



**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

FRIDAY, 21 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.

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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.

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Amended 20 May 2013

The committee met at 11.02 am.

Appearances:

University of Canberra

Shorten, Mr Bill, Vice-Chancellor

Lincoln, Professor Michelle, Deputy Vice-Chancellor

Drummond, Mr Geoff, Chief Financial Officer

Pheasant, Mr Jonathan, Chief Operating Officer

THE CHAIR: Good morning, and welcome to the public hearing of the Standing Committee on Social Policy for its inquiry into annual and financial reports 2023-24. This morning the committee will hear from officials from the University of Canberra.

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 the city and this region. We would also like to acknowledge and welcome any other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who may be attending or listening in to this 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 would be useful if witnesses used the words, "I will take that question on notice." This will help the committee and witnesses to confirm questions taken on notice from the transcript.

We welcome the Hon Bill Shorten, Vice-Chancellor of the University of Canberra, and officials. I remind witnesses of the protections and obligations afforded by parliamentary privilege and draw your attention to the privilege statement. Witnesses must tell the truth. Giving false or misleading evidence will be treated as a serious matter and may be considered contempt of the Assembly.

There are several witnesses for this session, so when you first speak, please confirm that you understand the implications of the privilege statement and agree to comply with it. As we are not inviting opening statements, we will now proceed to questions.

I have a question about student accommodation and the steps being taken by the university or more broadly, that you are aware of, to address the rising costs of accommodation for students.

Mr Shorten: I acknowledge the privilege statement and will comply with the obligations therein. I will answer the initial question. Obviously, I am now entering my fourth week. I am very fortunate to be accompanied by my Deputy Vice-Chancellor, Professor Michelle Lincoln, our Chief Financial Officer, Geoff Drummond, and our Chief Operating Officer, Jonathan Pheasant, who we hope will join us online.

Mr Pheasant: I can hear you, Bill.

Mr Shorten: Great. We provide an accommodation guarantee for all first-year students. We have approximately 2½ thousand beds available on campus in Belconnen. Our most

popular options—that is, in excess of 90 per cent occupancy—are our single-room lodges on campus, Belconnen, and the one- to-two-bedroom suites on campus.

Accommodation is a key component of our value offer proposition for student experience. Our pastoral care model is recognised as being nation leading. We are confident that our supply is meeting the demand from domestic and international students. In fact, we accommodate students from other universities. That is the scene-setter. I might ask Jonathan Pheasant to add to that answer.

Mr Pheasant: Thanks, Vice-Chancellor. I do not have a copy of the privilege statement. I am happy to read it; maybe it could be sent to me via Teams before I proceed.

THE CHAIR: I will read it out:

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That is the privilege statement, Mr Pheasant.

Mr Pheasant: Thank you. I acknowledge the privilege statement and acknowledge that I will comply with all of the obligations.

Chair, I missed the last section of your question in relation to the student accommodation. Just so that I can follow on from the Vice-Chancellor, do you mind repeating it? There was one final aspect towards the latter part of your question.

THE CHAIR: Yes. I was asking about the provision of accommodation, the cost of that accommodation and its sufficiency.

Mr Pheasant: The Vice-Chancellor has addressed the sufficiency of the supply that we have in order to meet the demand. We are sitting, across all of our accommodation, the 2½ thousand beds, on average, at about 80 per cent of accommodation. The

Vice-Chancellor has talked about where our students prefer to stay. We have approximately 250 ANU students using our accommodation this year.

In terms of the cost of that accommodation, we do market scans year on year. We had a moderate rise this year in line with CPI. We are always looking at how we keep the cost of our accommodation as affordable as we possibly can. We recognise the pressures that our students are under, in terms of cost of living; hence that is why we just went with a moderate CPI increase this year.

THE CHAIR: My understanding is that our rental rights laws do not apply to student accommodation. I believe that is the case; you can correct me if I am wrong. I should probably be the one who knows, as I am sitting on this side of the table. Do you have any mechanisms to track how your approach is aligning or not aligning with what is happening in the rental market here? You mentioned a CPI increase, which in that case would be a yes, that is within our—

Mr Pheasant: That is correct. Actually, the rental laws do apply to us. We have very similar obligations, essentially, as a landlord, and our students do as tenants. That has been challenging at times. The difference is that our accommodation policies relate to the students' participation in study. They must be enrolled in study at a university across the territory. If they are not enrolled, or if they are in fact failing subjects—and we work with them as closely as we can—in terms of their rights and privileges as a tenant, they have the full rental tribunal legislation behind them to support them in that. The only difference is the enrolment element.

THE CHAIR: I will be surprised if the answer is yes, but does the university have any sense, where people are not staying on campus, of how students are accommodated? Do we track that data in any way? I am partly asking because we hear about international students in the context of the housing market and so on. Do we have any sense of how people are living, within share-house arrangements or otherwise?

Mr Pheasant: Certainly, as students get into their second, third or fourth year, we do see a strong preference for them to move off-campus and share accommodation. We do not track that information. Anecdotally, we know that they do share accommodation. The Belconnen region, given its proximity to our campus, is very favourable. We are talking about non-Canberra locals. A significant proportion of our students are Canberra locals, so they do not need our accommodation.

MISS NUTTALL: How much influence does UC have over the provider of accommodation choice to, for example, change room classifications year on year? Anecdotally, I have spoken to students who have observed that, between years, certain student lodgings might change the different types of rooms available, and the price points for that, without undergoing any particular, observable structural works. What is your ability, as a university, to talk to providers or regulate that?

Mr Pheasant: Thanks for the question. We try to be as supportive as we possibly can. Unlike ANU, which, as you will know, has very different accommodation options on its campus and in the CBD, we do not, typically, have the range of accommodation available. We have our UC lodging, a typical lodge, which are our single-room ensuite or shared bathroom, facilities. As we move towards the west of our campus, that is

when some of the accommodation shifts. But it really only shifts between one-, two- and three-bedroom. We then move into the larger accommodation blocks of eight rooms, 10 rooms or 12 rooms to a building block with shared kitchen and bathroom facilities.

We will try and accommodate any request where it is possible. The challenge is that some are of higher quality, but that comes with a higher price point. Some students are able to move and accommodate that price point; others are not. I feel very confident in our conversations with the students.

The contracts can be on a semester or an annual basis. Each time a contract comes up for renewal, we work with those students to try and understand their needs and see whether we can accommodate them. If they already have accommodation on campus in a particular lodge or a particular facility, they get preference to continue that. We do not kick everyone out and start from scratch. We try and have some continuity.

MISS NUTTALL: That is good to hear; thank you. Does UC have any obligations or initiatives to make students aware of their tenant rights regarding campus accommodation?

Mr Pheasant: Certainly, as part of the orientation and induction, we talk about what their contract with UC, and UC accommodation, means. In that contract, there are their obligations and rights, as well as the university's obligations and rights. I do not think that we specifically go into the rental tribunal rights. I can take that one on notice and see how much detail we go into in our contracts and in our induction conversations.

MISS NUTTALL: Thank you. I would also be interested to understand, if there is any ongoing support, whether it is proactive and the university reaches out to students to make them aware of those rights or whether there is a dedicated service where students might be able to go to discuss the nature of their contracts.

Mr Pheasant: Understood; thank you.

MR HANSON: The university is facing a few financial pressures; that has been reported. I am interested in hearing, firstly, how you got into this position in the first place. Secondly, in the shorter term, there is talk of pretty significant staff cuts. How is that going? I assume that will address the \$50 million shortfall or thereabouts. In the longer term, how can we be assured that the university is on a sound financial footing?

Mr Shorten: I will start on this. Again, I will bring in the executive leadership team to perhaps flesh out particular points. As I said, I arrived here in late January. The financial position is something that I have immediately acquainted myself with.

It would appear that there are external factors and internal factors which have contributed to the sustainability issue. I would stress that the university is sustainable, but it has been living beyond its means. Its expenditure has outstripped its revenue. The organisation has expenditure of roughly \$400 million. I will get Geoff and Jonathan to give more precise information. What happened was that the forecast of new students and the revenue in 2024, from the beginning to the end, did not materialise. It was overly optimistic. That has led to a deficit position.

The factors for this, I think, are both external and internal. There has been a lot of debate about international students, and I think that had a dampening effect on the market. It has been the case that life has got more competitive for UC. There are more online offerings from other universities and more universities working in Canberra and the surrounding areas, so there is more competition.

It is also the case that 26 of 39 Australian universities are recording deficits at the moment. There has been a drop in overall student demand in Australia—domestic demand, that is. Also—and these are early observations, so they will evolve and mature as I spend longer in the job—the free TAFE offerings have soaked up some of the people who might have otherwise looked to enrol at UC. Along with being Canberra’s university, we are a vocational university, so there is external competition.

Returning to internal propositions, it has been the case, again—and I have the benefit of hindsight, but I do not wish to be the curator of the UC museum of history—that there have been optimistic projections which have materialised in hiring of more staff. The number of staff has increased but not the number of students; and, at a certain point, that is not a realistic proposition.

The council, as I understand it, last year took steps to tackle the financial challenges. A plan was developed by the executive leadership to reduce the staff numbers. Again, both Jonathan and Geoff can provide more precision around this, but our largest expenditure item is wages, which is not surprising. Between professional staff and academic staff, it is broadly two-thirds of our expenditure. So that is where some of the cost reduction has to occur.

The executive leadership and the council developed a plan to reduce and disestablish positions. Roughly 120 professional staff positions were reduced and 70 academic staff positions were reduced, so roughly 190 positions are being reduced. That is off a base of approximately 1,200 staff.

I will come back to our growth strategy, because I think that is a very important issue, but, at this point, if it is all right with the committee, I will ask my executive leadership to talk about the specific measures that we have been adopting to reduce our outgoings, our fixed costs. Jonathan, do you want to outline some of that? I will then come back to the growth strategy and the process of the staff cuts.

Mr Pheasant: Yes. Thanks, Vice-Chancellor. I understand that you can see me now. I apologise. It no doubt helps. I might start with the salary reduction in professional staff and then I will talk a little bit about the non-salaried reduction. As the vice-chancellor said, we have been growing the number of our professional staff over time, ahead of the revenue coming in, for the reset that we undertook late last year, where we looked across the university, both within our portfolios and within our faculties—the professional staff sitting outside of the faculties versus the professional staff sitting within the faculties. It is fair to say that, of the 120-odd, the vast majority, over 80 per cent, have come from the non-faculty areas. We have really tried to retain support for the core business of the university and look at how we can reduce central services.

We are already a quite centralised university, which helps, but the focus was about removing layers. For example, we have gone from five executives to two and we have removed 14 positions that had a senior management classification. We have really tried to reduce layers and increase spans of control across the professional staff. That has contributed to a significant part of the salary reduction that we were focused on. I might pause there before we move on to the non-salaried area to see if there are any questions in relation to that.

MR HANSON: There were no academic staff reductions? Was it only professional staff?

Mr Pheasant: No; there have been. I have specifically been talking about the professional staff. I might hand over to my colleague, Professor Michelle Lincoln, to talk about the academic staff, if that is of interest at this point.

MR HANSON: Yes.

Prof Lincoln: I acknowledge and will comply with the privilege statement. We are in the process of reducing the number of our academic staff. We will probably end up with having disestablished around 51 positions across all five faculties. We have taken the approach of offering voluntary separation for academics. We also had targeted disestablished positions. We are also in the situation where we need to go through a spill-and-fill process, where we are looking to reduce, in some areas, from six professors to three, for example. We have done it in a strategic way. We have looked at areas where demand for courses and areas of study has reduced over time and where the workforce associated with the delivery of those courses has not reduced. Taking a very evidence based approach, we have made decisions around that. We have also looked at how we can get some efficiencies in our teaching and our offerings and made decisions in alignment with that as well.

Obviously, the VSP process is a separate issue for people who were ready to leave the university. That process will come to completion about next Monday. People are actually employed until the middle of the year because it takes a while for academics to leave an institution. Obviously, they are deeply embedded. That is where we are sitting with that group of people.

MR HANSON: Given the time constraints, perhaps I can go to the third element, which is that you have identified the origins of the problem and what you are doing to fix it in terms of the reduction in costs. Does this put the university on a stable footing? And what are the longer term projections?

Mr Shorten: Yes; it does. I should have acknowledged at the outset of this answer that I want to thank both the executive leadership who were here when I came and the workforce, and that we have been working with the NTEU, as we should. This is a difficult period and people are losing their jobs. It is very difficult if you are one of the people who are losing their job and do not want to go, so it has not been straightforward. I acknowledge that there is a human dimension to what we are saying, which I am sure members already realise, but I just wanted to put that on the record. As you know, our financial year is a calendar year, so we are still finalising the 2024 report. We will have more precise understandings of the extent of the deficit. We have the broad picture.

We believe that, with the reduction in staff numbers and the other professional savings, we are on track to return to net out expenditure and revenue. Whether we quite get to that in one year will be difficult, but there will be a marked and significant reduction. We are on track, either by 2026 or during 2026, to return to our revenue meeting our expenditure. We will wait until the census at the end of this month, but we are experiencing growth in our student numbers as well.

Going forward—and I appreciate the confidence the university council has displayed in giving me the opportunity to be VC—we do want to grow. We think that this university has some excellent strengths and we will seek to rejuvenate them. I will give you four examples of where we see positive direction, but we will not prematurely announce victory or targets. This is the home of public administration in Australia. It is the centre of it, both through the ACT government and the Commonwealth government. We think that is something with which we can develop our offerings. We think that, with our adult education—fee-paying students, not just people coming through the Commonwealth supported or international routes—there are opportunities to develop our base through micro-credentials and developing our offering for people who want to come back to university.

One of the things which has been constraining university demand, not just here but everywhere, is a strong labour market. That means that people have options. If there is a weaker labour market, people tend to use some of that time to go to university. The cost of living is a giant issue, as members will be acutely aware. So we want to look at how we can encourage people to return. Obviously, working more closely with the CIT, which is a remarkable institution, is common sense. We currently already offer courses which harmonise with Queensland TAFE. We think that there are propositions there. We have some excellent strengths. As you know, just about any nurse in Canberra will have been trained with us. Most of the kids in Canberra will be taught by a UC graduate. And there is a range of professional vocations which we think are doing well, and we can afford to extend that.

MR HANSON: Thanks.

THE CHAIR: I would like a quick clarification of some numbers, if you do not mind. There are 129 academic staff and 51 academics?

Mr Shorten: Seventy-one positions. There are, roughly, 120 professional staff and 71 academic staff. One observation about the academic staff profile which is a bit more unique to UC is that nearly half of our academics are in the top two levels of the award. They are at professor level. That is quite high.

Prof Lincoln: And we will subsequently replace some of those senior positions with lower level lecturer positions, because we need that workforce for teaching. So there is a bit of a rebalancing of what is a very senior academic workforce.

THE CHAIR: Do you have the wages as a proportion of expenditure off the top of your head?

Mr Drummond: I acknowledge the privilege statement and will comply with it. If you

give me two minutes, I will calculate the wages as a proportion of revenue.

THE CHAIR: Thank you. You said the new student forecast was not met last year. Do you know the gap? What was the scale of the gap between the forecast and what happened?

Mr Shorten: I should not just rely on memory, but I think the shortfall was nearly \$30 million in revenue. Is that right, Jonathan?

Mr Pheasant: Yes; that is correct. It is made up predominantly from a decline in the number of international students and domestic students.

THE CHAIR: And the number of students for \$30 million? Do you have that figure?

Mr Shorten: We can take that on notice and give that to you.

THE CHAIR: Sure.

Mr Drummond: Salaries and wages represent 57 per cent of our overall revenue.

THE CHAIR: Thank you.

MS BARRY: Going back to what you said around the cause of the problem, you indicated that you started preparing for the future of a bigger university. When did this growth start? When did you start planning for this growth—2022 or 2023? And what is the reduction in international students numbers from that time of growth to date?

Mr Shorten: I cannot tell you about 2022-23.

Prof Lincoln: I can. We started in late 2022 with an online strategy for the university, when we realised we were losing students to online competitors from around Australia. We had a project to get a number of new courses online and to place existing courses fully online—fully asynchronous and online. There was work throughout 2023 to do that. We launched 20 new courses at the beginning of 2024, and the impact that had was to maintain our current student numbers. Given the environment that we were operating in then, without those courses we would have been in a much worse position than we are. It effectively maintained the level that we were at. We had very similar numbers between the two years. We had predicted growth, but you may recall that the new arrangements around international students actually came in in November of 2023, which was very late in the year. We had already done our planning and our budgeting before that—all of our financial work. That turned things on its head quite a bit.

MS BARRY: Between 2022 and 2024, you had predicted that there would be international student growth in 2024, not from the start of the planning, in 2020 to 2023.

Prof Lincoln: We had been on a growth trajectory with international students for some time.

MS BARRY: How has that number changed between 2022-23 and 2023-24?

Prof Lincoln: We had 4,401 international students in 2023 compared to 3,940 in 2022.

MS BARRY: So it has essentially gone down by a few hundred?

Prof Lincoln: No; it went up between 2022 and 2023 and it has levelled off from then, and we had been projecting growth.

MS BARRY: Thank you.

Mr Pheasant: Perhaps I could add a point to that. I think it is important to note that our student number score, whether it is for undergraduates, postgraduates, domestics or internationals, has not actually gone down. Michelle is correct: we budget to target; we budget to projection. When you think you are on a growth trajectory and you budget accordingly and then those numbers do not come through—that is why we saw the significant shortfall in revenue last year which caused the major challenges.

MR HANSON: You mentioned what could be described as an imbalance in the academic profile, the staff profile, where you have a lot more professors than perhaps other universities. My understanding is that the University of Canberra has a policy whereby you come in at the lower levels, As and Bs, and move up, and, if you do not achieve the next level within a certain time frame, you are out. That drives people towards trying to get up the greasy pole, for want of another term, so everyone ends up as a professor. In other universities, people are perhaps quite comfortable remaining at level C or level B, or whatever the level is. Are you looking at that policy which seems to be forcing that imbalance?

Mr Shorten: I will ask Professor Lincoln to start and I might supplement at the end.

Prof Lincoln: Sure. You are referring to the assistant professor scheme, which we have had since 2015. The university used that as a strategy to lift our research profile, to bring in people super keen and fast-track them to associate professor. We have not appointed anyone to that scheme for two years. In fact, under the new workplace legislation, it is not a legal scheme, so we are not using that scheme in the system. But some of what we are seeing—you are absolutely right—is an unintended consequence of that. We had a lot of people who worked very hard and were fast-tracked through to associate professor level and—

MR HANSON: So it is more of a legacy, and, moving forward, it will not be a feature?

Prof Lincoln: Correct.

Mr Shorten: As I understand it, the assistant professor program to fast-track people is quite novel to UC. There was probably some assumption when it was introduced that some of the people would get to professor status and then spread out and work at other universities. UC is a nice place to work, so they did not spread.

Prof Lincoln: They stayed.

Mr Shorten: That is an issue. You can see how it has happened. It was perhaps a good idea 10 years ago, but it has led to some consequences, where there is some grouping

of people at the higher levels, who are all good people.

Prof Lincoln: Great people.

Mr Shorten: We could probably get some of that data about the number of students for 2021, 2022 and 2023. Again, there is the benefit of hindsight, and I was not there, but you can see why the council and the university said, “We have had growth each year trending upwards. We can assume that continues in 2024.” There was some growth, but it was not at the dimension expected, but the hirings had already got underway for the extra growth.

MISS NUTTALL: I assume you would have seen the NTEU’s recent report, *Ending bad governance for good*. It references and tracks boom-and-bust cycles, for want of a better term, in staff hiring at universities across Australia. UC was included. Obviously for staff, these are their careers. Insecure work is pretty terrifying during a cost-of-living crisis. What are you doing to futureproof against future cycles and make sure that UC staff have long-term job security?

Mr Shorten: I might answer it with some of the principles. I am deeply aware of the university sector’s problems with wage theft and casualisation. One of my really interesting discoveries in coming to UC a few weeks ago is that the ratio of permanent to casual is 90 to 10. It is broadly that, and it is probably even slightly better, but that is pretty good for a workplace. We are very conscious of that. The use of external consultants is a relatively very small proportion of the total budget outlay. Again, having worked in a range of departments and organisations, it is actually at the pretty good end. You have to use external consultants sometimes, but this university, in my first survey of it, does try to keep things in-house and permanent whenever it can be done.

The best security we could give the staff is by doing these reforms now. I would say that the commitment that the leadership has shown, and that I have come to see, is that we want to do this once and not have to do it again. That is why it is difficult now, but, if we can get this change right, have it at a sustainable footing, and then, in a targeted way, build up our opportunities, then people do have job security.

MISS NUTTALL: Are you aware of whether this rationale was used in previous times when there have been significant job cuts?

Mr Shorten: I do not have that history.

Prof Lincoln: UC, unlike most other universities in the sector, did not do job cuts during COVID. We were one of the very few universities not to. There were thousands across the sector. To some extent, that is also what is going on here. Lots of universities took the opportunity to rebalance at that point. We did not, for lots of good reasons, actually, for our staff and for the Canberra community.

I think there is a cycle across universities; you can see that going on. The NTEU is absolutely correct, in that we all have an obligation to try and stop that. One of the ways of doing that is regularly to review your portfolio of courses and areas in which you are offering study, to make sure that they are relevant for the workforce, that they are things

that students want to study and to realign your workforce with that. That, actually, is not an easy thing to do, to be honest, but we need to be doing that. We need to be constantly on top of that as well—watching student numbers, where students are voting with their feet to study, and making sure we have the right workforce aligned with that.

MS BARRY: On the staffing, we have heard that redundancy payments would not be for more than six months; is that right?

Mr Shorten: I will ask Michelle or Jonathan to supplement my answer with more detail. Under the industrial award, it is all about giving people notice. Under the arrangements, if a person's position is targeted, they get to the end of the year's notice. We are looking at not requiring them to work. The good news is that they get notice. You do not want to lose your job, but it is quite generous compared to what I have seen in other industries.

What the university leadership has come up with, which I think is quite good, is that they are not going to make people work out their year. If your position is disestablished and you are going, even though we could make them work for the year, the reality is that we think the better practice is for them to finish up at the end of first semester, but they still get paid for the rest of the year.

MS BARRY: With the redundancy payments, when do you pay—

Mr Shorten: That gets paid when you finish your job.

MS BARRY: When you finish the job?

Mr Shorten: Yes.

MS BARRY: Whilst they are not working, you are paying their wages. You pay the redundancy payment at the end of that year?

Mr Shorten: That is a good question. No, it would be at the end of the first semester.

MS BARRY: Okay, so they are not waiting for six months for that?

Mr Shorten: No.

Mr Pheasant: They have to be paid within seven days of their termination date, which we have adhered to.

MISS NUTTALL: I am keen to understand more about the ethical investment guidelines. Has there been any effort to expand the UC's ethical investment guidelines to exclude investing in weapons manufacturers and financial institutions—the ones listed by the United Nations office of the high commissioner on 20 June 2024 which are complicit in human rights violations and possibly genocide?

Mr Shorten: I will ask Jonathan to answer that question,

Mr Pheasant: Last year, council approved a new investment policy which included

quite a detailed section on ethical investment. As members are probably aware, the investment policy has to be signed off by ACT Treasury, so we are in the process of submitting that investment policy for review.

I will use the language that we have in our investment policy, if you do not mind. We have looked at a range of other investment policies that exist across the sector. We did have an ethical investment framework. We did touch on what we deemed to be acceptable.

With the way that the investment policy is structured, we have structured it around ESG factors, including both positive screening and negative screening. In terms of negative screening, we are excluding an investment in a direct security, company or entity that undertakes the manufacture of tobacco-related products, generates more than 10 per cent of revenue from gambling operations, manufactures or sells controversial weapons, including nuclear weapons, or undertakes the extraction of fossil fuel.

When we are looking at our managed investments, as you are aware, they are a little bit more challenging, in understanding the detail. We have our best endeavours approach to ensure that there is no individual exposure by revenue of more than 10 per cent to each of the excluded industries, including a primary manufacturer of tobacco, gambling operations, manufacture or sale and then fossil fuels, including thermal coal extraction or conventional or unconventional oil and gas extraction.

MISS NUTTALL: Controversial weapons: is that a technical term? I am interested in understanding what constitutes a controversial weapon as opposed to an uncontroversial weapon.

Mr Pheasant: I have to admit that is the first time I have been asked that question. Can I take that one on notice? In our review of other policies, it was a term that we came across quite a lot. As I said, I have not been asked that question and I will need to do some research on that one.

MISS NUTTALL: Yes, please. As part of that process, did you go through and systematically review all of your current investments, or is it just the policy that is being formed right now?

Mr Pheasant: We have an investment committee; that is now part of our finance committee. On a quarterly basis, we review all of our investment. On an annual basis, we do a detailed ESG review, red and green. In fact, last year we divested some funds—BlackRock, as an example—where we were not comfortable that we could guarantee we were meeting the ethical investment framework. It is a very active strategy that we take to ensure we meet our investment policy.

MISS NUTTALL: Can I confirm whether the list from the United Nations high commission was factored in? Was that list essentially crosschecked?

Mr Pheasant: It was. I am double-checking because I think we specifically made reference to that. In terms of positive screening, we have listed in our investment policy a signatory to the United Nations backed Principles for Responsible Investment.

MISS NUTTALL: Can you confirm that at this point in time the UC is not investing in any of the companies on that list?

Mr Pheasant: I would need to take that one on notice. I am confident, but I need to check, just to be doubly sure.

MISS NUTTALL: That would be great; thank you very much.

MR HANSON: The student profile by gender shows a couple of interesting things. Firstly, 61 per cent or thereabouts are female and 39 per cent are male. But when you look at the trend over the last 10 years, that gap is widening. There are about 450 fewer male students than there were a decade ago. I presume, if we extrapolated that further, that is an ongoing trend. The question is: why? Is it of concern to the university? If it is, what are you going to do about it?

Mr Shorten: I will ask the deputy vice-chancellor to answer that.

Prof Lincoln: It is a sector-wide trend across Australian universities, not a UC-alone trend. I think it is a broader question for society and what is happening for young men, in fact, and why they are not seeking higher education. There is some interaction with vocational education, obviously—CIT. Men, boys, are more likely to go into trades in that kind of training space compared to women. It also depends on how you look at it. It is good news for women, and there has been a historical trend of men having higher levels of education than women, so maybe there is a rebalancing going on here.

MR HANSON: The historical trend, certainly going back a decade, is not true.

Prof Lincoln: Yes, that is right.

MR HANSON: It might be funny, but if it had reversed the other way, I would contend that, if there had been a decline in higher education of women to such an extent over a longer period, we probably would not find it so funny. What are we doing about it?

Mr Shorten: I certainly do not think anyone thinks it is funny. One of the strengths of this university is its health faculty, and our biggest course is nursing. What we are seeing also is that we teach a lot of these feminised professions and, as that has grown, that has had a centrifugal context.

The bigger policy issue is that we want more people to be doing higher education. Our challenge is the cost of higher ed, getting people to retrain, and having course offerings which are actually off-putting for people coming back to retrain. If you have a family, you are working or you run a small business, the idea that you are just going to down tools for a couple of years and upskill is not realistic.

Our challenge is to go to more blended offerings. By that, I mean flexible offerings online. I notice, though, that there is a debate in some universities about just being online. I still think the campus experience is crucial to the maturation and development of people getting that educational knowledge.

I am very interested in pursuing our engagement with CIT. The view that TAFE is in

one silo and higher ed is in the other, and the two will never meet, is not a good reading of what our skills needs in the future are. I think there are opportunities to grow the overall enrolment. Obviously, within that, with our articulating pathways from TAFE, there is some of this question about whether there are blokes that we are missing out on, and we want to let down the drawbridge. Unis might not have fences around them, but there are still plenty of ways to discourage people from coming.

MR HANSON: I get the localised element, and that some of your courses are in feminised professions, and that is a broader issue. Are you aware of anyone—and it might not be in UC but in other universities—looking at this more globally? Is anyone looking at why this is a phenomenon? Why is this happening and what are we going to do about it? Why are men being discouraged from seeking higher education in the ACT and elsewhere? Is anyone looking at that, that you are aware of?

Prof Lincoln: Not that I am aware of in the sector. I do know there is specific work going on around Aboriginal men, because the disparity is even greater among our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students; there is a much higher proportion of women.

MR HANSON: But for non-Aboriginal men, who, for over a decade, have been declining in significant numbers in university, no-one is looking at that, that you are aware of? It is quite a thing, isn't it?

Mr Shorten: I take that as a comment.

MR HANSON: Yes. Someone needs to start looking at it, maybe.

MISS NUTTALL: I am glad that you brought up feminised professions like nursing and teaching. Is there any work that you are aware of happening within those spaces to try and attract more men to the professions?

Prof Lincoln: I think that is an ongoing challenge. We certainly partner with the professional associations in that space to make sure that we have equal representation, for example, in our marketing and advertising materials, and that we do not shy away from, for example, when we are engaging with all-boys schools, promoting courses like nursing, occupational therapy and some of the others that are highly feminised. Yes, we have to be very aware of that, because if we take a photo of our group of students in nursing, it is nearly all women.

MR WERNER-GIBBINGS: The campus master plan, presumably, is a fairly critical document for the university now and in the future. Your short tenure as vice-chancellor notwithstanding, can you talk me through your vision for the plan? Where are you taking it? How are you going to get there?

Mr Shorten: I can; then I will ask Jonathan to provide the detail. We want our campus to be attractive, comfortable, safe, technology-enabled spaces. I am aware that there has been work done before I got here. The hospital is quite a remarkable development on campus. We know that we need to refurbish the student study spaces across the UC library. It is core business of a university, really, isn't it? We want to have technology-assisted learning spaces, collaborative workspaces. We have been doing work, but we

think that that is a priority for us going forward.

The Ngunnawal Centre relocation has been good; that has led to an enhanced experience for academic and pastoral care of our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. We are pleased that, through our recruitment there, we have had the highest number of Indigenous Australians coming to our university. It is north of 100 this year.

We refurbished the UC medical and counselling space. We have relocated the UC SRC to a purpose-designed space. We signed a five-year civic partnership in November 2023 with the ACT government. There was a lot of internal and external consultation with stakeholders. We are also looking, in the health precinct, to see whether there are partners we can have who might deliver our aged-care services, where we could use our workforce to improve their learning experience, but where it is consistent with the values of what we are doing on the campus. Hopefully, we will have more to say about that in the very near future. I will ask Jonathan Pheasant to talk a bit more about what we are doing.

Mr Pheasant: Thanks for the question. There is no doubt that our campus is, behind our people, a significant asset for us. We are relatively land rich, but we are cash poor. We are very conscious, when we are looking at developments on our campus and what we can do, of making sure that we are not selling off the family silver in order to pay for the operations of the university.

I am pleased to say we are very close to a significant announcement of a development within the healthcare space on our campus. There are huge collaboration opportunities not only for the university but also for ACT Health. There is a lovely partnership in the northern area of our campus, flowing from the hospital through this development through to our health clinic, which services thousands of Canberrans every year. There is significant work underway. We have no shortage of people coming to talk to us, in terms of what they would like to do with our land, but we are incredibly protective of it.

The other point I would like to make—and I am happy to answer any questions—is around our accommodation, and what we can do with our accommodation to improve the amenity of that accommodation, and to look at housing options more broadly, particularly for skilled workers that come onto our campus, who work on our campus or work with our partners, without diminishing accommodation options for our students, which is part of our core business.

The final point is that we are also in conversations with the ACT department of education in terms of a feasibility study for a school on our campus. There are lots of conversations happening, all in line with the campus master plan.

MR HANSON: Back in 2015 there were some changes made to the Territory Plan, rezoning, that gave the UC the ability to do developments, including, as I recall, residential developments on its land. There is talk about the suburb of UC and things like that. Are there any plans more broadly to sell off land for residential purposes or is the university considering doing a residential development on its land?

Mr Shorten: Because of time constraints, I will give you a very high-level answer; then

we can reply in writing and give you more detail. There was this peak development; you all know the map of UC better than I do. Basically, there is the continent of UC; then there is some land beyond Haydon Drive. Within that, there is a peak development. I am still trying to get through the history of that. There is a residential development in that bigger mass of land. We are having discussions with people. We want to see that move forward.

Beyond that, regarding where it is within that big continent of UC, our principal approach is that we do not want to sell off any further land. We would use that land to generate revenue that is consistent with the overarching objectives of the university. Shared development would be good, but we are not interested in giving it away or selling it in a one-off. There are two little pockets of land beyond that, which I think are in a different category.

MR HANSON: Something that will give you ongoing income rather than a sugar hit.

Mr Shorten: Yes; partners. We would like to do more in the health space with health providers; then we put in the workforce and training. There are a lot of opportunities in the IT area with our science and tech faculty. It is very early days. This university has good educational partnerships. It works closely with government. I want us to work more closely with the private sector on development which would see jobs, research and opportunities for our students and our teachers.

MR HANSON: If you have more to add on that, I would be interested.

Mr Shorten: I think we can give a summary of where the peak development stuff is up to, and we could provide a bit of a state of play.

MR HANSON: It was sold to us in 2015 as, “This is the panacea that’s going to keep UC on a stable footing forever,” and here we are. That has not come to fruition. I am wondering how that land will be used as part of your growth plan to make sure that we are not meeting back here—

Mr Shorten: We will take that on notice. I think some of that critique is fair.

THE CHAIR: What has been the level of engagement between the Suburban Land Agency and UC on the Bruce precinct master plan? Has that conversation commenced? I note that there was \$10 million in the last federal budget for the development of that plan, and part of the pitch was that it will be a health, education and sports precinct.

Mr Pheasant: We have certainly been in active discussions. I do not think I am talking out of school to say that we would like more discussions, because we see ourselves as a significant player in that precinct more broadly. Absolutely, we have been involved in the discussions.

THE CHAIR: But not detailed work going on?

Mr Pheasant: Not detailed work.

Mr Shorten: I have had two meetings with the Chief Minister since I arrived. I know

that the ACT government is interested in that development, especially that CIT Bruce area. We have been invited to be involved, in a formal way, with the development of that plan. That is right now.

MS BARRY: I have heard that there has been considerable cost for the renovation of your office. Can you tell us how much that has cost?

Mr Shorten: No. When I say “no”, I have not spent anything. You are welcome to see it. I have not even hung up any paintings. I am still looking for some bookcases. No, the renovation of my office is about a 100th priority. I am happy with what I have got. Our priority is not our own conditions, in terms of offices. This operation is committed. If we are going to shed staff then the obligation is everywhere to try and save money. As I understand it, compared to the previous vice-chancellor’s entitlement, the number of staff of the vice-chancellor has been cut in half. The corporate overheads would have been the first target of reduction. If someone is saying that we are spending money on renovating my office, it is just not right.

MS BARRY: That is good to hear. Thank you.

THE CHAIR: On behalf of the committee, thank you for your attendance today. If you have taken any questions on notice, which you have, please provide your answers to the committee secretary within five business days of receiving the uncorrected proof *Hansard*. The committee will now suspend the proceedings and resume at 3 pm.

Hearing suspended from 12.03 to 3.00 pm.

Appearances:

Berry, Ms Yvette, Deputy Chief Minister, Minister for Education and Early Childhood,
Minister for Homes and New Suburbs and Minister for Sport and Recreation

Community Services Directorate

Rule, Ms Catherine, Director-General

Borwick, Ms Ailsa, Executive Group Manager, Housing Assistance

Valler, Ms Megan, Executive Branch Manager, Infrastructure and Contracts Branch,
Housing Assistance

THE CHAIR: Welcome to the public hearings of the Standing Committee on Social Policy for on its inquiry into annual and financial reports 2023-24. The committee will now hear from the Minister for Homes and New Suburbs. The proceedings today are being recorded and transcribed by Hansard and will be published. The proceedings are also being broadcast and webstreamed live. When taking a question on notice it would be useful if witnesses used these words: “I will take that question on notice.” This will help the committee and witnesses confirm questions taken on notice from the transcript.

We welcome Ms Yvette Berry, Minister for Homes and New Suburbs. 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 agree to comply with it.

As we are not inviting opening statements, we will now proceed to questions. I have some questions about the property in Ainslie, which is topical. I wanted to ask whether Housing ACT was aware of the garden that had been constructed in the backyard of 48 Foveaux Street, or when Housing ACT became aware of that garden.

Ms Borwick: I have read and acknowledge the privilege statement. Thank you. We were aware that there was a modification request that came through in 2021 in relation to some pergola, some decking and a garden as part of that process. We had, at the time, looked at that and assessed the property and the likely trajectory of that property—which, for us, it was likely to be a redevelopment should the tenant return the property. So we had actually advised not to proceed with modifications in relation to that. We were aware when we prepared the property for sale that there was a garden as part of that, and that formed part of the sales process, documentation and registration.

THE CHAIR: Okay. When were the volunteers who work in the garden informed about the sale?

Ms Borwick: I do not think we would have informed the volunteers about the sale. The property was returned to us, and we would have assessed that property and considered it for redevelopment. When we actually looked at the property and what would be required for that, it was not as viable a proposition for us as to sell it and to use that income for other properties elsewhere. That is the sort of process that we go through. The tenant who had been there had vacated that property some time before we made that decision to sell.

THE CHAIR: Yes; 12 months ago or something like that.

Ms Borwick: Yes.

THE CHAIR: When you say the property was returned to you, do you mean to your area? I am just trying to understand the internal developments.

Ms Borwick: What happens when a tenant has a property like that and we have a lease arrangement with them, they can seek to transfer that property back to Housing ACT if it no longer meets their needs, and, in this case, it did not. That was in the context of a rejig of their services as part of a new contract rule arrangement. The property itself was returned to us because it was a three-bedroom property, it was aging, it was running hot and cold for them and it really was not suited to their needs. Plus, it was a youth service, as I think has been reported in the media. That group living environment is not really in step with contemporary services. So they asked us to swap that out for some other properties, which we have assigned to that. But, again, the maintenance of the property, including the garden, was part of the reason that they returned that to us, because they want to focus on their service delivery.

THE CHAIR: Do you track whether or not this kind of work is happening in other properties? I am just aware that how it has unfolded publicly has not been ideal.

Ms Borwick: As a social landlord, we want to make sure people have quiet enjoyment of the properties and make use of the properties. We have a process there for people to apply to us to seek, if they want, to make changes to the property. That can be inside of the property or outside of the property. Where we have those processes in place, those forms submitted and agreement with that, people submit the plans of the works. So we have those sorts of things on record, and that is how we can track that. If people make modifications outside of that process, it is harder for us to have visibility of it. We may pick that up within one of our service visits or property inspection type approaches. But that is sort of how we would be made aware of those works.

MR CAIN: When you say the property was returned to you, do you mean that the tenant no longer wished to live there? Is that what that means?

Ms Rule: I have read and acknowledge the privilege statement. The organisation, I think, has been reported in the media as the Salvation Army. We have a range of lease arrangements. Sometimes it is with organisations and sometimes it is with individuals. But, in this instance, it was with an organisation.

MR CAIN: That makes sense. Regarding the peace garden, who actually communicated to these volunteers—many of them professionals who spent a lot of their time and donated some exotic native plants—and actually gave them that encouragement, the go-ahead, to develop a peace garden at the back of that property? Who did that and when did that happen?

Ms Rule: Mr Cain, I think Ms Borwick has already answered that question. We received a request to modify—

MR CAIN: When was that?

Ms Rule: —the property in 2021. We advised for that not to happen because the property was likely to be sold in the future.

MR CAIN: Are you talking about the pergola, decking and the peace garden—that that was in 2021?

Ms Rule: On 9 June, we provided notification not to proceed with any modifications.

MR CAIN: On 9 June. Which year?

Ms Rule: 2021.

MR CAIN: So why would these volunteers then proceed? They must have had some supporting messages from the government, perhaps even from the minister, to go ahead and invest heavily of their time and donate tens of thousands of dollars of natives to sculpt and create a refuge for youth and other vulnerable people? Why would you think they went ahead, if you told them in June 2021 not to do it?

Ms Rule: Mr Cain, the officers at the table were not in the directorate at that time. But I think we have been clear in the evidence that we advised that those modifications should not proceed. So I cannot answer that question. Our records do not indicate that Housing ACT encouraged the development of the garden.

MR CAIN: So when did you become aware it was happening nonetheless, and what did you do about it to stop that investment by our volunteer community?

Ms Rule: Again, I think Ms Borwick has indicated that we may likely have become aware of it during the course of regular visits to the property, site inspections and those types of things. We are not aware of any further correspondence between Housing ACT and the organisation leasing the property in relation to the garden.

MR CAIN: Do you have a record of those site visits for that particular property?

Ms Rule: We would have to take it on notice.

MR CAIN: Take it on notice—and full records, please, including confirming advice not to develop the garden, if that is indeed what you are saying, and the response of those volunteers.

Ms Rule: We have already answered the question about advice not to go ahead with the garden—

MR CAIN: No; I mean since that initial advice—during these site visits and other communications with these volunteer groups.

Ms Rule: We can take that on notice.

THE CHAIR: That 9 June advice would have been to the Salvation Army—is that

right?

Ms Borwick: Yes.

Ms Rule: Yes.

THE CHAIR: So the Salvation Army would have made the application, not the volunteers?

Ms Rule: That is right. Our relationship is with the Salvation Army.

THE CHAIR: Okay. So when it became clear that they proceeded with those works anyway, at which point, the government—

Ms Rule: We will review our records to see what, if any, information we gave to the Salvation Army since 9 June 2021 in relation to modifications at the property.

THE CHAIR: Thank you. People visiting the site would have noted, “There is a garden happening here,” and then that might have been included in those records.

Ms Rule: Potentially. I do not know what is in the records. We will have a look and see what is in the records.

MR CAIN: When was any communication with, for example, Mr Scott Laidlaw and others who were professional volunteers contributing to that peace garden construction? Was there any contact at all from Housing to them directly?

Ms Rule: Again, we will have a look. But I do not think so. I would not imagine that we would have had a need to communicate with the volunteers, because the lease was between us and the organisation.

MS BARRY: My question is around fraud allegations. The number of fraud allegations linked to housing assistance increased from 69 to 101 from 2023 to 2024. I want to understand what caused that increase and whether there was a common theme across those allegations.

Ms Borwick: I would have to take that on notice and go through the detail of those.

MS BARRY: Okay.

Ms Borwick: Sorry; I am not sure what you are reporting from. If it is fraud directed towards—

MS BARRY: It is housing assistance.

Ms Borwick: Typically, it might be people reporting that they are concerned that there are other people living in the house or someone is deriving a benefit that they are not entitled to or eligible for. Sometimes people will report that information. Predominantly, it is undeclared residents living in a property.

MS BARRY: In the first half of 2024-2025, have you seen an increase, or is that still trending steady?

Ms Borwick: I would have to take that on notice. The other key area is undeclared wages—obviously, with public housing, we have an income test coming into public housing—and people raising concerns when perhaps they are not paying the rent that they should be as a proportion of their wages.

MS BARRY: Following those allegations, what do you investigate? What is the outcome? How does the process work?

Ms Borwick: The outcome will depend on the investigation, of course. We would typically, as a sort of standard complaint process, we would investigate the matter and talk to the individuals. For something like income, we might ask for payslips. It depends. Sometimes we exchange information—where they have given authority for us to do so—with Services Australia, for instance, and people can give us a statement around their income, and that helps demonstrate that.

With an undeclared residence, it might be that we attend, have a visit, and we talk to people there and have a look at who is actually at the property. Often that can be resolved quite simply by them making sure that they are declared and are on there. Their family composition might have changed, for instance, and those sorts of things. So it can be resolved fairly straightforwardly or it could result in moving through and just checking that these people are actually eligible and action taken if they are not.

MS BARRY: Thank you. That is useful.

Ms Rule: Those are numbers, not percentages. So just to be clear on the record that it is 69 instances of allegations about fraud up to 101 in the most recent financial year. Given that we have stock of more than 11,000 properties, that is a relatively small number of instances. We do investigate each of those cases on the evidence available to us, depending on the nature of the allegations that are being made. But it is a small proportion of our overall tenancies.

MS BARRY: I agree. But it is an increase anyway.

Ms Rule: It is. Absolutely; I agree with you.

MISS NUTTALL: Is there any work that you have done to understand whether this might be related to us being in a housing crisis and that it might be, for example, friends and family who have not managed to get secure housing who might be staying either short term or medium term as they look for houses? Do you go to that level of detail when you talk to people?

Ms Rule: We would in individual circumstances. But I do not think we have the aggregate kind of result of that. I do not think I have got enough information to be able to identify an overall trend. I am sure that is reasonable in some cases and that that is what tenants are telling us. But I cannot speculate whether that is a broad trend or not.

MISS NUTTALL: How many of the allegations of fraud were substantiated and how

many were cleared up with a conversation?

Ms Rule: We will have to take that on notice.

MISS NUTTALL: Thank you. I understand that there was a public housing property that might have been auctioned off on Wednesday as a new home. ACT Labor took a promise to the election to build 30,000 new homes. I want to confirm whether they would be counting that public housing property that was auctioned off as a new home when it is rebuilt, despite, ultimately, not increasing the overall stock of housing.

Ms Berry: I have read the privilege statement and I understand it. The whole program is both renewing 1,000 properties and increasing the number by 400. That is part of this current Growth and Renewal Program. In selling this property and receiving \$1.4 million we are potentially able to increase the number of housing by up to two, potentially buying up to three properties, at least replace that one, and potentially increase the number by two. It is not that simple to kind of measure it in that way, but the intention of the program is that you replace older unsustainable properties—and, in this case, increase the number as well.

MISS NUTTALL: When we look at that 30,000 house target, would that be a net increase of 30,000 properties that are liveable—

Ms Berry: No, this is just for the Growth and Renewal Program—so not necessarily part of the 30,000 increase. But, if you are referring to the Growth and Renewal Program, for example, in some areas we have demolished or sold two houses on very big blocks and then put on six houses, which means you have a net increase of four. That is what this program does as part of that as well—selling one home and then replacing it somewhere else or even growing the stock, depending on how much.

MISS NUTTALL: So, for example, if you sold off two and ultimately six properties were developed on that block, that would be considered a net increase of four towards that?

Ms Berry: Yes; replacing the two and increasing it by four.

MISS NUTTALL: When it comes to that 30,000 commitment, does the same principle apply? Is it the net increase of total housing available?

Ms Berry: No; because the 30,000 is not just going to be developed by the ACT government. Some of that will be homes that are developed by other private developers as part of the Indicative Land Release Program. But there is nobody here that can really talk to that today. There is only CSD to talk about housing here today. But that is—

THE CHAIR: But the 1,000 is part of that—

Ms Berry: The 1,000, yes.

THE CHAIR: So that would net? I guess the question is whether it is 1,000 new dwellings or additional to the stock of the 1,000 if we lose some along the way.

Ms Berry: In completing the Growth and Renewal Program that we currently have in place, by 2026-27, we will have replaced 1,000 properties and grown the housing stock by an additional 400.

MISS NUTTALL: My question was specifically in relation to that 30,000 commitment. So I am just interested to just confirm that, for example, if the government sold the one property and only one property was developed on the site—

Ms Berry: Well that is a replacement.

MISS NUTTALL: And that would not be counted towards the 30,000 new homes target?

Ms Berry: No, because it is a replacement of a property. So it is part of the Renewal Program.

MISS NUTTALL: That makes sense. Thank you.

Ms Berry: And it is for public housing specifically. The 30,000 includes a commitment to 5,000 affordable community and public housing as well as another 25,000 private dwellings.

MISS NUTTALL: Thank you.

MR CAIN: Minister, at the previous hearing, last week, I asked why there was such a delay in ministerial responses from your office and how long it took Housing to respond especially for urgent matters. You responded saying that there were other methods of contact for urgent matters. I recently attempted to speak to you regarding an urgent matter, following up on your recommendation, but was informed you were too busy and a member of your team would provide information.

Ms Berry: Was that when you came into my office with Mr Emerson?

MR CAIN: No, that was earlier.

Ms Berry: When you spoke to one of my staff?

MR CAIN: When I came up to your office and asked to speak to you about the Ainslie property. That was earlier in the week.

Ms Berry: And one of my staff came down and spoke with you?

MR CAIN: He did. But you gave me the impression last week, at the last hearing, that you would be available to talk, as you did with the previous shadow minister, on urgent housing matters. I am just saying that that is what I sought to do, based on your offer. So, while I did have a briefing with your housing adviser, I was disappointed that I could not speak to you directly after you had really encouraged me to contact you.

I am also aware that there is a process that was implemented last term to seek briefings with your office after obtaining authorisation and consent from the tenant to provide

further information. This process, it is my understanding, includes a briefing from the minister's housing adviser, the member and, on occasion, an official from Housing ACT. These briefings took a maximum of 15 minutes and allowed the exchange of further and pertinent information which the member could relay to constituents where appropriate. These briefings were very high level in detail and provided assurances for urgent matters when a letter would include no information. Minister, why are these briefing requests often ignored by your office or delayed by months after multiple follow-ups?

Ms Berry: I will have to check on particular circumstances, Mr Cain, but it might surprise you to know that I am not personally available all the time at your beck and call. I try to make myself available as often as I can, as I have with all members in this place, particularly when it is a matter of urgency. I would also say that I treat, and my office treats, seriously any issues that are raised with my office with regard to public housing, or on behalf of individual tenants, whether they come to me, through our phone lines or our emails, or any member in this place.

On the matter of how long it takes for Housing ACT or my office to respond to an issue, it depends on the particular issue. It goes through a range of checks and balances to ensure that the information that is being sought is allowed and that it does not breach the privacy of a particular person. If the person has given permission for their information to be provided, we still need to check on the inquiry that is being made to understand the specific information that is being sought and whether that information is available.

On the availability of Housing ACT staff, as I said, my office staff and I try to make ourselves available as soon as we possibly can, pending follow-up and investigation of the information that is required. However, that might not be at a time that is completely suitable to you or any other member. We will make a time that is mutually convenient for everyone and will then bring the information as appropriate.

MR CAIN: Minister, some of the requests that I have made have taken weeks, a month or longer. Surely, any member would deserve some sort of interim response to indicate why there is a delay, particularly in responding to an urgent matter. At the moment, there is just pure silence.

Ms Berry: If an inquiry comes to my office, it usually takes around four weeks for the process—for Housing ACT to investigate the inquiry, get back to my office and then for me to respond to the letter. Sometimes it takes longer, depending on the detail of the incident. For an urgent matter—an extremely urgent, life-threatening matter or something like that—it would be more immediate. I would get in contact with a member, if appropriate, and share the information with them.

MR CAIN: That is appreciated.

Ms Berry: But I have never had a complaint from members in this place that they have not been able to work with me and get information from me, particularly when it comes to public housing, in an appropriate way—not by coming into my office unannounced, not by just demanding something at a particular point in time—

MR CAIN: It certainly was not a demand; it was accepting your invitation to consult.

Ms Berry: but respectfully engaging with my office—

MR CAIN: As I have done.

Ms Berry: Then you will receive a respectful and timely response, where appropriate.

MR CAIN: On timeliness, where there is a significant delay in dealing with any communication—ministerial or an email—surely, in a customer service driven approach, one would say, “We had better explain why this is taking so long,” at least as a courtesy. That would make members like me aware that you are actually doing something about the matter.

THE CHAIR: We will take that as a point.

MR CAIN: Thank you.

THE CHAIR: Priority Reform Two in the National Agreement on Closing the Gap is focused on building the Aboriginal community controlled sector. My question is: which ACCOs in the ACT are now registered under the National Regulatory System for Community Housing? That is the first thing. And have any of them been funded by the ACT government as housing providers?

Ms Berry: Thank you very much for that question. Working with Aboriginal community controlled organisations is something the ACT government has been committed to and is prioritising. We did not have any for a long time, but now we have three who are registered in the ACT, which is 100 per cent more than zero. It is a really great starting place for us to be able to work with these organisations to continue their growth and support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in our community. I will ask Ms Borwick to go to the detail on who they are.

Ms Borwick: We have registration for SEARMS, Yeddung Mura and Yerrabi Yurang as providers. I am conscious that this is a question that we have on notice. That will detail the responses. We have recently funded Yerrabi Yurang to deliver the tenancy and management supports as part of our homelessness contract suite. That has been a fantastic outcome. They started with that contract in early February. That is a fantastic step forward in relation to ensuring that we are seeing that spend to the sector.

THE CHAIR: Is it via OneLink in that instance? How do those—

Ms Borwick: No. That is a contracted service provision. It is a partnership with CatholicCare and Marymead as well. It is a consortia approach. As part of building capacity and capability within the sector, it is a really great outcome that we have actually seen transfer of knowledge and support within the sector to make sure that we have continuity in services for newly emerging organisations and moving into new areas, as well as the experience behind that. That is part of the way that we commission the services. It is not just ACCOs that can apply. They can choose to go into a consortia arrangement.

THE CHAIR: That is positive. The last thing we want is to stand up a bunch and then half of them fall down.

Ms Borwick: It is really great to see that the whole community sector is looking at innovative ways to drive those outcomes as well. That is a real credit to the ACT.

THE CHAIR: Thank you. That is very positive.

MS BARRY: Minister, I note that the Official Visitors annual report is critical of the standards of maintenance in social housing, and there are particular concerns about the impact of poorly maintained accommodation on young people. I have also heard regular complaints from people with disability. Minister, what impediments are there to maintaining social housing?

Ms Berry: Maintaining public housing?

MS BARRY: Yes.

Ms Berry: Thank you for that question. It is a very big portfolio—a diverse portfolio—of housing stock. We currently have a project. It is a very large contract—in fact, the largest contract the ACT government holds—with Programmed ACT. However, we recognise that maintenance in our public housing could be improved, which is why we are working through a trial of insourcing public housing maintenance. We have started with a trial of some multi-unit properties, working with iCBR and Infrastructure Canberra, to understand how we could make that work differently and try a few different things to see how we could start moving towards insourcing more maintenance work within the ACT government. The other part to that is making sure that we have the professional staff and tradespeople to be able to deliver on that commitment, so that will take some time to get through.

The ACT government has financed, through millions of dollars, an increase in maintenance and repairs in public housing. It will always be a challenge for us. We saw an improvement in the number of homes that were being responded to more quickly and also a reduction in the number of people who were expecting repairs to happen more quickly, so we know that investment and the work that we are doing with the trials is making a difference. We are certainly getting that feedback from some of our tenants in the multi-unit properties, that it is working really well for them.

I was with the Tenants' Consultative Group this morning. They are public housing tenants who advise the ACT government and Housing ACT on how we can respond better to various tenants' needs. They were really excited about the insourcing trial and really wanted to participate and be part of how we could make that work in a really informative way for tenants—making sure that tenants understand how we can support them better through their maintenance and repairs requests.

MS BARRY: I have heard stories from social housing tenants that they have been forced to pay for general maintenance. Is that right? Is that your understanding? Has that happened?

Ms Rule: It depends. In terms of terminology, social housing is broader than public

housing. When you talk about social housing, you could be talking about properties that we are not responsible for as Housing ACT. I am happy for Ms Borwick to talk about how we handle maintenance in Housing ACT properties—public housing, which is a subset of social housing.

Ms Borwick: We do not force people to pay for general maintenance. A tenant may call and report that repairs or maintenance needs to be undertaken. We will go there, depending on what it is. At times, there will be instances where it is clear that something has occurred in the house that is the responsibility of the tenant, as any kind of landlord would see it. As part of that process, people will be advised around the cost of those works and proceeding with those works. The component that we call the tenant responsible maintenance component will be charged to the tenant. That goes onto their account and they will work out payment arrangements around it. We will take into account if there is hardship or other things—around payment plans—where it has come up.

MS BARRY: In the meantime, do you undertake the repairs or do you wait for that payment to be made before you undertake the repairs?

Ms Borwick: It will depend as well on the severity of the incident. If it is an urgent repair, it is absolutely undertaken, or it may be something that is within our timeframes for scheduling—a 20-day job et cetera. It is not something that we necessarily delay, unless, of course, the tenant asks us to.

MS BARRY: Thank you very much. That is useful. What supports are available for people with disability or young people to appropriately advocate for public housing, when they do not have a social worker or someone who is overseeing their care? What do you—

Ms Rule: Do you mean an advocate in terms of their needs around maintenance?

MS BARRY: Around maintenance. That is correct.

Ms Rule: We talked in the previous hearing about how each property has a housing manager allocated to it, and that housing manager will engage with the tenant, regardless of the cohort that the tenant may come from. We sometimes have some additional support that people might need. We have occupational therapists on staff. We have access to other expertise that we can use when we need to, as well as all the advocates that exist outside of Housing ACT, like Official Visitors, the Human Rights Commission and the Advocate for Children and Young People. They are often in touch with us about matters that have been raised with them as well.

MS BARRY: Thank you.

MISS NUTTALL: I am interested in accessibility modifications. How much money is allocated for public housing modifications for residents with disabilities each year?

Ms Valler: I have read and agree with the privilege statement and understand the implications. May I ask you to ask the question again?

MISS NUTTALL: Yes; absolutely. How much money is allocated for public housing modifications for residents with disabilities each year?

Ms Valler: Last year, \$1.9 million was spent on disability modifications, and that was for close to 460 homes.

MISS NUTTALL: Could I confirm the number again?

Ms Valler: It was \$1.9 million.

MISS NUTTALL: Of that \$1.9 million, how much remains for this financial year?

Ms Valler: That was in the 2023-24 financial year. At the end of this financial year, 2024-25, I will have an accurate number for you.

Ms Rule: That was the actual spend. I think it comes out of our general maintenance budget, not our repairs and maintenance budget. Those are actual numbers that Ms Valler was referring to.

MISS NUTTALL: Does that mean that everyone who has needed a modification so far has received a modification?

Ms Valler: I believe so. I will come back to you. I will take that on notice. There may be situations where the person is after a disability modification, but it might not necessarily fall into the threshold of disability modification. It might fall into the threshold of tenant modification.

Ms Borwick: Depending on the modifications requested, it is also dependent on the infrastructure. If you are in a house of a particular age, it might be that widening the doorways, for instance, to meet the requirement actually cannot be done within the infrastructure footprint. In those cases, we may seek to transfer an individual to a more suitable property. In terms of whether we have met all of them, I am not sure that we would be able to give a black and white answer, because it will depend on a couple of circumstances.

Ms Rule: I do not think there is a circumstance, though, where those modifications have been denied on the basis that there is no funding available. It has been in circumstances where it is not possible; there are different solutions that we have to work through with individual tenants.

MISS NUTTALL: That is good to hear. Are there cases in which you have had to relocate someone rather than undergoing the modification? You mentioned things like widening doorways where it becomes clear the property does not fit the need. How many cases are there? Is that something you are able to go to the detail of?

Ms Valler: Are you asking how many relocations have occurred because disability modifications were unable to be undertaken?

MISS NUTTALL: Yes.

Ms Valler: I will take that on notice.

MISS NUTTALL: Thank you. That is very kind. I am interested in understanding: when things do not meet the threshold for disability modifications and they could be considered tenant modifications, does the maintenance area still bear the cost of that or does the tenant bear the cost of that?

Ms Valler: It will depend. It is on a case-by-case basis.

MISS NUTTALL: I am trying to zero in on whether people's disability access needs are being met by public housing maintenance. If someone has identified a need associated with a disability, are there circumstances in which they ultimately have to pay for that?

Ms Valler: No; not for a disability modification.

MISS NUTTALL: That is good to know. Thank you.

MS BARRY: Regarding disability modifications and the new housing stock, are there any plans to include SDA approved homes in that stock, especially for people with disability? Is that included or are they all standard public housing?

Ms Berry: Are you talking about the new public housing that we are building?

MS BARRY: That is correct; yes.

Ms Berry: In the new public housing that is being built, as much as we can, we make sure that they are at least gold standard—

Ms Valler: Class C or gold.

Ms Berry: or class C adaptable. Class C adaptable means that they are fully adaptable regardless of your ability—so, wider hallways, wider doorways, the flooring is appropriate for different kinds of mobility scooters and chairs and things, the power points are low, and there are wider garage doors and garages so that people can get in and out of their cars easily. In our housing plan, that is what exists. Gold might have all the wider doorways and hallways but might have some stairs, so it is not fully class C, but it is adaptable. It might have all the other adaptability included in the actual build, but it might just have some stairs, which just takes it out of being class C. I think we have 13 per cent—

Ms Valler: That is by the end of the program. We will have more than 13 per cent that will have accessible features by the end of the transition—

THE CHAIR: Of the new stock?

Ms Valler: Yes—

Ms Rule: Under the grant program overall.

THE CHAIR: For total stock?

Ms Rule: You mean of the over 1,000 or—

Ms Valler: Of the total stock, yes.

Ms Berry: Yes.

THE CHAIR: I did want to ask if Housing ACT has become registered as a specialist disability accommodation provider, and if not, when is that happening?

Ms Borwick: We are a registered SDA provider. That is a legacy from when the NDIS was created, and some properties were rolled in and transferred as part of that process.

THE CHAIR: How many properties? How many people on NDIS plans that are eligible for SDA funding are we receiving funding for?

Ms Borwick: We are not receiving funding for any that I am aware of. They are public housing tenants; we provide the property.

THE CHAIR: That seems like a large source of potential funds that we could be getting from the commonwealth. Is there any work happening to have that happen?

Ms Rule: We are just working through, at the moment, some policy options for government in relation to this. SDA is broader than just the bricks and mortar. It is actually the support services that are provided to the people that live within those tenancies. And, in fact, often that is the bigger part of the funding for SDA, so Housing ACT is not the right organisation to provide those kinds of services. Certainly, right now we are not. We do not have that capability within Housing. We are working through with government, at the moment, about this exact issue and what the kinds of future policy settings are for us around SDA.

THE CHAIR: And that might be doing a calculation and figuring out the community housing providers who do have that capability. When you say “exploring options”, is that a kind of option that you are looking at?

Ms Rule: I think there are really two choices. We continue to be an SDA provider, and we need to look at ways in which we can actually become a proper SDA provider, whether that is through sub-contracting arrangements or not, or we do not. I think those are the choices that we need to explore a bit further.

MISS NUTTALL: Back on the request for modifications, I am interested to know if you have the average wait time between a request being received and the modifications being in place?

Ms Borwick: That would vary enormously. The process is, probably, a meeting with our OT, or receiving a report from an OT, to assess what is actually required, and then looking at what works and the scope of works that would be required for that, and then agreeing to and signing off and getting a contractor to do those works. Sometimes it can be quite specialist. There might be a series of things to do in a house. Some of it

might be relatively simple, like putting grab rails in or a ramp in. Some of it might be much more work, such as widening doorways, putting in electric doors, changing the levels within a kitchen—those sorts of things. I do not think we would be able to give an average, because it would really depend on a case-by-case basis on the type of work.

We could certainly give you some further information around that process that I just stepped through, but to tell you from that as to when works are completed, I really do not think would be particularly helpful.

MISS NUTTALL: Yes. Are they differentiated by category at all? Are there some that are considered minor modifications, and they have, for example, a completion time of two weeks, and then more major works have a target completion time of a month, three months?

Ms Rule: Again, I think it depends. There are so many variables about the mods and what the property is like.

MISS NUTTALL: Yes.

Ms Rule: Some properties are much easier to modify than others.

Ms Borwick: The flipside, too, that I have just been reminded of, is also working with the tenant and their needs to go through that process. Sometimes we have to relocate somebody whilst we are doing those modifications, depending on the scale of them.

Ms Berry: Or permanently relocate them to another more suitable home.

Ms Borwick: Yes, exactly. And working with somebody with their conditions as well and making sure that those supports are wherever they need to be. So, it is not just a physical infrastructure piece; it is also working with the tenant and their needs.

MISS NUTTALL: Beautiful. What about the average time to respond to a request for maintenance? Do you have the data on that?

Ms Rule: We will probably have that across all types of maintenance. We will have to have a look, because the maintenance is handled by a contractor. It is done under contract—under the total facilities maintenance contract. There are a series of data points that we collect from that contractor. We will have a look at what data is available, but it may not go down to the responsiveness on disability mods. It might be responsiveness to client maintenance requests overall, if we have that. We will have to take that one on notice, Miss Nuttall.

MISS NUTTALL: Thank you. How do you communicate to your tenants about the delays and the process for modifications?

Ms Valler: They will have the support of an occupational therapist or the support of their housing manager, or the support of the contract management team to update as things happen or as scheduling occurs.

MISS NUTTALL: Thank you.

THE CHAIR: The Productivity Commission's *Report on government services* shows that the "dwelling condition" of our public housing stock is the second worst in the country. Seventy-six per cent is an acceptable standard across all households and 24 per cent a quarter is not. It is defined as having four working facilities and fewer than two major structural defects. That number drops to 58.5 per cent for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander households, and 60 per cent for people with a disability. If you are an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander or a person with a disability, the dwelling conditions are quite a bit worse—

Ms Borwick: Can I just confirm, Mr Emerson, is that for public housing or community housing?

THE CHAIR: Public housing.

Ms Valler: And what was the name of the report you were referring to?

Ms Berry: It was *RoGS*.

THE CHAIR: The *RoGS* data, yes. They have new data, but I do not think they have 2024 figures, so it is still 2023 data. The *RoGS* data is 76 per cent across all households and drops down for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander households and people with disability. Is there any work going on in understanding why that is the case for these disadvantaged groups?

Ms Rule: I think we have talked broadly about some of the changes in some of the approaches to maintenance. The minister has talked about some of the trials and pilots we are doing around insourcing, particularly in terms of disability modifications, and some work that we are doing.

We do not have that data right in front of us right now. To go to the specifics of the data will require us to have a bit of a look at what it says, interpret it and see what we can see that is behind it. But broadly, as I said, the minister has reflected on some of the things that we are doing to improve maintenance across the public housing stock, as well as the renewal of stock, which, obviously, has a significant impact on some of those issues.

THE CHAIR: Okay. So it is probably fair to assume that there is not active work going on in addressing that?

Ms Rule: I think I just said there is active work going on.

THE CHAIR: No, but in addressing this differential, where if I have got a disability, there is a higher likelihood that my dwelling will be in a substandard condition according to the Productivity Commission.

Ms Rule: I think what I would say is that we are certainly—

THE CHAIR: Which is not relative to the needs of that person with disability; it is an objective standard.

Ms Rule: We are certainly targeting our efforts around maintenance at the areas where we think there is the biggest need. In some instances that is around the age and nature of the stock, but in some instances that is around particular client groups that we might be dealing with. So I do not think it is reasonable to say there are not active efforts, because I think we are targeting our efforts at the areas of greatest need.

Ms Berry: And at the end of this program of growth and renewal we will have renewed 20 per cent of our stock. That will be 20 per cent of our stock that is in much better condition than, perhaps, other states and territories. Growing our public housing with newer and better stock will make a difference.

It might be helpful, perhaps, if you could put a question on notice exactly from where you are referring to in the *RoGS* so that we can provide a more fulsome response to that.

THE CHAIR: Sure; okay.

Ms Berry: I am just trying to find the spot now.

MS BARRY: It is hard; *RoGS* is hard!

THE CHAIR: It is the twelfth table on the housing—

Ms Rule: Yes, it is wading through treacle!

THE CHAIR: I have done some good digging to get there! I will send something through. Thank you.

MR CAIN: I have a quick substantive—

THE CHAIR: I am conscious we are a couple of minutes over, but maybe we can go with one last question. Mr Cain?

MR CAIN: And you will probably take it on notice, unless you know it. What percentage of Housing ACT dwellings are there per suburb, per district, compared to the similar types of total residential stock?

Ms Rule: I think we took this question on notice last session.

MR CAIN: Did I ask that? I do not know if I did.

Ms Rule: I think you may have—Ms Carrick, maybe; I am not sure.

THE CHAIR: It was part of a layered QON—

Ms Rule: Somebody asked it. We have got a question on notice about proportion of public housing by district.

MR CAIN: Great minds think alike! Thank you.

Ms Rule: The committee will have that data shortly.

MR CAIN: Righto.

Ms Rule: You may already have it.

THE CHAIR: Thank you so much for coming back on a Friday afternoon. We really do appreciate it. Thank you for your attendance today, on behalf of the committee. For questions taken on notice, please provide your answers to the committee secretary within five business days of receiving the uncorrected proof *Hansard*.

On behalf of the committee, I would like to thank our witnesses, who have assisted us through their experience and knowledge. We also thank broadcasting, Hansard, and the secretariat for their support.

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 3.49 pm.