



**QUESTION TIME**  
OF THE  
LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY  
FOR THE  
AUSTRALIAN CAPITAL TERRITORY

**HANSARD**

Edited proof transcript

Tuesday, 4 February 2025

This is an **EDITED PROOF TRANSCRIPT** of question time proceedings that is subject to further checking. Members' suggested corrections for the official *Weekly Hansard* should be lodged with the Hansard office as soon as possible.

**Tuesday, 4 February 2025**

Questions without notice:

|   |    |
|---|----|
| Government services—funding .....                               | 1  |
| Health—bulk billing .....                                       | 1  |
| Canberra Health Services—patients .....                         | 2  |
| Visitors .....  | 4  |
| Questions without notice.....                                   | 4  |
| Health—bulk-billing .....                                       | 4  |
| Health—funding.....   | 6  |
| Hospitals—dental conditions .....                               | 7  |
| Schools—Aunty Agnes Shea High School .....                      | 9  |
| Housing—Housing Australia Future Fund .....                     | 10 |
| Taxation—levies and duties .....                                | 11 |
| Rates and levies—interest rates on overdue accounts.....        | 12 |
| Schools—Brindabella Christian College .....                     | 13 |
| City and government services—road and cycleway maintenance..... | 14 |
| Gaming—gaming machines.....                                     | 15 |
| Light rail stage 2B—London Circuit construction work .....      | 16 |
| Teachers—recruitment and retention.....                         | 17 |
| Ginninderra Falls—water management .....                        | 18 |

## **Questions without notice**

### **Government services—funding**

**MS CASTLEY:** My question is to the Chief Minister. In the 16 weeks since the ACT election, your government has announced a public service restructure, with job cuts, a blowout to the health budget, cuts to health services and a public sector hiring freeze, virtually none of which was disclosed or even hinted at prior to the election. Chief Minister, why weren't you fully honest and up-front with the community prior to the election?

**MR BARR:** I thank the Leader of the Opposition for the question. Happy New Year! It is good to be back. I reject the premise of the Leader of the Opposition's question. It was very clear last year, as was reported extensively in the media, that we would be looking to reshape the ACT public sector, and of course, following the election, we followed through on that commitment.

**Ms Castley:** Restructure, but not cut surgeries.

**MR BARR:** There are no cuts outside of changes to the senior executive. The government has been very clear about that, and we are undertaking consultation in relation to changes to the structure of the ACT public service to reflect the priorities of the government in this new parliamentary term.

**MS CASTLEY:** Chief Minister, did you have any discussions or make any plans or strategies about cutting public service jobs or services prior to the election?

**MR BARR:** Again I reject the premise of the question—

**Ms Castley:** It is yes or no: did you have any conversations before the election?

**MR SPEAKER:** Ms Castley!

**MR BARR:** I made very clear that we intended to align planning and transport to better align it. I made that very clear in a speech and indeed reported it in the media well ahead of the election. Further changes to the structure of the ACT public sector have been announced and we are going through a consultation process in relation to those. And I have been very clear that, outside of changes in the senior executive service, there would be no job losses.

**MR COCKS:** Chief Minister, were any options for cutting jobs or services presented to the government prior to the election?

**MR BARR:** No.

### **Health—bulk billing**

**MS CASTLEY:** My question is to the Chief Minister. The *Cleanbill 2024 Blue Report* of 30 January 2025 found the bulk-billing rate for new patients was just 3.3 per cent, a decline from the previous year, which also coincided with rising out-of-pocket costs. Further, the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare report of 13 December 2024

found the bulk billing rate for all attendances was just 52 per cent, down from 63 per cent when you appointed the health minister to the role. Yet you told ABC Radio on 17 January that the bulk-billing rate “has started to lift in the ACT.” Chief Minister, why did you mislead Canberrans on the declining rate of bulk billing in the ACT?

**MR BARR:** Again, I reject the premise of the question. The data I was referring to was official Medicare data, I suspect, not some third party that does not—

*Members interjecting—*

**MR SPEAKER:** Mr Hanson.

**MR BARR:** Official Medicare data, as reported by the Australian government.

**MS CASTLEY:** Chief Minister, can you explain to Canberrans why the ACT has less bulk billing and higher out-of-pocket costs than the rest of the nation?

**MR BARR:** Well, that stems from a decision by Tony Abbott 10 years ago to freeze Medicare rebates. It was a decision of the then federal Liberal government—

*Ms Stephen-Smith interjecting—*

**MR SPEAKER:** Ms Stephen-Smith.

**MR BARR:** —outlining the usual anti-Medicare position of the Liberal Party.

**MR SPEAKER:** Point of order Mr Cocks.

**Mr Cocks:** The Chief Minister is now debating rather than answering the question.

**MR SPEAKER:** I do not think there is a point of order. I think Mr Barr is answering the question. Do you have anything further to add Mr Barr?

**MR BARR:** No, I have sat down Mr Speaker.

**MR HANSON:** So Chief Minister, when will you be honest and upfront about the true state of the health system?

**MR BARR:** I thank Mr Hanson for the supplementary. I am always honest and upfront, Mr Speaker.

### **Canberra Health Services—patients**

**MR RATTENBURY:** My question is to the Minister for Health.

Minister, it was announced last week that there were an additional 85,000 patient episodes in Canberra Health Services. It has been reported that this includes: 6,000 more emergency department visits, 6,600 more overnight hospital admissions, and additional surgeries and procedures.

Minister, could you please outline to the Assembly the other categories of treatment that make up these 85,000 additional patient episodes and the exact timetable over which these occurred?

**MS STEPHEN-SMITH:** I will take the detail of the question on notice for Mr Rattenbury, because there will be a lot of different types of presentations and you can break it down in different ways. But we are talking about things like walk-in centre presentations, which we know have increased dramatically. We also know that walk-in centres have been effective in taking pressure off the emergency departments, so you can only imagine what would have happened if the five nurse-led walk-in centres were not there from 7.30 am to 10 pm, 365 days a year, which would have been a risk under a Canberra Liberals government. I will take the rest of the question on notice.

**MR RATTENBURY:** Minister, why did the ACT's presentations at emergency departments grow by seven per cent, compared to the national average of 0.4 per cent? Why is there such a significant difference in emergency department presentations between the ACT and the rest of Australia.

**MS STEPHEN-SMITH:** I thank Mr Rattenbury for the supplementary question, because it does go to something that the Chief Minister and the Leader of the Opposition were talking about earlier. We do not know exactly what is driving increased emergency department presentations, and we know that this broadly is a trend that other jurisdictions actually have been seeing.

But part of that is there is a lack of access to primary care, which is of course a commonwealth responsibility. As the Chief Minister was saying, the freeze in Medicare rebates over many years under the previous coalition government increased the cost of attending a GP, and the ACT has for many years had a relatively high number of people reporting to the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare that they are delaying general practice appointments because of the cost of attendance.

This is a commonwealth responsibility and this—

**Mr Hanson:** In the ACT. In the ACT!

**MS STEPHEN-SMITH:** In the ACT. The ACT has historically experienced this, but it got worse under the coalition government and it has been improving under the Albanese government, since they tripled the bulk-billing incentive.

*Mr Hanson interjecting—*

**MS CLAY:** Minister, what is the government doing to ensure there is greater access to preventative health care that is timely and bulk-billed here in the ACT?

**MS STEPHEN-SMITH:** I thank Ms Clay for the supplementary question, which of course enables me to talk about ACT Labor's election commitment to improve bulk-billing in the ACT. We have a committed to a fund co-designed with our clinicians in the community and with consumers to specifically target increasing rates of bulk-billing. When the ACT government has done this before, when we have invested in GP primary care infrastructure before, we have had an impact on increasing the rate of bulk

billing, despite the efforts of the coalition federal government at the time. We have committed to a fund to increase bulk-billing, and we have also committed to a fund to support the attraction and retention of junior doctors into general practice.

**Mr Hanson:** But it's not working, is it?

**MS STEPHEN-SMITH:** Mr Hanson, we committed to it in the election. We will be—

**Mr Hanson:** It's gotten worse. Relatively, it's been getting worse, hasn't it?

**MS STEPHEN-SMITH:** We have not implemented it yet, because we committed to it in the election—something the Canberra Liberals did not do.

So we will be working with primary care providers, general practitioners and practice owners; with our consumers and with junior doctors to co-design this fund to increase the rate of bulk-billing but also to attract and retain junior doctors in the system and to support the wellbeing of our general practice workforce, including supporting the AMA's DRS4DRS program, because we know how hard our general practitioners work and we know how important they are in improving the health care of Canberrans.

## Visitors

**MR SPEAKER:** I draw members' attention to the presence in the gallery of a couple of shady characters! But additionally to two former members of the Assembly, in Michael Moore and Bill Stefaniak.

On behalf of all members, I welcome you both to the Assembly.

## Questions without notice Health—bulk-billing

**MS CASTLEY:** My question is to the Minister for Health. Minister, reports from Cleanbill and the Institute of Health and Welfare show access to bulk-billing continues to fall in the ACT, both for new and existing patients, while out-of-pockets keep rising, as we have been discussing—and this is for those fortunate enough even to see their local GP. What do you say to Canberrans who are now unable to see a bulk-billing doctor because of their very genuine concerns about cost?

**MS STEPHEN-SMITH:** I thank the Leader of the Opposition for the question, because it does give me the opportunity to point out, again, that unlike the Canberra Liberals, ACT Labor committed specifically to a fund to support better access to bulk-billing. It is a commonwealth responsibility. The Albanese Labor government has tripled the bulk-billing incentive. That has, in fact, had a significant impact on stopping the slide in bulk-billing and increasing the rate of bulk-billing—stabilising that and increasing the rate of bulk-billing in the ACT, according to the Medicare data, which is the data that is generally used in this area, and which the Chief Minister referred to.

**Ms Castley:** A point of order on relevance.

**MS STEPHEN-SMITH:** I think the question was, "What would I say to people"—

**Ms Castley:** To Canberrans. We don't need to know what Albanese has done. We need to know what you would say to Canberrans who cannot see a doctor.

**MR SPEAKER:** Ms Castley, I do not think there is a point of order.

**MS STEPHEN-SMITH:** What I would say is thank goodness the ACT Labor government was elected, because we committed to a specific fund to support bulk-billing, and we will be considering that, Mr Hanson, in the context of the upcoming budget. We have only just been elected, and it was an election commitment.

We also specifically committed to a \$4 million professional development and well-being fund for primary care to ensure that we can attract and retain junior doctors to general practice training in the ACT. Our university here, the Australian National University, has a specific focus on general practice and is highly regarded for that. We need to ensure that we are keeping our medical students training here and working in general practice here. Some of the previous training arrangements have not been structured to support that, but we, unlike the Canberra Liberals, have committed to specific funding to support that outcome.

**MS CASTLEY:** Minister, when can families struggling to get access to a doctor expect to see real changes to this situation?

**MS STEPHEN-SMITH:** A lot more quickly under a Labor government than they would have if the Canberra Liberals had been re-elected.

*Ms Castley interjecting—*

*Mr Hanson interjecting—*

**Ms Orr:** On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Ms Castley, I appreciate, is very passionate about this topic and has a lot of views, but there are a number of interjections which do make it hard to hear. I also seek your guidance on addressing comments through you rather than directly to the minister, because there has been a bit of finger pointing that indicates that that might not be happening.

**MR SPEAKER:** Thank you, Ms Orr. It is getting a little rowdy. If we could just try and keep a lid on it, that would be good. Additionally, my advice to ministers would be that, although Mr Hanson is extremely entertaining it, it may be beneficial to direct your answers through me rather than through him.

**MR HANSON:** Well said, Mr Speaker. Minister, who is responsible for health care becoming less affordable and less accessible in the ACT? Is that you, or is it Mr Albanese?

**MS STEPHEN-SMITH:** If you refer to my previous answers, both the ACT Labor government and the Albanese Labor government have been working very hard to address the 10 years of neglect of primary care, aged care and the NDIS under the previous coalition government, but this was never going to turn around overnight after 10 years of neglect.

**Mr Hanson:** On a point of relevance. She is talking about who is responsible for addressing it. I asked: who is responsible for it becoming less affordable and less accessible in the ACT?

**MS STEPHEN-SMITH:** That is easy: it is the previous coalition federal government.

### **Health—funding**

**MS CASTLEY:** My question is to the Minister for Health. On 30 January 2025, it was reported in the *Canberra Times* that you were considering cuts to ACT health services, saying:

To cut what is the equivalent of 10 per cent of Canberra Health Services budget, we'll be looking at things like significantly reducing access to elective surgery for the rest of the year.

In the interests of transparency, can you please outline exactly what cuts you are looking at and which elective surgery options will be reduced.

**MS STEPHEN-SMITH:** I do not quite know where to start with this, because if Ms Castley had read the entire transcript, she would see that what I was saying was that if the ACT Labor government had not chosen to invest an additional \$227 million in Canberra Health Services this year, which will be done through an additional supplementary appropriation bill to be introduced into the Assembly this week, we would be having to make very difficult decisions about cutting services. The ACT Labor government, which is committed to maintaining high-quality health care for Canberrans, has made the choice of making additional investment rather than the cuts that Ms Castley has referred to.

**MS CASTLEY:** Minister, if you have wasted so much money on so many scandals, rebrands et cetera, will you be able to keep providing some of these services?

**MS STEPHEN-SMITH:** We will be continuing to provide these services.

**MR HANSON:** Minister, will you rule out any cuts to services in ACT Health this year?

**Ms Castley:** Low-value care, for instance.

**MS STEPHEN-SMITH:** The Leader of the Opposition just interjected, “Low-value care.” The Leader of the Opposition has been the shadow minister for health for at least 2½ years. If she is not familiar with the term “low-value care”, I would encourage her or her office to google that term.

**Mr Hanson:** A point of order, Mr Speaker.

**MR SPEAKER:** A point of order, Mr Hanson?

**Mr Hanson:** I asked a question. You have just made a ruling about not responding to



interjections. I have asked a direct question about whether the minister will guarantee that there will be no cuts to any services this year, and I would ask for a direct response.

**MR SPEAKER:** Minister, I think there is a genuine point of order here, on relevance. Have you finished your answer?

**MS STEPHEN-SMITH:** No, I am waiting for the call.

**MR SPEAKER:** Minister?

**MS STEPHEN-SMITH:** Mr Speaker, we have been very clear about the efforts that Canberra Health Services will make to ensure that we do not have to invest more than another \$227 million through this particular measure; that is, we are seeking to institute \$27 million worth of efficiencies this financial year. We have also been clear that we are not cutting services this financial year, but we have been clear that we need to have a tough conversation with Canberrans about what services are delivered by the ACT government and what those services look like into the future.

This is not a new conversation. The former Leader of the Opposition and the shadow minister for health sat with me on many panels through the election campaign, and I have said many times on radio that growing health funding, which is a third of the ACT budget, by eight or 10 per cent a year is never sustainable, and that this is an ongoing, difficult conversation with the Canberra community about how we fund high-quality healthcare services in the ACT. But I can tell you one thing, Mr Speaker: we are focused on delivering high-quality frontline services, and those opposite are not.

### **Hospitals—dental conditions**

**MR RATTENBURY:** Mr Speaker, my question is also to the Minister for Health.

Minister, given the pressure on the emergency department we discussed earlier, I am concerned that potentially preventable hospitalisations have been steadily increasing in the ACT. Data from the Australian Research Centre for Population Oral Health reporting in 2020-21 suggested 1,407 people attended hospital for preventable dental conditions.

Minister, what are the more recent trends in preventable hospitalisations for dental conditions in the territory?

**MS STEPHEN-SMITH:** I thank Mr Rattenbury for the question.

Again, I will take the detail of the question on notice. But specifically in relation to dental care, of course, is another area where former Prime Minister Tony Abbott, former health minister Tony Abbott and former health minister Peter Dutton, actually cut—literally cut—literally cut funding—

*Members interjecting—*

**Ms Berry:** Mr Speaker, on the level of the volume in this place when ministers are trying to answer questions: a minister should not have to yell across the chamber to

answer a question—

**MR SPEAKER:** Thank you, Ms Berry. If we can just try and keep a lid on it.

**MS STEPHEN-SMITH:** The former coalition government cut funding for public dental services. This has had a very real impact, and it is a serious point; it has had a very real impact on the capacity of lower income people across Australia, not just here in the ACT, to access quality dental care.

This is a significant issue that the ACT government has consistently advocated to the commonwealth about, to restore those funding cuts to commonwealth dental funding, because we know that oral health is vitally important.

Overall, the ACT actually has a pretty good record on preventable hospitalisations and the walk-in centres are an important part of that.

**MR RATTENBURY:** Minister, what steps have you taken to make available data on how many emergency room presentations arise from dental issues, given that the inquiry into annual and financial reports 2022-23 recommended that the ACT government report this data regularly?

**MS STEPHEN-SMITH:** I will take the question on notice, just to see what work is underway in relation to that. Mr Rattenbury would be aware that we have had some data reporting challenges in relation to the implementation of the digital health record. I can advise the Assembly that we will soon be publishing a dashboard with some important data in relation to that. But that does mean that some of the work that would have otherwise been done in relation to detailed reporting around causes of presentations et cetera, may have had to be put a bit on the backburner while we undertook the data remediation project.

In addition, as Mr Rattenbury would be aware, because it has been mentioned in responses to multiple questions on notice and probably in hearings as well, it is challenging to get cause of presentation data from emergency departments in a highly accurate way, quite often, because people will present with complex conditions, and they will be coded in different ways.

But I will take the detail of the question on notice and come back to Mr Rattenbury with a response specifically in relation to those dental and oral health issues.

**MS CLAY:** Minister, what steps have you taken to provide Canberrans with better access to dental care?

**MS STEPHEN-SMITH:** Canberra Health Services does provide dental care for Canberrans, and we have been investing in that. Since the COVID-19 pandemic, when some of those services had to be put on hold—because obviously, they are services where there is close contact between people and it was a respiratory virus—we have made significant efforts to continue to increase access and to reduce those wait times. So I will take on notice to provide Ms Clay some data on relation to how many services we have been delivering in the public dental system.

But again, that is a co-funded system with the commonwealth government and the previous coalition governments' specific and deliberate cuts to public dental care have had an impact in this area.

### **Schools—Aunty Agnes Shea High School**

**MR WERNER-GIBBINGS:** My question is to the Minister for Education and Early Childhood. Minister, on Monday, another school opened in the ACT. Can you explain why this is important for our city?

**MS BERRY:** I thank Mr Werner-Gibbings for his question and his interest in our public school system. The ACT government is continuing to make strong investments in public education and is committed to delivering the best possible schools for our growing population. I am so proud that we have opened another new public school in the ACT—No 92. We have opened a new school every year for the last five years in the ACT. Our latest, Aunty Agnes Shea High School, opened yesterday in Taylor. I was really happy to be there with the foundation principal, Daniel Mowbray, and lots of excited year 7 students and their families. It was a really special moment to share with Aunty Agnes Shea's family. Aunty Agnes's granddaughter Selena Walker and other family members were also present. Selena has a special connection with the school now, having designed the artwork on the logo and the uniforms. I want to especially thank Aunty Agnes's family for trusting us and for sharing Aunty Agnes's namesake with our community. It is such a powerful thing for them to have done.

**MR WERNER-GIBBINGS:** Minister, how many students will be learning at this school?

**MS BERRY:** Thank you for the supplementary. There are currently 81 students enrolled at Aunty Agnes Shea High School for this year. The school has capacity for up to 800 students in years 7 to 10. The school will be phasing in years progressively, with the current school year only open to year 7s. Students at Aunty Agnes Shea High School will have the best opportunities to learn in state-of-the-art facilities, including wood technology and metalwork rooms. From talking to the students, I know they were especially excited about these two areas, as well as the arts and science spaces. The school features a double gym, a covered hardcourt and kick-about spaces. Schools are important hubs for the community, so these spaces will also be available for community use outside of school hours.

**MR HANSON:** Minister, how many schools will need to open before we make up for the 23 schools closed by Mr Barr?

**MS BERRY:** Every new school that has been opened in the ACT is in an area of significant population growth. As Mr Hanson may know, from 2019 to now, 2025, we have opened schools in Molonglo and Gungahlin, and we will soon have new schools in Whitlam and Strathnairn.

**Mr Cocks:** On a point of order on relevance: the question was around the quantity of schools, not their location. Mr Speaker, I ask that you direct the minister to that issue.

**MR SPEAKER:** Minister, I hate to say it, but I think there is a point of order on

relevance. I think the question was—

**MS BERRY:** I had completed my answer. In fact, I described that schools are being built in areas of population growth. This is not a replacement program. A replacement program is not required.

### **Housing—Housing Australia Future Fund**

**MR EMERSON:** My question is to the Minister for Homes and New Suburbs. It is an unfortunate reality that basic shelter is now often spoken about through a prism of crisis and desperation. The situation here, as we know in Canberra, is especially dire: older people without accumulated wealth feel forgotten by a housing system that is leaving vulnerable people sleeping in cars; working families are facing increasing housing stress with no change in sight; and many young Canberrans feel they cannot afford their own future. Housing is consistently identified by ACTCOSS as the greatest cost-of-living pressure for low income households in the ACT. So I was pleased to secure a commitment from the Chief Minister to increase the proportion of social housing dwellings in the ACT, which has been going backwards for many years. The Housing Australia Future Fund, or the HAFF, can help the government deliver on that commitment. I understand preferred projects under funding round one are currently progressing through contract negotiations and, subject to contracts being awarded, will deliver more than 13,700 new social and affordable homes across Australia. Can the Minister advise how many dwellings were applied for in the ACT in round one, and how many were approved? How many homes out of the 13,700 across Australia can Canberrans expect to see built here in the ACT through the HAFF funding round one?

**MS BERRY:** I thank Mr Emerson for his question and his interest in housing support for Canberrans here in the ACT. I can advise that I have anecdotally heard there will be around 700 new dwellings delivered here in the ACT. This is an achievement that is well above expectations for the ACT community, so that will be a good outcome. It is well above what other per capita outcomes have achieved throughout the rest of the country. However, I have not been advised which projects yet will be successful, given, as Mr Emerson said, the federal government is still in contract negotiations. But as soon as we are aware of that, obviously we will make that publicly known.

**MR EMERSON:** The deadline for funding applications under round 2 of the HAFF closed at midday last Friday, 31 January. Round 2 is open only to state and territory governments who are able to submit in collaboration with community housing providers and will deliver 5,000 social housing—

*Members interjecting—*

**MR SPEAKER:** If someone wanted to make a point of order, they could, but—

*Members interjecting—*

**MR EMERSON:** Is there a point of order?

*Members interjecting—*

**MR SPEAKER:** Mr Emerson, your question contains a massive preamble. It needs to start with a question. Do you have a question?

**MR EMERSON:** How many dwellings did the ACT government apply for in round two?

**MS BERRY:** Thank you again Mr Emerson for your supplementary question. I am really excited to say the ACT government last week submitted a list of Housing ACT projects to the Housing Australia Future Fund round two and that will mean more than 100 dwellings across a number of proposed developments across all corners of the ACT. So we are hoping that we will be successful and that those applications will be considered favourably, which would mean that over the next five to 10 years, we will be very busy in the ACT building a range of different kinds of housing types but including making sure we are supporting people on low or no incomes.

**MS CARRICK:** Round one of the HAFF contracts need to be signed before 30 June 2025. Can the Minister commit to ensuring all project contracts for successful applicants in the ACT will be signed before the 30 June deadline?

**MS BERRY:** That will be up to negotiations that are held—if I am referring to HAFF round 2, those will depend on our success for the applications that we have made. If they are positively received and we are successful, then we will go into contract negotiations with the federal government. The current contract negotiations are occurring with the federal government right now. I cannot guarantee the timelines around that as that is not something the ACT government has any control of.

### **Taxation—levies and duties**

**MR COCKS:** My question is to the Treasurer.

Treasurer, could you please clarify the distinction between a tax, a duty and a levy, as well as how each is applied within the government's fiscal framework?

**MR STEEL:** I thank the member for his question. If he is after a sort of statement of opinion about those things, we can certainly provide him some further details on notice. But certainly the ACT government will be looking at a range of different measures in the budget. I encourage him to look at what measures we have made in relation to the budget review when I present it on Thursday.

**Mr Cocks:** Point of order. It is on relevance. I did not ask for a statement of opinion; I asked the Treasurer to clarify the distinction between a tax, a duty and a levy.

**MR STEEL:** I thank the member for his question. As I have indicated, I am happy to take that on notice with some further information, if that helps him to understand what the differences are.

**MR COCKS:** Treasurer, could you please advise when the Safer Families Levy, so-called, which has been in place for nearly a decade, is intended to cease, given the generally accepted definition of a levy is a temporary and targeted measure?

**MR STEEL:** As I noted in the answer to the first question, the government considers revenue measures, including taxation measures, levies and duties each year as part of the budget process, and we will do so again for the 2025-26 budget.

**MR MILLIGAN:** Could the Treasurer please confirm when the Energy Industry Levy, the MAI levy and the private sector worker's compensation levy will conclude? Or has the government used the term levy to mislead Canberrans into thinking these permanent taxes are temporary measures?

**MR STEEL:** No, and we will provide updates for the community about revenue measures in the budget, as we do every year.

### **Rates and levies—interest rates on overdue accounts**

**MR COCKS:** My question is to the Treasurer. The ACT government charges an interest rate on overdue rates of 12.42 per cent, compounding monthly. This is significantly higher than other jurisdictions, including New South Wales, and far higher than the interest rates people pay on home loans, for example. Given the significant financial pressures on ACT households from rising rates and other factors, why are such high penalties necessary, especially when those most likely to have overdue rates are those struggling the most with cost-of-living challenges?

**MR STEEL:** Well, of course, the sustainable revenue base, including own-source taxation, like rates, provides funding to be able to deliver the healthcare services, the education services, the transport services and other services across government that Canberrans rely on. And it is important that those are paid by Canberrans, and there is an expectation that they are, and there are penalties if they are not paid. We are not going to the same extent as the jurisdiction next to us is—at QPRC at the moment—which is undertaking some quite strong measures in relation to non-payment of rates, but there are penalties that are available for enforcement of a payment of those things.

*Members interjecting—*

**MR SPEAKER:** Mr Barr and Mr Hanson!

**MR STEEL:** Of course, if those people have an issue with paying, they should contact the government through Access Canberra and the Revenue Office to discuss that.

**MR COCKS:** Is the government even concerned about the disproportionate impact this policy has on low income households?

**MR STEEL:** There is the range of different measures that the government is undertaking to support Canberrans with cost of living, but we also need to make sure that we are delivering services to the community that Canberrans rely on, particularly healthcare services, at the moment. That is why it is important that there is a source of sustainable revenue, and there are penalties in place for those that do not pay that revenue to support the services that Canberrans rely on. But if people have an issue with paying that, then they need to get in touch to discuss how that payment can be made. And we will continue to look at a range of other measures to support Canberrans with cost of living, as we already have done in relation to public transport, since we were

elected, and as was announced by Minister Berry this week in relation to providing support for camps for students through our school system. We will continue to look at a range of ways to support people with cost of living, but it is important that there is also a revenue base to support services and, indeed, cost-of living measures for Canberrans as well.

**MS BARRY:** Minister, what specific measures is the government implementing to ensure penalties and interest charges on overdue rates do not exacerbate financial hardship for vulnerable Canberrans?

**MR STEEL:** By encouraging them to get in touch early. Of course, we also provide funding for organisations like Care financial, for example, which can provide support for people who are experiencing financial hardship. We would encourage people to reach out and get a hold on what their situation is in relation to liabilities that are due, but we have been clear about what those penalties are. I encourage Canberrans to get in touch with Access Canberra and the Revenue Office if they have any issues that they want to talk through.

### **Schools—Brindabella Christian College**

**MISS NUTTALL:** My question is to the minister for education. Minister, last week Mr Rattenbury and I met with the Community for Constitutional Reform at Brindabella Christian College. With the school term starting shortly, they expressed significant concerns about the lack of guarantees from the ACT government regarding the proprietors' compliance with financial and regulatory requirements. Last year you promised action by December, yet nothing has been done. Minister, school is back today. Why has the government not acted to address the alarming behaviour of the Brindabella Christian College board?

**MS BERRY:** I thank Miss Nuttall for her question. I know that there is a significant amount of interest in the affairs relating to Brindabella Christian College, so I do thank her for the question. All families should have confidence in our schools across the ACT, regardless of whether they are public schools, independent or part of the Catholic school system.

Members will know that, in September last year, I took regulatory action against Brindabella Christian Education Ltd. In that action I imposed conditions on the registration of Brindabella Christian College which required them to comply with conditions imposed on them under the Australian Education Act. I should clarify that I said in December that I was hopeful that I would be able to make public any further action that I would take before Christmas, or before the end of December. However, I was not able to do that.

Brindabella Christian College have responded to that regulatory action. I am carefully considering their response. These are really serious matters, and they have serious consequences for our community, particularly those at Brindabella Christian College, so I am taking them all very seriously. That is why I am taking the time to consider them so carefully before I make a decision.

**MISS NUTTALL:** Minister, what guarantees can you provide to concerned parents

that their students returning to Brindabella Christian College this week will attend a safe and compliant institution with suitable teacher-student ratios and safe workloads, considering the proprietors' various breaches of regulations that have been identified by the school community?

**MS BERRY:** I can assure the community that the Registration Standards Advisory Board are working diligently within their legislative powers to ensure that the proprietors are doing the right thing, and they will continue to do that work.

**MS TOUGH:** Minister, do you remain committed to providing further information on this matter to families and the public?

**MS BERRY:** Absolutely. I think it is an important question to ask, and it is important to explain that Brindabella Christian College are being held to account, although I understand the community's frustration regarding the time it has taken to get a response and a clarified position on what the ACT government can do and what the Australian government can do. I am not able to foreshadow any decisions or any considerations that are being made at this point in time. As soon as I am able to do so, I will make sure that I keep the community, and the school community in particular, engaged with those responses.

### **City and government services—road and cycleway maintenance**

**MR MILLIGAN:** My question is to the minister for city services.

Minister, numerous cyclists have reported an unprecedented level of glass and other debris, and it has accumulated on the bike shoulder of the Monaro Highway, leading to many punctures and the risk of serious injury. The northbound route between Mugga Lane and Lanyon Drive has long been problematic and continues to become worse. Correspondence with Pedal Power has confirmed this is a major issue for local cyclists.

When was the last time a street sweeper was deployed on this section of the road? Why are street sweepers not regularly deployed, given the government's push for more active travel?

**MS CHEYNE:** Mr Speaker, I am not sure that you are many people, but certainly your activism, Mr Speaker, does feel like many people sometimes.

Mr Speaker, in response to Mr Milligan's two questions, we do deploy street sweepers regularly throughout our suburbs. In fact, information is publicly available every week about where street sweepers are scheduled to be. There has been a real focus of the street sweeping fleet in the north of Canberra in particular, following the storm that we had on 15 January. That has been appropriate, Mr Speaker, given the huge amount of debris that has been there.

In relation to when a streetsweeper was last in that exact location, I will take that on notice and come back as soon as I can.

**MR MILLIGAN:** Minister, why does not the Monaro Highway upgrades include a separated bike path?



**MS CHEYNE:** I have answered this on many occasions, including to Ms Clay's questions in the last term. There are future plans for this, but we are doing it in a staged way, and that is the answer.

**MS MORRIS:** Minister, why is it that the government does not deliver the same attentions and services in the outer areas of Tuggeranong and Canberra as the inner city?

**MS CHEYNE:** Well obviously I reject the premise of that question. We absolutely do and you only need to look at that weekly update, that I was speaking about. You can sign up to a newsletter. It is regularly updated on the website, 3.00 pm on Fridays for the week ahead.

The Chief Minister regularly shares updates specifically as they relate to Tuggeranong because we know there is a distinct amount of interest there. In fact, Mr Speaker, when Ms Tough and I were just at Urambi Hills with the local park care group there about 10 days ago, it was remarked to me just how good Tuggeranong is looking and how much effort our hardworking City Services crews have put in, and all others who provide our municipal services, and have been working in some pretty wild conditions over the last few years. That they have been able to get on top of it has been remarkable, and I have been getting that feedback right across the board. But it was great to hear it and to see it while I was in Tuggeranong just recently.

### **Gaming—gaming machines**

**MS CARRICK:** My question is to the Minister for Gaming Reform. The government's community clubs policy states that it will support community clubs to diversify as part of reducing the number of electronic gaming machine authorisations. The Suburban Land Agency has selected the Hellenic Club to deliver Phillip Section 7, across from its primary premises on Matilda Street. The Hellenic Club has also received approval for a \$146 million redevelopment of its primary premises. How many electronic gaming machine authorisations will the Hellenic Club be surrendering as it diversifies its income through these significant developments?

**DR PATERSON:** I thank the member for the question. The machine reductions are proportional across all venues. I can take on notice the exact number of machines that the Hellenic Club will have to surrender through the next surrender, which is occurring now, but it is proportional. Small clubs have to reduce by a smaller number of machines. For larger clubs, it is proportional to the number of machines they have. It is a fair reduction. At the point where a club reaches 20 machines, they are not required to participate in the surrender scheme.

**MS CARRICK:** When will the terms of reference for the inquiry into the future of ACT clubs be released? And what is the anticipated timeframe for the conduct of the inquiry?

**DR PATERSON:** I thank the member for the question. The terms of reference will be released shortly, over the next couple of months. The inquiry will take about a year. That is what we committed to when we went to the election. Work has progressed on

these things. I look forward to informing the Assembly when we have released the terms of reference and we will start the inquiry.

**MR EMERSON:** Will the minister commit to reducing the number of poker machines in the ACT more rapidly given that recent research out of the ANU suggests there will be no likely impact on gambling harm reduction until we reach fewer than 2,000 machines, which, at the current rate, will not happen for another 12 years?

**DR PATERSON:** No. I am committed to reducing the number of machines to 1,000 by 2045. That is what we took to the election. That is what I am committed to delivering.

**Mr Hanson:** Just close the Labor Club pokies. Get rid of your own pokies. Show some leadership.

**MR SPEAKER:** Mr Hanson!

**DR PATERSON:** I am strongly committed to reducing the number of machines to 1,000 by 2045. That is why we are working on an inquiry into the club sector—to work with the clubs in terms of supporting them to diversify and on what a sustainable club sector is in the ACT. I think this is incredibly important and I think the ACT can act as a model for the rest of Australia in terms of reducing machine numbers and supporting our club sector to transition.

### **Light rail stage 2B—London Circuit construction work**

**MS TOUGH:** My question is to the Minister for Transport. Minister, it is fantastic to see the commencement of the major construction works for light rail to Commonwealth Park. How does this project contribute towards the government's vision for our growing city?

**MR STEEL:** I thank the member for her question. Light rail is symbolic of our government's long term vision for our city, to make it a vibrant, connected and sustainable place to live. We have always said that light rail is more than just about providing better public transport for our growing city. It is about better streets. It is about better public places and support for more homes and businesses as well. We have seen the benefits already that stage 1 provided to our city with the introduction of mass transit. We are seeing construction now about to start on the western side of London Circuit for the stage 2A project that will bring significant benefits as well. We have seen, of course, the enabling projects coming to a close with the raising of London Circuit, which is helping to bring our city closer to the lake and revitalise the southern part of the CBD. Light rail will transform what was a busy road interchange that used to have a six metre high wall blocking pedestrian movement between the city and the lake into a place that will be welcoming for residents, businesses, visitors and commuters. We have already seen additional investment from the private sector with the recent announcement of more housing and commercial facilities in section 121 of Civic. The construction of light rail will also support delivery of the Acton Waterfront vision and the new Canberra Theatre, as well as other city-shaping infrastructure that will benefit all Canberrans for decades to come. Light rail to Commonwealth Park will give an easier way to visit major events by the lake, increase public transport patronage and create hundreds of local jobs in the construction sector. It is a fantastic Labor

initiative, delivered by Labor government.

**MS TOUGH:** Minister, what work can Canberrans expect to see with the start of construction?

**MR STEEL:** I thank the member for her supplementary question. We have been clear from the beginning, again, that building this once in a generation piece of infrastructure will cause some disruption in the city. Canberrans will understand that we need to do this work now so that we can avoid future gridlock that so many cities face by not putting the infrastructure in place. Works will include fencing stored around London Circuit west between Northbourne Avenue and Edinburgh Avenue and the removal of existing street assets on London Circuit for readiness for construction; that includes bike racks, water fountains, park benches and light poles. We will also see the start of utilities being removed and relocated. Additional construction compounds have already been set up in the corner of London Circuit and Constitution Avenue and in the cloverleaf on the south side of Lake Burley Griffin between Flynn Drive and Commonwealth Avenue.

While sections of London Circuit west will be closed to motorists and on-road cyclists between Northbourne Avenue and Edinburgh Avenue, parts of London Circuit will be re-opened as they are completed to maintain local access through the area. Access will be maintained to businesses along London Circuit and signage will be in place to assist visitors, residents and other people to navigate the area. Variable message signage will also be in place around the city to alert approaching drivers about the closures. Access to Knowles Place north and Odgers Lane will be maintained for motorists and cyclists. Pedestrian and wheelchair access will be assured for the bus and light rail interchanges as we build this significant project for our growing city.

**MR WERNER-GIBBINGS:** Minister, what is the easiest way for people to get current information about the project as construction work progresses?

**MR STEEL:** I thank Mr Werner-Gibbings for his question. The government has been flagging to the community for some time about the upcoming road closures and subsequent construction work required to deliver this once in a generation asset for Canberra. There are a range of ways that Canberrans can access information to stay up-to-date with the construction and delivery of light rail to Commonwealth Park. This includes signing up for construction notifications through the Built for CBR website. We have also developed an interactive map about the deliverables on the project for people who may be more interested in the finer details. Of course, Canberrans can also continue to follow the ACT government's social media accounts, as well as Transport Canberra, to get a more fulsome understanding of what work is happening and when. There has also been a very considerable engagement with businesses along where the construction will be occurring for stage 2A and of course, we will be continuing to update them in a timely way as the construction program moves through different phases.

### **Teachers—recruitment and retention**

**MISS NUTTALL:** My question is to the minister for education. Minister, last month the ACT Education Directorate informed the media that ACT public schools are now

fully staffed, which is awesome to hear. Can you confirm that all vacancies in ACT public schools have been filled?

**MS BERRY:** I thank Miss Nuttall for that question. As of 3 January there were seven vacant positions across 92 public schools, which is an excellent position for our ACT public schools to be in starting the year in 2025. Of those seven vacancies there are four permanent substantive vacancies and there are three temporary vacancies. But the Education Directorate has not stopped with its ongoing recruitment program, campaigning across a range of different areas, online channels, social media sites, job boards, Seek, LinkedIn, Teachers On Net, Facebook et cetera. Also advertising in New Zealand, Canada and the United Kingdom, establishing pathways from college to initial teacher education as well as continuing to work with local and interstate universities to provide a supportive induction program for educators wanting to work here in the ACT.

**MISS NUTTALL:** Thank you, minister. What measures will be implemented to ensure that the current workforce will stay in the public education system in the long term?

**MS BERRY:** Well, we are working very closely with the Australian Education Union in particular on making sure that we retain our front spot in the country of having some of the highest wages and the best conditions in the country for educators in the ACT. I have committed to ensure during our next round of negotiations that our wages will remain amongst the highest in the country and that our public schools are places where people want to work.

We are also working with educators and their unions about how we make sure that our workplaces are safe and that we address workload challenges that have become more and more obvious across our school system. And so we are working across the board to reduce workloads through things like insourcing building service offices into a more centralised program to take those workload pressures off our executive staff in our schools; working with our school principals about what we can do to support them through their mental health and wellbeing; taking workload pressures across the system so that teachers, school principals and school staff can do what they have been engaged to do, and that is to provide our children with the best possible education.

**MR BRADDOCK:** Minister, what measures will be implemented to ensure new educators in particular are able to stay in their profession?

**MS BERRY:** Well, again I refer to some of the highest wages and conditions in the country in our enterprise agreement, also our induction process with new educators in the ACT, where we had over 200 new educators join our public school education system, inducted into our system with specialised support through the Education Directorate as well as expertise within their schools to offer mentoring support to new educators.

As I have been speaking to new educators who are coming to work in the ACT, they are excited. We want them to remain excited through their career and provide them with opportunities to continue with their professional learning, but also to continue on a career pathway to make sure that they stay in the ACT in our public school systems and that they have a pathway to career development into the future.

### **Ginninderra Falls—water management**

**MS CASTLEY:** My question is to the minister for the environment. Minister, as you are aware, there is a major Netflix production currently set up at Ginninderra Falls involving up to 300 people. This \$350 million production relies on water flowing over the falls, but I understand the water flow was stopped by your agency this morning, stopping the production of the movie. There is an imminent risk of the production shutting down and moving to another location outside of Canberra. What actions are you taking, or will you take today, to ensure production can continue?

**MS ORR:** I thank Ms Castley for her question. As Ms Castley will be aware because we have had previous discussions on this, there is a bit of history here in that there was a little bit of water that was needed to be released from Lake Ginninderra, from the ACT water supply. That can only be done under the legislative framework that is in place to make sure that we are managing our water system in accordance with sensible water management and good environmental outcomes.

As Ms Castley is aware, there has been a significant amount of work by directorate officials to support the production and to meet our environmental obligations, and that resulted in water being released so that they could do their filming. My understanding, and what I have been briefed on, is that a request for additional water to what was originally requested has come forward. That is being considered, but it has to be considered under the same framework.

**MS CASTLEY:** Minister, have you personally communicated with anyone involved in the production to explain what has happened and why?

**MS ORR:** I thank Ms Castley for her follow-up question. My understanding is that my office has been in communication with the owner of Ginninderra Falls. The directorate, which does the assessment and makes the recommendations as to whether it meets the legislation, and other technical experts, who can make the assessment as to how much water can be released and when, are working through the detail that they need to work through with the owner of Ginninderra Falls, which is where the film location is, and Netflix, which is the producer of the film. So, yes, I can assure Ms Castley that there have been extensive conversations between many people to support a project that we are very happy to have here in Canberra, but I must stress it must also meet our environmental requirements.

**MR CAIN:** Minister, will you commit to personally intervene to immediately restore the flows for the next three days, lest we lose this massive injection into our economy?

**MS ORR:** I point the member to my previous answer. We have to work within the legislative framework that is there. That is what we will continue to do while looking at how we can support a production that we are very excited to have here in Canberra and have worked very hard to support so far.

**Mr Barr:** I ask that all further questions be placed on the notice paper.