. And we have other metrics where we are not doing a great job. So, of those 17 SEOs, the socio-economic outcomes, how are we tracking in the ACT?

Mr Moyle: We are doing better in some. You highlighted some that we need some development on. Education, as an example, we are doing much better on. Part of the challenge remains, though, quality of data capture. The Productivity Commission is working with all jurisdictions so that when you look at the 17 outcomes, there are headline statistics, and then there are indicators under each of those. Late last year, the Productivity Commission issued their updated PDR, which is a version of the dashboard, which starts to interrogate those. So, for example, with education, it is not just about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people where children are finishing year

12 or equivalent, it is also NAPLAN results of years 3, 5, 7 and 9 and school participation and attendance. So as that builds out, our reporting requirements will build out and grow as well, and that will give a much richer data capture in working with the elected body and with the ACCOs to be able to further refine and target services.

THE CHAIR: Do you have any concern that—

MR HANSON: Chair, can I just make the point that you said that was going to be your last supplementary question. We are 22 minutes into a one-hour hearing, and you have taken all the time. I think your questioning is good, by the way, but there are five members of this committee and a visiting MLA. Can I draw that to your attention?

THE CHAIR: Yes, thank you, Mr Hanson. I did signal before that I have an extended line of inquiry at the beginning and will then hand over. Finally, do you have any concern that with the national agreement—and it sounds like we are putting in place infrastructure to deal with the agreement—we are halfway through, and we will get to the end of that agreement and be ready to start delivering on it but not have delivered with respect to tracking these outcomes?

Ms Rule: That is several years away, so I think you are asking us to offer a view on what might happen in the future. Mr Moyle has outlined all the work that is underway, and the commitments that have been made, but I do not think we are in a position to speculate on what that might look like in a number of years time.

THE CHAIR: Are we halfway through the agreement where we want to be halfway through the agreement?

Ms Rule: Again, you are asking us for an opinion. It does not matter what we want—we, as officials, in this instance. Government has made commitments under Closing the Gap and has agreed to a certain number of things under the framework that attaches to Closing the Cap. We are doing the work to implement those commitments that government has made.

THE CHAIR: Yes. I guess the question is whether we are actually implementing them, but I am happy to pass on to Ms Barry.

MS BARRY: I understand your frustration, obviously, especially considering that this is a committee, and we are here to do the best job that we can for the committee in that we represent—

Ms Rule: And so am I. I am honestly not trying to frustrate the committee, but our role as public servants is not to speculate on what might happen in the future or to offer opinions on how we are going. We can talk to you about facts and figures. We can talk to you about the things that we have done. But our role is to advise government. Our role is not to sit in committees and provide opinion. I am really happy to help the committee with whatever we can in terms of facts, figures and information on what we have done, but it is not reasonable to draw public servants into offering opinion.

THE CHAIR: I think the line of inquiry is about whether we are delivering the commitments, and that is not an opinion.

MS BARRY: We have a few questions, so we will just carry on—

MR HANSON: It is about providing advice on the progress, and I do not think that is an opinion.

Ms Rule: Providing advice to government. We have provided advice in terms of the reporting that is already underway on Closing the Gap—where we are up to and where the numbers have been met, and some of Mr Moyle’s examples have outlined where we have been above and below. We are 100 per cent happy to provide that sort of information to the committee. But then to be drawn on whether we think it is enough or whether we are on track—I am going to give you the facts and figures but not be in a position to discuss—

MR HANSON: Asking you whether you are on track is not a matter of opinion.

Ms Rule: But we are being asked where we are going to be in five years time and asked to speculate on things in the future, so—

THE CHAIR: Let’s go to the next question.

MR BARRY: Let’s proceed. You have talked about Boomanulla Oval and the Ngunnawal Bush Healing Farm. I understand that there is an agreement to hand that oval to an Aboriginal community-controlled organisation. How is that progressing, and what are the impediments to that happening?

Ms Orr: Ms Barry, this is obviously an area that is very important to the community. I have met with a number of people who have identified that as a key priority. It is one of those areas that would sit across portfolios, so while relevant to this portfolio, it is not necessarily entirely operationalised by us. I might just get the officials to talk you through what they can and then maybe point you in the direction of where to ask other questions.

MS BARRY: That would be useful; thank you.

Ms Rule: To make some opening comments about Boomanulla—you have asked, I think, about Boomanulla and the Bush Healing Farm?

MS BARRY: That is correct.

Ms Rule: Okay, so let’s deal with those separately. Boomanulla, at the moment, is managed by our colleagues in Transport Canberra and City Services. In terms of the amenity of Boomanulla, if you like—that the grass is mowed, that it is clean, that it is safe, that the lights are fixed, and all of that sort of stuff—those operational things are, at this point in time, managed by Transport Canberra and City Services.

Government has committed to handing Boomanulla over to community control. What we are working through now with the elected body is: what does that look like? There is not an existing entity that we can easily just hand it over to. We have got to find somebody who can take on the management of Boomanulla that the community is

happy with—for that group of individuals to take over the management of Boomanulla. We have to sort out the finances. At the moment, the ACT government pays for the water and the rates and all of the things that go into maintaining that facility, so all of those details have to be worked through. It is absolutely on the work program with the elected body to make that commitment happen, but we can only move at the pace that the community and the elected body are able to move at.

MS BARRY: Have you identified the community organisation you can hand that facility over to? And are you doing any capacity building? Obviously, this is an issue that has been on the table for a while. Are you doing any capacity building to make sure that, for all these things you have identified, the community organisation is ready?

Mr Moyle: There is no individual community organisation. There are a number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled organisations that have identified, over an extended period of time, their plans for it. The work that we are currently doing with the elected body is to, firstly, implement a community oversight committee and to develop the proposal for that. The actual management will be overseen by the community itself. Certainly, some early conversations we have had. That would capture not just members of the elected body. Boomanulla's history and legacy goes back decades and generations, so we want to be able to develop a framework that allows some of the people that may be newer to Canberra and some of those people that have some of that legacy attachment to Boomanulla to be part of that decision-making process.

We have had conversations with TCCS as well around lease mechanisms, because the cost effectiveness of running the actual oval itself is not sustainable. The next step beyond that community oversight committee really needs to be how we then negotiate what roles the ACT government continues to put in in terms of investment—as Catherine was saying, the mowing of the lawns and making sure that the infrastructure is looked after—and what the community retains comprehensive control of.

There is a significant increase and uptake. Just today I was there, this morning, before coming over. We have the elected body meeting over there, and we also have Aboriginal youth groups in the demountable, so we are seeing an increase in terms of participation and the use of it. We have seen the NAIDOC committee start to use it for their official flag-raising ceremonies for the NAIDOC family days. We are actually starting to see that in terms of revitalisation. The challenge remains, though, trying to do it in an equitable way, noting that so many different stakeholders have such passion and commitment around Boomanulla and divergent views about what it should actually look like.

MS BARRY: Correct me if I am wrong, but hasn't this been going on for 10 years or so?

Mr Moyle: I believe it has, yes.

MS BARRY: What would it take to get us there?

Mr Moyle: I think that this next step—actually having a group that can govern the administration and provide strategic oversight in terms of how it works and what those

next steps actually are—will be absolutely critical. In the last term of the elected body, they had some community consultations on what that should look like. The elected body have come to the ACT government with that, and this is the proposal that we are working on now.

The elected body, to their credit, recognised that they should not have sole custodianship, because of those diverse views, so they want to look at how they draw everyone in. I cannot speak on behalf of the elected body; certainly, that is the conversation that I have had.

MS BARRY: I am anticipating that would also include capacity building?

Mr Moyle: Correct.

MS BARRY: That consultation would include capacity building, so that the—

Ms Orr: Everything that Mr Moyle has outlined indicates a level of capacity building with the community, for them to have community ownership. Mr Simpson can provide a little bit more information, so I might pass over to him.

MS BARRY: I think Mr Moyle has provided enough information. I would love to go on to the Ngunnawal Bush Healing Farm.

Ms Rule: Again, I will pass to Mr Simpson, to give some detail. Firstly, I note that the Ngunnawal Bush Healing Farm is managed by the Health Directorate. Accountability, funding and decision-making around the bush healing farm sit with Minister Stephen-Smith and the Health Directorate. Mr Simpson can provide a little bit of background on the work that we are doing through the Aboriginal service development branch with the Health Directorate on the bush healing farm.

MS BARRY: Where is that up to? What is holding up the handover to a First Nations organisation?

Mr Simpson: I have read and acknowledge the privilege statement. I am a proud Waka Waka man. I would also like to acknowledge the traditional custodians of the lands on which we meet here today, the Ngunnawal people, and respect elders past and present.

In regard to the support mechanisms, we have been working very closely with our Health Directorate colleagues and partners, particularly around community organisations and community members that are coming together to be part of a delivery mechanism for that. Each community-controlled organisation starts at a different point in time, and those support mechanisms are available.

With the formal ones, we are establishing the ACCO Establishment and Expansion Fund, which is \$3.86 million over four years, which helps organisations, new and emerging, to build capability and support them to be able to deliver against those, whether it be governance mechanisms, doing five-year plans or ensuring that they have the right regulatory registrations in process. There is investment that will be able to be provided there.

We are working with an organisation around the Office of the Registrar of Indigenous Corporations' registrations with the ACNC, for their charitable donations. There are a lot of frameworks to move through there.

We utilise clause 44 of the Closing the Gap agreement on what a community-controlled organisation is. There are some key markers there, such as an Aboriginal community board, having ACNC registration and serving those communities from there. We are working closely with those and working with members of a new and emerging community-controlled organisation whose aspirations are to deliver services within the Ngunnawal Bush Healing Farm. We have had joint meetings with our Health Directorate colleagues to land a pathway forward from there.

As part of that, we have also engaged subject matter experts from external jurisdictions, in order to have their expertise. It is about how we make sure that they work within the ACT. They are providing advice and baseline things regarding what worked for their organisation. It is a very successful organisation in New South Wales.

MS BARRY: It is comforting to hear that there is some funding going towards capacity building. That is useful to know. I understand that there is a lot of work to be done, but is there a time line for when this will be delivered?

Mr Simpson: I do not want to speak on behalf of my Health colleagues, but we are working very closely with the Health Directorate on making this happen.

MS BARRY: Okay. I will ask the Health Directorate.

MS TOUGH: My question is about the Gugan Gulwan Youth Aboriginal Corporation in Erindale. I am interested in finding out when we expect to see the opening of that new building, and how it will support the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community in the ACT and in Tuggeranong.

Ms Orr: I might hand over to Ms Rule on this. Without pre-empting what she will say, she might tell you that it sits across a few areas.

MS TOUGH: Yes, of course.

Ms Orr: She can tell you what she can help you out with.

Ms Rule: We can help you out with this one, probably from whoa to go. The building is very close to completion. The completion date will be next month. There are a few remedial works that have had to happen. There are always a few last-minute issues. There was an issue with some damage to the building that has had to be repaired. We are very close to being able to hand that over to Gugan.

I have been out there a couple of times. It is an amazing building. It is a really beautiful space, with lots of natural light. Some innovative building techniques have been used. There are lots of curved surfaces. It is not a square building. There are lots of curves, lots of light and lots of natural spaces. Certainly, when you talk to the staff at Gugan, they are so enthusiastic about the opportunity to get into that building and to be able to use it for the work that they do with young people and their families. Also, they will

have a bigger footprint on which they can expand and be a bit more innovative.

They are putting in a recording studio and some of those types of things that have offered great programs to the young people that they engage with. I think that they are pretty enthusiastic. Brendan can probably offer a little bit more about what we see Gugan being able to do from that site, once it is available to them in the next month or so.

Mr Moyle: Absolutely. I might start by acknowledging Gugan Gulwan, and Kim Davison and Dennis Davison, who started it. Gugan Gulwan started over 30 years ago. The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community has grown significantly since that time, so the original building was no longer fit for purpose.

The handover, as Ms Rule said, is due imminently, in March. I would have to check, but we are in the process of settling the lease, a 10-year peppercorn lease, with them, to give them security of tenure, with an option to renew.

Certainly, with the programs they offer, they offer art programs, school-based programs for young people and families. As Ms Rule said, they offer music programs. They have a recording studio. I know that there are conversations that OATSIA, the Office for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs, are having with them, to connect some of these opportunities, particularly with the Reconciliation Day that is due on 2 June.

It will allow for a significant expansion of their programs, particularly in response to not just how the community has grown over the last 30 years, but to what the forecast in growth is likely to be over the next 20 to 30 years. We are seeing growth rates across the ACT community of about 20 to 30 per cent.

Ms Rule: In terms of why we can deal with this question and not some of the others that have been asked, this program is within the responsibility of the Community Services Directorate. It is with children, youth and families, which is my responsibility, as opposed to Boomanulla or the bush healing farm.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander affairs is one of those areas where the directorate has a coordinating role across government on some of the bigger picture things. Also, we have a bit that falls within our purview, in terms of what we are responsible for delivering. That is why we could help a bit more with this, as opposed to some of the other questions.

MS BARRY: Would you be able to tell me the final cost of the building, or would that be Treasury?

Mr Moyle: At this point, until the actual construction has been completed, we would not be able to give that level of information. A total of \$19,017,000 was allocated. That is off the top of my head. That was for the design, the demolition of the old building and the construction of a new building.

We are still operating within contingency funds. We have a contingency budget there. It is looking as though it will come in under budget, which is fantastic, in terms of the administration and management work that has gone in. But once the building has been

completed, at the next hearings, we will be able to provide a more accurate figure on that.

MS BARRY: What is the capacity of the building?

Mr Moyle: I could not tell you exactly what the capacity of the building is. If anyone has seen it, it is quite a large building, with a lot of open spaces. We would need to get confirmation in terms of what the fire loading would permit there. It is a very large building with a lot of floor space.

Ms Orr: Ms Barry, is it the capacity, or are you asking about the services that can be delivered from there?

MS BARRY: I would love to know what services will be delivered.

Ms Orr: We can give you the fire loading. I am sure Mr Moyle will happily find that out for you, if that is of interest to you, but I am not sure that that is quite what you were after.

Ms Rule: As Mr Moyle has outlined, we are in negotiations with Gugan at the moment about the lease arrangements. Effectively, we then hand the building over to them and they decide how they use it, in terms of the number of staff. For organisations like that, their staffing capacity expands and contracts in any given year, depending on what funding they get from a range of sources. They will deliver whatever programs out of there that they are funded for and that they have the capacity for.

Some of that funding comes from ACT government, but some of it comes from other sources. It is really up to Gugan to use that building as they see fit to deliver the services. It is an investment from ACT government to provide a place for Gugan, because we know that, with the work that we are doing on developing the capacity of the Aboriginal community-controlled sector, part of what they need is places to deliver those services.

There are a number of instances where we have arrangements with ACCOs around property, and this is one of those. Essentially, it is their building, under lease, that they will use as they see fit.

MS BARRY: Thank you; that is useful.

MS TOUGH: I wanted to ask about different services. You mentioned the music recording studio. Is there anything else like that on the site?

Ms Rule: Gugan Gulwan's target audience, if you like—client group—is children and youth and their families. I will ask Ms Sabellico or Mr Simpson to talk a little bit more about some of those programs.

Ms Sabellico: I have read and acknowledge the privilege statement. It just so happens that yesterday afternoon we were out at Gugan, having a conversation with the team about some of the programs that they are running. They provide some intensive family support services. They also work broadly with young people, and young people that are within the youth justice area. All of their programs are targeted towards being able to

support children and young people to be sustained with their families at home, and provide the in-home support and other services to ensure that they are able to function as a family unit.

With adolescents, they have a reconnect program that they implement in terms of working with young people and families to ensure that they remain together when there is friction, when kids become adolescents.

They provide a service jointly with a non-Aboriginal organisation, which is a functional family therapy program. It is a particular accredited service. They do drug and alcohol counselling and support. It is a wide-ranging service that they offer and, regardless of where they are funded from, they deliver on whatever the families' needs are. It is a gold-standard service provision.

MR RATTENBURY: Are you monitoring the rollout of First Nations ranger positions across the ACT government in the oversight and coordination role you have?

Ms Rule: No. I think that is under EPSDD.

Ms Orr: It is under EPSDD. Luckily, Mr Rattenbury, it is coming up on Friday, and I have a feeling you will be at that hearing.

MR RATTENBURY: Yes. I was interested from an OATSIA point of view whether you have any line of sight on how that is going from a cultural point of view.

Ms Rule: I have not heard any issues raised around that piece of work. When it comes to whole-of-government reporting around the Elected Body agreement and Closing the Gap, we seek input from other directorates. I do not have anything contemporary on any issues that might exist around the rangers.

Ms Orr: It is probably best put to the environment directorate and Parks and Conservation.

MR RATTENBURY: No problem. Following on from that, do you have any input into joint management of Namadgi National Park and where that is up to?

Ms Orr: Noting I am the minister for both areas, Mr Rattenbury—

MR RATTENBURY: You can prepare well for Friday, Minister Orr.

Ms Orr: thank you for giving me test questions in advance. That is one we will be able to help with on Friday, noting that the operation of Parks and Cons actually goes to Minister Cheyne. We will see exactly where we get to and how helpful I can be at the time. We will do what we can to help you with that, Mr Rattenbury, in another session.

MISS NUTTALL: This is about Aboriginal community controlled housing. I hope this is the right session.

Ms Orr: Maybe.

MISS NUTTALL: What work is on foot to support the growth of Aboriginal community controlled housing?

Mr Simpson: We are working with our community controlled sector on that. A year ago, we had one registered NRSCH—National Regulatory System for Community Housing—provider. We now have three community controlled organisations registered to deliver Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander housing, or community housing. As part of that, we work very closely with the Coordinator-General for Housing to provide opportunities for our community-controlled sector. Just recently, the Indicative Land Release program was launched and was heavily weighted to community controlled organisations to provide responses—ACCO-led applications. The Aboriginal Service Development branch provided a concierge service for our ACCOs to ensure that they were putting their best foot forward and seeking those particular opportunities. I am very pleased to advise that we did receive applications from our ACCO sector for partnerships for both Indicative Land Release Programs, and I look forward to seeing the outcomes from that. It was heavily weighted for the community controlled sector.

We are also working with the ACT Housing office with regard to opportunities. In November and October last year, we did an approach-to-market for First Nations housing solutions as part of the grants program. That was only open to Aboriginal community controlled organisations or a consortia that was led by an ACCO. I am very happy to say a partnership was successful to deliver that. That was through Yerrabi Yurwang, as a NRSCH provider, and Marymead CatholicCare. They will provide that together with their memorandum of understanding and learnings to ensure that they are delivering housing solutions for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people that are trauma aware and healing informed. I say “trauma aware and healing informed” because that is based on the Stolen Generation application.

Some great work is moving forward from that. We are also seeking opportunities around other developments when it comes to community housing or housing solutions. We work with our sector, and our sector tells us that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander housing consists of homelessness to home ownership and everything between.

Ms Orr: I would add to that by saying that this is a really good example of how OATSIA is working across government to embed the priorities and get the focus and cultural shift that we are looking at. As we have had a lot of discussions about what it is, there is a good tangible example we can point to.

MISS NUTTALL: I have a quick supplementary. Has any work been done to support Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander housing officers and managers in the public housing space? I have chatted to a couple of constituents who previously enjoyed that support and are interested in where it is up to.

Ms Rule: That is a slightly separate question that I can answer in my role as the Public Housing Commissioner. We have Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff in Housing ACT who have roles associated with supporting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander clients in public housing. We would like there to be more. The war on talent for Aboriginal staff is very hot, so, while we have worked hard in the whole of CSD to increase the number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff in the directorate, it can be hard to keep the staff all the time. As at December, about 6.4 per cent of all CSD

staff are Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander, which is well above the target for the ACT public service. We have a number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff within Housing ACT who work with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander clients, but, as with any staff group, there is some turnover. The number can go up and down at times.

MISS NUTTALL: Just to clarify, are those formally identified positions or—

Ms Rule: There is a mix across the directorate. I do not have the numbers for Housing broken down in front of me, but across the directorate we have—I am adding the numbers up in my head, which is dangerous—60 identified positions in different parts of the directorate. Some of those are in Housing, but, right now, I just cannot lay my hands on the number that are in Housing across all of our program areas.

MISS NUTTALL: Thank you.

MR RATTENBURY: I have a very quick supplementary on the ACCOs. You have provided great news. Does the agency have any programs in place to support mechanisms to help with the governance of those organisations? Historically, we have seen a few struggle. Are you taking deliberate steps to help maximise that? Let's not go to the organisations, because I do not know exactly who they are, but is there a systemic approach?

Ms Orr: I think I understand the spirit in which you are asking the question: is help to develop that sector ongoing? It is not about just saying, "If we are talking about targets, we have established this many ACCOs—tick," and then they all fall over and suddenly we have none. It is about how you measure it as opposed to how you actually get sustained change. I think that is the point that your question goes to.

MR RATTENBURY: Yes. Thank you.

Ms Orr: I dare say that Ms Rule, Ms Sabellico or Mr Simpson, and perhaps even Mr Moyle, might be able to assist.

Ms Rule: The answer is yes. The feedback we got from ACCOs was that they would get funding for a particular program, but what they actually needed was support to recruit staff, train staff, manage their governance and seek property—all of those things. That is entirely the work of the Aboriginal Service Development branch and the fund that is now available to them to build capacity in the sector. One of the things that we do within that work is help Aboriginal community controlled organisations through governance programs. There are various programs that people have attended to help strengthen that aspect of their business to allow them to get set up properly and be sustainable. That is really what we are seeking to do: build that capacity so that, when they get funding to do a particular thing, they have all the foundations that they need to run an organisation.

MR RATTENBURY: Thank you.

MS BARRY: Minister, my question is around human rights abuses in Bimberi. You probably read the Official Visitors report and the Custodial Inspector report. There have been significant concerning reports about human rights abuses in Bimberi. What

practical solutions have you taken to date to ensure that the issue is being managed?

Ms Orr: The operation of Bimberi does not sit with me. I think the question is best directed to the responsible minister. I think Ms Rule is more than happy help you—because it sits within the directorate—with where to best direct the question.

Ms Rule: It is the responsibility of Minister Pettersson, and—

MS BARRY: I understand that, but you know that First Nations children are over-represented in Bimberi, so I think that, as the minister responsible, there needs to be some action on your end, considering that the people who are most affected are First Nations children.

Ms Orr: Ms Barry, your question was about actions within Bimberi, and, as I said, the operations of Bimberi do not sit under me. If your question is around the priority reforms of Closing the Gap, where it goes to improving the rate of over-representation, so that we have less over-representation, that is potentially something that we can talk to. The specifics on Bimberi, though, sit with Mr Pettersson. I think Ms Rule has a bit more to add.

Ms Rule: Yes. That is next Tuesday, with Minister Pettersson for the Children, Youth and Families hearing. Bimberi and its operations, whilst the responsibility of this directorate, are under Minister Pettersson.

MS BARRY: If I understand correctly, Minister, what you are saying is that you have no responsibility to do something about the human rights abuses of First Nations children.

Ms Orr: Ms Barry, regarding the part that is potentially where the two lines of communication are not joining up, as the minister responsible for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander affairs, I have a responsibility to work with all my colleagues across government to implement the commitments and agreements that we have signed up to. That does not mean that I operationalise every part of that. It will go to the ministers within particular portfolio areas and their remits. I think that is correct, because what we are hoping to do through these changes is drive change across the whole of the government, not just one area. It has to be an activity of everybody, not just one person.

To answer your question, I will continue to work with my colleagues, and we will all implement these reforms. As to the specifics of certain parts, the decisions and the responsibilities will sit with different ministers, as we have discussed throughout the whole hearing.

THE CHAIR: Perhaps the question could be: what is currently being done to address—

MS BARRY: Thank you very much. What is currently being done to address the over-representation of First Nations children? What action has been taken to date?

Ms Orr: Across a number of portfolios, there is a range of measures. Ms Rule, with your knowledge, as someone who wears a lot of hats, not necessarily just the one hat for this portfolio, maybe you can help Ms Barry with a little bit of an overview and

perhaps point her in the direction of where she can ask the right questions.

Ms Rule: Many of these issues fall into the Children, Youth and Families portfolio, but I will make some broad comments. There are a number of initiatives across the ACT government that are aimed at reducing over-representation of young people, particularly in the youth justice system but also in child protection and the out-of-home-care system. In the first instance, around youth justice, there are a couple of major things. We are the first jurisdiction to lift the minimum age of criminal responsibility. The age is now 12, and, in July this year, we will move to 14, which means the age at which children can go into Bimberi is higher, and that will be the highest in the country.

It has not just been a matter of lifting the age; it has actually also been about the service system that exists for children who previously may have found themselves in Bimberi. What are the therapeutic interventions that we are undertaking with those children to make sure that we try to intervene as early as possible when there are problematic behaviours? We have a therapeutic support panel and some money attached to that which works intensively with young people who are on the fringes of the youth justice system—that is, children who are aged under the minimum age of criminal responsibility, but also children who are aged over the age of criminal responsibility. It is a significant step. Again, that sits within the Children, Youth and Families portfolio. We can talk to you more about that in that hearing.

In terms of early intervention around the child protection system, again, it sits in the portfolio of Children, Youth and Families, but the initiative is outlined in the *Our Booris, Our Way* report and the Next Steps policy agenda, which lays out the work that we are doing to change the way in which child protection happens for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families. There is increasing use of community controlled organisations to work with those families. There are a number of specific programs around early intervention and family preservation. A whole range of things is happening that we are very happy to talk about in more detail on Tuesday.

MS BARRY: Thank you. A community member has sent me an ad by CSD for an unqualified and inexperienced youth worker position. The ad said, “Youth worker required. No experience required.” Do you think that is an appropriate ad, considering the complexities?

Ms Rule: That is because we train those people. Again, this is a question for Tuesday. There is a very intensive training program for youth workers that work in Bimberi before they actually work with any of the young people who are in our care in Bimberi. The work is hard, so recruiting and retaining staff in that environment is difficult. This has been a good strategy for us to get people who are interested in youth work as a career but may not think about that in the context of youth justice; they may think more about the community sector. It attracts people into that work. The same ad mentions that we will give people comprehensive training, which we do. Many of the staff will go through that training program, work for a period of time in Bimberi, and then they may do youth work in other parts of the sector. It is one of many recruitment strategies to try to attract and retain staff in Bimberi. It is a very thorough training program.

THE CHAIR: I will ask a final question about the Elected Body hearings. Has the government prepared and made public—I might have missed it—its response to the

2024 Elected Body hearings report?

Mr Simpson: Yes. I can confirm that is correct. It was tabled in the Legislative Assembly and published. We are working with the Elected Body in terms of the delivery of the agreed government position.

THE CHAIR: Are updates provided on the delivery of those outcomes?

Mr Simpson: Not formally. We usually try to wrap them up with delivery against the annual report on Closing the Gap and the impact statement. The annual report on Closing the Gap is currently under development. We anticipate having that for government decision by May and the impact statement by June. We make sure that we capture that.

THE CHAIR: Just for reference for next time—I think the hearings are in August—when was the response delivered?

Mr Simpson: Under the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Elected Body Act, the Elected Body has essentially four months to provide a copy of the report to government and provide it to the minister. The minister is then required to table it in the Legislative Assembly. The minister has four months to actually provide a formal government response, from the time that they receive the report itself. That needs to go through the development of what the ACT government position is through the bureaucracy and then must be agreed by cabinet before it is actually tabled. It comes down to cross-directorate and cross-portfolio responsibility. It is not something that just the minister agrees; it is something that the actual government agrees.

THE CHAIR: To confirm: has the government response to that report been provided?

Mr Simpson: Yes. The government response was provided about two weeks before caretaker mode. Given the tight time frames, the Elected Body and the secretariat did an amazing job in pulling together—

THE CHAIR: Really quickly.

Mr Simpson: Absolutely. It took about eight weeks or nine weeks to get their report done. That was tabled and provided to the former minister on Reconciliation Day, in late May last year, and then the government developed and provided a response to that before going into caretaker mode.

THE CHAIR: Thank you, everyone. We want the ACT to be a beacon for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. People on the other side of the table do as well. The way that we do that is by holding ourselves and each other to account. I think it is fantastic that we have this opportunity to do that. I thank you for your attendance today and for the evidence that you have provided. 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 so much for being here.

The committee suspended from 12.22 to 4.20 pm.

Appearances:

Pettersson, Mr Michael, Minister for Business, Arts and Creative Industries, Minister for Children, Youth and Families, Minister for Multicultural Affairs and Minister for Skills, Training and Industrial Relations

Community Services Directorate

Rule, Ms Catherine, Director-General

Perkins, Ms Anita, Executive Group Manager, Inclusion Division

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

THE CHAIR: Welcome back to the public hearings for 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 Multicultural Affairs. The proceedings today are being recorded and transcribed by Hansard and will be published. The proceedings are also being broadcast and web streamed live. When taking a question on notice, it would be useful if witnesses used the words, “I will take that question on notice,” which will help the committee and witnesses confirm questions taken on notice from the transcript.

We welcome Mr Michael Pettersson MLA, Minister for Multicultural Affairs, 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. Please remember that witnesses must tell the truth, and that 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.

Let us proceed to questions. I have a question about venue access for our multicultural community. Canberra’s multicultural community has advocated for an event space suitable to host major multicultural events for some years, as you would know. I understand that, in the 2020 parliamentary agreement, a large new purpose-built venue was promised. This has been scaled down to a refurbishment of Fitzroy Pavilion at Epic. Understanding that some of those decisions are outside of your remit, is it your understanding that the planned use of this facility is limited to multicultural organisations and the multicultural community?

Ms Rule: That is not within the multicultural affairs portfolio.

THE CHAIR: Would you mind confirming that you have read and understand the privilege statement.

Ms Rule: Sorry. I have read and acknowledge the privilege statement. Ms Perkins might remember which directorate it belongs to, but it is not within the multicultural affairs portfolio.

Ms Perkins: I have read and acknowledge the privilege statement. We work closely with our colleagues in Venues Canberra, within the Chief Minister’s directorate, who are responsible for the Epic facility and Fitzroy in particular. We worked really closely with Venues Canberra during the consultation process and as that project was being

scoped up and the refurbishment of the project. While they have responsibility for the ongoing management, I can say that preference is given to multicultural bookings and community groups as part of the booking process for that venue.

THE CHAIR: Have you heard concerns from our multicultural community about affordability, especially when there are lots of guests for events like big weddings and so on?

Ms Perkins: We certainly heard through the consultation process that there were concerns in general about availability of venues, affordability and about having access to a range of venues for different sized events. What Venues Canberra has done through that process, and continues to do, is provide information and accessibility about the range of community venues that are available but also the community rated that are available to groups.

THE CHAIR: Have you heard concerns about whether this particular venue will be fit for purpose? I know it has a lengthy process and there has been quite a lot of consultation. I have certainly heard from people who are concerned that it still will not be able to host some of the events that people are keen to host in Canberra. Have you heard those concerns, and are we making any sorts of representations around future facilities?

Ms Perkins: What I would say is that we are not continuing to hear those concerns at the moment. The venue is operational. The venue started taking bookings from November of last year or October of last year, and it is being used for a range of purposes, both for small-scale events and large-scale events.

THE CHAIR: I am not going to ask you about utilisation rates. That would be a question for Venues. Thank you.

MS BARRY: Thank you again for being here, especially Catherine. It has been a long day for you. I am interested in the implementation of the Multiculturalism Act. I want to know, Minister, what you have done to implement the Multiculturalism Act across the public service. I have a few follow-ups but I will start with that.

Mr Pettersson: Can you provide some more context?

MS BARRY: Ensuring that the directorates fully implement the Multiculturalism Act.

Ms Rule: The Multiculturalism Act was enacted in 2023. Noting the minister's relatively short time in the portfolio, perhaps Ms Akhter can give a bit of an overview of some of the activities that have happened since the act came into effect to implement it.

Ms Akhter: Thank you, Catherine. I have read and understand and acknowledge the privilege statement.

The Multiculturalism Act came into effect in February 2023. The legislation requires a number of areas that we implement. One of the key areas of the legislation is to enshrine the Charter for Multiculturalism and then establish a ministerial advisory committee for

multiculturalism to advise the minister. It also requires that all ACT government directorates continue to report annually on their activities, which include how they have promoted multiculturalism, how they have applied the principles in the Charter for Multiculturalism, how they have developed, applied and reviewed their policies, programs and services in a way that promotes multiculturalism, how they have consulted with the Ministerial Advisory Council for Multiculturalism and other administration units, statutory agencies and the ACT community about how they can promote multiculturalism, and comments received from those consultations that are carried out and how they have been responded to must also be reported. The agencies will also have to ensure that people in the ACT community, regardless of their diversity, have effective and equitable access to information, programs and services provided by the directorate.

We have implemented these reporting requirements via the annual report mechanism. That was established last year, and all directorates have started reporting as part of their annual reporting. So you would start seeing those reports as part of the annual reports. But, obviously, CSD has its own remit where we would have reported. Every directorate will report through their own annual reports.

MS BARRY: How much, if any, is committed to the implementation of the act? Is there any funding committed to its implementation?

Ms Akhter: There was funding committed a number of years ago, in the 2021-22 budget. I do not have the number in front of me, but obviously that is not relevant for the annual report, which is for 2023-24. It was before then.

Ms Rule: We do have money out of our core funding that goes to the multicultural affairs portfolio. We have a team that supports the activities in the multiculturalism portfolio, including the work of overseeing the act. So there are a number of staff who work on this amongst other things related to the government's multiculturalism agenda.

Ms Akhter: I do have the number in front of me. Overall, the government has invested \$485,000 to date to consult, develop and design the act. Obviously, the implementation is CSD's responsibility, and we are doing that within our existing resources.

MS BARRY: So it gets absorbed into CSD's resources?

Ms Akhter: Correct.

MS BARRY: Is there a plan to have a longer-term strategy to ensure the objectives of the act are sustained beyond the years of implementation? Is there any plan?

Ms Rule: Again, I think we see it as part of our core business of delivering the various initiatives that government has decided on in the multiculturalism space. The work of the Multicultural Ministerial Advisory Council is ongoing, and we work closely with them on what priorities might be. They provide advice to the minister on what some of those priorities might be and what some of the issues are, and they are very good at giving us feedback on things that have been implemented. There is ongoing work through that council and through the multiculturalism team about overseeing the implementation of the act.

MS BARRY: Thank you. It was just information gathering, really.

Ms Rule: No worries; thank you.

MS TOUGH: I am interested to know how much money was spent on the 2024 National Multicultural Festival Grant Program and what that money was predominantly used for?

Mr Pettersson: That is a wonderful question. I will hand over to officials on that one.

Ms Akhter: Thank you for the question. In the 2024 National Multicultural Festival Grant Program we allocated approximately \$200,000. The grant program facilitated community participation at the festival to showcase cultural traditions and heritage and provided a platform to keep multicultural traditions and celebrations alive and relevant. The festival obviously promotes equality, social cohesion and sharing of culture, cultural traditions and customs through music, dance, language, cultural displays, food, and workshops, contributing positively to building a community that respects and celebrates diversity. Of that total funding, we provide \$193,405 to 145 individuals and organisations for activities that support the aim of the grant program.

MS TOUGH: What support was offered to any applicant or smaller community group that might not have been successful for grant funding?

Ms Akhter: The festival operates on the basis of funded performance and activities and also volunteer performers. The groups that were not successful in the program were not able to be provided government funding; however, they were still able to participate as volunteer performers in the program.

MS TOUGH: Wonderful. Thank you.

MS BARRY: I heard from various attendees at the multicultural festival that it is not easily accessible to people with disability and older Australians, or Canberrans. Can you please advise what, if anything, you could do to make that event more accessible, or if you have even considered accessibility for disabled people?

Ms Akhter: I can assure the committee that the festival has been working hard to improve accessibility for all attendees. In the planning for the 2023 and 2024 festival and also for the 2025 festival, we engaged an accessibility consultant to identify and implement strategies to create a more accessible and inclusive festival. This year we also had Dementia Australia conducting an audit of the festival planning and deliver dementia awareness training for public-facing volunteers and staff. We also had a dementia-friendly phone screening, that is just on the side.

A range of accessibility initiatives were implemented during the 2024 festival and some of them were carried through in 2025, and there were more additions to 2025. We had the installation of temporary hard pathways on grassed areas, installation of temporary ramps on kerbs and dedicated accessible drop-off zones on the perimeter of the events side. We had removal, where possible, of ground-based electrical cables which may present a trip hazard; the allocation of additional accessible parking spaces in the

carpark on the corner of Northbourne Avenue and London Circuit; a dedicated quiet space, breastfeeding room and multi-faith prayer room at the Fiona Torres Multicultural Centre; and we also had yoga and meditation for those who needed to rejuvenate through quiet activities and mindfulness. Additionally, we had family-friendly activities and airconditioned spaces were provided in the Civic Library and Canberra Museum and Gallery for patrons with sensory sensitivities. One of the very popular ones that we introduced in 2024, and carried through in 2025, was the silent disco, which was offered in Glebe Park to allow participants to control noise levels and engage in the festival in a less congested environment.

MS BARRY: Were all of these services advertised on your website?

Ms Akhter: Absolutely, yes.

MS BARRY: Thank you. I am sure there would be—

Mr Pettersson: Did you have any specific feedback?

MS BARRY: The feedback was that it was not accessible around Glebe Park. I met a few older people around Glebe Park who said that Glebe Park was not quite accessible to people with disability in a wheelchair. It will be interesting to go back to them with all of these things that you have done.

Ms Akhter: We are in the model of continuous improvement, and I am very happy to take that on board and include that as part of our improvement for accessibility as part of the future festival.

MS BARRY: That is great. Thanks.

MISS NUTTALL: I was happy to hear that we are now at the advanced level in the Welcoming Cities accreditation. I want to check in particular what anti-racism programs we have run in the last year to support that accreditation, or just in general.

Mr Pettersson: I will hand over to officials.

THE CHAIR: Minister, would you mind acknowledging the privilege statement?

Mr Pettersson: I acknowledge the privilege statement.

Ms Akhter: The ACT is an advanced accredited welcoming city, as you have said. In terms of combating racism, that sits across a number of portfolios within the ACT government. I am happy to touch on what we have been doing and talk a little bit about the general policy levers that the ACT government utilises.

Within CSD's responsibility, the key mechanism for us is to administer and implement the Multiculturalism Act, which has the charter for multiculturalism embedded in it. The charter for multiculturalism talks about racism in particular. It talks about a shared responsibility that we all have, not just the government but across community and businesses, to end racism and other forms of unlawful discrimination.

In addition to that, of course, we work very closely with the commonwealth government. They are working to develop and deliver a national anti-racism strategy. At the end of last year, they released a framework. We work very closely. The minister attends the national forum for multicultural ministers, where these matters are discussed.

Finally, within the ACT we have anti-racism and anti-discrimination frameworks, and a positive duty to eliminate discrimination has been introduced into the ACT Discrimination Act, which will commence in stages. From April 2025, the positive duty applies to any ACT government administrative unit, territory authority and territory instrumentality, and any individual with organisational or management responsibility for any of these entities. From April 2027, the positive duty applies to all other people and entities who are duty holders under the Discrimination Act, including service providers, employers, education providers, accommodation providers, health service providers et cetera.

From CSD's point of view, we will continue to strengthen anti-racism and anti-discrimination frameworks by supporting the implementation of the positive duty, in alignment with the ACT Discrimination Act, to protect our multicultural community and promote Canberra as an open, inclusive and welcoming city.

Mr Pettersson: I would identify the largest anti-racism program that exists from the ACT government as the Safe and Supportive Schools program, that is run in our schools. It is not strictly anti-racism, but a large focus of it is discrimination.

MISS NUTTALL: I am glad to hear that that is a big one. I absolutely take your point; I think it is great that we are embedding this in our systems. Would the Office for Multicultural Affairs be responsible for seeing that some of these anti-racism programs are implemented or is that responsibility spread out amongst the directorates? I am wondering whether respective directorates are responsible for implementing anti-racism programs within the public service. Are there particular programs, for example, that you are providing for the community or the community sector? Is that within your remit?

Ms Rule: There are specific programs provided in other parts of the public service or the community sector. Safer Schools is a good example. There are things that other directorates may include in their induction training, for example, around these kinds of issues. Certainly, in the community sector, based on the providers that we work with, we know that this is a part of the training that they deliver for their staff. Some of the funding that we provide would be used for that purpose. But there is not a specific bucket of funding, if you like, around those types of measures.

MISS NUTTALL: Have you had the case brought forward to you that that would be a useful thing to introduce? Have you had feedback that that is useful or necessary?

Mr Pettersson: Yes. In the last Assembly, the Assembly conducted an inquiry into racial vilification, so this is not a new idea that you are raising. It is an important one. I do not think this conversation is going away. There is clearly a lot of work going on at a national level that states and territories are trying to align to. I am hopeful that we will be able to see some movement in this space.

Ms Rule: There is also a leadership role here for the Human Rights Commission. They may be able to describe for you some of the work that they do in this space.

MS BARRY: I have a question around social cohesion. Within the Multiculturalism Act, obviously, one of the pillars is to promote social cohesion. What are you doing in terms of practical solutions, considering the conflicts in Ukraine and Gaza, to promote unity among cultural groups?

Ms Rule: In terms of the work that we do in multiculturalism, we work with communities across the ACT, and at different times different communities have different needs. The Multicultural Festival is a significant event in our landscape about trying to promote the ACT as an accepting, multicultural, harmonious community. It sounds like you had a chance to head out there on the weekend. There is an amazing kind of feel at the event. I think it is a great example of the ACT community at its very best.

We work with the different groups. A feature of the Multicultural Festival is that we always try to make sure that we manage whatever geopolitical tensions might be happening around the world in a responsible way and take into account the needs of the various groups. We are deliberately apolitical in that process, because it is a community-based festival, and we try to be as diverse as possible.

We do think about things like where to locate certain stalls and where performances might be scheduled, so that we are not creating an environment where groups might feel intimidated, where they are going to clash or anything like that. It is very carefully managed, in terms of the Multicultural Festival, and we get very positive feedback from the participants in the festival about that.

More broadly, as I said, we work with different groups at different times, depending on what the needs are. There are not specific things that we have done as a result of the current geopolitical tensions in various parts of the world, but it is something on which we work closely with various groups as we need to. Ms Akhter can add a little bit more.

Ms Akhter: In terms of practical actions and support that we offer to ensure that we maintain social cohesion, obviously, there is the legislative framework that we are bound by, which sets the direction, and the actions under it. Other than that, we have funded services and programs. We have awards, events and grants programs to ensure that communities feel included.

In our Multicultural Inclusion Grant Program, we offer grants for events and activities that promote community participation, cultural diversity and inclusion, and social cohesion is a key theme there. If they can establish that their event is going to support that, they will be successful in attaining grant funding.

The Ministerial Advisory Council for Multiculturalism, under the act, is another mechanism for us to ensure that we have enough intelligence, going through to the broader community, to understand how the community is feeling and what sort of support they are seeking, maybe, because they act as a link between the community and the minister. They can advise the minister directly.

In August last year, the council organised the first community consultation. Under the legislation, they have a requirement. These are the areas that they have discussed with community leaders and participants. They try to understand where the community is at, what support they are looking for and how the minister can provide that support through the ACT government funded programs and activities.

Mr Pettersson: The missing piece here is also the support services that we provide to migrants and refugees, for people that are leaving some of these conflict zones around the world to come to Canberra and call it home. There is a role that the ACT government plays in making them feel included and supported.

MS BARRY: You talked about community consultation in August last year. Are there any outputs for that? Is it something that you can share? Are there common themes coming through, in terms of future programs? Is there any information that you can share?

Ms Akhter: With the outcome of the consultation, the report was provided to the then minister for multiculturalism just before the election and the caretaker period. The council is obliged under that legislation to provide annual reporting to the minister and to inform the minister's annual statement on what progress has been made in the last 12 months. Any outcome of the consultation would inform reporting through the statement.

MS BARRY: You are saying there would be a report that would talk about the outcome of the consultation?

Ms Akhter: There would not be a report as such published. The legislation requires the minister to provide a ministerial statement, which is essentially a form of reporting back to the Assembly on what progress has been made under the legislative requirements. That includes ACT government agencies; it also includes the council's activities.

MS BARRY: So we would expect a ministerial statement on the outcome; thank you. I heard from the Muslim community and the Hindu community about racial slurs around the temples and graffiti. Is there anything being done? Are you working with these communities to ensure that they feel safe in their places of worship?

Mr Pettersson: Very clearly, no-one should be experiencing those things. Every Canberran should feel safe and included in our city, particularly around places of worship. The first port of call, if you are experiencing property damage or witnessing any sort of crime, should definitely be the police. There is a role for the Human Rights Commission, if you feel that you have been discriminated against. I would be curious to know whether those avenues have been pursued in these instances. If not—

MS BARRY: Let me take a step back. Have you heard about the vandalism of the Hindu temple? Have you met the group? Have you spoken to them and talked about solutions to avoid that happening—proactive rather than reactive? All of these things are reacting after the fact.

Mr Pettersson: Unfortunately, these matters are topical. We have seen vandalism and

property damage at religious sites here in the ACT. The first port of call, as I have suggested, is always to contact police if you are a victim of crime. Here in the ACT, we have been relatively proactive in responding to these issues in our community by legislating the positive duty to eliminate discrimination and legislation to ban the display of Nazi symbols. I think we have been on the front foot. When things like this do happen, though, it is appropriate, if that community is interested, to engage with police to try to identify the perpetrators.

THE CHAIR: What is your involvement in delivering targeted programs to address employment barriers faced by migrants? I am particularly thinking about when it comes to securing jobs that match their skills and qualifications. We have all met Uber drivers who are over-qualified to drive Ubers. Is this something that sits within your remit?

Ms Rule: Broadly, employment matters are a commonwealth responsibility, and there are a whole range of commonwealth programs around support for various groups into employment. There are some smaller-scale things that we do here in the ACT. I refer, for example, to the work experience support program and some of the particular grant programs, as well as some of the things that we have already talked about in previous committee hearings this week. For example, the programs that support women into work are often accessed by multicultural Canberrans. Again, Ms Akhter can probably talk through some of the detail about some of the specifics that we deliver here.

Ms Akhter: We do have a specific program for free assessment of overseas higher education qualifications for ACT residents. The assessment broadly compares an overseas qualification to an Australian qualification, using the Australian Qualifications Framework. That is a free service that we provide. The program enables the ACT's new migrants, or any migrants—any ACT residents, essentially—who have an overseas qualification that they want to have assessed to better access further study or employment in Australia, and enhance their social participation.

We did a total of 149 assessments in the reporting year 2023-24. Other than that, we have the Work Experience and Support Program, as the director-general mentioned. We run two rounds each year, with up to 20 in each round—40 participants. It is a highly acclaimed, very competitive program, and it has a high rate of success. Almost 80 to 90 per cent of participants have reported that they find employment after completing the program.

In addition to that, we have a funded service with the Multicultural Hub, where they provide a similar service that is targeted to vulnerable cohorts, such as refugees and asylum seekers and, of course, any other migrant cohort, to help them find meaningful employment opportunities through training, coaching and support.

THE CHAIR: We have, it seems, a growing number of social enterprises operating in the ACT that play a crucial role in providing employment pathways, and thereby improving the settlement experience for migrants and refugees. Is this an area that you are looking at? Are there any financial or policy support opportunities or levers that you could pull to help these kinds of enterprises to sustain and also grow their impact?

Ms Rule: There are different social enterprises funded in different ways, or that we work with in different ways. We have already outlined some of the grant programs that

might exist in the multiculturalism space. One of the more successful programs that has had some well-deserved acknowledgement over the last little while is the Stepping Stone cafe. The Stepping Stone cafe at Dickson—and this is slightly outside this portfolio—operate out of a Housing ACT building. The opportunity to run a social enterprise out of that building went to tender. They were the successful tenderer. That is going great guns. It is a fabulous place, doing great work and getting acknowledgement, as it deserves, on the national stage.

There are various ways that we work with social enterprises. That is one example. As I said, there are others that access our various grant programs, be it in multiculturalism or in other grant programs that we run across ACT government.

Mr Pettersson: I appreciate the line of questioning and where this has come from. I would suggest that these questions are not best directed to this portfolio. Unfortunately, I would direct you to a range of portfolios. Putting on a couple of different hats, in the skills and training space, there is a large body of work going on across the country to see what we can do to better align international qualifications with what we have here in Australia. Going to the support that something like Cafe Stepping Stone receives, that would be through the business portfolio.

There is a range of different moving pieces here. It is a good thing that all parts of government are trying to respond to the issues that the multicultural community is experiencing, but a lot of that work does not actually take place within the Office for Multicultural Affairs. It is in wider parts of government.

THE CHAIR: Yes. You have pre-empted my example, because I have spoken with one of the founders of Cafe Stepping Stone. She is maybe experiencing a bit of frustration. She has that support through Housing ACT. I think that the Common Ground housing project is fantastic. If we could build a million of them, we would, and we should. So great job there.

Ms Rule: It is a very high-cost model.

THE CHAIR: But it is kind of siloed. The markers or metrics in that program are based on housing and what they are delivering for that development. I am curious about whether your area is actively going out or maybe considering going out and looking for opportunities to further support great things that are happening so as to maybe reduce the burden on some of the people starting and operating these enterprises who have to go directorate by directorate, to your point, and search for programs—you know, they have got their employment provider federally and all these different live interests in trying to run a cafe and help women who have barriers to employment.

Ms Rule: Again, this kind of goes outside the boundaries of this portfolio per se, but we talked yesterday—I think was yesterday—in one other hearing, anyway, with Minister Orr about the community sector hub that has been announced as an election commitment, which is really intended to provide a bit of a front door for community sector organisations to be able to come into government and for us to help them make some of those connections across government of different programs and things that might exist. But, certainly in our experience, the sector is pretty well versed in what opportunities exist and where to look for them.

We do have a grants hub where people can see what grant opportunities exist across ACT government. That is not program by program; it is everything in one place. People pretty well understand the rhythm of those grant programs, when they are likely to come out and what their scope is. Certainly our experience in almost every grant program we deliver in Community Services Directorate is that those things are well known and usually oversubscribed, because people know to apply for them.

So I think, whilst it would be ideal if we could make all of those connections for people, community sector organisations are very good at making those connections, at seeking funding and support from various sources and using that to build a viable operation that often does more than one program's worth of funding might provide for.

THE CHAIR: It might be worth giving consideration to including social enterprises and any work that is going on in that space. Often it is defined as you have got to be a not-for-profit or a registered charity, which is understandable. But, yes, there is great work happening in the space; so anything that could support it would be fantastic.

MISS NUTTALL: I want to go back to the free assessment of overseas higher education qualifications. I just want to confirm that 149 undertook, based on the annual report.

Ms Akhter: Yes, as of 30 June 2024. That is the number in that reporting period.

MISS NUTTALL: That is excellent. Do you mind me asking how many applications were received?

Ms Akhter: I do not have that number in front of me. We tend to assess all applications that come in, and then the assessment outcome is based on a framework that the federal government has developed. I am happy to take that on notice and provide that number.

MISS NUTTALL: If that is all right, that would be wonderful. Thank you. This might also need to be taken on notice, but what is the average length of time for such an assessment from the time a person applies?

Ms Akhter: The assessment framework and the parameters for this program are determined by the federal government, as I have just mentioned. We provide an administrative function that allows the application data to be input into the program, which then determines the equivalent qualification based on the program parameters. We have a team of people. It would be difficult for us to quantify exactly how much effort has gone in into that. As applications come in, we assess them and provide a response.

MISS NUTTALL: So, just to confirm, how long it would take is not data that you are currently recording?

Ms Akhter: I am not sure we do, because, as I said, it depends on the workload of the team and everything that we have responsibility for we deliver on. It is not that we receive all applications in one day or in a month; they come in in a very random fashion, and then we tend to respond to them as soon as we can.

MISS NUTTALL: That makes sense. Are you hearing any consistent issues or concerns that crop up from people who submit their applications? Have you had any particularly consistent feedback about any part of the program?

Ms Akhter: Just to clarify one more time: we use a federal government framework; we input the data; and it provides us a report. Our job is when we receive a request, we take the information from the applicants and then we enter the data into the framework, and we then provide them the report back. That report will tell them where they sit in that comparison with any Australian qualification. So, really, the function that we deliver is not an analytical one; it is just to facilitate that assessment for those ACT residents so that they are not going through a number of agencies between the ACT and the federal government.

MISS NUTTALL: That makes a lot of sense. Thank you. Is that service provided face to face?

Ms Akhter: It depends. If they need to talk to us face to face, we can obviously entertain that and that is not a problem. But often they come to us via email and then, depending on their requirements, we provide the service.

MISS NUTTALL: That is good. I was just wondering if you had received any feedback from those services at the point of contact that you had with them. But if there is nothing in particular that has jumped out, that is fine too.

Ms Akhter: We often get requests. For example, when we are in a consultation session, people will come and ask us about assessment. We take these opportunities to let them know what we can do and what the federal government's responsibilities are. Often people do not know, if they are new to their city—and obviously we have other services where they can get connected to the right area and right services. It depends on the level of support the applicant is actually seeking from us

MISS NUTTALL: That really helps, thank you.

MS BARRY: I have a few follow-up questions around the Multicultural Festival and the monies allocated to that. You said \$200,000 was expended on the festival—is that right?

Ms Akhter: That was just the grant program.

MS BARRY: For the grants.

Ms Akhter: Not expended; that was the allocation. We offered \$193,000. I think I provided the number.

MS BARRY: Sorry; I heard that wrong. I think there was an increase in revenue. How much was the increase in revenue for last year's festival? For the 2024 festival what was the increase in revenue? Do you have figures for that?

Ms Akhter: The revenue comes from stall fees and stall fees have been kept at the 2018

rate and not increased for the 2024 festival. It is a very modest stream of revenue for the festival compared to the overall operational cost.

MS BARRY: Have you heard from stallholders that there are some community organisations who struggle, especially with the cost-of-living crisis, to pay those stall fees? Is that feedback that you have heard through your various channels of consultation? I have heard this from—

Ms Akhter: Not really, because, as I said, the focus of the festival is, of course, to support the community and small businesses. The stall fees have been capped at the 2018 rate despite CPI increases. So, in effect, what we have been charging is well below the CPI. For example, I think a three-by-three community food stall would be charged around \$300 for a one-day stall.

MS BARRY: Is anything in place for community organisations? Bear in mind that I understand that \$300 is not a lot of money for some organisations; for others, it could cost \$600 for a larger stall. Do you have any grants that would support these organisations if they were not able to pay for the stall? Do you have anything in place? What happens?

Ms Akhter: We often offer them a payment plan if they are struggling, but we have not been approached by any stallholders asking for a payment plan. We often do that with grant approvals if they need a payment plan to support them with phased payment. This festival is community-led. It is for the community, so—

MS BARRY: I am not criticising. I am just saying that they probably do not know that you can offer a payment plan. It is something that we would need to say to community organisations: “You could probably get a payment plan if you are struggling to pay the fee.”

Ms Akhter: But, at the same time, as I said, the stall fees provide us with very modest revenue. The festival’s operational cost has been rising—often more than 200 per cent in some areas. We just have to have a balance between delivery of the festival in a safe way and supporting the community at the same time.

MS BARRY: I understand that.

Mr Pettersson: I appreciate the point you are raising through your questioning. I too get feedback from multicultural community groups across all aspects of interaction with government that the fees that are charged are too high. I appreciate that it can be a barrier for certain groups when it comes to the Multicultural Festival. I understand that we are oversubscribed with people who want to attend the festival, so I suspect that we are probably doing okay when it comes to how much we are charging.

Ms Rule: The feedback that we get at the other end of the spectrum is that, for many community groups, the sale of food and beverages, for example, funds their activities for the forthcoming year. Some community groups make a significant amount of money out of the sale of food and beverages throughout the course of the festival, and it allows them to provide the things that they provide in their community group for some time. So for many of them, it is a good exercise in raising some funds.

MS BARRY: That is a fair point, but there are also some groups that do not sell anything; they are there for only information, and \$300 out of their budget is a lot of money. One example would be Aussie Peace Walk. They would have loved a stall this year—they have a big event—and that \$300, although I know it does not sound like a lot of money, is a significant cost.

MS TOUGH: This is also about the National Multicultural Festival. What value has increasing the size of the Community Panel Reference Group added to decisions about the festival?

Ms Akhter: Widely, I would say. When The Multicultural Festival returned after COVID, we established the Community Panel Reference Group. This was to ensure that the festival remains a community-led festival at its heart. We expanded the Community Panel Reference Group's membership to ensure continuity of the community leaders that were involved, and to also expand the reach of the community leaders so that we have better reach to the broader community. The core idea of having the Community Panel Reference Group as one of our key engagement mechanisms was to get guidance and advice from them in terms of the festival's planning. The group met 10 times in the 2023-24 financial year, strengthened engagement across Canberra's multicultural community and provided strategic input to the overall delivery of the festival in a really meaningful way.

MISS NUTTALL: The Chief Minister and the government recently changed its rules so that more visa holders could have access to permanent ACT government jobs, which is awesome. It is great news for Canberra's community and the multicultural community in particular. Minister, have you made any representations to federal counterparts so that visa holders might have access to Commonwealth jobs as well, deepening the potential APS talent pool and extending more opportunity?

Mr Pettersson: No; I have not.

Ms Rule: That is a very simple answer.

MISS NUTTALL: That was very succinct. That is it.

MS BARRY: I have questions around volunteering at the Multicultural Festival. My understanding is that the number has shrunk. It has gone down. Do you have the number for 2024?

Ms Akhter: Let me see if I can find it.

MS BARRY: I want to understand what is driving the reduction, because I know this is an event at which people like to volunteer. I have volunteered for over 10 years. Do you have any visibility of what is driving the reduction and what you could probably do to increase the number for next year's festival?

Ms Akhter: I am not sure that the volunteer number has dropped significantly. It depends on a number of factors. Of course, volunteers are volunteers; they have to agree to support us. We rely on a huge volunteer base, because this is a community-led

festival. We need volunteers from the community to support and assist us.

MS BARRY: I will read out the number so you know how significant the drop is. In the annual report—I think it is on page 242—the number goes from 332 to 189. That is a significant drop.

Ms Akhter: Often volunteers register their interest and, by the time the festival is happening, there can be multiple reasons for them not being able to actually come and do their shifts on the day. That is one contributing factor. The other thing is how much ahead of time we are able to plan and seek expressions of interest from volunteers for the festival, and then there are all the logistics that go into supporting that process. In 2024, we had a 74 per cent increase in the number of applications for stallholders and grants. That was a huge administrative overload for us to process and progress. That meant that the volunteering process started a little bit later than we would have liked. That could have contributed to it, in addition to what is happening with volunteers on the day and whether they are able to come and join us.

Ms Perkins: I could add to that. For the festival that we had on the weekend, we had an increase in volunteer numbers. This year, as Sanzida mentioned, we started the volunteer drive earlier than the year prior, as we had settled down on the expanded footprint. Regarding the shifts that we have just had, we had a total of about 450 volunteer shifts, noting that volunteers often undertake a number of shifts over the three days. There is a smaller number across the three days than the total number of shifts. We are working through, as you would appreciate, pulling together our statistics after the festival. We do not have all of that finalised, but we are looking at around 245 registered volunteers for the festival that we have just had.

MS BARRY: That is comforting to hear, because obviously this festival depends on volunteers. Are there any incentives? I have heard from volunteers that one of the reasons they probably will not put their hand up is the day's cost. They have to find something to eat and festival foods are usually very expensive. Are there any incentives for people to volunteer? I note that you said the numbers have gone up, so maybe not, but, just speaking about the 2024 numbers, are you looking into that or is that something that you—

Ms Akhter: In terms of incentives, what we provide to them is training so that they know what they will be doing and they are aware of their responsibilities. We also provide a free T-shirt with the festival printed on it. I feel very proud every time I wear it. That is something. Also, there is a tote bag with goodies, if possible. And we provide a meal voucher at the end of each shift so that they are able to enjoy the festival and also eat something that they would like.

MS BARRY: That is useful to know.

Ms Akhter: After all of that, we deliver a thankyou event at which the minister comes and thanks the hundreds of volunteers. We provide a certificate of appreciation, and we also feed them during that thankyou event.

MS BARRY: It is good to know that we value them. Thank you.

Mr Pettersson: I am looking forward to that. I would also make the broader comment that volunteering has been declining across all forms for well over a decade. It particularly spiked through COVID. I think the numbers that the festival is experiencing stand up pretty well in that climate.

MR HANSON: In the interest of bipartisanship, will you be inviting the shadow minister to that thankyou event? It sounds like something that would be most welcome to have a bipartisan contribution!

Mr Pettersson: I will take that on notice, Mr Hanson.

MR HANSON: Thanks.

THE CHAIR: I have a question about housing. What steps are we taking to ensure newly arrived migrants joining our multicultural community have access to secure housing? I am particularly interested in the extent to which visa status creates an eligibility barrier to access social housing, especially for refugees? I know it is a housing question, but I think it is also very relevant to this portfolio area.

Ms Rule: It is, but, in terms of questions that go to the eligibility criteria for public housing, the officials who could answer those questions are not here right now.

THE CHAIR: Is this something that is raised with you as a concern? People may have barriers to access the private rental market due to language, lack of rental history and financial constraints. Again, I am thinking especially about migrants and refugees.

Ms Rule: We know people represent a whole range of vulnerable cohorts on public housing waiting lists. That includes people from various multicultural communities in various sets of circumstances, some of the groups we have talked about in other hearings this week, as well as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Canberrans. Often the groups that are vulnerable and are waiting for housing have a whole range of issues that have led them to that path, and that can be because of their migrant or visa status. It can be due to a whole range of things.

Ms Akhter: I can add a little bit. This does not directly answer the question, but I think we have a relevant response. Within CSD's responsibility, we have a number of humanitarian responses that we provide to the vulnerable cohorts, including refugees, asylum seekers and migrants who are struggling. Some of the internally focused responses include a coordination committee that we chair, where we bring together Commonwealth counterparts and our service providers from the sector within the humanitarian space. We coordinate responses and assess funding applications. The funding is provided by the ACT government to support the refugee, asylum seeker and migrant cohort where they are struggling with cost-of-living pressures, affordable housing, work rights and access to services across the sector. Where they have access to the ACT Services Access Card, they will be able to access that funding. That is one response.

An externally-facing response that also, to an extent, supports refugees, asylum seekers and migrants who are coming to the ACT to call Canberra home from perhaps conflict-prone zones is \$5,000 per family via the Red Cross. They provide that funding

to assist in finding housing or participating in civic and social life and economic life. We have a couple of responses in that form.

THE CHAIR: That is good to hear. On the first one that you mentioned, does that program engage directly with individuals or does it go through service providers? I am thinking about a women's refuge I visited. They support women refugees with children. The CEO is having to do all their housing applications and that sort of stuff, such as trying to manage visas and all the stuff that goes on. Are you also supporting organisations? You can see the common theme with my questioning.

Ms Akhter: We used to manage and administer that in-house until the 2023-24 financial year. We worked with a couple of service providers—very close partners—to help us with that process. However, following a review and feedback from those close partners, our service providers, we changed the administrative arrangement for the 2024-25 financial year. Now we provide that funding to one of the organisations. They are the head in the MOU set-up with the other two. We provide the funding and they administer it based on the applications that come through, and they assess the applications. We stay involved, but it has changed slightly. We are not directly involved anymore.

THE CHAIR: Who is the head?

Ms Akhter: It is Companion House.

THE CHAIR: Thank you. On behalf of the committee, I thank everyone for their attendance today. If you have taken any questions on notice, please provide your answers to the committee secretary within five business days of receiving the uncorrected proofed *Hansard*. On behalf of the committee, I thank witnesses who assisted the committee through their experience and knowledge today. We also thank broadcasting and Hansard staff for their support, and the secretariat as well. If a member wishes to ask questions on notice, please upload them to the parliamentary portal as soon as possible and no later than five business days from today.

The committee adjourned at 5.20 pm.