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Madam Speaker Purick took the Chair at 10 am.

VISITORS
Parap Primary School

Madam SPEAKER: Honourable members, I advise of the presence in the gallery of two Year 6 classes from Parap Primary School, accompanied by their teachers, Mr Young and Mrs Hardy. On behalf of honourable members, welcome to Parliament House. I hope you enjoy your time here.

Members: Hear, hear!

Madam SPEAKER: Honourable members, I draw your attention to the presence in the gallery of the wife of the Opposition Leader, Rhonda Higgins. Welcome. The two little chipmunks must be grandchildren. Hi, boys.

Members: Hear, hear!

MINISTERIAL STATEMENT
Early Childhood Development Plan

Ms MANISON (Children): Madam Speaker, the Gunner Labor government will place children at the heart of government. As the Territory's Minister for Children, it is with a feeling of great anticipation that I state this central objective of our government and deliver the first ministerial statement on the government's early childhood development plan.

Prior to and during our election campaign the Chief Minister made it very clear that the evidence for investing in our children is unequivocal. In regard to our economy, our capacity to deliver our social fabric and our reputation, we must invest in our children. We took our policy to the people, holding town hall meetings to discuss the importance of the early childhood years and how government can best support children and their families, and the non-government organisations that can work in this vital sector. Many Territorians had input into this policy development work.

The Northern Territory's future prosperity depends on the collective investments we make in our children's development. As Minister for Children I intend to keep this Assembly and all Territorians well informed about the development, implementation and outcomes of our early childhood plans.

I will now detail how the government will approach the why, how, what and when of early childhood development.

First, let me start with the why. When we invest in improving programs and services that help all children to be healthy, get a good education and contribute to our collective prosperity, we all benefit. Every dollar we invest in early childhood will increase productivity and revenue, as was noted in the Great Start Great Future strategic plan of the previous government. It is estimated that every dollar spent on preschools will yield almost an \$8 return on all investment for the broader economy.

Investment in early childhood will substantially reduce the social and economic burdens of major public health problems, such as obesity, heart disease and mental health problems. This will address the barriers that lend to poor social and emotional outcomes, and reduce welfare dependency. These are well-documented, evidence-based reasons to invest in early childhood development. It is sound common sense that spending on preventative efforts is better than searching for a cure in later years.

Key international literature tells us that a strong, healthy start is not a choice. It should be every child's right. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child clearly states:

Children have the right to live. Governments should ensure that children survive and develop healthily.

...

Governments should respect the rights and responsibilities of families to direct and guide their children so that, as they grow, they learn to use their rights properly.

...

... children have the right to a primary education ...

Let me assure you that this government takes the intentions of that convention seriously.

There is a growing evidence base illustrating the impact of early years interventions on downstream outcomes, such as education attainment, economic and social participation, involvement in the criminal justice system and family wellbeing.

High-quality early education and care are significant levers for improving children's outcomes, a critical part of this package of inputs that sets children up to succeed at school and in life.

Strengthening early childhood development paves the way for us to achieve our goals for a more prosperous Territory. It is well established that the early years are a crucial window for fostering positive health and wellbeing, and establishing the foundations that enable all children to become creative, entrepreneurial, resilient and capable learners.

The Productivity Commission Inquiry into Child Care and Early Childhood Learning of 2015 found that formal and informal early childhood education and care services play a vital role in the development of Australian children in their preparation for school and enabling parents to work.

Children who have a poor start in life are more likely to develop learning, behavioural or emotional problems that may have far-reaching consequences throughout their lives and, in turn, the lives of their children. These problems accrue to the whole of society in the form of increased social inequality, reduced productivity and high costs associated with entrenched intergenerational disadvantage.

We will now go into the how. As soon as we found out we were fortunate enough to become government we began shaping the structures needed to begin the difficult task of preventing such disadvantage. How will we do this? The people we listen to, the organisations we consult and the terms we consider are fundamental to its success. We decided very early on to start with the key decision of marking the arena for government, the Cabinet.

During our first days of government the Chief Minister instructed the Cabinet's subcommittee to be formed to drive the early childhood plan. The subcommittee is headed by me, as the Minister for Children, and is also attended by my Cabinet colleagues, the Ministers for Health, Education, Housing and Community Development, and Territory Families.

The agencies of Health, Education, Housing and Children and Families, led by the respective ministers, will produce a whole-of-government effort in driving the early childhood plan. The children's subcommittee of Cabinet will ensure the coordination of effort across governments to make a generational improvement in the health, wellbeing and education of Territory children. That is a huge task but we are 100% committed to making it happen.

I am pleased to report that we can announce the academic members of the early childhood expert advisory panels. They are Professor Kerry Arabena, Professor Frank Oberklaid, Professor Sven Silburn, Professor Fiona Arney and Professor Collette Tayler. This is an expert reference panel of great depth and experience. Professor Arabena is the Chair of Indigenous Health at the University of Melbourne; Professor Oberklaid is the Foundation Director of the Centre for Community Child Health at the Royal Children's Hospital in Melbourne; Professor Silburn is a national leader in evaluative research in child development and education; Professor Arney is the Chair of Child Protection and Director of the Australian Centre for Child Protection at the University of South Australia; and Professor Collette Tayler holds the Chair in Early Childhood Education and Care at the Melbourne Graduate School of Education.

The high calibre of this panel is indicative of the wishes of many prominent Australians who want to help the work to improve outcomes of children here in the Northern Territory. I am very grateful they have agreed to be part of this significant undertaking.

The non-government sector, through NTCOSS and APONT, will also choose members to be on the expert advisory panel. The expert reference panel will combine with the government, non-government and community-based sector members of the reference group, which will drive the development of the government's early childhood plan. Importantly, to drive the consideration of the early childhood development plan in all aspects of government we have also included a section called Impacts on Children in the template for Cabinet submissions. This requires agencies to identify how a given proposal may impact on the health and wellbeing of children and/or on early childhood development. It also requires

agencies to outline how these impacts will be managed and implemented, and how the non-government sector could be approached to assist.

The key coordinating agency, the Department of the Chief Minister, has also begun the task of bringing the vital non-government sector into our planning processes. We value the expertise, knowledge, skill set and commitment of the non-government and community services sectors, and improving outcomes for the young will come together with the non-government sector playing a key role.

In the short time we have been in government we have met a very important commitment to commence the work with the NT's Aboriginal Peak Organisations, APONT, to deliver a five-year funding agreement. APONT is an alliance comprising the Central and Northern Land Councils, the NT Aboriginal Justice Agency, the Central Australian Aboriginal Legal Aid Service, and the Aboriginal Medical Services Alliance Northern Territory. The alliance was created to provide a more effective response to key issues of joint interest and concern affecting Aboriginal people in the Northern Territory, providing practical policy solutions to government.

Furthermore, APONT is committed to increasing Aboriginal involvement in policy development and implementation, and expanding opportunities for Aboriginal control. The Northern Territory Government has listened to APONT and welcomes the opportunity to partner with it to identify local solutions delivered through place-based mechanisms. This new relationship with APONT is a further demonstration of our commitment to working with the non-government sector.

I was also delighted to announce, last month, the additional \$340 000 per annum for one of the Northern Territory's longest-established not-for-profit social justice advocacy groups, the Northern Territory Council of Social Services, or NTCOSS. The announcement highlighted this government's commitment to forging strong partnerships with the non-government sector to make sure we get the best outcomes for all Territorians.

Early childhood is a period when many children face their first major transition in life, from the family home to other environments such as childcare, early education and full-time schooling. It is a pivotal time for learning, social and emotional development, social participation and the acquisition of literacy and numeracy skills. Early childhood programs can make a substantial difference to children's cognitive development well before school, when early childhood educators actively engage in promoting children's learning. This is why Australia has increased universal access to preschool. This is why we need to invest in programs that give children the best start in life.

Participation in early childhood education for all children, particularly children experiencing vulnerability, improves educational outcomes, prevents learning difficulties, improves socialisation and addresses emotional and behavioural problems.

Participation in early childhood education, such as Families as First Teachers and preschool, provides children with a foundation that sets them up for life. It is also the most cost-effective investment, as steps taken to address problems in the early years are more effective and provide the greatest return on investment.

An important part of the development of our plan is to establish boundaries, terms of reference and scope. There is a significant body of evidence that confirms a child's development starts before birth and continues into adulthood. A particularly important time is from conception to age two. It is an important time to work with parents to increase the chances of establishing positive foundations for their baby's life.

Early childhood is an area of complex public policy comprising all levels of government, non-government organisations, community organisations, the not-for-profit sector and families. The early childhood education and care sector is a key element of the early years platform and shares this complexity.

In Australia we are extremely fortunate that we have an agreed approach to measuring the development of our young children. The Council of Australian Governments endorsed the Australian Early Development Index as a national progress measure of early childhood development. The index provides insights into how a child's community and social environment affects their outcomes. We have endorsed this index as a measure to help assess our progress. It helps us build and strengthen our communities for our children.

Communities can also use the index to develop and evaluate their efforts to improve their children's outcomes. The index is a proven and reliable measure of a child's development. It provides valuable evidence to support policy, planning and action for health, education and community support. The index

measures childhood development under five areas: physical health and wellbeing; social competence; emotional maturity; school-based language and cognitive skills; and communication skills and general knowledge. Each area has a set of characteristics. These characteristics tell us if our children's development is on track, developmentally at risk or developmentally vulnerable.

Every three years the Australian Early Development Census collects this national data as children start their first year of full-time school. It gives us a picture of how well we are raising children before they get to school. It can show us how ready they are, as well as how ready their families and communities are to raise children. The census gives us a picture of children's development across Australia.

I will provide you with the Australian Early Development Census example of how we can understand information about our children. One example is the area of language and cognitive skills. Children who are developmentally on track in this domain will be interested in books, reading, writing and basic mathematics, capable of reading and writing simple sentences and complex words, and able to count and recognise numbers and shapes.

Children who have been identified as developmentally at risk under this domain may have a number of literacy difficulties—for example, not recognising shapes, numbers and letters—and not be able to write their name or count to 20; have difficulty remembering things; show a lack of interest in books, reading, mathematics and numbers; and not have mastered more advanced literacy skills, such as reading and writing simple words or sentences.

It is quite easy for us to recognise the difference between kids on track and those at risk. The difference is even more evident when children have been identified as developmentally vulnerable. They will experience a number of challenges relating to emotional regulation. These children, for example, have problems managing aggressive behaviour, are prone to disobedience and/or are easily distracted and are inattentive and impulsive. These children will not usually help others and are sometimes upset when left by their caregiver.

I have only provided a snapshot of characteristics of one area. We can all envision the different types of responses, programs and support necessary to not only respond to those children at risk who are identified as vulnerable, but also ensure those who are on track stay on track. However, what if our children are at risk or vulnerable in more than one area? What if our children are vulnerable in more than two areas? What does our response look like then? Is it the same or is it different? What else do we need to think about?

In 2015 the Australian Early Development Census identified the majority, 62.8%, of Northern Territory five-year-olds were on track. However, more than one third, 37.2%, were developmentally vulnerable in one or more areas. Being developmentally vulnerable means these children have a greater risk of struggling with transition to formal learning. Nearly one quarter, 23.1%, of Territory children were developmentally vulnerable in two or more of those areas. These children will require special support to be able to keep up with their Year 1 classmates.

Tragically, our childhood development trends lag behind the rest of the country. However, in some cases that data shows that some communities have seen decreases in vulnerability for children across some of the developmental areas. In Alice Springs there has been a 2.5% decrease in vulnerability for children in their language and cognitive skills. The Darwin community has seen 3.5% and 2.7% decreases in vulnerability in children's language and communication respectively. The Katherine community has seen a decrease in vulnerability across five areas, including 11.7% and 9.6% decreases in the proportion of children vulnerable on one and two or more areas respectively.

While we have a significant proportion doing well, and we have seen improvements in some areas and communities, we need to do much more. In early childhood we are naturally talking about and focusing on children, but we have to recognise that children come with their own, often varied, families and family circumstances. There are their parents, siblings, aunties, uncles and grandparents.

We need an approach which recognises that many things impact on the wellbeing of children. These include safe and stable housing, healthy food, clothing, opportunities to participate in sport, access to medical help when they need it and access to school. To do all this, mums and dads, or any primary caregiver, are best placed when they have a job and job security. They need to be able to access transport to do the things they want and need to do, and for their children.

This government has made a number of commitments that will enhance the social determinants of the health of Territorians and, thereby, add to our commitment to early childhood development. Many of those commitments are the responsibility and passion of my colleagues.

A Gunner government will:

- enhance the yellow book with eHealth capabilities to ensure children are immunised and health checked regularly
- develop a child and adolescent health plan that uses a holistic approach to improve the health and wellbeing of young Territorians
- recognise foetal alcohol spectrum disorder as a disorder and develop a framework to support its prevention, including universal and targeted strategies to do so
- continue to support and expand the Families as First Teachers program
- work with land owners, land councils and Aboriginal businesses to develop options and opportunities for the development of remote housing
- develop a long-term plan to enhance the post-school options for young Territorians with a disability.

I believe this snapshot of commitments underlies the government's pledge to a constructive and holistic reform agenda that will drive growth, ultimately increase job opportunities and keep focus on our kids. Importantly, central to the major parts of our early childhood development reform agenda in the Territory is our respect and acknowledgement of Aboriginal kinship and family structure.

We have spoken with many Aboriginal leaders, families and individuals about our early childhood plans. We understand the importance of seeking their advice and guidance as to how things should work, operate and function in their communities. We accept the very strong message that we should work with Aboriginal peoples and not do things to them.

As I have said, this government values the significant expertise and commitments of the non-government and community services sector. Government does not have all the answers. By working closely with the non-government sector we can often achieve better outcomes. The non-government sector works closely with communities and families; they know the people, issues and opportunities. It would be extremely foolish for us to ignore their knowledge and expertise.

NTCOSS undertook a significant piece of work with its members to develop the NTCOSS Child and Family Wellbeing Framework, which has been identified as a foundational document for our approach to early childhood development. Ongoing policy development work will also include discussions with the Northern Territory and Commonwealth governments' staff, private providers and businesses that will help us understand the wealth of work already undertaken to improve early childhood development across the Northern Territory.

It is clear we have a number of experts here in the Territory whose valuable input will help us not only with the development of our plan, but by identifying how it will be implemented. I also take this opportunity to make special mention of the staff of the Departments of Territory Families, Education, Health, and Housing and Community Development. I also acknowledge the work of the previous government in the early childhood area, with the development of the NT early years strategic plan, Great Start Great Future. There are many public servants whose expertise, passion, commitment and dedication to early childhood development will continue to be instrumental to our commitment.

I also acknowledge the policy development of my predecessor in this area, the former Member for Nhulunbuy, Lynne Walker. Her passion and commitment was inspiring. As a former teacher, a parent and a person who had the interests of kids at heart, Lynne's efforts remain entrenched in what we are doing.

What will we deliver? In partnership with our key partners we will develop an early childhood development plan that will contain key deliverables across all sectors of government—measurable outcomes over the next 10 years. Fundamental to the plan will be a commitment to funding evidence-based projects and services, early childhood programs and services that are culturally appropriate, and ongoing, thorough independent program evaluation and research. That is very important.

The Northern Territory Government recognises how important it is for all children to be ready for their first day of school in their first year. Many of us remember the joy of buying our kids their first school uniform—that is a joy I am yet to have—their backpack, school shoes and pencil case. For many of us this is, or will be, a routine part of family life; however, this is not true for all families or, sadly, for all children. That is why this government will tackle school readiness head on.

One of the most significant opportunities to improve practice and outcomes in early childhood is to expand access to quality early education and better equip the early education and care sectors to support children's learning, development and wellbeing.

Quality early education provides a strong foundation for a positive life outcome for children. It can play a key role in narrowing the gap between advantaged and disadvantaged children that begins long before a child's first year at school. Early education provides children with opportunities to develop critical skills in the years prior to school. It is particularly important for children who have not had the opportunity of exposure to a rich home learning environment.

Australian and international research has shown the impact of quality education on children's social, emotional and learning outcomes. While critical, a focus on early childhood education alone is not enough. We need to do more in early childhood health and family services. That is why government is committed to expanding the Nurse-Family Partnership Program. The importance of this program cannot be underestimated; it builds a strong foundation for life. It focuses on improving outcomes in pregnancy by improving women's prenatal health, each child's health and development by helping mothers to provide more skilled parenting, and parental life choices aimed at helping mothers and families to plan future pregnancies, complete their education and find work.

The role of fathers, also, is unmistakably important and we will ensure programs and services support dads and their needs. It is important because fathers have a huge role to play in the development of children in the Northern Territory—if we are to meet the outcomes we so desperately need.

Supporting, enabling and empowering parents will increase the physical and emotional health and the social and cognitive development of their children. Good government can do a lot but nothing can replace a strong family, and that is a fact.

As I have already stated, we have started to implement some of our early childhood development commitments. We know there is much to do and these commitments will form a significant part of next year's budget. However, we accept that to do this well we need to allow enough time for the development of a reform agenda that will be achievable, drive outcomes and be meaningful to children and their families. The commitment we have made to the non-government and community sectors will be enhanced by streamlining the grants management system; co-designing outcome-focused funding agreements; ensuring our funding processes are transparent and accountable; encouraging parents, Indigenous employment and innovation; and supporting peak bodies and advocacy groups.

We do not underestimate the enormity of this challenge. It can appear, at times, to be quite overwhelming. Over the next 10 years we will celebrate some success. There will also be times when we need to return to the drawing board when we have not met our goals. We expect to be fairly held to account.

As the chair of the children's subcommittee of Cabinet, I will update the House regularly on progress and we will provide progress reports to all Territorians. We are committed to ensuring every child realises their right to be raised in an environment that promotes their physical, emotional and social development. Territory families and children deserve this commitment.

Madam Speaker, in closing, I take the opportunity to outline the fundamentals of what the early childhood development plan will look like. Our plan must be focused on local and placed-based solutions; respectful of Aboriginal kinship and family structure; evidence based, informed by the best possible research; supported by a robust monitoring and evaluation framework; achievable in terms of available resources, both human and financial; and able to be implemented to deliver real and sustainable change.

We know we have a big job ahead and lots of work to do, and it is our genuine intention to get to it and deliver for Territory kids.

Madam Speaker, I move that the statement be noted.

Mrs FINOCCHIARO (Spillett): Madam Speaker, I thank the Minister for Children for bringing this statement to the Chamber today for debate.

I fully support the intention of government to make investing in children an essential objective of its plan policies. I hope to work cooperatively and constructively with the Labor government to build a better Territory for all Territorians. I believe early childhood outcomes have a long-lasting and all-encompassing impact on a person's future life successes. Getting early childhood right allows children to thrive throughout their school and adult lives. Bringing about a significant change in early childhood development is challenging, complex and an ongoing issue in the Northern Territory. Even though there have been recent outcome improvements, the Northern Territory still represents a significantly higher percentage of vulnerable children than the rest of Australia.

For children who are at risk of having poor early childhood development outcomes, that may follow them for life. That percentage of vulnerable children is higher in areas of socioeconomic disadvantage in the community. Research has shown that children from these backgrounds are more likely to develop health, learning, behavioural and emotional issues later in life.

Early childhood is a crucial development window that is important not to miss. It affects school readiness, literacy and numeracy outcomes. Poor outcomes in early childhood are also linked to risk of unemployment, suicide, substance misuse and criminal activity. That is why it is so important to get it right and be proactive in the beginning rather than relying on reactive strategies later in life through intervention, such as special schooling or the youth justice system.

It is clear from your ministerial statement and the large amount of information and statistics included that you understand just how important early childhood is when guiding a young person's future. However, I have some concerns about this government's approach so far.

True to the growing trend with this government, the why, how and what elements of your objective to improve early childhood outcomes are severely lacking in detail and, moreover, pose a worrying number of questions that are ultimately left unanswered.

You talk about the Australian Early Development Index and how it can indicate whether children are developmentally at risk in one or more areas of development. You described some characteristics an at-risk child might display and you proudly stated:

We can all envision the different types of responses, programs and support necessary to not only respond to those children at risk who are identified as vulnerable, but also ensure those who are on track stay on track.

This is a very broad assumption to make, that we can all envisage the appropriate response to a child at risk. Surely if that were the case these problems would solve themselves. Territorians would benefit and be rightly justified in expecting from this government some elaboration of what these obvious solutions are. But that is not explained in this statement.

The government went on to ask:

... what if our children are at risk or vulnerable in more than one area? What if our children are vulnerable in more than two areas? What does our response look like then? Is it the same or is it different? What else do we need to think about?

None of these questions are answered in this statement. Does the government have any idea how it will confront these problems, or are you just asking 'how' in a series of questions? This is looking to become yet another example of this government's lengthy rhetoric about the problems faced by the Northern Territory without action, and there is no indication of any solutions.

A subcommittee of the Cabinet has been formed and an advisory panel is in the works. You will establish boundaries, terms of reference and scope. You expect the Health, Education and Housing agencies to put in the bulk of the effort in managing childhood impact and you intend to lean heavily on the non-government sector.

We welcome your intent and your stated commitment to consultation, but at some point this government will have to make decisions and demonstrate leadership to Territorians. It is not enough to rely on NGOs to make the so-called tough decisions for you. You cannot simply outsource this obligation to Territorians.

Up until this point we have seen very little of substance for key stakeholders to comment on. After nearly three months in government we are still stuck in a cycle of inaction, rollover of previous government programs and talkfests. This is evident in the areas of action discussed in this ministerial statement. You mentioned that you will continue to support Families as First Teachers. I am thrilled to know that you will be carrying on with this excellent initiative, which supports adults and children in early learning, literacy and numeracy at home in order to successfully transition to preschool ...

Ms Lawler: It was a Labor initiative.

Mrs FINOCCHIARO: I pick up on the interjection from the very eager Minister for Education, who has not yet contributed in the House. If this government was not so busy playing the blame game and would let me finish my sentence they would hear—and I ask the member to have patience and exercise restraint. My next sentence is, 'We recognise this as a valuable program first initiated under Labor'. We maintained it as a Country Liberal government and bolstered it, and it is encouraging to see, under this new government, that it will be continued. I also note that you will be expanding the Nurse-Family Partnership Program, also in place during the previous government, which is a voluntary home visitation program for disadvantaged mothers, aimed at bettering maternal health and birth outcomes.

I am encouraged that you will be using the Australian Early Development Index to measure progress. It is a fact already in the Australian standard, as established by the Council of Australian Governments, and you can read a great deal about it in the previous government's early years strategic plan, Great Start Great Future.

The Great Start Great Future strategic plan, developed by the previous government, has no doubt been a valuable resource to this new government which it has drawn on heavily. It represents a holistic, evidence-based and whole-of-government approach to improving the early childhood years of Territorians and lists specific actions priorities and measures of success. It was ready to be put into action, but now it will not be implemented. Instead of action, we will see inertia, inaction and long, drawn-out planning processes.

The previous government's initiatives that you have committed to continuing have proven effective over the past several years, and I commend your good sense for continuing with these, but to see only a recycling of the previous government's initiatives begs the question of what the Labor government is bringing to the table. What is the Minister for Children actually doing for children, other than outsourcing the implementation and outcomes to the not-for-profit sector?

It is time this government stops passing off the previous government's policies and initiatives as its own. We have already seen examples of this in your ministerial statement on infrastructure, where this government claims credit for the 1830 infrastructure projects already being undertaken, all set in motion by the previous government.

We are happy that the Territory will benefit from the foresight and planning of the previous government, but we recognise that this government needs to take its own action to keep things moving. Another promise made in this statement was to develop targeted strategies to prevent foetal alcohol spectrum disorder. While I fully support the intent behind this strategy, this statement strikes me as at odds with your government's conduct yesterday, when it voted down a motion to set politics aside and work together cooperatively with the whole parliament in partnership with the community to tackle critical issues of alcohol abuse.

The motion was intended to benefit all Territorians through collaboration on an issue of major concern, and it was disappointing that 17 out of 18 members of the government ignored it. It was disheartening that the government had so little to say on alcohol policy, and the Minister for Children did not even speak on the issue of direct concern to the children across the Territory affected by FASD.

The fact your government voted this motion down brings in to question your promise in the early childhood development plan to not allow partisan politics to change effective policies. Territorians should now question your commitment on that promise. There could be no other reason to deny the whole parliament collaboration on the critical issue of alcohol other than putting politics at play. Will you similarly scrap effective early childhood programs for political reasons? Which ones will go?

I am also worried by the glaring omission of parents and carers in this discussion. As we know, parents and carers are the single biggest influences in a young child's life. For any measures to be effective in improving early childhood development outcomes, the parents must be on board. They must participate and understand the intended outcomes for their children.

Parent and carer impact on a child's development is especially poignant in light of the most recent report from the Children's Commissioner, which referred to 1800 children suffering at the hands of abuse and neglect by carers this year, and a 20% spike in reports of potential harm to children. If improved, early childhood outcomes yield positive results in a child's future. It is saddening to reflect on the long-lasting, sometimes irreparable damage that abuse at the hands of a parent or carer has on a young person's future.

You, as a government, made the broad statement that many Territorians had input into this policy development. Who had the input and how many people contributed to this process? Did you speak directly to parents about their expectations and their concerns? Were any remote communities visited while bringing the policy to the people?

Ms Lawler: Yes, we did.

Mrs FINOCCHIARO: I pick up on the interjection. It is so interesting that now everyone wants to have a chat in this parliament and be part of the debate, yet we heard crickets yesterday in a fundamental discussion about moving alcohol policy forward for Territorians, a discussion that would be a nation-leading first, that would see the end to the political battle lines on the debate around alcohol policy and a collaborative community-driven approach to addressing alcohol concerns, one that transgresses through terms of government. This is not a four-year cyclical issue. This is an issue facing Territorians for the entire life of our community, yet we have heard nothing from 17 out of 18 members. Shame on you!

Here I stand today to talk about the emotions of children and early childhood development and you all have plenty to say. I would love to know why the Attorney-General gagged this debate yesterday, gagged the back bench and gagged the ministers. That remains to be seen, and voters will judge you for yesterday's behaviour.

The only concrete reference to the role of parents in early childhood development made in your statement was the importance of parents having a job and job security. If this has been the only consideration to the role of parents, Territorians should be very concerned, especially in light of this government's approach to jobs. It has all been about creating political jobs and not jobs in the real world that affect Territorians. There is no real plan or job target. This government's only commitment to jobs is continuing to deliver on previous government initiatives. Where is the substance, Labor? Where are the tough decisions? You are three months into your government.

Where is the budget? Your costings do not have a dedicated amount for implementation of the early childhood plan. In your childhood development discussion paper you note that the government's approach 'requires that we review our current spending in this area'. This begs the question we have consistently asked across all areas of government, which is how implementation will be budgeted. Will there be a redistribution of funds akin to the axed infrastructure budget? How will you balance cutting infrastructure spending with your commitment to create jobs and grow the economy?

It is true that there are well-documented reasons to invest in early childhood development. You have stated that every dollar invested in early childhood can yield an \$8 return on investment for the economy through the production of employable, happy and healthy people. It is important to consider that this return only holds true in normal economic conditions under full employment. We are unlikely to see that kind of return when the inaction of this government is essentially hamstringing the jobs market by diminishing the confidence of business and investors.

These are all questions that Territorians need answer to, but we continue to be stonewalled by the lack of a budget and the lack of action and leadership from this government. Early childhood development is critical in the development of the Northern Territory in so many ways. I hope this government can put aside its fear of inaction to do the right thing and get it right so future generations have every opportunity to live healthy, dignified and meaningful lives in the Northern Territory.

Ms WAKEFIELD (Territory Families): Madam Speaker, I support the Minister for Children's statement on early childhood development.

I am proud to be part of a government where, for the first time, there is concerted, coordinated effort to drive a whole-of-government approach to early childhood. We are coordinating strategy and structure, and we will put in place collaboration mechanisms between the many players in this field and hopefully see cooperation across this Chamber.

The creation of Territory Families brings under one roof a whole-of-life approach to families, placing child protection and youth justice within the broader framework of prevention and early intervention. This enables a range of expertise, practices and systems to be put in place, which can ensure we respond quickly and well to the needs of Territory families.

Evidence shows that the greatest return on investment is to work early, with the most vulnerable, and this is exactly the space that Territory Families works in. Our government is committed to continually improving our capacity to invest in children earlier. This approach is backed by the recent Productivity Commission's report, *Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage: Key Indicators 2016*. This research shows that investing in resources to support children in their early years of life has long-term benefits not only for them, but for the whole community.

The benefits to children extend well beyond childhood; they are a way of changing a child's chance and trajectory in life. As I said in my maiden speech, it is important that Territory children's chances are not an circumstance of birth, but a birthright. These are critical years, before birth and the early years, where the greatest gains can be made in changing a child's life path. This approach is backed by science. In the early years the brain grows faster than in any other stage in life. The brain's development is enormously influenced by a child's relationships, experiences and environment. These years form the basis for developing the essential skills and attributes needed for success in later life.

Experiences in early years have long-lasting effects, influencing an individual's mental and physical health, social adjustment, educational experience and life expectancy. Investment in the early years can change the trajectory of children with developmental concerns and young people going into care.

Changing the life chances of children in vulnerable families requires renewed investment in prevention and early intervention. Evidence shows that the best responses are those built on universal population services that are available to all and do not target a few. We are aiming for services which combine universal intervention and service delivery with targeted interventions and which are able to respond to a range of needs. In other words, if we invest in all kids our most vulnerable kids also benefit.

Territory Families will be working closely with the Departments of Health and Education to strengthen the capacity for health and education services to provide targeted intervention services in the universal services that are familiar to children and families, such as school, child and family centres and health centres. Co-locating family support services and providing wraparound, intensive support for vulnerable families will make it easier for families to access what they need. These services include parenting support, family preservation services and child health checks.

If we are catching up with every child we will catch the kids who need the support as early as possible. Our intensive child nurse home visiting is a great example of that. I have had experience of that program, particularly the Congress program in Central Australia, which has been a very successful program. Families refer themselves back to it; they trust the service and feel comfortable in it. This shows, very much, the importance of community-led, Aboriginal-run organisations.

Other services available to families include wraparound services targeted at creating employment pathways, and educating and building the health and wellbeing of young adults and parents. The Minister for Children's statement about making sure young parents and young carers stay in the workforce—work we will do with our federal government—is essential.

We need to focus on children who are at risk of entering the child protection system. Our child protection system has been overwhelmed by demand, especially in the last couple of years. Reading the Children's Commissioner's annual report is an incredibly sobering experience of where things are up to. It shows the need to act, but also gives a good foundation of why we are acting in the way we are when focusing on out-of-home care and other issues.

We have had an overwhelming increase in referrals. More than 70% of referrals to our child protection system are from police, health and education professionals exercising their mandatory responsibilities, and those referrals are largely related to the zero-to-five years age group. We know that 50% of child protection notifications do not proceed to investigation. These are missed opportunities. Last year there were more than 12 000 notifications that did not proceed to investigation, and I see those as 12 000 missed opportunities to intervene and support families to divert them from the child protection system.

If someone rings up with a concern it means something is going on in that family. These children are vulnerable and it is critical that we do everything we can to keep them out of the child protection system.

This means we need to build a robust system at the community level, where vulnerable families are provided with the support they need before problems escalate. In order to do this the government is developing a dual pathways model where notifications not screened for investigation are referred to an NGO provider for support.

Systems like this have been set up in other jurisdictions and have resulted in a reduction of children being referred through child protection, with more families accessing the service and being supported in the community. The end result is that vulnerable families are being maintained in the community and not coming into the child protection system. I want to be very clear; this is evidence-based practice. It is not outsourcing. We are doing what we know has worked elsewhere and will have the best outcomes for children.

It is important to note that people in our community trust our NGO sector. We have a very strong NGO sector and people feel comfortable accessing those services. By providing key services that intervene early in the community sector we will achieve better outcomes; the evidence tells us so, and that is why we are implementing this strong partnership model.

Local child safety wellbeing teams are being established in communities to coordinate responses across agencies, NGOs and family community members regarding child safety concerns. These teams are under way through the remote family support service—and I acknowledge that was CLP-led with a federal government approach—in remote communities such as Borroloola, Maningrida, Wadeye and Yuendumu. This service provides a range of prevention and early intervention services. It is supported by local community-based family support workers, the experts on the ground. These workers look out for and provide support for vulnerable families at risk. The service will build on the intensive family preservation services provided in regional centres by NGOs which are targeting and supporting families at risk and preventing children being placed in care.

A high percentage of child protection notifications involve families where family and domestic violence, mental illness and alcohol and substance misuse are present.

In White Ribbon Day week we must acknowledge the impact of violence against women on mothers and their ability to be a mother. Where we can increase a woman's safety we can increase her children's safety. If we stop violence we will stop a child's exposure to it. We need to make sure our domestic violence services are focused on children and are working well with child protection services. One of the great advantages of placing domestic violence policy into the Department of Territory Families is that it gives joint service delivery a much better chance.

We need to work with drug and alcohol services and make sure there is a range of services that people can access. It can be difficult for families to access drug and alcohol treatment. We need to make sure we get alcohol policy right. Our BDR will be an important tool in managing vulnerable families where alcohol is involved. I am really looking forward to joining up that policy to direct outcomes to Territory Families. We have missed having that tool. When I was working in the sector and the previous BDR was in place there were many opportunities for us, as a sector, to refer people to the service and make sure there were ongoing tools that could put women and children's safety at the centre of that intervention.

A joined up approach across programs which works with children at risk and vulnerable families is required. There are opportunities to build upon the best-practice work taking place in the Domestic Family Violence Centre. This government will look at building on the success of the Family Safety Framework in regional and remote centres. I was very proud to be a part of the start of this program in Central Australia. It was a very strong Labor Party initiative that the CLP then rolled out across the Territory. One of the big advantages of the Family Safety Framework was that it was co-designed with strong partnerships between government and the NGO sector, and the outcomes show that. It involves integrated service provision and information sharing across service systems and service providers. It focuses on developing safety solutions for individual families and it places victim safety in the centre of every intervention that happens; this is what we need to do with children's service delivery, making sure we are focused on the child.

We also need to invest in programs and support for men that address the fundamental social factors which affect men's health and wellbeing. Programs which deal with trauma enable men to become leaders, role models and fathers. Having a strong, safe, male role model is one of the best things that can happen to young boys and girls. Fathers are an essential part of this path forward.

We also need to focus on the early years and youth at risk; this is an area which will be a strong focus in Territory Families. Vulnerability and coming into contact with the justice system is often multigenerational. It

then makes sense that investing in the early years and vulnerable families not only directly benefits the children, but can strengthen communities and break the intergenerational cycle of family vulnerability and offending.

A number of those in the youth justice system were once children in care. We need to stop them being part of the adult correctional system so we can stop the process of them having contact with government services throughout their whole lives. This is the cycle we need to focus on and we will do it by focusing on young children and breaking the cycle. The evidence tells us this. Evidence-based early childhood programs have been shown to reduce, by more than 75%, interactions between young people and criminal justice. This is what we need to focus on and we need to base our policies and interventions on evidence.

Our approach to intervening early will extend into young adulthood and reform in the youth justice system. The previous government defunded a number of services. We will introduce youth services targeted at prevention and early intervention, including recreational services and activities that engage people positively. This includes after-hours services for young people in Alice Springs and Tennant Creek. The school holidays program in Central Australia looks fantastic. Some amazing people are doing some amazing work on the ground, and these are the people we need to partner with if we are to have good outcomes.

We will also look at early intervention and diversion programs to prevent young people from entering or re-entering the youth justice system. We also need to provide pathways out of the system, not straight into the adult system. Evidence shows that intervening in the early years plays a key role in creating resilience, pathways and connectedness for young people in later life, and in preventing crime.

One thing that often concerns me is that when we talk about young people we talk about them as if they are not part of our community. They are like another being. We need to make sure children, young people and teenagers feel—at a very difficult stage of life. I think we can all remember the feeling of not quite fitting in, being disconnected and not knowing what your pathway is. We need to provide a sense of community and let young people know we have a valued role for them in our community and that we are not looking at every child sideways, thinking they are up to something. That is happening too often in our communities. There are some great kids out there and we need to tell those good stories.

It is critical that these integrated, whole-of-life frameworks and strategies are embedded into the work of government for the long term. That is why the creation of a Cabinet subcommittee on children is such an important step. The Cabinet subcommittee will enable engagement across government with the non-government sector and the community. It will gather internal and external expertise, base decisions on evidence, oversee continuous improvement and measure and monitor outcomes. We must be able to listen to our experts on the front line and integrate that feedback into what we do ...

Mr McCARTHY: A point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker! Pursuant to Standing Order 43, I request an extension of time for the member.

Motion agreed to.

Ms WAKEFIELD: We will have an approach that allows for testing new ideas, finding out what works and investing for the long term. We can make the intergenerational changes needed in this field. This will be the most rigorous approach the Territory has seen in the field of early childhood, but this government cannot do it alone. A skilled, capable non-government sector, including Aboriginal organisations, is critical to achieving outcomes. We will work with peak bodies such as NTCOSS and APONT, as well as NGOs as partners and collaborators.

In many communities, NGOs are the primary providers of child and family services, but we also need their input into frameworks for long-term strategies. Since becoming a minister I have received feedback that people are grateful to get a meeting, because they were not listened to for four long years. They are very excited to be part of the strong future of the Northern Territory and to contribute their expertise. There is an extraordinary amount of expertise in the Territory; let us not be mistaken about that.

We will work with Aboriginal people, the traditional owners of this land, with respect so that we may learn together how to succeed in doing better than we are. The overrepresentation of children in care who are Aboriginal is overwhelming. It is imperative that our strategies and practices are informed by what works for them.

Investing in the early years is critical to changing the life trajectories of vulnerable children, and preventing children and young people from entering the protection and justice systems. The Gunner government has a long-term vision and plan, and mechanisms for achieving them. Governments across the board spend so much money on dealing with the problems after they emerge. Child protection, youth justice, detention, gaols, hospitals—the list goes on. As someone who has been a social worker for most of their adult life, I know it is despairing when you see a client you knew 10 years ago still moving through the system.

With the systems and processes we are setting up at the highest level, we hope to start to turn this investment around so the biggest investment is supporting children and their families to remain healthy, strong and able to contribute to the economic, social and cultural life of our great community.

This is a big agenda and I do not think any of us in this House understand the magnitude of the issue we are looking at. I often think of Lynne Walker, the former Member for Nhulunbuy, who used to say, 'This is the heavy lifting of government; this is the hard work; this is the biggest responsibility.' To achieve it we must be very frank. We need to work together. We need this to rise above politics and petty arguments. We need to focus on the evidence and on working together so we have happy, healthy children, like the ones in the gallery today, who are participating in the political process.

This is the future of the Territory and we need to stay focused on it. It is wonderful having the schools come to visit; not only do they learn, but it reminds us of what we are doing.

VISITORS

Parap Primary School

Mr DEPUTY SPEAKER: Before we proceed, I take the opportunity to advise honourable members of the presence in the gallery of the Year 6 students from Parap Primary School, accompanied by their teacher, Temira Wallis. I extend a warm welcome to the school this morning.

Members: Hear, hear!

Mrs LAMBLEY (Araluen): Mr Deputy Speaker, I feel very encouraged by what I have heard this morning from the Minister for Children, who presented this statement, and just then from the Minister for Territory Families. I feel a strong sense of confidence in the ability of both these ministers to carry out the policy they have outlined this morning. Both these women have the best of intentions, and what they have described this morning is a robust framework for how this government will tackle the problems of childhood development, child protection, juvenile detention and many of the other social problems in the Northern Territory we know all too well.

As a former Minister for Education, Health and Child Protection—the easy bit is the theory and crafting the policy; the difficult bit is in the implementation. That is where successive governments in the Northern Territory have struggled over the last 30 years. It is not easy to fix these problems. The Ministers for Children and Territory Families know how difficult it is.

The Minister for Territory Families, the Member for Braitling, has enormous experience in this field. She knows firsthand how difficult it is to turn things around and address the very deep-rooted social problems we face in the Northern Territory.

From my perspective, having a similar background to the Member for Braitling, as a social worker, I know firsthand, being a former minister, that there are struggles and problems you will encounter despite the best of intentions. Even with the CLP government that has just departed, we—and I say 'we' because I was part of that government for two-and-a-half years—talked about targeting services, evidence-based practices, partnerships, early interventions, pathways, connectedness, intergenerational change and all the concepts that have been mentioned this morning, pretty much. The government before us did that too. The previous Labor government had the same language and used the same concepts.

The challenge is about putting all this into practice and making it happen on the ground. It is incredibly difficult. I will share some of the difficulties I faced, particularly when I was the Minister for Children and Families in the Northern Territory. One of the greatest challenges is that you never have enough money. Like every other portfolio, in the Territory child protection is restricted by the lack of government funding. There is never enough money to do what you need to do. In my experience as the minister for Child

Protection we were still implementing all the recommendations of the *Growing them strong, together* report which were originally implemented by the former Labor government.

It was tough; there were not enough funds to do the things we needed to the satisfaction of any of us. You have to make the best with what you have. Sometimes that means making some very difficult decisions, which the government has already had to face this week in regard to deciding to prioritise one project over another or one non-government organisation over another. You have to constantly make these difficult decisions, which are not met favourably by the sector, community or population at large, but that is the reality of being in government. In regard to child protection, it is a bottomless pit in respect to how much is needed and how much you could spend; it is infinite in its demands. Listening to the ABC radio this morning, and possibly every other radio station in Darwin, we heard about the Children's Commissioner's report that has just been released, outlining a record number of child protection notifications that have been received in the Northern Territory over the last 12 months. It is staggering and overwhelming. At the bottom of this is a huge demand for resources to address this problem; that will be the very first challenge faced by the Minister for Children and the Minister for Territory Families in trying to implement the well-intended policies we have heard this morning.

The other incredibly challenging situation we have within child protection, and possibly other areas, in the Northern Territory is finding and keeping good, professional and experienced staff; it is an ongoing challenge. As the minister, it eternally struck me how it was one step forward, two steps back. You felt you had a stable workforce in the Katherine office of Children and Families, but the next week it would all change because four or five people decided to go back to Ireland or where they were recruited from.

The reality of providing child protection services on the ground is very challenging, with the high turnover of staff, the fact that a lot of our professional staff we have had in child protection over the last five years have come from overseas, they have been recruited from New Zealand, Ireland and various other places. Inevitably a lot of them want to go back there. They come from different backgrounds in training and education in social work and child protection. All those things remain enormous challenges.

The other issue this government will face is the intention to break down the silos of government, to make the provision of services to children and families across government seamless. This is a wonderful idea. I attempted to embark on this myself, but I realised it did not have the support of my colleagues. It is extremely difficult to create a seamless service between health, education, child protection and possibly other related portfolios too in providing investments into early years and services for children and families.

This government, like most throughout Australia and the Commonwealth, has departments. We have the Department of Health and the department responsible for child protection, which have their own budgets. To remove that separation is incredibly difficult.

A couple of weeks ago the Select Committee for Opening the Parliament to the People went to the Queensland parliament and we were told the same story by some bureaucrats. It is incredibly difficult to merge departments and create a mega-department due to resistances within the bureaucracy and the fact budgets, mechanisms and systems are separate.

That will be very difficult, but not impossible. I do not want to sound negative about anything I heard from the ministers for Territory Families and Children this morning. I am very optimistic and positive. A fresh approach is exactly what is needed. I do not feel any sense of criticism of what I have heard this morning. I just feel an obligation to put a few of the challenges I can foresee on the table.

It is wonderful that this government has good relationships with the non-government sector. This sector has possibly been neglected over the last few years. The former CLP government did not have a lot of time for many of these organisations.

This is the business that Labor governments do well, providing welfare, health and education services. These are your strengths. I look forward, over the next four years, to seeing how this plays out and the people of the Northern Territory truly benefit from a Labor government in this sense. I also look forward to seeing how remote housing rolls out. That is of great interest to me. It all connects. Without good housing much of this stuff will fall flat, as we have seen for many decades.

I congratulate the Minister for Children on her statement today. I have great confidence in her and the Member for Brainting. I know they can turn this around and make some really positive changes for children and families in the Northern Territory.

Mr McCARTHY (Housing and Community Development): Mr Deputy Speaker, it is a privilege to follow on from such a positive contribution from the cross bench.

I support the minister, my ministerial colleagues and Caucus colleagues on a resounding Labor Party policy which was taken to the election and fully endorsed by the Northern Territory constituency.

The policy goes to having an insight into children from a very early age. I can remember my mother's strategy, where we were always surrounded by lots of children. I had siblings, cousins and extended family, and there were always lots of neighbours' kids. Her strategy was to make sure they were all at our place. I did not work that out for a while, because it was a serious tax on our resources. When mum baked a cake you only got a little piece because it was shared around. I worked it out later, in my teenage years. Essentially, my mother used that strategy to keep all the kids together so she could keep an eye on things, keep in touch with things and be up to speed and keep us safe.

That translated into teenage years when I seriously ran amok. My peers had grown through those years to trust and get on well with my family and siblings and extended family. They were comfortable visiting the family home, and that gave mum the opportunity to interrogate them and find out where exactly Gerald was going and what he was up to. It was a very effective strategy in that part of my life, particularly for the peers. I remember a number of them who were quite good orators who used to sing like canaries and tell my mother everything, which was rather embarrassing but at the same time created a serious sense of reality, protection, safety and understanding of what took place when I was climbing back in my brother's bedroom window at 3 am. Mum was still awake at those times and was up to speed with what was going on.

That translated to teaching. I remember Territory children—I came to the Northern Territory and was recruited to open a school on a cattle station. That was 35 years ago now and that cattle station was a remote place about 250 km southeast of Tennant Creek. A group of Alyawarra Indigenous people had little contact with the wider world at that stage. The cattle station was a small family-owned property and I was, essentially, the first whitefella who was allowed in.

We started that school together. I camped on the riverbank. There was no housing in the community. There was no infrastructure. It was not until the second year of the school being open that there was a communal ablution block built in that community. That was known as the camp. It was a very interesting experience because those Territory children had no real services. There was no housing. There was a visiting doctor, rarely, and very few visiting services other than the old Department of Aboriginal Affairs and the different bureaucratic services. When we started the school the Department of Education started to visit.

Those kids lived very much in a structured tribal discipline. I tested that on one occasion. It was almost 100% attendance. The men worked on the cattle station, the women did most of the volunteer work around the station, in the gardens and around the store, and the kids went to school. We had a great life together. I was as much a student as a teacher.

There were not too many discipline problems, but I was training an assistant teacher who had the first real public sector job in that community, and a part-time cleaner—there was an issue around the ablution block. I had come to the end of my tether with teaching kids how to use this new ablution block. I decided to test the theory and marched the school, in a line, down to the camp and presented the school to the community. I wanted to discuss the issue with the ablution block.

I left those children there for a lunchtime period and I returned to the school, and that issue was dealt with by the parents, carers and elders. Those kids did not talk to me for three days because that discipline was extremely significant. It was meaningful and strong. I felt really sorry about that for many years after. Those kids were not dealt with in any physical sense, but they were seriously disciplined on the issue. It was solved and, after about three days, we returned to good relations when they got over their stress.

That community is a remote town of around 200 people. It has all the services of a modern town. There is housing, a clinic and a school. The school numbers have dropped a bit, but the school grew to having six teachers. There are lots of ancillary and school support staff jobs. There is now a local council and sport and rec infrastructure, as well as associated infrastructure. The roads have been vastly improved and the mobility factor is out of control.

People are entering and exiting that town on a regular basis, sometimes multiple times a day. Its isolation has been changed. It is now the third generation raising children. The children I enrolled in the school have had children, and their children have had children. I now visit that remote town as the local member.

I think we share something in this House and this policy; no matter where you put a group of people together, you will find the discussion on children at the centrepiece of that interaction. This policy reflects that children are the centrepiece. If I go to that town—I will visit shortly after this sittings, with a keen interest to learn more about the constituents and their issues—I guarantee that children will be at the centre of our discussions. It is not necessary to conduct this intense consultation, particularly while the Member for Nelson continues to bring it back to this House. It will happen naturally.

The conversations over 36 years will be radically different and reflect the challenges of the big wide world, such as child protection, education—or lack of—and nonattendance, alcohol, drugs and substance abuse. These are challenges to traditional culture and it is why these kids will not listen to their elders or do what they are told. They will also reflect the challenges of mobility of families, family breakdowns, domestic violence, police intervention, health, chronic disease and of our elders and looking after old people.

These are very modern conversations and this has been a very short period in history whereby we have arrived at this critical element of community development, which, in most cases, relates more to community disadvantage than community development. What better time for a Labor government to stop the bus and say, 'Let's look at how policy can be all encompassing'. What is the most important element? Our children and making sure they are the centrepiece. It will be difficult with the bureaucracy.

I spent 30 years as a teacher trying to change the bureaucracy and I got into this job to change it. I am still trying to change it; that is part of the work we sign up for. There are challenges in regard to the essential element that I define as parental responsibility. There is an intergenerational issue with disadvantage and trauma. There is an overarching issue within the electorate that I represent which relates to colonialism. These issues are real, deep and meaningful, and we have to make sure we are cognitively aware of how complex these layers are.

The Labor government has said to the Territory, 'If we are judged worthy and elected we will implement this policy; it will cross over all elements of our work and underpin, as a matrix, in all Cabinet decisions that go forward to represent the expenditure of taxpayer dollars, and it will interface with each and every element of the work we do.' This work is focused on generational change. I do not think any member in this House or the public will be under any disillusion. There will be a challenge for parliamentarians to manage expectations, and that is part of our job, but it will be a generation's change and if we do not start then we risk losing further generations to disadvantage.

There are some very important links in the work we have been charged with as members of this House, and which I have been charged with in my privilege as a minister. I want to reflect on what the Member for Spillett, the Deputy Leader of the Opposition, said. She challenged the various aspects of this policy. She talked about jobs; jobs are about wellbeing in my estimations. Whether it was the uncle selling motorcycles or Billy Smith up the road on a garbage truck, everyone played a part in the community. The jobs provided another layer to social and family status, wellbeing and prosperity.

In regard to the new housing policy, what members on the other side have chosen not to engage with is the underpinning element to engage local people in the processes and work.

In housing we are talking about tenancy management and cyclical repairs and maintenance. The new Room to Breathe program establishes additional, innovative living spaces to take the pressure and stress off and improve outcomes. We are talking about critical government employee housing and new builds. When you look at it over a 10-year period, that is a sustaining program that can take a young person who is interested in the construction sector from the elementary levels of home handy person to the level of master builder. This is the dream. It is doable and real. In remote communities that translates to sustainability in running, managing, supporting and developing the infrastructure in each and every remote town.

This is where the government's plan is long term. It is looking for a bipartisan approach. It goes beyond electoral cycles, but, most importantly, it looks at each and every aspect of community development. It is the cliché of doing this with the people, by the people, for the people.

I am proud to say this was tested in an election. If you want to cut to the chase with the politics, leave it all aside. The two members of the CLP who rose from the ashes of that completely dysfunctional train wreck of a government, over four years, have to wear some of the responsibility because they were part of that. This is now the new government and new policy direction. It will be about delivery and testing policy every step of the way.

Let us talk about jobs in a construction sense. We can also add to the local government aspect of essential and municipal services, and governance in communities, with members of the community stepping up and being on local authorities, standing as elected members and being leadership figures in their local communities.

Envisage a four-year-old waking up in the morning in a home that has some room to breathe—we will work on the overcrowding issue. That four-year-old waking up in the morning will see family members—and hopefully the younger family members—busy and organised, with a purpose, as they have to do something which will be meaningful. It will make them feel good, be of community benefit and, essentially, the underpinning element will be that it will develop that community. Those four-year-olds will see the busy nature of people who are moving, focused and dispersing into the community. The four-year-old might see an uncle, brother or dad who picks up a tool bag or who goes to a vehicle that has signage on the side and the classic tradie ute back with power tools and all the associated elements of the construction sector. That four-year-old will wave goodbye as dad goes to work.

How does that translate to economy? Well, dad will go to work because he wants to. He is an important member of that community and will make a difference. He will also be earning real wages and generate economy in that community.

I do not want to be misogynistic and risk any level of criticism from the two CLP opposition members. Let us talk about mum in the trade sector; I have no problems with that. We have lots of great examples of women right across the spectrum of all trade and service sectors. It is about local, real jobs, and this is a generational change. It was wonderful to talk to the Vice Chancellor of Charles Darwin University the other day and say, 'You'd better prepare; when this policy kicks in we will have a great need for training in the VET sector and the trades area.' He was very pleased to hear that. He said to me, with a very real understanding of what we were talking about, 'It's great to see a government planning over a 10-year cycle because it gives all the other community sectors an opportunity to plan'. It gives associated Territory industries security and confidence to say, 'You are worthy; I need you; I will give you an apprenticeship.' That person then travels through and is indentured at the end of that and becomes a trade person in their own business in the future.

Member for Spillett, there are real job opportunities. It is not just about housing; it is about many areas within government service delivery. This will be important not only for the family, but for the four-year-old. They then see something that is quite normal. When the family gets together at night, let's hope the housing situation is better and that the family's nutrition is improved. Let's hope we can deal with the scourge of chronic disease issues like rheumatic heart disease. If we can work on basic housing infrastructure we can be one of the important links in the support chain.

Let us hope, most importantly, the family shares time together, discussing the events of the day, which involves their contributions to the community. Those children will understand the platform of what their parents do in community, their value to the community and the family, and, most importantly, the value they bring to facilitating community development into the future.

That is where this policy is heading. The multifaceted layers that need to support those outcomes will be the story that is told in this House, year after year. This is not about four years; this is about making a big, bold decision to go beyond electoral cycles.

Mr VOWLES: A point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker! Pursuant to Standing Order 43, I request an extension of time for my learned colleague, the Member for Barkly.

Motion agreed to.

Mr McCARTHY: The Member for Araluen touched on some very good points about the capital resourcing within any government. Being a previous minister in this government, having been in this House for a considerable amount of time now and having gone through various budget processes, I realise these are tough times and it is difficult. Then you have to look at what Labor did to make sure this policy is supported. Let us look at housing and that significant investment in this area.

It is not about new houses; it is about the raft of housing issues from homelessness right up to people engaging in the private sector. It is considerable—\$1.1bn, over 10 years, of Territory money. It is an historical time whereby the Territory government has invested into that significant issue. It is a real game changer for our regional and remote communities.

In regard to budgetary control, we will see rollouts every year, over the 10 years, of \$50m for new housing, \$20m for repairs and maintenance, \$20m allocated to the Room to Breathe program and \$20m for government employees working in their own communities to access government employee housing. The 10-year program will be consolidating the evidence of growth and there will be elements that focus on community development.

We have put this money forward to bring the Commonwealth back to the table in 2018, as members should be aware. On 30 June 2018 a lot of the national partnerships will conclude. At this stage housing is not on the agenda of the federal government. I am heartened to hear that at an official level it is shaping up as a discussion that has to translate into a significant Cabinet submission. We have to be at the table with the Commonwealth Government to, hopefully, match that funding, if not better.

Equally important with the Commonwealth taking the Northern Territory lead and showing we will do this by engaging with local people—we will do this in terms of a new method of service delivery. When you aggregate resources and dollars, you will have a real, comprehensive, invested program over the next decade. We are concluding 10 years of a national partnership agreement in terms of remote Indigenous housing. As the Member for Nelson said in his contributions to the House, 'We have learned lots of lessons'.

I look forward to meeting with Minister Scullion to talk to the Commonwealth officials and show the lead from the Northern Territory. From colleagues to the Chief Minister, we are all in this together to instil the trust and confidence of the Commonwealth and take this to the people.

It was so important yesterday, during a division in this House—I could not spend any longer with the Member for Nelson or the Leader of the Opposition because they would have ended up on our side, voting with us. But they did not want to do that. The conversation was, 'Hey, you guys really need to take a deeper interest in this story'. It is not just about new houses. There are many developmental layers in this to get new houses built. When we get there in 10 years' time, I can guarantee some of my ex-students will be building new houses. It is about layered development and community capacity. It is a really good policy that sits perfectly with this statement as well as the policy we have in front of us on early childhood development.

The Minister for Children has duly acknowledged the important elements of support—the public sector officials. The Minister for Territory Families has outlined the complexities around our challenges with child protection. That will be an important partnership through this process. This government is about partnerships with Territory families.

Children and families is a critical area for community development. There is so much need, which the minister talked about in the statement regarding the early childhood development index. That is why I am so proud our Education minister has chosen, as one of her many important projects, the new early childhood development centre for Tennant Creek. To put that into context, what we know in the town of Tennant Creek, anecdotally, is that there are about 400 children between zero and four years of age. A high percentage of those children will present, in their first contact with childcare, early childhood, preschool and then formal school, with complex deficits, sometimes in cognition and cognitive ability. They will be challenging times for families and children.

New infrastructure brings, alongside jobs and regional economic development, a place to engage the community. The Minister for Territory Families talked about the nature of the silos and how we have to work on that. The Member for Araluen also spoke about that, and she is exactly right. But I am so proud that our Minister for Education has made this announcement and will introduce this concept to our community. It will be supported with real infrastructure which will allow all the stakeholder groups, often many groups working in childhood development in isolation, to come together into a place that will support childcare, purpose-built innovative outdoor child education, early childhood education, the Families as First Teachers program, and co-location and co-use of existing infrastructure to develop real efficiencies. We can learn from each other. This is no dream; this will happen, it will be driven by a Labor government.

In conclusion, Labor's policy about early childhood development, with enhancing the numbers and capacity of the community maternal nurses, is an excellent initiative. I put on the public record my sincere condolences to the family of Jenni Kennedy, who passed away this year. Jenny was a nurse who lived in Tennant Creek for six years. She was a member of our local authority. She reminded me of my mother, who was a triple certificate nurse. Jenni was a visiting community maternal nurse. She conducted clinics on the boots of broken-down cars because families were too embarrassed to take her inside.

I have to work on that issue of families not having homes they are proud of. Jenni was adaptive and creative. She was an innovator. She conducted a clinic with a child, who was under the protection of Territory Families, in the kitchen area of the electorate office. I learned so much from Jenni in that hour, which turned into two hours, about early childhood growth and development. It was amazing.

She reinforced everything about Labor's policy and her own position. Tragically, she passed away a couple of months later at home. It devastated the community. I think Jenni Kennedy's legacy will be this policy. It will be what we do; it will be what we say. I am proud to be part of Michael Gunner's Labor government, which has put Territory children at the centre of all our work, not just for the next four years—we have identified the next 10 years.

Mr VOWLES (Primary Industry and Resources): Mr Deputy Speaker, I thank the Minister for Children for introducing this statement on early childhood. It is very important.

As a minister in this government and a proud Aboriginal Territorian I strongly support the early childhood commitment. If we are to see a future for the Territory that is positive for all children, we must change the way in which we invest in and support them. These changes are needed if we are to see long-term economic and social improvements. For too long I have seen, through my work in remote communities and even in my own family, our children and families struggling—inadequate housing; homes designed for city living; culturally inappropriate practices and consultation; no jobs; no money; money being mismanaged; kids roaming the streets; and intergenerational domestic violence trauma. I am tired of hearing about the disproportionate disadvantage that many of our Aboriginal children experience. Change is needed and, through this early childhood development platform, changes will occur.

Sadly, there are wide gaps in early life outcomes of Indigenous and non-Indigenous populations. We have failed and are still failing. Listen to some of these differences: the significant gap in the mortality rates of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal children under the age of five; the higher rate of poor health conditions, low birth weight, hospital admissions and poor nutrition among Aboriginal children when compared with other children; the higher prevalence of clinical behavioural and emotional disorders among Aboriginal children; and the low performance of Aboriginal children in tests for literacy and numeracy compared with other young Australians. I am appalled, disgusted and embarrassed as a member of parliament.

We must and can change our early childhood development framework. I know many Aboriginal families who are strong, connected, have ambitions for their children and love their children. While the statistics are appalling and overwhelming, I truly believe in the strength of our families and communities to make the changes necessary to ensure a strong, vital future for our children. Our children are in greater danger developmentally, owing to risk factors such as smoking and drinking during pregnancy, community stresses, poor health and poor nutrition during pregnancy, challenges faced by parents, problems in parenting, disadvantaged socioeconomic conditions, and the insufficient availability and effectiveness of early childhood development programs and services.

Through the expansion of the Nurse-Family Partnership Program, internationally recognised as the best-practice model, we will work directly with young mothers to support positive changes during their pregnancy. This will build up their capacity to parent confidently, strengthen parent attachment and, in turn, result in babies being born healthier.

My mother is a highly-qualified and experienced Aboriginal health worker, and her passion for evidence-based antenatal and postnatal care for Aboriginal women has been a big influence in my life. She followed on from my great-great-grandmother and my great-grandmother, who were traditional midwives on country.

We need to support mothers not to smoke, to build up their understanding of the importance of eating well during pregnancy, not to drink and to understand the impact of stress and violence on brain development and, consequently, the behaviour of our children.

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, as the Minister for Children mentioned, clearly states:

Children have the right to live a full life. Governments should ensure that children survive and develop healthily.

...

Governments should respect the rights and responsibilities of families to guide their children so that, as they grow up, they learn to use their rights properly.

...

Children have the right to an education.

This leads me to the Families as First Teachers program, which will strengthen the attachment of parents and carers with their babies, a crucial strength factor. I also understand the importance of early literacy and numeracy to support the pathways to good educational and employment outcomes. I am very proud of the work of our local FaFT workers and I am inspired by the strong women who are there week after week, setting up the playgroups, rounding up the parents and carers, and for their passion for the children.

It is fantastic to see the confidence of parents as their children build up their reading skills and confidence through the Families as First Teachers program. The Michael Gunner government is committed to providing a holistic, integrated focus on investing in families and their children by addressing other key social determinants, such as housing and community.

A recent announcement of \$1.1bn to remote housing over the next 10 years will support families and their children to live healthily and safely in their communities. I am particularly proud of our commitment to housing for local Aboriginal workers as I believe it will make a real difference to our key workers. Over the years I have worked with many amazing local Aboriginal staff who would return home at the end of the day from a local health clinic, school or safe house to an overcrowded house of 15 to 25 people. This has impacted on their ability to work effectively day to day when, at times, there are issues at home. Across all cultures and societies the pressure of home life impacts our day and jobs.

Through providing this housing we are showing the importance of working in the community and how valuable a job can be. This will inspire our children and young people to study and learn, like many of our local Aboriginal workers have. This is a practical commitment of our government which will benefit our children. Measurable change will require active partnering with key Aboriginal leadership and involvement in governance, action planning, program delivery and prioritised community capacity building.

Working with APONT and the non-government sector we will invest in sustainable initiatives that are evidence based and which strengthen the development of our children. Finding solutions is not something government should do alone. I look forward to hearing more about the co-designing outcome, focused funding agreements and the inspiration of our non-government sector, which carries an enormous responsibility for government to succeed in this area. We will listen to our community and the experts.

I am excited about the appointment of the academic members of the early childhood reference group. The depth and knowledge of this group will greatly enhance and challenge the way in which we move forward on this framework.

Our early childhood framework is a sweeping agenda that aims to enhance our children's potential and the wellbeing of the Territory by providing a foundation of good developmental outcomes in the early years. Research has repeatedly proven that investment in early years develops human capital, facilitates economic growth and development, and encourages greater social equity. I am proud of this framework and look forward to hearing about its benefits over the coming years.

Debate suspended.

The Assembly suspended.

PETITION

Petition No 4 – Larrakia Nation Aboriginal Corporation

Mr GUNNER (Chief Minister)(by leave): Madam Speaker, I present a petition not conforming to standing orders from 735 petitioners relating to the Larrakia Nation Aboriginal Corporation. I move that the petition be read.

Motion agreed to; petition read:

Save Larrakia Nation Aboriginal Corporation! It's the right thing to do!

MOTION
Note Statement – Early Childhood Development Plan

Continued from earlier this day.

Mrs LAWLER (Education): Mr Deputy Speaker, I am pleased to have the opportunity to respond to the statement on early childhood development by my colleague, the Minister for Children.

As I mentioned in my opening statement to this parliament, one of the reasons I wanted to be part of this Labor government is because children are at the heart of its agenda. We understand that governments need to invest in early childhood development. As adults, we have a responsibility to give the next generation the very best possible start in life. Getting the right start in life is essential to for children's later success. It shapes a child's ability to thrive at school, stay healthy and socially connected and contribute to society socially and economically.

As the Minister for Children stated earlier, every dollar we invest in early childhood would yield an almost \$8 return on investment for the broader community. The Member for Spillett debated that, but I argue that in the Territory's remote communities that figure would be higher. Dollars being spent on education makes for a great start for children in the early years. Dollars spent on early years in remote communities ensure a child who has a great start then goes on to employment and has a healthy, long life. I believe it would return even greater than an \$8 yield in the long term.

Not only is investing in the early years the right thing to do for our children's futures, it will reduce the need for government spending in their later life and, over the long term, will reduce the need for government healthcare, incarceration and all the things that cost us in the Territory.

As a mother and a grandmother I want the best possible future for my children and grandchildren, and for all children in this wonderfully diverse place, the Northern Territory. We all have a responsibility to do everything we can to harness the potential which exists in every young child. As a former preschool teacher and educator for over 30 years, I have seen firsthand the positive impact that quality early learning can have on an individual's life for their wellbeing and later success, whether that is undertaking future training, going to university, getting a job or raising a happy and healthy family. Early childhood is the period where we develop the basis of our cognitive skills, social wellbeing and competence, and physical and cognitive health.

In her statement the Minister for Children talked about the high levels of vulnerability amongst young children in the Territory. Unfortunately too many Territory children grow up in households characterised by stress, violence and hunger. This environment compromises the child's development and long-term outcomes. The Member for Johnston, an Indigenous Territorian, discussed earlier today how chronic those issues are. Although some children in the Northern Territory are doing well, 37% of Territory children were identified as developmentally vulnerable at the start of their school lives from the Australian Early Development Census data. Children who are identified as developmentally vulnerable when they start school are much more likely to have difficulties in reading, numeracy and meeting national minimum standards.

Although the 2013 Northern Territory NAPLAN results indicate that Territory children were performing below the national average, there have been improvements in a number of areas. Of particular note are improvements in the Year 3 results in reading, spelling, grammar and punctuation. I believe that can be, in part, attributed to an increasing level of participation in early learning programs. The programs we often talk about in this House include the Families as First Teachers program and the child and family centres. Hopefully this data shows that they are having an impact.

Research has found a direct relationship between the quality of early childhood services, the amount of time children spend in them and the children's intellectual and social development. Early childhood education and care services form a significant part of the universal service system that the Minister for Children referred to in her statement. Our education system strives to shape education outcomes from the start of a child's life. The majority of research into the benefits of attending preschool and early learning programs found that children who attend early years education gained higher literacy, numeracy, English and mathematic results. The more time children spend in preschool the greater the impact on their grades in English and maths.

Children who had experienced high-quality preschool education were better at self-regulating and social behaviours and were less inclined to hyperactivity. Attendance at preschool increased educational

attainment which, in turn, resulted in increased earnings. I look forward to working with the Minister for Children and my parliamentary colleagues to develop a holistic early childhood development strategic plan that will inform high-quality programs that are locally responsive and culturally appropriate with a stable and long-term future.

I also look forward to working with the expert panel that has five of Australia's and some of the Territory's very best early years professors, as well as five local representatives who also have expertise and experience in early childhood development. We have 10 or so people, an expert working group to be able to call on and draw on the latest research to make sure our decisions are evidence based. It will be a wonderful thing. Part of this plan will be for government to build on some of the successful initiatives already in place. Some of these initiatives go back to the previous government, but some go back further than that. One of them is the child and family centres. There are six operating across the Territory to engage with parents and carers to help them better understand how they can support their children's learning. These centres are located in Palmerston, Maningrida, Ngukurr, Yuendumu, Larapinta and Gunbalanya.

I know how fortunate I am to have a child and family centre in Palmerston. I was recently at the Gunbalanya child and family centre, so I saw how wonderful that one is. The Member for Braitling recently visited the Larapinta child and family centre. These centres deliver holistic, integrated services in a way that best suits the children and families. They were built using money from the federal government, but it is up to the Northern Territory Government to support the centres with staff and by engaging families. Child and family centres allow professionals in child health, early childhood education and care and family support to work in partnership to deliver targeted services, which address the challenging issues facing so many Territory families.

In addition to these six existing centres, a new \$6.5m child and family centre will be established in Tennant Creek. The new child and family centre is a much-needed initiative for Tennant Creek, where children's vulnerability levels are well above the Territory average. Community consultation has commenced in anticipation of construction starting in the second half of 2017. Child and family centres become central hubs for children and families in the communities, where they provide a soft entry for families; families feel comfortable. Young mums go there with their children and get advice on really practical things, such as feeding their children and support for young mums and families. Often that is practical based—for anyone who is a mum, you would know how valuable it is to have people with children of a similar age to yours and talk about your concerns and be informed about your child's development.

The Palmerston child and family centre celebrated its first birthday recently, and I had the pleasure of attending the celebrations. It was a great day showcasing the range of programs at the centre, including the Young Mothers are Strong Mothers project. Young Mothers are Strong Mothers supports teenage mums and young mums in continuing their education as well as assisting in the development of skills in caring for their children—a vital program.

This program is consistent with our community-based approach to education. The program launched a series of videos earlier this year which are uploaded to YouTube. These videos feature the success stories young mothers and their children have following their return to formal education. I encourage members of the House to look at these videos on YouTube, see the successes and hear their stories.

Attendance at quality early childhood education and care services—that is, preschool, long daycare and programs such as Families as First Teachers—supports young children's development and early learning, and reduces their vulnerability when they start school. As I have outlined, the child and family centres are a hub to co-locate services for families, for example the Families as First Teachers program, which I am proud to say was an initiative of the previous Labor government.

The Families as First Teachers program is underpinned by the Abecedarian Approach, an evidence-based program designed to support families and improve children's early learning development and achievement at school. Abecedarian is centred on an intervention that involves intensive learning and social and emotional support, starting in infancy and continuing into kindergarten entry for children and, importantly, for their families as well.

The program has four key pillars, language priority, learning games, conversational reading and enriched caregiving which seeks to build children's language and cognitive skills while strengthening parents' ability in caring for and teaching their children. Long-term evaluation of the Abecedarian program found that children who participated in the children, that is, children who received early learning support through the program, achieved higher reading and maths results at ages 8, 12, 15 and up to 21 years.

If you have not looked at the Abecedarian program I encourage you to Google it and have a read. It is an amazing program that has been in place in the long-term in America and some of the stories that have come out of the program are heart-warming. Children were also less likely to repeat a year of school and were more likely to be employed in jobs or enrolled in higher education. They were also more likely to lead healthier lives.

To ensure the program was suitable for the Northern Territory it was trialled and refined in consultation with a range of Indigenous families and communities. That is the great thing about the Abecedarian program; we are taking something that works and is evidence based, and then fine-tuning and adapting it to make sure it fits the Northern Territory context. The activities and resources were modified to make sure they were culturally appropriate and supported children's learning and effectively engaged with families. The Australian version of the program is referred to as 3a Abecedarian Approach Australia and is being implemented in other areas of Australia.

Because of its success the FaFT program is being expanded. By December of next year the program will be available at 38 sites, including five urban—Darwin, Palmerston, Katherine and Alice Springs. Importantly, programs at each FaFT site are tailored to the needs of the local community, while at the same time retaining the integrity of the Abecedarian approach.

As we have said before, we need to have that place-based approach. We need to look at the local communities. Yuendumu is very different to Gunbalanya and Larapinta is different to Palmerston. We need to ensure, even if we have a program that is evidence based, we still tailor it to meet the needs of its local community.

As Education minister, and in my previous roles in education, I have had the privilege of visiting schools, preschools and early childhood centres across the Territory. Meeting young people and their families always reinforces in me the great responsibility we have as adults to provide the best possible start for young people. Our role as government is to ensure families are supported to do this.

Last week, I had a great opportunity to see the FaFT program in action at Gunbalanya and Yirrkala. It was heartwarming to see the children and their mothers enjoying singing and dancing activities together. The mothers have a space to come together and share their stories and learn from each other as well as the educators leading the program. It is not just mothers. The majority are mothers, but there are also dads. Parents are the children's first and most important teachers.

The Member for Spillett was criticising the Minister for Children, saying not enough emphasis was placed on families. That shows a lack of understanding of these programs. Families as First Teachers, as the name suggests, is all about just that. Families need to be, and are, the first teachers for our children. Those program, yes, are centred on families, but it is about supporting children, and families as well, with the skills they need to bring up healthy, strong children.

Parents can help their children become confident and motivated learners. This government wants all children entering formal schooling to have the skills and attributes they need to succeed in their education. That is why we have programs targeting our most vulnerable in society. As our Labor policy says, we want children to be school ready on day one, Year 1 of schooling.

I want to let members know about the preschool curriculum being developed by the Department of Education. It is the first curriculum document for preschool written specifically for the Territory. It was developed in consultation with the preschool teachers across the Territory. It provides continuity and learning from preschool to Transition, ensuring children are best prepared to commence formal schooling. It provides the practical details, strategies and guidance for teachers and educators to implement the early years framework in all preschools across the Territory. The Territory has a reputation of developing innovative curriculum and it is great to see that the preschool curriculum is another example of that.

Professional development and training in the use of the curriculum has been provided to preschool teachers in government and non-government preschools, along with staff working in long daycare. Ensuring our workforce has the appropriate skills is essential for the provision of quality early childhood services. There is no doubt the Territory needs an early childhood education and care workforce with strong leadership able to work with children and families with complex needs.

Many of our children are vulnerable, but they also have complex needs. The Territory is a different setting and we need to make sure we work carefully with those families. Having this expert panel to advise the subcommittee of Cabinet will be a useful and positive thing.

It is not enough to simply implement programs without putting in place a proper process of review and evaluation. We all know that we must review and evaluate programs. It is no good enough to just bumble along and let the programs continue to fail and not be clear about why they are not succeeding. We must modify and be agile in changing programs so they meet people's needs. We will make sure we review and evaluate as we go.

As part of our election commitments we will review the child and family centre model to ensure the services are properly utilised, have strong local involvement and are effectively responding to the needs of children and families.

The Department of Education is working with the University of Melbourne to fully evaluate the Families as First Teachers program as well. While the program continues to go from strength to strength, with another five urban and remote services planned, we are working to develop a fuller understanding of the impact the program is having on children's learning and development. We also want to identify any changes that might be required to deliver even more positive results into the future. We need to continue to trim the sails to make sure our programs are getting better and hitting the mark. Not only are evaluations of this nature important in ensuring services are effective in responding to the needs of children and families, they also contribute to building the evidence base which indicates what really works in the unique educational settings of the Territory.

An integrated early childhood plan requires assessing structures and practices which could form barriers to service coordination, and working in partnership. Our early childhood development plan aims to achieve just that. The government is exploring opportunities to increase the recognition of early childhood qualified teachers working in before-school settings, such as Families as First Teachers and childcare.

Children cannot enter school ready to learn unless families, schools and communities provide environments and experiences to support their physical, social, emotional, language and cognitive development. Contemporary education recognises the importance of engaging with families and supporting learning from birth. Educators cannot just respond to children when they start school; they are key players in the provision of universal early childhood services.

When I first started my teaching career it was basically when the child arrived at school, at four or five years old, that you started teaching them. We have moved beyond that. Now it is about the very early years, which is what this government is focusing on. The years before school are such a vital time. Instead of playing catch-up or responding when the child turns five and starts school, the early years are being addressed through Families as First Teachers.

The role of teachers and education has broadened—and that is happening at the other end too. When most of us started our education there were no vocational education and training programs in schools, and there was not much focus on getting kids ready for jobs, but both ends of the spectrum have been expanded in schools since then.

Educators play a key role with families in developing children's skills and knowledge so they are ready to continue their learning on day one of school. Achieving this goal is a shared responsibility. I look forward to working with the Minister for Children and my colleagues in the subcommittee of Cabinet to develop our early childhood development strategic plan. We need to do the heavy lifting that is needed in regard to social programs for our kids.

We will put children at the heart of our program. I am confident the strategy will provide the Territory's children with the very best start in life.

Mr SIEVERS (Brennan): Mr Deputy Speaker, I am very pleased to know that this government is putting children at the front and centre. The wellbeing of children is everyone's business, and this government has reviewed its structures and policies to ensure it works in a collaborative approach across organisations so we do not let children fall through the cracks or wait until they become involved in the justice system before we act.

Over the past few years I watched the previous government's approach to social and health issues. It was an approach that many of my friends, including Mr Hodor, would describe as watching a bus go over a cliff before reacting or putting up a fence. I am pleased the Labor government's approach is far different to that approach. This government believes prevention is better than cure. This government's approach is to identify issues very early and have the long-term interventions required, which is a commonsense

approach. It is not short term or a one-off fix; it is a long-term, collaborative approach that is evidence based. It is an approach that Territorians voted for.

The first stage of the Labor government children initiative was announced by the first ever NT Minister for Children, our Deputy Chief Minister, Nicole Manison. It was a fantastic move by this government, and I applaud that move. What better way to ensure our children are always at the centre of government?

The second stage was to combine departments that work in similar areas. They are working collaboratively and efficiently for all Territorians and our children. Further, the research conducted by a number of organisations, including the Menzies School of Health Research, provides the foundations for an effective approach to support vulnerable children and families, whilst accepting that the primary responsibility for the care of children is with the parents of those children.

One of the compounding issues is foetal alcohol spectrum disorder. I thank the previous government, which established the Select Committee on Action to Prevent Foetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder and released the report, *The Preventable Disability*, in February 2015. Unfortunately nothing further was done. This new government is keen to progress on the select committee work, and it is developing the framework to respond to foetal alcohol spectrum disorder issues as part of a holistic early childhood development plan.

I have worked in the alcohol and other drugs area for over 15 years. Foetal alcohol spectrum disorder is a lifelong disability. Alcohol exposure on the developing brain can mean children born with foetal alcohol spectrum disorder will have long-term difficulties with speech, language skills, thinking, planning, memory and managing impulsive behaviour. Health impacts include problems with eyesight, hearing, breathing and heart and physical development. These problems, often referred to as secondary symptoms, include poor self-esteem, disrupted relationships with family and peers, poor educational outcomes and increased likelihood of coming into contact with welfare and youth justice services. Often children with foetal alcohol spectrum disorder are unable to learn from past mistakes and have difficulty understanding abstract concepts such as time, maths and the value of money. Foetal alcohol spectrum disorder has a profound impact on children, families and the NT community.

While foetal alcohol spectrum disorder is totally preventable by avoiding alcohol while pregnant, it is sometimes very hard to do. Issues are associated with addiction, lack of understanding about alcohol and its effects, and community attitudes to alcohol and drinking make it a very complex problem to address. Preventing foetal alcohol spectrum disorder, and supporting families and young children affected by it, requires coordination and multidisciplinary approaches. The select committee identified that good postnatal support and quality childcare can reduce the consequences of the damage caused by foetal alcohol spectrum disorder and aid in preventing it for the future of our children. Further, it recommended improvements to diagnostic services, parent support and early childhood education, improvements that are needed to address critical gaps in service delivery.

We are very fortunate that this government's early childhood development plan will work to address these issues and provide an integrated and collaborative framework for an appropriate approach across the NT, as it is a whole-of-government and community service approach encompassed in a holistic early childhood development plan. The plan also outlines that restoring our education systems and schools with teachers, support and special needs staff, bringing back the Banned Drinker Register and rolling out the housing and Room to Breathe programs are also key strategies to address related parent, child and youth issues. The underpinning philosophy of the plan is the social determinants of health and wellbeing, and it clearly reflects that this government is following and incorporating evidence-based approaches to Territory issues.

I am a parent, a father of five, and I remember thinking after my first child, 'Right, I have this job down pat'. How wrong I was, as I found out very quickly that each one of my children is very different in every loving way. Parents do not get a handbook when they become a parent, although sometimes parents would like one. Being a parent can be tough, but it is a very rewarding job.

Our children are all so different, which is the reason we must have different options and ways to ensure they are connected and not left to fall through the gaps or enter the justice system before we do anything. Evidence shows it is far more difficult at the acute end for change, so we must focus on the early development stages to give our children the best possible long-term outcomes in the Territory.

I am very proud that this government will put children first and at the centre. We will invest in our children from day one. We will tackle the tough issues when it comes to the misuse of alcohol and other drugs, and we will provide options and opportunities for children to ensure their wellbeing, education and health issues are addressed to give them and their families the best start in life.

Mrs WORDEN (Sanderson): Madam Speaker, I support the Minister for Children on her statement regarding early childhood development. It is a breath of fresh air to see a government put such emphasis on an area which is not immediately media-sexy, an area where the results will not possibly be known beyond the term of this parliament, but it is the responsible thing for any government to do.

Since the launch of this policy approach earlier this year, we have heard consistently from our Chief Minister that this policy will transcend his term of government. What a breath of fresh air that a government has recognised that there is a problem and, equally, that there is no easy fix. The solution will take years, possibly generations, but instead of being focused on a quick vote grab, we have chosen—as a party and now as a government—to start the hard work, or, in Michael Gunner's words, 'get the big rocks rolling'. We will put in place a plan that can be referred back to and continue to be implemented and acted upon by subsequent governments in the years to come.

When pondering this subject I naturally looked closer to home. I have previously reflected on my own history of being a teenage mother of two. With the arrival of my eldest daughter, I had absolutely no idea what I was doing. I am pretty sure she was the first newborn I had ever held, and all the other mums on the Flinders Hospital ward helped me grapple the art of holding my baby correctly and changing nappies. I had a supportive family and fairly fearsome community nurses, and I quickly made my way. I also knew that my parents valued an education and never thought twice about taking the girls to preschool, playgroup and so forth. As their parent I was their carer, advocate, disciplinarian and role model. This was, in fact, my job.

I now look at my eldest daughter, my son and many of their friends, who are raising their own families, and I see how well they are doing. It is a matter of pride—I think we can all share that—when you see your young children and their young children growing to be strong, confident and open to all the opportunities they may come across in their lifetime.

I also look at my second daughter, now going through her first pregnancy with the support of our public system's medical staff, the amazing people at RDH. They are already providing her with advice on how she can get support once our grandchild is born early next year and then how she can connect with the broader educational and social community when that time comes.

We can safely say that my children are not the primary target of this policy; they were born into a family that I like to think was equipped and capable of raising them. They have always enjoyed good support and advice, even if they have not wanted to hear it, and they were given discipline, clear boundaries, access to education and strong family and community role models. You could possibly say they were born into a life of privilege. Whilst their children will continue to benefit in the years to come, it is those who fall through the gaps or do not engage from day one that are the focus of this policy, and they are the ones we need to keep an eye out for.

How many times do we think a young person's life could be different with a different start in life? As I have said a number of times, life is, sadly, often about where you were born and into which family you were born. A good education provides opportunity for economic and social participation, and it contributes to good health, positive behaviours and emotional stability, all things we have heard from previous speakers. I was very pleased to hear the minister quote the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child in her statement. It is so important that we set the bar high so we are striving for the best practice and excellence, and that is what we should always be reaching for.

Before I turn my mind specifically to our plan, I would like to ask a very important question: what is the cost of not striving to meet the standard set by this convention? Sadly, I do not think we have to look far for evidence of the outcomes. Every time we see news headlines about some young person it is only natural that we question what has gone so very wrong. Why did they steal that car? Why did they act out on their frustrations? Why are they so angry? More often than not we can trace it back to a social and/or economic disconnect.

At a broad level, a poor start can often increase social inequality resulting in reduced productivity and intergenerational disadvantage. Sadly, many children will not reach their full human potential because of issues affecting the family, such as poverty, inability to access healthy foods, violence and substance abuse. They often do not even receive even the basics of adequate nutrition, care and opportunities to learn. It is our job to remove or minimise the impact of those barriers.

This is not just a problem in the Northern Territory, or Australia, for that matter. Sadly, there continues to be many countries around us where children still do not have access to education and are condemned to a life of poverty. As so many speakers have already told us, there is consistent evidence which shows that brain

development is most rapid in the early years of life. When the quality of stimulation, support and nurturing is deficient, child development can be very seriously affected.

When we see a new parent chatting to their newborn child, besides it being very cute, we know it is having an effect. This stimulation is important for the child's developing brain. We know that such simple as this can make a huge difference. We also know that many young children who do not have positive interactions with their parents and who experience extreme stress are at greater risk of developing cognitive, behavioural or emotional difficulties.

These impediments can have a lasting effect on the child's readiness for school and, later, their performance in school. Ongoing disadvantage and being deprived of positive stimulation can have an ongoing multiplying effect. Children raised in poverty are much more likely to complete far less education than middle-class children. Children who experience a poor start and do not develop the required literacy and numeracy foundation skills are less able to participate and learn at school. But it is not all doom and gloom. We know the effect of early disadvantage on children can be reduced. Early intervention programs for disadvantaged children and families can lead to improvements in children's safety, health, growth and cognitive and social development. Children who receive assistance in their early years achieve more success at school. As adults they can have higher employment earnings, better health, and lower levels of welfare dependency and crime rates than those who do not have these early opportunities. This means they can have a way out of the poverty trap and a life of disadvantage. The good news is the cycle can be broken.

Early intervention is not only the right thing to do, in the long run it is also the most cost-effective thing for a government to do. Efforts to improve early childhood development are an investment and not a cost. My research into this identified that the cost-benefit ratios of early intervention—also spoken about earlier by my colleague, the Member for Drysdale—indicate that for every dollar spent on improving early child development, returns can be on average four to five times the amount invested and, in some cases, much higher.

The question is how can we not invest? It has to be cheaper to invest in the early years than to be shackled to lifelong or even generational welfare dependency, poor productivity and, importantly, increasing costs associated with child protection, policing and our corrections system. Investing in the early years is also a good way to start ensuring that yawning gap between the rich and poor in our society does not continue to widen. Who does not want that?

We all have a part to play—families, services and communities—but none more so than government. We have not lost the importance of our role. The formation of a Cabinet subcommittee to drive the implementation of the early childhood development plan will allow us to keep our eye on the ball, and that is central to our strategy. Bringing together the key government service providers of Health, Education, Housing, Children and Territory Families, for the first time working together, is vital. Beyond this how do we support those building blocks for life and go about breaking the cycle, and what is government's role? My research indicates there are a number of things this government can do. Visionary planning and partnership with key stakeholders—and the minister clearly outlined this is happening. Making early support to children and their families central to government policy is a focus of our plan.

We have heard that the provision of evidence-led programs that are consistent across every sector is our way forward. We then need to monitor and evaluate so our efforts are reviewed and modified as required as time changes and new challenges or opportunities emerge.

Education is a central focus of our policy. Education is not only about literacy, numeracy or social skills; it is so much more: preschools, schools, early education centres and community engagement hubs. Families, even those who experience some level of dysfunction, can access a sense of community and support from teachers and educators who are strong role models. In these places the focus is also on the parents and their role in children's early years. Mothers and fathers have an equal role in raising their children. Improving early childhood outcomes means working with and supporting parents and families. We can work with and understand their concerns, hopes and dreams for their children. We can support them, but, more importantly, we can enable them. We can provide ever-improving programs and services in health, education and wellbeing to support every child's development.

For parents who have not had the opportunity to develop the tools to do this important work—I said that correctly; this is work—we have to support and give them the opportunity to gain these skills. The early years are of crucial importance for every child's development. It is a period of great opportunity, but young children are also extremely vulnerable to negative influences.

I look around me at some great mothers and fathers in this room—exceptionally hard-working role models who are their children's carers and champions, which are equally important. Government's role is to support parents, carers and families to raise healthy, happy, well-adjusted, strong children who grow to be strong, capable adults.

I want to take a moment to acknowledge that over the years our first Australians have been denied access to equal education and/or not accepted the notion that education is the game breaker. Many have suffered greatly as a result. Given the low level of jobs available on country, who can really blame them? We are still seeing the results of this play out across the Territory, so our early childhood plan has to be developed and implemented in partnership with our first Australians.

We all acknowledge that early engagement and education is the key to turning things around. Listening to my colleague, the Member for Johnston, I realised he is so very right. Creating jobs and fixing the housing issues are big parts of solving this puzzle. We need to do more in both these areas and provide quality, culturally-appropriate early learning to ensure Indigenous parents and children are supported to address their disadvantage, and it can be done. They need to be able to see that at the end of their formal education years there will be opportunities in remote and urban areas, as the Member for Barkly spoke so eloquently about earlier today. A good foundation in the early years will make a difference through adulthood and the next generation. It is important to give a better start. Educated and healthy people participate in and contribute to the financial and social wealth of their societies. The early years of childhood form the basis of intelligence, personality, social behaviour and capacity to learn and nurture yourself and others.

Without doubt the opportunity to help disadvantaged children attain an equal start is schooling starts well before school; it starts in the home. To achieve this, parents, families, community organisations and governments will have to work together.

I am proud to say that in my electorate of Sanderson I am lucky enough to have the Wulagi Early Learning Centre, where I have seen firsthand the critical work the staff there are doing with local families and with children from birth. They are setting a fantastic example of community and education support right from the start, inviting in and supporting vulnerable families—migrants, refugees, those living in the local area—so they can not only learn from those around them but feel supported in raising their own children. It is a very good example of what is possible with the right people and the right model.

I clearly recall being a young child in a schoolyard. Back then you knew exactly which kids were from the poorer, disadvantaged families—no uniforms, no lunch, long absences and often loners in the playground. It is great that since then we have come some way to addressing the stigma through initiatives like the Back to School vouchers and the buddy system, so no child is left sitting alone. But there is so much more to be done.

A commitment to reducing poverty and increasing social inclusion to increase the chances of success for all children requires investment in the early years.

I commend the statement to the House.

Mr WOOD (Nelson): Madam Speaker, I have some strong queries on this plan. Are we reinventing the wheel?

We know about all these problems. There are people in the Northern Territory dealing with those problems, but we have a plan that invites people from down south to come here and look at something we should be looking at from the Northern Territory's perspective.

We have NAPCAN, which has been operating in the Northern Territory for a very long time. Anyone who knows what NAPCAN is would know who Lesley Taylor is. She was on the radio today.

The NAPCAN website states:

NAPCAN (National Association for Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect) was co-founded in 1987 by Rosemary Sinclair AO and Christine Stewart OAM.

Since then NAPCAN has made a significant contribution to the safety and wellbeing of Australia's children and young people by raising public awareness of child abuse and neglect and its impacts, and by developing and promoting effective prevention strategies and programs

The plan that has been put forward today has four headings: why, how, what and when. Why are we not using all the knowledge we have at present? This is not new. All these issues about early childhood development have been around for a considerable amount of time. If the government wishes to develop a plan, you could go no further than including NAPCAN in this discussion. It has a range of programs within town communities and remote communities, which it has operated for many years.

You only have to look at some of the programs, for instance—it has a prevention program. NAPCAN says that sometimes, with these plans the government puts out, it is looking at people who already have a problem. That is not to say it should not be looked at, but we need to deal with parents who need support. We need to introduce programs that help existing families so we do not accentuate the problem later on. We need to support those people. That is what NAPCAN is about.

You will not find this in the plan—where is the mention of families? Families are mentioned once. If a child is raised in a good environment you can bet your bottom dollar someone in that family has a job, a reasonable house and access to good-quality childcare. If you have those things you have the basis for making sure a young child has a fair chance at a good start in life.

Whilst we need to aim for that we should not forget there are people already in that position who need to be helped. We can help the people who might be desperate for some help and where kids are in trouble, but we cannot do that and leave other people alone and hope everything will work out fine for them.

We need to give them support, which is what NAPCAN does. NAPCAN makes sure that not only children who are in danger and have to be made safe receive support, but existing families that are caring for their children need to be supported. This needs to be an emphasis—if we are to talk about early childhood development we need to promote the benefits of having strong, safe families. It is not in this plan; that gap needs to be looked at.

I heard Lesley Taylor on the radio this morning. She said that when we are speaking about families, especially in the Territory, we are also speaking about grandparents. It is hard for them to get recognition from anybody, yet, in many families, it is the grandparents caring for the children. How do we help the grandparents look after these children and give them a stable family life? It is not covered in this early childhood statement. It just gives an indication of what the members of government see as the problem, how they will fix it and when they will do it. In the process they have forgotten some of the other important, central issues, that is, supporting families.

NAPCAN also believes the community itself must be very much involved in this, that you need community education and support. This not only refers to urban society; it refers to remote Aboriginal communities. We need to support the people working to benefit the broader community and the families in those communities.

Everybody will say this is a fantastic statement, but I am simply asking this question: surely we know these things already? Surely there are people in the Northern Territory who have the skills, expertise, background and knowledge that we can use to come up with solutions, instead of going down south and employing four academics—they might be perfectly good people—to deal with issues we should know about.

We had the *Little Children are Sacred* report with a series of recommendations. We also had Howard Bath's report with a series of recommendations. It is not as though we do not know some of these issues. Why have we not used our own expertise? There are people in the Northern Territory who have been dealing with these issues for a considerable amount of time. Maybe all we need to do is give them some more assistance and take them on board.

You need to talk to Lesley Taylor. She is staggered that she has not been involved in this discussion. She has worked tirelessly in the Territory, making sure children are safe and well looked after. That is what disappoints me—I believe there are times when we make grand plans that sound good from a political point of view, but in reality why do we not pick up on the experience we have in the Territory? We know the problems; they are not new. They have been around since the *Little Children are Sacred* report and before that. I imagine there are other reports sitting on a shelf somewhere.

Whilst this is a good statement to promote what the government wants to do, there are some deficiencies in it, especially in relation to the use of local people with experience and qualifications. As I said, the one other area that is missing is an emphasis on the families. People might ask, 'What else?' I would say, 'Here is NAPCAN's *Whole of School Respectful Relationships Educational Resources: An Overview*. Here is NAPCAN's article on neglect prevention and its article on child-safe organisations.'

NAPCAN has developed a range of things over a long time. It has been in the Territory for a long time, and it is sad for me that we have not bothered to use our local expertise. There will be representatives from various groups who come on board, and I understand that some of those are important bodies that should be involved, but they might not necessarily have the expertise when it comes to what we are dealing with. People like Lesley Taylor and NAPCAN certainly have that expertise. Some of the discussion, if we go down this path, needs to be broader. Families are important.

I noticed this article from the Australian Institute of Family Studies, which did a summary of a seminar held on 19 August at the institute, where Warren Mundine spoke. What he said was interesting; it related to families and the importance of families being a key part of making sure children in the early stages of development are brought up in a way that gives them the best chance for the rest of their life.

I will read this part of the report; it says:

In a seminar delivered at the Australian Institute of Family Studies, Warren Mundine, Managing Director of NyunggaBlack and Chairman of the Australian Government's Indigenous Advisory Council, the Australian Indigenous Education Foundation and the Australian Indigenous Chamber of Commerce, delivered his vision of parental responsibility as the key to building strong, functioning families and, ultimately, safe and sustainable communities.

If you have a safe and sustainable community you will have a much better chance at good early childhood development:

Illustrating his presentation with vignettes of families with harrowing histories of child neglect, physical and sexual abuse, and drug and alcohol dependency, Mr Mundine argued that such cases of intergenerational dysfunction were enabled and exacerbated by welfare dependency and by the failure of governments to hold parents accountable. Revealing that several of his case studies came from the UK government's 'Troubled Families Programme', an initiative focusing on families with multiple and complex needs, he stressed that chronic intergenerational breakdown is not solely a problem for Indigenous families but instead can arise anywhere that parents do not understand or accept their responsibilities.

That is a key focus of NAPCAN; we need to advise people on good parenting skills. Howard Bath, in his report, said exactly the same thing: we need to make sure parents have good parenting skills. We need to have that up front:

As such, he argued that poverty, in itself, is not the issue nor are dysfunctional families entirely 'society's' responsibility. Rather, parents have to accept personal responsibility for providing a safe and secure environment for their children, regardless of their economic circumstances, and for inculcating the value of education and employment. In this he contrasted his approach with what he characterised as the 'progressive' discomfort with talk about families and values and the equally unhelpful 'conservative' focus on moral concerns about family form ...

In other words, there are different types of families we can focus on, whether good, bad or otherwise, but the issue should be about supporting families.

Reiterated throughout the presentation was an emphasis on employment as a means of escaping poverty and as a moral value to be passed on to children. Further arguing that welfare dependency perpetuates intergenerational poverty, Mr Mundine suggested that government assistance should move away from state-provided financial support, except as a last resort, and refocus on getting unemployed family members into work and, where necessary, compelling parents to meet their familial obligations. Again suggesting that we could learn from the UK 'Troubled Families Programme', and, in particular, its emphasis on shifting state support towards interventions designed to help families help themselves, Mr Mundine proposed adopting a model of intensive family case-management. Such an approach could, he suggested, assist families who are struggling with their responsibilities by identifying their specific issues and providing flexible and tailored support.

If we are to have this plan it cannot be narrow based; it has to be broader and deal with families, and it has to look at employment issues. If we have families that are dysfunctional it will be difficult to achieve good early childhood development.

I hope we do not get too narrow a focus in this discussion. I believe there should have been more emphasis on family in the statement and we should rethink how we will set up this plan from the point of

view of trying to use the knowledge we have in the NT, the reports in the NT and the people in the NT who have already had years of experience. Otherwise, it will look like, 'Here we go again'.

This is a new government with brand-new ideas. There is nothing wrong with the purpose, but do we need to bring in the Lamborghini model, or can we bring in the far more practical four-wheel-drive model, with people who have a good knowledge of the Northern Territory and the issues around early childhood, parenting and families. We can get the experts in the NT together and work towards doing a great thing, but I believe the focus has gone off the rails a bit by bringing in people from interstate and not focusing enough on other key issues like employment, families and good housing.

Ms UIBO (Arnhem): Madam Speaker, I rise today in support of the statement by the Minister for Children. It is critical to support and develop children in order for them to grow and be healthy, safe and happy. The Minister for Children spoke about the entrenched generational disadvantage that our Territory children face. This is something the Labor government is completely committed to addressing, and it is strongly focused on developing strategies and solutions in order to overcome barriers so our Territory kids have the best start in life.

We know from much academic research that the critical years for child development are between zero and five years old. Even before birth it is essential that a child grows safely and healthily to have the best chance of a healthy development once born. We do not claim to have all the answers, which is why we will be creating, promoting and maintaining important partnerships across government agencies and the non-government sector. There are many organisations, foundations and even business corporations that have children at the forefront of their focus.

As a government committed to improving outcomes for Territory children, it will be part of our approach to engage stakeholders across various sectors and work to find real solutions. It will not be an easy task, but, then again, raising a child is no easy task. As the Minister for Children stated, we will be focused on local and place-based solutions, which we believe will have the greatest impact on achieving positive outcomes for the children of the Northern Territory.

As stated by the minister, to ensure we get the best outcomes across the Territory, we are committed to our agencies of Children, Health, Education, Housing and Territory Families, led by the respective ministers, who will produce a whole-of-government effort in driving our early childhood plan. The Chief Minister's Cabinet subcommittee has been formed to drive our early childhood plan. The subcommittee is headed by the Minister for Children, Minister Manison, who is joined by Minister Fyles, Minister Lawler, Minister McCarthy and Minister Wakefield. This clearly demonstrates to Territorians and the rest of the country how serious Territory Labor is in committing to our position in supporting Territory families and communities in growing, developing and caring for children in the Northern Territory.

I will now take the time to talk about some progressive programs working in the electorate of Arnhem. Last month I had the privilege of visiting the Gulman child and family centre in Ngukurr community in southeast Arnhem Land. I was extremely impressed by the facility, having driven past it many times from Numbulwar and never having visited inside the centre. The Gulman centre is a hub for early childhood development and is a hive of activity for that community. It involves the Anglicare playgroup, the Families as First Teachers program, preschool and after school care.

Other important programs for children and families in remote communities include mobile play groups, which are often run by non-government groups. Two examples in my electorate are the Anglicare playgroup in Numbulwar and the Children's Ground in Jabiru, which services the town camp and outstations in Kakadu National Park.

In the Arnhem electorate there is also a program called Families and Schools Together, also known as FAST. As described on the FAST NT website:

Through government funding and partnering with key agencies such as The Smith Family, Anglicare and the Red Cross, FAST connects with schools to support families in helping their children to grow up and succeed in life.

As the Member for Arnhem it is great knowing about some well-established and successful programs running across the wider Northern Territory, especially in the remote communities within my electorate of Arnhem. It is these types of established programs which our government can connect with and support so we do not reinvent the wheel, but rather strengthen and support the services being delivered for our Territory children.

I would like to talk about my role as the assistant minister to the Minister for Education, Hon Eva Lawler MLA, Member for Drysdale. In my role as assistant minister I am working with Minister Lawler in two capacities: on the Families as First Teachers program, also known as FaFT, and in the area of remote education.

I must admit, in my five-year experience in teaching I worked closely with secondary school students and middle year students. People thought I was a bit crazy when they asked me what grades I taught and I said, 'High school, and I love it'. In my new role as the assistant minister I am relishing the opportunity to learn about the other end of the learning scale, the little tuckers. I enjoyed my visits already in the last three months, talking with FaFT educators and, where possible, visiting FaFT facilities, which are mostly linked in with Territory schools. There are 28 FaFT programs across the Northern Territory. This program is delivering to children and families to enhance relationships, learning, growing and supporting the connections between families, communities and schools with young people and babies in the critical learning years of zero to five years old.

It is very exciting to hear from the Education department that five new FaFT programs in remote areas as well as five in urban areas will be established in 2017. I am enjoying learning in my new role as assistant minister for FaFT that it does not matter where a family in the Northern Territory lives, the focus on children and families in support of this FaFT model can be vital in both remote and urban areas alike.

My sister, Jocelyn Uibo, completed her Early Childhood Teaching degree at Charles Darwin University last year. She is now nearly at the end of her first year of teaching and has spent the last three terms teaching at Karama Primary in the preschool. My immediate family is made up of four teachers from four—my parents are both retired teachers and principals, my sister is an early childhood teacher and I am a former secondary teacher. I have grown up knowing the importance of education in my family and have had mostly positive experiences with schooling. However, sadly this is not the case for many young people across the Territory.

I will now mention the housing crisis in remote Northern Territory. The Labor government's remote housing policy is one I am very proud to support, an unprecedented commitment by any Territory government of \$1.1bn over a 10-year plan. I point out this policy because the impact of adequate and safe housing in the bush is critical in supporting the development of children. The impact of housing on children's safety and health encompasses three areas: physical, emotional and psychological health.

There is a proverb from Africa: 'it takes a village to raise a child'. The principle of this proverb goes to the heart of what the Labor government is trying to do, that is, take a holistic approach to caring, growing and keeping our children healthy, safe and happy. Children grow up and become adults, so the importance of having a community to support and contribute to the positive rearing of children so we can develop productive, strong members of society and create a positive cycle in the Northern Territory is what the Labor government is committed to doing.

Mr COLLINS (Fong Lim): Madam Speaker, it is with pride that I speak to the Minister for Children's statement with regard to this government's commitment to early childhood development. This issue was a central plank of Territory Labor's election platform earlier this year. We were clear in what we were saying and the people of the Territory were clear in their response.

Early childhood development is something every one of us on this side of the House takes seriously. It is something each and every member of this House and the community should take seriously as well. It was heartening to hear the words of support from the Member for Araluen. However, we do not think this will be an easy task. There is no low hanging fruit here. This is why the plan is looking to the next 10 years, not the next six months or the last three months, not even the next election. The issues are far too important.

It is an enormous task, and finding even part of a solution will be difficult and may take a number of attempts. The issues are multifaceted, multidisciplinary, interdepartmental and complex. In spite of the inherent difficulties, this is what governments are elected for, to take on and tackle difficult social and community problems. I hope this does not become the pill in some ugly game of political football.

I despair at the state of politics here and across the world. We have just witnessed the US presidential elections and, without buying into the rights or wrongs of the result or the many theories about what happened and why, the tactic adopted by the GOP candidate during the campaign is undeniable. It was to use slogans without details, pander to disaffected groups of potential voters and activate those people without providing answers. This was way beyond dog whistling; it was direct provocation of the disaffected, those who feel disenfranchised. Whether there is any intention by the president-elect to implement many of

the measures he espoused remains to be seen. While it may be a relief to many, including me, if many of those promises are not implemented, the down side will be further alienation of those disaffected sectors of the community.

I do not want to be seen as a troglodyte. I have always considered myself an early adopter of technology, with the exception of Twitter, and I remain a staunch denier in that area. Having said that, I fear the effect social media is having on our political institutions. It is far too easy in this day and age to create fear in the community and peddle simplistic responses. The answers to the problems we face are rarely, if ever, simple.

I am one of those lefties so regularly derided by the right-wing media commentators of this world. For those people sloganism is easy; you identify a social or community problem, then you wind up fear and concern, but you never provide a coherent response. When you are a lefty or, heaven forbid, a socialist, the answers are never easy.

Ms Nelson: Being a socialist is easy!

Mr COLLINS: But the answers are never easy; they are always complex and difficult to explain. They are difficult to conceptualise and they cannot be distilled to three-word slogans or 10-second grabs. I get that people do not have time to listen to difficult explanations or the patience to consider problems that make a masters chess games look like a game of noughts and crosses. Simple answers and three-word slogans will never fix complex problems. All they will ever do is increase anxiety, disaffection and dissatisfaction.

As I said in my maiden speech, it is incumbent on this government to begin the process of restocking lost community confidence and trust. This should be a priority of governments everywhere, but we only have control over our own backyard and that is where we should concern ourselves first. As the Member for Araluen identified in her earlier response, funding is a perennial problem for any government program. While there is no getting around this issue; we should bear in mind there will be cost savings resulting in the government's proposed approach. I hope the bean counters take this into their calculations.

Success of the program will ultimately mean reduction in the number of children entering into the juvenile justice system and, as time goes by, adults entering into the justice system. As I understand, each person we incarcerate costs the Territory around \$100 000 per year, so it follows that for every person we keep out of the system there is a commensurate saving. Not only is there a direct saving, the individual will generally move on and be a more productive member of society, a consumer, worker and effective parent. The economic benefits go way beyond simple savings.

I, for one, want to see some effort put into determining exactly what those savings will be so the true costs of the initiatives can be understood. Whilst I am one of the older members on this side, I am also one of the few members with young children. As I said in my maiden speech, I have two young daughters, Sophie and Eloise, who are becoming well-known around parliament, mostly under people's feet. I also have two older children.

I have spent a substantial proportion of my life, more than 30 years, being a parent. For me, that means worrying about the health, welfare and future of my children. That is what I get for being silly enough to jump on the merry-go-round twice, I suppose.

In spite of the failure of two marriages, I have four fantastic children who make me proud every day. I am fortunate enough that my two older children—Grant, 30, and Alyssa, 28—have grown into responsible, well-grounded adults. This is most likely the result of them being well-nurtured and well-prepared as very young children. As much as I would like to take the credit and say it was my influence, that would be unfair. I think it was their mother, Vicki's influence. However, I think Vicki and I worked well as a team in providing a stable, supportive home life for Grant and Alyssa.

Vicki was always a loving and diligent mother, ensuring the children's vaccinations, health records and all their entertainment was up to date and well-recorded. While a stay-at-home mother, Vicki appreciated the benefit of having children attend playgroups and preschools so as to provide the best start for them and help them socialise and prepare for school.

I remember my first day at school, sitting under a huge camphor laurel tree at Burnside public school, bawling my eyes out. My anxiety levels were very high. Things got better though. I also have memories of Grant's first day of school in 1992 and it was significantly different. We walked together down the road to Kingswood South Public School and when we got to the gate he took off, leaving his mother and me

behind. He casually waved goodbye over his shoulder and did not even look back. He was well and truly ready for school and his results bore that out.

When Alyssa started school two years later, her first day was almost a carbon copy. Skip forward 13 years, Vicki and I have gone our separate ways and I am now married to Greta. The first of our two daughters, Sophie, was born. Nineteen months later along came Eloise. Again, I was fortunate enough to have a partner who had the interests of the girls at the forefront of everything she did—that or it was the control freak lawyer in her coming out. I am only joking, although there was a bit of control freak lawyer going on, but that had nothing to do with Greta's commitment to providing the best platform for Sophie and Eloise to be healthy and prosper. Greta was not a stay-at-home mum. She returned to work in law after a period of maternity leave, but I reckon that only made her more determined to ensure the girls had the best possible start.

Again, when both Sophie and Eloise commenced their schooling, there was not a hint of the anxiety I had felt. They were ready and eager to get their teeth into it. Both Sophie and Eloise have shown the benefit of early socialisation and early learning at preschool. All that said, I have contributed to the people each of my children have become or are becoming. My children are fortunate. They were brought up in a supportive, nurturing family, but not every child has the same luxury.

This statement of the government's intention is not about one size fits all. It is not about the government enforcing or even producing a uniform upbringing for children. Different people and different families have different stresses and different resources. It is the intention of the government and this policy to provide the resources for the best possible outcome in the relevant circumstances. That means supporting families in whatever form they come.

As a single father I understand the needs of all parents to be supported—parents, partners, single mothers, single fathers, foster carers and grandparents who look after their children, as the Member for Nelson pointed out earlier. Fathers play an important and integral role, although often underestimated even by themselves, in raising their children, and they also need to be supported.

It is trite to say that children are the future of the Territory; it goes without saying. How we, as the elected representatives of all Territorians, deal with our single-most important resource and how we invest in our children and their future will be how we will be judged. This statement is an outline of how this government will approach that.

Mr PAECH (Namatjira): Madam Speaker, evidence tells us that a person's life journey, road to success, health and emotional wellbeing stem from their early roots in childhood development. History has taught us that if we get it right in the early years we can expect our children to bloom throughout school and their adult lives, having the opportunity to participate in whatever they desire.

Some children in the electorate of Namatjira live in a harsh environment where conditions can have serious impacts on our children. Extreme weather conditions present obstacles for parents living in regional and remote places. However, there are many advantages to living in these places, such as the deep connection to country and culture young people will have from an early age.

These elements—land and culture—have the ability to impact and influence children's development. Caring and supportive environments, wherever they may be—at home, school or the local sporting facility—will assist optimal early childhood development, and greatly increase the child's chances of successful transition to school. This encourages children to attend school and increases their chances of achieving better learning outcomes while at school.

Education is a key focus of this government. Along with our investment in early childhood development, we are also making significant investments right across education. These investments start in early childhood development, follow through to transition, primary and secondary, and continue on to adult learning.

This government is passionate about making sure we invest in education across the board to ensure that every Territorian has access to a quality education. We believe education is success for all. This is something the government cannot, nor should, do alone. It takes a community to make change, and that involves everyone being front and centre of the learnings of their children. If we are to close the gap on disadvantage in the Northern Territory, we must include parents in the process at each stage of their child's development. We must consult, discuss and listen to what people are saying about the goals and aspirations they have for their children.

This will not happen overnight, and we may not see massive results in this term of government, but it is the right thing to do. We must stop focusing on short-term political wins and develop policies and programs that will make everlasting change for the people of the Northern Territory.

Territory Labor's policy goes beyond the political cycle. It begins to unpack the challenges and barriers our young people are faced with from birth. It began with our commitment to funding the non-government sector with the option of five-year contracts to allow these vital organisations the opportunity to develop meaningful relationships on the ground, build trust with the communities and allow time to fully adapt the programs to suit varying audiences.

We must not stop our support of and funding for these vital organisations. As I have said previously, and continue to say, they play a vital role in developing, shaping and growing our upcoming leaders, the next generation, a generation which will hopefully replace us in the Chamber one day.

I am fortunate enough to have a number of these organisations within the electorate of Namatjira, which are currently developing programs for young people and families. These organisations include Early Childhood Australia; Tangentyere Council; the Central Australian Aboriginal Congress; the NPY Women's Council; the Alice Springs Women's Shelter, which runs an outreach service; the MacDonnell and Central Desert Regional Councils; and I must not forget the outstanding work of our community-controlled remote clinics in delivering services to Territorians living in regional and remote places. It is organisations like these that work every day to ensure the road to equality and equity is achieved for all Territorians.

I am passionate about early childhood development, as I am sure everyone in this Chamber is. I would like to see priority placed on a child's first language and hope to see options developed for children to attend bilingual preschools. Language is a proven core of early childhood learning and school readiness. It allows children to organise their thoughts and explain their ideas in both a first nation's perspective and a contemporary Australian one. It gives them the means to express their feelings and the tools to interact with peers and adults both in their mother tongue and in English. We understand that for many Territorians English will never be the primary tongue. We should be valuing the importance of language and culture, and working to encourage language revival.

Political, economic and social structures may change with time, but for people living in regional and remote places one thing is for sure: they will outlive any one of these factors. They will remain on country, with sound knowledge systems and traditions. We must approach early childhood development in the same way with our commitment to our people, understanding that life on this land, for some, carries a far greater connection to country, a far more meaningful experience.

We must not fail our people. If we are to invest significantly in early childhood we must focus on the other end and ensure that people wanting to stay on country have opportunities to use their skills and participate in the workforce without leaving country. If we do not do this we have failed our people. Our parents are our first teachers. They are our first role models, our benchmark for our development, the people we usually aspire to be like.

Early childhood is not isolated to programs just designed for babies and children; overcoming this level of disadvantage and giving our children the best start in life must be a bipartisan approach. I was very happy to hear the Member for Araluen deliver her speech, and other members on this side of the Chamber, highlighting their commitment to investing in early childhood development. This also takes a whole-of-government approach in which every government department must work together and not in silos.

We must reduce the level of overcrowding and waiting times for housing, bring down the rates of domestic and family violence, reform our education and health systems, and develop a youth justice system that deals with the issues rather than just being punitive. We must reduce these things so our children's earliest memories are not of deep trauma or growing up in a household which has never had power.

I also want to talk about a very important organisation in my electorate of Namatjira which delivers remote mobile childcare centres. It is also known as Early Childhood Australia and it does phenomenal work in delivering remote childcare, preschools and school readiness programs in the electorate of Namatjira and the region of Alpara, where there are some 16 remote outstations, which always have a large portion of young children and infants.

Early childhood workers in Australia deliver phenomenal work. They not only work with infants and children, but with young mothers, fathers, grandmothers, aunties and uncles to ensure these children have the best start to life possible. They also work with the Urapunga health service, which is an Aboriginal medical serve

that does an outstanding job in that region. They also deal with a lot of early childhood development programs, getting kids ready for school and making sure they have the best opportunity to achieve in life.

Further to this is the desire to see the day when people like me—a gay person—are entitled to adopt children who need a loving home and family unit. I take note of the Member for Brailing's maiden speech, when she shared my passion and desire to ensure that same-sex couples were awarded the same opportunities as heterosexual couples. There is no denying that homosexual couples can offer young children or infants the same level of care, opportunity and love that heterosexual couples do. I look forward to working with the Member for Braitling, the Minister for Territory Families, and ensuring that we can see this level of equity and equality in the Northern Territory.

I am very proud of the plans our government has begun in this space, and it provides me with great comfort in knowing that when I am fortunate enough to either adopt or have a child of my own they will be nurtured and supported like other children living in this nation. Yes, you did hear correctly previously; I intend to raise my family in my home of Central Australia, an area about which I am very passionate and for which I remain a strong advocate. I will continue to lobby hard for my constituents in the electorate of Namatjira. I am very much looking forward to that volume of work.

I hope that marriage equality and adoption laws can catch up with contemporary Australia's views on this matter. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are significantly overrepresented in the child protection system in in-home and out-of-home care. That leads me into the next topic I want to discuss, which is kinship care. Kinship care is provided by a family member or a member of a child's social network when a child cannot live with their parents for a variety of reasons. Aboriginal kinship care is provided by family or friends of an Aboriginal child who cannot live with their parents. It is where Aboriginal families, community and culture are valued as central to the child's safety, sustainability and development, as well as ensuring the child's cultural obligations and cultural competence are upheld.

Every Aboriginal child who is unable to remain in the care of his or her parents should first have an alternative placement with an Aboriginal family or friend in a kinship system. We need to begin this volume of work by looking at the criteria for kinship carers. We need to look at engaging our people so they can play a role in reducing the horrific statistics we are currently seeing in the rate of children in out-of-home care.

We need to learn from some of the organisations in the electorate of Namatjira, such as the Tangentyere Council. It has kinship care and early childhood programs and has demonstrated that kinship care can and does work in the Northern Territory, particularly in the Central Australian and Alice Springs region. We need to look at the support for kinship care. Grandmothers and aunties who care for their family's children do not get the same level of support, including financial support, that other carers do.

I want to see us develop a nationally consistent approach to overcome the overrepresentation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in out-of-home care and to increase the connection of Indigenous children in out-of-home care to their families, communities and culture. I want to see us back proposals similar to those which are supported by the Queensland and Victorian governments to extend the eligibility of the Family Tax Benefit Part B to foster and kinship carers until the youngest child in their care turns 18.

Families come in all shapes and sizes. The important thing is that our children are nurtured, loved and cared for, and that carers, whoever they are, are supported to do this for the care of our kids to ensure that the future of the Northern Territory's children is taken seriously and no longer left in the dark. We aspire to ensure that every child has access to quality health, education and early childhood development programs like those mentioned previously which are delivered by Central Australian Aboriginal Congress and Tangentyere. The mobile preschools play a vital role in the Northern Territory. I am proud to stand as a Territory Labor politician who will make sure the future of our young children is something we will fight for and see advancements in.

I thank the members right across this Chamber, both in government and out, for the support we are seeing and hearing today. It is very refreshing to look at and listen to the commitment across this Chamber that is coming from all members. This is something we must continue to have bipartisan support of. We must continue to close the gap on disadvantage for Indigenous and young people living in regional and remote parts of the Northern Territory. This must become a thing of the past. We embrace young people and make sure these vital organisations continue.

The Central Australian Aboriginal Congress is doing spectacular work in the form of developing what are known as language nests in preschools. It is where young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children

have the ability to attend preschool as their first contact with the education system, where they are provided an opportunity to communicate in their mother tongue, which will probably remain their primary language.

I will continue to advocate on the importance of bilingual schools and preschools. They provide a great opportunity for our young people to learn and develop in a cultural aspect and in a Western world approach. I look forward to that.

Many of my constituents in the remote parts of the electorate of Namatjira are very excited at the prospect of having early childhood centres and programs rolled out across the electorate and in their communities. I am sure all members will agree with me when I say we have a growing young population in the Northern Territory and, therefore, we must invest in these programs to meet the demands of our up-and-coming leaders, who will replace us at some point in the Chamber. I want to be able to stand proud in days to come, proud that I was part of a Labor government which delivered those services to provide people the opportunity to stand here before us all today and say that they had the best opportunity to achieve whatever they desired.

I think it comes back to looking at changing our perspective. You do not have to leave a community to embrace meaningful employment and engage in society in the Northern Territory. I am very much looking forward to working with all members.

Mr McCONNELL (Stuart): Madam Speaker, I support the Northern Territory Government's early childhood plan. That is a bit innovative, isn't it—a plan, consultation, actually talking to people and engaging experts. It is very innovative and good to see in this place.

Investment in Territory children should be our easiest investment decision to make. Dividends can be enormous. Children growing up in safe learning environments are more likely to become stable, well-adjusted adults who will contribute productively to our communities. I have often said that the future of the Territory lies with ensuring that Aboriginal land and people are able to participate in the economy with equity. In order for this to occur we must invest in our local human capital, Territory children.

The right of a child to an education is paramount. In the electorate of Stuart most children receive an education through School of the Air. I am proudly a product of the School of the Air process as well as some local community schools. Most other children receive education through boarding schools and remote community schools. I will talk more about them later.

Improving health, housing, community safety and communications in remote communities helps to ensure there is a positive learning environment for our remote students. It is also essential for the government to support early learning facilities in remote communities so children can develop the routine and discipline required for school.

Improved early childhood development will enable children to learn later in school and take their schooling to new and higher levels. Families as First Teachers is a program I wholeheartedly support. I am glad to hear the government is expanding the funding of this program. I have seen the great work of Families as First Teachers firsthand. It involves parents and children in understanding the requirements of a good educational environment. It promotes healthy lifestyles, readies children for school and reminds the community that education requires parental involvement. Families as First Teachers enables children to enter school confidently. As the program grows I expect school attendance rates will increase. If children are comfortable and confident in the school environment they are more likely to attend regularly.

Many schools in my electorate do a lot with very little. Investment in schools is not always about bricks and mortar. Sometimes it is more important to fund quality teachers. Under the last government teachers were not a priority. I am glad to hear the Gunner government will reinvest in Territory teachers, creating more jobs in the Territory that will support development of the economy and human resources.

Interestingly, of the many people I got to know as a younger person living out bush, most of the ones I remember are those who worked in remote schools. Some of those people are still around in different roles in the NT now. Teachers clearly deliver a lot to the community and are underrepresented in the way we appreciate people who deliver to our community. Quality teachers promote community involvement in their schools. Local language and culture are not to be excluded. Parents are welcome. Local Indigenous employees are recognised as an asset and provided with professional development and staff housing. Quality teachers inspire faith in parents and the community that school is a positive resource. They inspire the community to support and be involved in active school committees.

Use of local language invites community back into our schools. It is really important. It promotes literacy in English and creates an understanding between two cultures. Quality teachers have high expectations of all their students, and they assist students to develop a vision and purpose for their lives. But teachers need to feel supported by their employers in order to function at their best. The Gunner government recognises the importance of quality teachers and will make them a priority. That is evidenced already in some early actions of this government.

I am proud to hear education success stories coming from communities in the electorate of Stuart—students who started their education in remote community schools and went on to boarding schools within the Territory and interstate who are achieving graduation of Year 12. A recent example is Urich Wilson from Nyirripi, who graduated from the Djarragun College in Queensland. We need to ensure these scholars pursue further education when they return to the Territory to allow them to participate in the economy and become leaders in their communities.

Besides superior community learning facilities, children also need to grow and develop in a safe environment. Appropriate family housing and functional community police stations are a key to providing this environment. Housing that is run down and overcrowded will not deliver a healthy lifestyle. Suitable housing for young families will reduce movement of young people and their children from house to house, community to community, and family member to family member, looking for a place to stay. This often happens in remote communities; children who are attending school often do not have a stable place of residence.

This government's plan will also promote better school attendance and access to community services. The government's investment in remote housing will begin to address the stagnation that has occurred over the past four years. I can tell the House confidently that in the electorate of Stuart in the last four years there has not been a single house built for an Indigenous tenant—plenty of talk, but not one built.

Providing staff housing for Indigenous government employees will also help relieve some of the housing shortfall. It will enable working families to develop routines for their children and support their school attendance and learning. Something as simple as a healthy dinner and a good night's sleep can improve the learning environment and development of a young child.

Remote police stations that are staffed and functional are essential in promoting a safe environment for children. There are communities in the electorate of Stuart, including Nyirripi, where the police station exists but is unmanned. This is a recurring topic at every community safety meeting. Why are there police in front of bottle shops but not in our community? Why are police stations provided if they are not staffed? The police who are committed to Nyirripi live at Yuendumu. It is 160 kilometres away and over an entirely dirt road. Having a police presence in a remote community to conduct community engagement, diffuse disputes and prevent violence and unlawful acts means the wider community values the children of Nyirripi as much as the people of Alice Springs or Darwin. Remote community police truly work in the spirit of prevention, not incarceration. They are even more motivated to provide community harmony because they are part of the community.

Better communications, Internet and mobile coverage is really important. They are now a quality of life issue for all Territory children. If Territory children in remote areas are only a small percentage of the country's children who do not have access to quality Internet they will, inevitably, have less learning experience than other children. Good communications and infrastructure is even more important the more remotely you live. School of the Air students require better Internet access speeds to be able to pursue their education in an online environment. Remote schools require the Internet to supplement the classroom experience. Better communications will ensure our remote students are not left behind.

I am optimistic about the future, and the future will belong to Territory children. Everyone has expressed an aspiration that the next generation will be better off than the current one. This is no different for people who live remotely.

It was the greatest privilege of my life to grow up being surrounded by people of other cultures. I learned that we may have our differences, but we are mainly the same. I wholeheartedly believe that our remote community children can succeed in their own communities as well as the wider world. I know many parents in remote communities who actively seek success for their children, just like everyone else does. Imagine the commitment of the Wilson family from Nyirripi to send their child across the country to get a Year 12 graduation certificate.

It is, of course, difficult to change outcomes in an area of entrenched intergenerational disadvantage, but this makes the success all the sweeter and the investment more worthwhile.

I am sometimes concerned that we can start to focus on negative stuff. I know there are lots of difficulties, and some people have parents who might be distracted by other issues in the community or are overly engaged in the legal system, but we must maintain optimism for every child all the time. I am concerned sometimes that we say, 'Oh, there are that many things wrong'. I know there are that many things wrong, but we need to have a sense of optimism. This policy demonstrates that, and with the appropriate consultation and expert resources we can address these very significant issues, but we will address them with optimism.

I am encouraged by the fact APONT and NTCOSS will appoint members to the early childhood expert advisory panel. It is important that local NGOs are included in the development of the early childhood plan. These organisations have the local experience and connections which will drive the implementation of the plan in Territory communities. NGOs are really important in any sector but, arguably, in this sector and the environmental sector they are more so than others.

Just to sink the boot in—members of the previous government seemed to think NGOs were running an agenda against them. Some of the most committed people I have ever met in my working life work for NGOs. They are committed to good outcomes for the Territory, regardless of the political persuasion of the government at the time. I really appreciate the input from the NGO sector. You can clearly see from the initiatives of the Gunner government that it is an important part of plan going forward.

The government's approach will engage with Indigenous communities, ensuring programs are developed with communities and not imposed on them. This will be the key to the success of this program. We have heard today, in some of the questions we received from the opposition benches, sometimes people want these answers in numbers. 'How many will you build? When will you build them? Who will live in them? How will you implement this policy?' Sometimes you need to consult with the community. That is the purpose of this place, to represent the interest of the community. There are hard decisions to make and they need to be made after you are fully informed.

As we can see from the last four years, if you hasten to a decision without adequate community consultation, what happens? You end up with another decision. Sometimes you end up with another Cabinet minister, or several other Cabinet ministers. Maybe you even end up with a different Chief Minister. Those things go wrong politically, and are measured on the front pages of the *NT News* and other esteemed media, because the consultation went wrong. They are a symptom of inadequate consultation. That is a mistake we will not make. I am sure ministers would sometimes come in here and not give the exact numbers, and sometimes they would tell you, 'This how we will do it or else'. That will not be the approach of the Michael Gunner government.

I commend the government for making Territory children our priority. I support these measures and every investment in the education and development of our youth.

Ms AH KIT (Karama): Mr Deputy Speaker, I support the Minister for Children's statement on the early childhood development plan. It is an important plan. Each child deserves the opportunity to live a full life. Each child deserves to be cared for. Each child deserves to be supported to reach their full potential. The Michael Gunner Labor government acknowledges this. We understand this and we will work to support all Territory children through this plan.

Our government is delivering on our commitment to place children at the heart of government. We made this quite clear in the lead-up to the election. Many Territorians I spoke with both during my campaign and in the three months since then are heartened by our approach.

The good people of Malak and Karama are tired of opening the newspaper or turning on the news to find another story of young Territorians committing offences, and so am I. Yes, these young Territorians should face consequences for their actions, but they also need to be afforded the opportunity to take responsibility and learn that bad behaviour will not be condoned, and that laws are in place that we must all adhere to. I ask what real outcomes are to be achieved by being reactive in our approaches to youth offending? I also ask this question of the members of the previous government. I raise this current issue, which is being experienced in my electorate, as I fear that opportunities to support these young people may have been missed in early childhood. I believe this to be the case because it is not normal human behaviour for a person that young to be carrying out offences like these. It definitely was not the case when I was their age, growing up in Malak in the 1980s.

The Michael Gunner Labor government has already established a subcommittee of Cabinet to drive this work and focus on Territory children. We have spoken with Territorians about our plans and will continue to

work in collaboration with stakeholders to achieve the best outcomes by putting our children first. Unfortunately, the challenges being faced by our children today have not arisen overnight and, as such, they will not be resolved overnight either. We need to get this right. We need to understand the factors impacting on our children and ensure that our children will benefit from our early childhood plans long after the next election and the next election after that.

Over the last six years I have focused my efforts on preventing suicide and improving access to and awareness of mental health and wellbeing support services. As you can imagine, this is a challenging area to live, work and volunteer in, especially due to the fact the Northern Territory still has the highest rate of suicide in the nation. According to statistics, I assume most of us in this Chamber have been impacted by suicide. Statistics also state that for each death by suicide at least eight people are impacted directly. However, I can confirm that here in the Northern Territory the figure is much higher. This is often attributed to the fact the Northern Territory has a small population, so the chances of us crossing paths and developing relationships with other Territorians are greater.

You do not have to think too hard about the thousands of Territory children who continue to experience trauma because of these startling facts. Many of the Territorians we have lost through suicide left behind spouses, children, nieces, nephews and grandchildren. Due to my work in this area I have been told many sad and mortifying stories of suicide and the impacts that such deaths had on individuals, families, communities and beyond. I have learned of instances of intergenerational trauma and understand all too well that once you are directly impacted by a death by suicide, you enter that at-risk bracket yourself.

Suicide in Australia and the Northern Territory is all too common. It seems youth suicide is becoming that way as well. How did we get here? This is 2016 and we are burying young children who have taken their own life, some of whom did not even get to reach their teens. What type of unfair world are we living in when a child not only knows about suicide, but has been impacted by suicide and then dies by suicide?

Frederick Douglass once stated:

It is easier to build strong children than to repair broken men.

I could not agree more, especially since Frederick Douglass was born into slavery in America. He escaped slavery at age 20 and went on to become an anti-slavery activist, author and orator. He had a difficult and challenging upbringing and found the courage to change his life and use his lessons to benefit others.

This is the type of outcome we want for our children. Each Territory child will benefit through the early childhood development plan, and government will ensure we are accountable, transparent and inclusive in our approach. As a proud Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander woman, I am pleased that Aboriginal cultural considerations are being included, which is necessary for the success of this plan. I am also pleased to see that measures to address and support the mental health and wellbeing of young Territorians have been included, and for there to be a focus on providing more post-school opportunities and consideration for our young Territorians who are living with a disability.

There are many more important approaches included in the plan. I have mentioned these because they fall under the areas I am assistant minister for. This government will make sure we are guided by evidence and best practice to ensure our children feel safe, cared for and are encouraged to reach their full potential. This is why I am proud to support this early childhood development plan. I understand that in order to achieve intergenerational change we must maintain resolve and commitment to the task at hand, while understanding that this type of real and sustainable change takes time.

Whilst campaigning in my electorate I was proud to advise community members about Labor's commitment to place children at the heart of government in order to achieve this intergenerational change for long-term benefits to all Territorians. Just as I suspected, there was overwhelming support for our approach, and this was reflected at the polls on election day. Territorians are looking for a government that will be progressive, lead change, and focus on them instead of its own selfish needs. That is what we will deliver.

Our government looks forward to delivering meaningful outcomes for all Territory children through a collaborative and coordinated effort within and outside of government. We know it will not be easy, but we are prepared to put in the hard yards because our children deserve it. That is why I am pleased to commend the plan to the House.

Ms NELSON (Katherine): Mr Deputy Speaker, I support the Minister for Children's statement on early childhood development. We have just finished listening to some of our colleagues, who have spoken

extensively about the family focus being front and centre, and the experiences they had growing up in the NT, including how family played such an integral part in their lives and educational development. It is in stark contrast to the criticism we heard from the Member for Nelson, where he said family focus is missing from this plan. I thought to myself, 'Was he listening to the same statement I was listening to?'

The previous Minister for Education, Mr Chandler, issued a media release on 19 May 2016 regarding the education budget. I will quote him:

Government has progressed education in the last few years, it is obvious Michael ...

The now Chief Minister:

... is stuck in the past.

In the last three years we have undertaken a number of systematic reviews and using the evidence, implemented recommendations backed by the science to focus on student outcomes. This is what parents expect from a responsible government, not using tax payers money for cheap political stunts or like confetti at a Labor party function.

The previous governments, on the NT and federal level, failed the children of Katherine. That was evident from the results in the 2015 Australian Early Development Census survey. The previous government cut funding, which resulted in 300 teachers losing their jobs. That is shameful. Team that up with the federal government cutting the Gonski program—again, shameful—and we end up with some of the worst educational results we have ever seen in the Northern Territory.

The Australian Early Development Census survey showed that the children in Katherine are significantly more developmentally vulnerable than their counterparts in Alice Springs and Darwin, yet we had no comprehensive early childhood approach to tackling this disadvantage in Katherine.

Of five-year-olds in Katherine, 46% are developmentally vulnerable on one or more domains, and 29.4% are developmentally vulnerable on two or more domains. Those are not statistics that I am proud to state. The CLP political spin was at the expense of good policy, strategy and support for Katherine schools for the last four years. Now, after several months of consultation with stakeholders and constituents in communities throughout the campaign—and now 89 days into the new government—we have actually begun work on developing a roadmap and plan, taking into account several factors, such as our unique geography and demographics. Local context is paramount and there is no single solution to the challenge we have set ourselves. This was reiterated by the Member for Stuart in his statement reply a few minutes ago. We have a good bank of evidence of what works in this area that will guide our strategic planning, broadly speaking, programs that are high quality and holistic, which provide early support when a problem is identified and are education focused work.

Supportive play groups and school transition programs are effective in promoting change. The involvement of local community in the planning, development and implementation of programs that are responsive to the local context, priorities, needs, strengths and culture is effective. Services delivered in a culturally competent and safe way, supporting Indigenous employment, investing in our workforce and building trust with individuals and the community are also effective. Stable, long-term programs that provide continuity of service from pre-birth onwards, preferably in one location in a friendly accessible setting—all of which has been highlighted in the Minister for Children's statement on early development—are effective.

A few minutes ago we heard the Members for Arnhem, Fong Lim, Stuart, Karama and others speak in support of the government's intention. They all talked about ensuring that families were front and centre in the early development plan and programs. In my inaugural speech I spoke of my own background, where I came from and the circumstances in which I arrived in Australia. I told the story that I have no traumatic memories of the civil war that I left, and all of this is to the credit of my wonderful parents. I also said that, more than anything, what inspires me to want to improve the everyday lives of the people in the community that I now represent are the memories of my own childhood and my parents, and the message that they delivered. Every child deserves to feel secure and safe, satisfied and confident, no matter what adversity they face. This is what the minister's statement will be delivering to the children of the Northern Territory.

In response to the Member for Spillett's tirade and commentary this morning, this government is a stark contrast to the previous government on so many levels, thankfully, and no more so than the fact we are not a government of kneejerk reactions and responses. We are indeed a reflective government that

acknowledges the errors we have made in the past and we make the appropriate changes to correct those errors. We listen, consult and ask questions.

I support Minister Vowles' comments from this morning. I, too, am appalled and embarrassed at the reported rates of developmental delays amongst Territorian children. It has been proven, time and time again, that to improve on these statistics and improve educational outcomes we must approach this in a holistic, whole-of-community and whole-of-government manner—healthy lifestyles, increased and improved housing, and safer communities. All this takes time and consultation. After the last four years of a government that provided short-term programs which were unsustainable and inequitable, we are determined not to follow suit.

I support the minister's statement and my government when we state that we are unapologetic for this approach. We will not respond to the comments and baits from the members across the floor.

I commend the minister's statement on early childhood development and I urge all my colleagues and all the members of this government to do the same.

Ms FYLES (Health): Mr Deputy Speaker, I will talk about what the Department of Health is doing for Territory kids, particularly in the early years.

You have already heard from the Minister for Children, who has outlined this government's commitment to place children at the heart of our government, something that is vital, unique and innovative, to put our children at the forefront of government's thinking. I will now outline in detail what this means for the health sector.

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child recognises the importance of health and states that no child should be deprived of their right to access health services. The convention outlines that in order to diminish infant and child mortality it is essential that children are provided the necessary medical assistance and healthcare, with an emphasis on the development of primary healthcare, preventative health, guidance for parents, family planning and education. These are vital areas that are so important, especially to this government.

The evidence is clear that many of the health and wellbeing problems we see in adults, such as obesity, diabetes, heart disease, mental health problems, family violence, poor literacy, unemployment and welfare dependency, have their origins in pathways that begin much earlier in life, often in childhood. A number of adverse childhood experiences have a strong relationship to health behaviours, as well as outcomes during childhood and adolescence, such as smoking, alcohol consumption, illicit drug use, adolescent pregnancy and suicide attempts. Improving these outcomes at a population level requires effective evidence-based healthcare systems. In this context, a good start to life cannot be overstated. Babies and children who are healthy have a much greater chance of going on to have a successful education and a productive life. There is evidence that we can identify in very young children the pathway they will have later in life. Will they be involved with the justice system? What will their health outcomes be?

Northern Territory Health has two distinctive areas: primary health, which covers services provided in the community, including specialist services; and acute care, which covers those services provided in the hospital setting. NT Health also provides disability support services to children and families and is the main provider of maternal health services, including antenatal, postnatal and birthing care. My statement today will focus largely on those activities undertaken within the primary healthcare sector, because evidence shows the essential problem in the most developed countries is that intervention often happens too late, when health, social and behavioural problems have become entrenched in a child's or young person's life. Delayed action increases the cost of providing a remedy and reduces the likelihood of achieving one. Early intervention is the right thing to do.

The Northern Territory has a large population of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children. Expert advice and evidence clearly shows that targeted investment in the health and development of Indigenous children in their early years is one of the keys to breaking the lifecycle challenge of ill health and premature death, which, sadly, affects Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

NT Health works in close partnership with other departments, such as Territory Families and Education, and non-government organisations and service providers, as well as the community-controlled Aboriginal medical services. All of these organisations and agencies work together to provide children and their families with a continuum of care and services before, during and after pregnancy.

Current NT Health initiatives are also consistent with the vision that was released by the NT Council of Social Service, or NTCOSS, in December 2015 for a coordinated service system to promote child and family wellbeing. This government's election commitments relating to child health are also aligned with the NTCOSS vision. This demonstrates that our government recognises it must work closely with the non-government sector in finding solutions to complex problems.

I pick up on the earlier comments from the Member for Stuart. He talked about the wonderful work the NGO sector does. This government respects the NGO sector.

I will now outline our election commitments relating to children, and then turn to our current health programs, services and initiatives that will feed into and build upon our commitments. We believe improving early childhood health and development is the key to changing our future. Our services for children will be universal, targeted and accessible. It is very important in the NT—which has a very remote, vast context—to deliver these services. We are creating an NT-wide early childhood development strategic plan, expanding the Australian Nurse-Family Partnership Program, enhancing the yellow book and developing a child and adolescent health plan. I am pleased to provide an update on these commitments.

The Australian Nurse-Family Partnership Program provides structured and sustained nurse home visits to women who are pregnant with an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander child from around 28 weeks, and it continues into the first two years of a child's life. This is an evidence-based program that aims to improve pregnancy outcomes by helping women engage in good preventative health practices whilst they are pregnant. It will support families to improve their child's health and development, helping mothers develop a vision for their own future, such as continuing education and finding or continuing employment.

The program is being provided in Central Australia by the Central Australian Aboriginal Congress. Yesterday at the Menzies School of Health Research I was pleased to hear that Menzies is conducting an evaluation of the impact of this program locally. We look forward to looking at the evidence and hearing the results.

The roll-out of the expanded program will be in two stages. In 2017 the Australian Nurse-Family Partnership Program will be rolled out under a federally-funded program in Gunbalanya, Maningrida and Wadeye. From 2017–18 our government is funding a further progressive expansion of the program into five more remote communities, providing \$8m over three years for that purpose.

Consultation and planning has begun on enhancing the yellow book with eHealth capabilities. This is a national initiative to develop a childhood eHealth record; however, the Northern Territory has its own ready-made solution. The NT eHealth record has been widely used by Territory clinicians for the last 11 years and has recently transitioned into the national My eHealth Record.

The Territory is exploring ways we can add an eHealth child health record capability equivalent to the yellow book to our My eHealth Record. This is important. It helps parents understand the developmental milestones, when their children are due for check-ups and when immunisations are due, which is vital when working with community nurses. If a parent feels that their children may need some support, early intervention can be provided.

As a busy mother myself—you think you should know when immunisations and other things are due, but in our busy lives those things are often forgotten. The check-up dates are not always straightforward. They can be at three, six, nine and 12 months and the next one might not be until 18 months. We need to provide a system that allows families to keep track of their child's development. That will benefit every Territory family.

NT Health has already commenced the early work to develop a child and adolescent health plan. A project planning group recently met to start the planning and engagement process with key external stakeholders. Representatives include the Department of Health; experts from child health, mental health, alcohol and other drugs, Aboriginal policy and engagement, and nutrition and physical activity; and the Top End and Central Australia Health Services. A discussion paper on the draft child and adolescent health plan will be developed and used to guide community consultation mid-next year.

All the activities I outline today feed into the delivery of our key commitment to our early childhood development plan. The plan, as you have heard from my colleague, the Deputy Chief Minister and Minister for Children, is a foundation for generational change. It is being led by the Minister for Children with 100% support from me as the Minister for Health, as well as the Minister for Education and the Ministers for Housing and Territory Families.

The Department of the Chief Minister is the lead agency on the early childhood development plan and has commenced stakeholder engagement with a range of organisations, including NT Health. Our ministerial team will drive the coordination across our agencies to make sure we have the generational improvement we need to help us make sure Territory children have the best opportunities for improvement in health, wellbeing and education, which is something we need to achieve.

I have met with a number of key health and justice stakeholders and discussed our intentions to work collaboratively on improving children's lives. They are excited at these opportunities and are giving us solid endorsement of this plan. It is a plan to work together across government, look through the prism and work with our NGOs and key stakeholders.

Our commitments will draw upon the current child health initiatives being delivered across the Territory, and I will detail some of those. It is interesting to note that a number of these initiatives began under the last Labor government. The Member for Araluen kindly acknowledged that when she spoke.

In the remote NT Government primary healthcare centres, all children aged zero to five are screened under the Healthy Under 5 Kids Program. This program facilitates the prevention, early detection, intervention and treatment of common conditions that cause illness and, sadly, early death. Child health checks create the opportunity for early referral and management of more serious developmental and chronic conditions.

It is important to provide parents with support, so if they think something is not right they know the pathway to discuss that with a health professional. Early intervention is the key. If we can engage families and provide them with support, it gives children the best long-term chance.

The Top End and Central Australia Health Services also deliver the Strong Women, Strong Babies, Strong Culture Program in selected remote communities. Strong Women, Strong Babies, Strong Culture workers provide culturally-appropriate education, support and activities to women and young girls in communities, and advice on health and wellbeing, giving them advice on stopping smoking, antenatal and postnatal care, parenting advice and nutrition et cetera.

Recruiting and retaining the specialist workforce needed to deliver these essential services across the vast Northern Territory is always a challenge. I am pleased the Central Australia Health Service is currently fully staffed with remote community child health nurses for the first time in several years. There are five remote community-based child health nurses and three outreach nurses. Two Aboriginal health practitioners have taken on child health portfolio roles in Ti Tree and Yuendumu, working in partnership with child health nurses. This has resulted in the successful implementation of a community-based well-child service at the Yuendumu family centre, which integrates a well-child model with other community services, such as Families as First Teachers, within our preschools and child centres.

There are currently eight outreach positions and four community-based child health positions in the Top End Health Service, with two outreach positions to be filled in East Arnhem Land.

Across the urban centres of the Northern Territory the Healthy Under 5 Kids Partnering Families Program provides a universal child health service for all families with children ages zero to five years. This program is centred on working with families and their capacity to nurture their children to achieve their full potential. It provides a range of services. These include child development assessments, screening, immunisations, parenting education and support, postnatal depression assessment and support, and sleep and behaviour management. These are all referrals by qualified child and family health nurses.

As we all know, it is not easy being a parent. It does not matter if you are a parent based in Darwin, the northern suburbs, Palmerston or a remote community; the more support we can provide families the better our children will be. For the families experiencing difficulties or who may be considered vulnerable or at risk, enhanced and extended contacts are provided. This includes additional support through the Young Mothers are Strong Mothers program, which is a collaboration between the Northern Territory Departments of Health and Education. Young Mothers are Strong Mothers is an integrated, holistic health service for young pregnant or parenting girls so they can continue their secondary education, which is vital. The program is delivered by the Department of Education at the Palmerston child and family centre and is supported by the Top End Health Service.

Every year that someone stays in school they have more chance of being healthy and having a job. We must support young women who may find themselves in the position of being a parent younger than they expected to be. We need to support them so they stay in school. The Minister for Education is passionate about that.

The school health service includes 15 health-promoting school nurse positions in 16 government schools in urban and regional areas. Health-promoting school nurses work within the school community to provide school-based services, incorporating a primary healthcare and promotion function. I have come into contact with them in the schools in my electorate. They are a positive part of the school community and a health point for young people and students to talk to. They are often based in our middle and secondary schools, but they also work in primary schools. It is a really important part of our health program, making it accessible to the community.

Recently Northern Territory Health has undertaken an anaemia project in remote Aboriginal communities to identify the prevalence of anaemia in children ages six months to two years. It will implement a universal treatment care plan and we will monitor those results. The project's success is illustrated by a fall of 29% in the rates of anaemia in three years, from 24% in 2012 to 17% in 2015.

This Territory-wide program is complemented by place-based local initiatives. An initiative that has been instrumental in driving childhood anaemia rates down in Wadeye has been the strong baby tucker program. This program provides strong baby tucker pots, which are texture-modified, iron-rich foods that are age-appropriate for babies starting solid food. Baby food is an interesting thing to talk about in parliament, but it is important to provide this support to mothers when their children are transitioning from being breast-fed or milk-fed to eating solids. The pots are sold from the local takeaway at an affordable price and are subsidised by local Aboriginal women's organisations, a vital program that is giving our children the best chance in life.

Another notable program in Wadeye is the first bites program. The aim of this program is to improve the health and wellbeing of infants aged zero to two years by reducing the incidence of anaemia, growth faltering and skin disease. It builds on community understanding of timely introduction to iron-rich solids to infants and providing a safe, supporting environment for families to engage in experimental learning. This is achieved by putting out key feeding messages in local language, the promotion of hygiene and healthy skin, and improving opportunities for social and emotional development of infants via engagement, bonding and play therapy. These are very important projects.

Lastly, there is an infant food supply project being undertaken in four stores across the Territory in an attempt to increase the reliability of infant food supply with guidelines for stocking baby food in remote stores. These issues are very unique to remote parts of Australia, the Northern Territory and, I assume, North Queensland and Western Australia. Many people in capital cities and interstate would take these things for granted. If we support these measures we will see the long-term change we are driving for.

As I have outlined, the Top End Health and Central Australia Health Services deliver two different child and family health programs, one in remote and one in urban communities. The revised Healthy Under 5 Kids Partnering Families Program will be piloted in nine remote communities, starting next week from 1 December, and two urban centres in the first half of 2017. This program introduces a consistent approach to have child health visits whereby every child in the Territory will have access to the same platform of care, support and information.

The implementation of the program is complemented by e-learning packages for staff, a redeveloped child health record and the Healthy Under 5 Kids Partnering Families Program parent app for their phones. These universal and targeted primary healthcare child services are supported by specialist services, such as oral health and hearing services. Oral Health Services provides children's services in a hub-and-spoke model, where large urban clinics support services across small, school-based clinics. All infants and school-aged children in the Territory are eligible for free dental services.

Oral Health Services NT developed the Healthy Smiles program in 2012 for primary healthcare practitioners, with the practical skills of underpinning oral health knowledge to deliver the oral health component of the Healthy Under 5 Kids checks in remote communities.

This program focuses on competency-based training in the application of fluoride varnish for the prevention of dental decay. It supports health practitioners to build skills in dental screening and is in line with Australia's National Oral Health Plan 2015–2024. These oral health services are planning to expand the Healthy Smiles program into urban populations.

This is a simple measure, but if we can implement it across our communities—60% of our remote communities have access to fluoride ...

Ms MANISON: A point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker! I request an extension of time for the member, pursuant to Standing Order 43.

Motion agreed to.

Ms FYLES: Across the Territory, fluoridisation of water is an issue in some remote communities, and governments have tried to tackle the issue. Using the varnish process on children's teeth can help prevent tooth decay. It is difficult to overcome the lack of fluoridisation of water in some communities. I have looked into this and asked questions, and there are challenges. As a component of the Australian government-funded National Partnership Agreement on Northern Territory Remote Aboriginal Investment, up to \$20m is allocated for meeting sealant and fluoride varnish targets for Aboriginal children through to 2022. I will continue to update the House on this important project.

It is well recognised that hearing loss in early childhood affects speech and language development, and contributes to poor social and emotional wellbeing along with behavioural problems. It must be hard to learn properly when you cannot hear. As somebody who sometimes suffers ear infections, I know that for that short period, with the ringing in the ears that stops me hearing clearly, it can be very difficult. For our children struggling with that in classrooms, it impacts on their education.

The House of Representatives inquiry into Indigenous youth in the criminal justice system found that hearing loss was a significant contributing factor for Indigenous children's disengagement with education and their involvement in the justice system. Therefore, access to hearing services in the early years is vital. Hearing health services are delivered to children across the Territory using a connected care model that includes prevention, identification, surveillance, primary healthcare, specialist intervention and tertiary provision if required. Newborn hearing screening is provided at the four birthing hospitals—Royal Darwin, Gove, Katherine and Alice Springs—and coverage for the screening program in the Territory is consistently exceeding the national benchmark of 97%.

Diagnostic hearing assessments are provided to children of all ages in purpose-built testing facilities in both urban and larger remote communities. Sadly, ear disease is more prevalent in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children. In 2014–15 a total of 5815 specialist ear and hearing services were provided to approximately 3500 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children. NT Health provides outreach services to 92 remote communities and homelands across the Northern Territory, with more than 250 outreach services provided each financial year. Specialist diagnostic systems and verification through an electronic clinical information system is a core component of the hearing healthcare system in the Territory. In 2015-16, 91% of the 1041 ear, nose and throat consultation services to Indigenous children were provided using this specialist diagnostic verification.

It is critical for families to understand that ear disease and associated hearing loss in children is preventable, and that early identification, intervention and management can help to minimise the long-term adverse impacts. One of the strategies of the hearing loss prevention program is to support families through media and conductive hearing loss intervention through culturally appropriate programs. We have those programs so parents can be aware. To support this a pilot project has commenced in recent months in Maningrida, Ngukurr, Gunbalanya and Galiwinku. The pilot is delivered by Northern Territory Health in collaboration with the Department of Education.

Aboriginal community hearing workers employed by NT health are working in the Department of Education's Families as First Teachers program. We heard about this program from the Minister for Education. The workers provide health promotion messages within early years services in a non-clinical setting, using play-based activities and first language acquisition. These are important programs.

The Northern Territory childhood immunisation rates are comparable and, in some instances, better than other Australian jurisdictions. For example, in March 2016, 93.6% of Territory children aged 12 to 15 months were immunised, compared to 92.8% of Australian children, and at four years of age 98.8% of NT children were immunised, compared to 92%, so if we are not better we are very much on par.

One of the biggest challenges facing Territory kids in regard to significant behavioural problems is foetal alcohol spectrum disorder, or FASD. As we all know, the government has committed to the development of a whole-of-government FASD strategic framework, as there is currently no overarching strategy for the prevention and awareness raising in the community relating to FASD. There are limited clinical, diagnostic and support services available for children and adults with FASD. This framework will acknowledge that FASD encompasses whole-of-life issues and will focus on building a cohesive support network within government and the community to provide for cross-sector integrated client care.

There is so much happening within health services. As a minister I am committed to working with my colleague, the Minister for Children, and all members of this House, driving forward health services so Territory kids can have the best chance in life. If we can improve health outcomes we will see better educational outcomes. In the long term we will have children in meaningful employment as they grow older. They will be able to continue their education.

We need to start one step at a time. If we can raise the birth weight of children by just a little and support families in those first few vital years we will see long-term generational change.

I thank the Minister for Children for bringing this statement before the House tonight and I welcome the opportunity to talk about what the Department of Health is doing in this space.

Mr COSTA (Arafura): Mr Deputy Speaker, I thank Minister Manison for bringing this statement to the House. I acknowledge Chief Minister Gunner for making clear that the interests of children will be front and centre of this government. This is one of the key reasons I decided I wanted to be a part of this government. I wanted to be a part of a government that wanted change. I am pleased that we are hearing of the work that has gone into developing the way forward on meeting our election commitment of putting children first. It is timely given the well-founded community concerns about growing child welfare notifications and the management of youth justice issues in the NT, which are now being considered as part of the Royal Commission inquiry—our children, our future.

It is critical that we develop integrated policies in this important policy area. This statement gives me confidence that we are on track to make things better for our children. One of my interests is health and addressing the growing burden of chronic disease in Indigenous families. We cannot tackle those issues unless we start with early childhood. We need to look at the areas of social wellbeing programs that are run in our communities. They need to be culturally appropriate to suit individual family needs. One of the key issues is to acknowledge the support that young parents need in developing parenting skills. We cannot always rely on the knowledgeable aunty, granny, uncle and grandpa being able to help.

Families want the best for their kids, but also need connection to support services when things get tough, as they often do with any family. In remote communities these issues are exacerbated by overcrowded housing, variable access to good food, and poverty. We have to acknowledge that too many families also have to deal with substance abuse, affecting family and wellbeing.

In my electorate there are many great initiatives that can help inform an approach we can build on: integration of health and early childhood services through child and family centres, such as in Maningrida and Oenpelli, a Labor initiative I would like to see developed in our communities; safe places where mums can access services and developmental needs of kids can be attended to, including early detection of hearing deficits, the need for speech therapy, disability support and nutrition; and our approach to community-led education, making schools a welcoming place where kids want to be.

Waruwi School has a good program. Gunbalanya School has established a school council to improve parents' work, linking school curriculum to local cultural values so education is relevant to the family life.

Tiwi College is a unique residential Indigenous school governed by the Tiwi Education Board. The college commenced in 2008. Students come from remote communities on Bathurst and Melville Islands, which lie about 60 kilometres north of Darwin. The board's mission is to support the highest aspirations of Tiwi people and their families through a learning community that operates from morning until evening at Pickertaramoor. The college has around 80 students enrolled. Most of these students board at the college on weekdays in purpose-built, modern family group homes.

The college curriculum includes vocational education and training, food, information technology, maths, English, Tiwi culture, science, health and physical education, and arts. The college utilises the National Accelerated Literacy Program and Sound Waves intensive phonics program, and an after-hours outdoor education program.

The board's vision is to support the highest aspirations of young Tiwi people and their families through the learning community. Operating from morning to evening at Pickertaramoor, the college has excellent facilities for netball, basketball, volleyball, trampolines, a 400-metre track and separate Australian Football League and soccer grounds. Clontarf runs the Academy and Red Dust Role Models supports the new soccer academy for girls. The school has a sport education development program with the support of Essendon Football Club.

Tiwi College coordinates its own power station, roads, airstrip and medical needs for the advancement of the Tiwi nation.

The Families as First Teachers program is another example. We started in government and now we look to expand across more communities.

Youth programs—the great service in Maningrida does a fantastic job to keep the kids safe in Maningrida. In Oenpelli also there is some very good work.

I am glad to see this government committed to doing more work on family support in regard to child protection notifications. This has always alarmed my sense of what is right and what is wrong, not unlike my concern about family and domestic violence. Our focus should be on prevention and supporting families, not standing by while the damage is being done and just focusing on picking up the pieces. Recently we heard the Children's Commissioner's concern about residential care for children in the protection system. She highlighted that it is not meeting the needs of kids in care. Of course, our kids need to be safe and nurtured to realise their full potential. I am mindful that kinship care is not always the answer, but we must do more to keep families together and support good parenting.

I also want to talk about the role of men in nurturing young people. The Tiwi Islands has a strong men's group in Wurrumiyanga and Garden Point, run by CatholicCare NT. The Chief Minister and Peter Wellings had the pleasure of seeing what they do firsthand. The strong men's group discussed various issues concerning community activities around health, housing and local government. It also invites other service providers and NGOs to talk to the group about drug and alcohol programs. The main focus of the group is to talk about keeping culture and ceremony strong. The Chief Minister attended the smoking ceremony.

Another person I would like to mention is Djolpa McKenzie in Maningrida. He does terrific work with youth, including cultural activities. He also has his own band. The kids love and admire him. He is a good role model.

Young dads can often need as much support as young mums. Men are an important part of early life, and we need to walk with communities to support men being good fathers and uncles.

In all of this I am mindful that we are also talking about adult wellbeing. Kids who grow up in a loving and nurturing environment are more likely to be healthier and more balanced in adult life. A focus on supporting a healthy family is not just about strong families, but also, ultimately, about strong and prosperous communities.

I commend the statement to the House and look forward to working with my colleagues in implementing our strong plans for the development of our most precious resource, our children.

Ms MANISON (Children): Mr Deputy Speaker, I thank all the members who contributed to this statement on government's priorities and the work we intend to do in the early childhood development space. There were some fantastic contributions. It was great to finish with the Member for Arafura, who raised some really important points, such as the role of good parenting and support for young parents who need extra help with their parenting skills.

I like it when I hear representation on the floor of this House and in the public sphere about the important role of fathers, uncles and grandfathers. Men play an important role in the family structure. It is important to keep them in mind as part of the debate.

Another point the Member for Arafura raised was the importance of culture. It is very important, with regard to our Indigenous kids, to make sure that as a government, in the work we are doing, we work hand in hand with the NGOs and communities to ensure the plans and programs we put in place are culturally appropriate. If they are not they will not work. It is vital that we get it right.

The Member for Arafura also made some good points about the importance of integrated services and the role of child and family centres. The very reason we are debating this today—early intervention and making those critical changes we desperately want to make.

On a day like today, when we see the horror statistics of child protection notifications, neglect and the horrors that too many children suffer in their lives, we look at the issues we have in youth justice and the adult correction system—the level of education, poverty, inequity and health deficits obtained in the Northern Territory tells you how critical it is that we are doing what we can in our time as members of

parliament. It is a real privilege to be here. When you have time here you need to make the most of it. I am proud that in the next four years of government we will make sure we have a strong program, policy and plan to target that space, from conception to getting kids into schools. We have a plan to support children in the critical early years. We believe if we get that right and start making inroads, we will drive the generational change that we desperately need in the Northern Territory.

I welcome the positive comments from members who entered into the debate. The Member for Spillett welcomed the plan, but she raised questions and concerns about the details of the plan and the budget appropriation to go with the plan. It is important to point out that this is about getting it right. We have said we will not achieve everything we want to do in this term of government alone. We will look to future governments to continue this work. We are looking at this in the context of 10 years.

In order to do it right, we need to engage with the experts. That is vital because the experts in the Northern Territory, who are doing this work in the NGO sector every day, are fantastic. We have experts in the public sector in the Departments of Health, Education, Territory Families, Housing and Community Development as well as the Chief Minister's department. We have some amazing public servants who are dedicated to and passionate about this body of work and have much to bring to developing this plan.

Today we were happy to announce the first members of our expert panel, who are nationally and internationally renowned for their work in the early childhood space. They have a proven track record of expertise working in the area of early childhood development. They will be joined by up to six local experts, selected from the NGO sector. We will take their advice on choosing those experts. The last thing I wanted to see as the Minister for Children was a group of interstate people telling the Territory experts, who are on the ground, working in this space for their whole professional careers, 'This is what you need to do'.

We need external expert advice—leading, innovative advice that is pushing through and getting results. We need that expertise at the table, but we also need the local context. We need the local expertise. We need the people who have the relationships on the ground, know where the opportunities lie and where the threats are, and have the experience of working in the Northern Territory. It is fantastic to bring them all together and get this wonderful mix of people who will analyse, guide, constantly update, provide advice and scrutinise the work that will be undertaken in delivering this plan.

We do not have the full details of that plan yet, because if we are truly to achieve success—one of the things we have been very clear about with this plan is that we need strong NGO involvement. We need strong support and consultation, with views expressed by the communities, because the solutions have to be place based. They have to be relevant to the place they will be rolled out in. In order to do that, you need people on the ground having those conversations.

I do not want to say this will take forever, because a lot of this work has already been done. The previous government did an extensive body work, as has NTCOSS. Our NGOs know what needs to be done in this space. It is about pulling this together and making sure we have the right plan for where we want to go and the outcomes we want achieve, making sure we have a strong plan for delivery, ongoing evaluation and monitoring to make sure we get it right, and to make sure there is buy-in and ownership on the ground where we will be rolling out these plans and programs.

If people do not own it or believe in it, it will not get the traction we desperately need it to get. You cannot do that with a top-down approach from government. We have learned from mistakes and failed programs from the past—well-intentioned and well-meaning programs—that that approach will not work; there needs to be ownership.

We do not have all the details yet, but, my goodness, we have a lot of passion from the NGO sector and an amazing group of early childhood development professionals coming together to advise government and the non-government sector on where to go forward. Those plans and programs will be public; they will be there for all to see. We have made a commitment to regularly report to this parliament on the progress. It is important we are held to account and heavily scrutinised because this is a space we need to get right. The more accountable we are the better we will be. We must be ready to have a good, hard look at our progress, hopefully with successes, but if things are not going so well then we need to address them. This is about making the fundamental change we desperately need.

You will begin to see budget appropriations as they occur through the budget process because we are working through this. We have heard from several of the ministers here about the work that is already happening. The Minister for Health made a very extensive contribution and clearly there are several programs targeted through the Department of Health that support parents and children in the critical first

years. There are some wonderful programs to support families, including child health checks and nurse home visits. They are very important programs which support new bubs and give families the comfort that if there are problems they will be picked up early. They are wonderful programs, and that is why we are looking to extend those types of programs. They can pick up things early on and make sure kids get the support they need as early as possible.

The Member for Spillett also talked about the role of parents, and we wholeheartedly agree. Parents and families play a critical role in the outcomes for the child. Much of this work will show that, as part of supporting these children, often it will mean also working with the families. When a child is vulnerable, mum and dad probably have a few vulnerabilities themselves. It is about supporting them also.

It was wonderful to hear from my colleague, the Minister for Territory Families, as she spoke from her expertise in social work about the importance of co-design. It is about working together with communities and NGOs because if we are to get it right we have to listen to the experts on the ground, the people on the front line. We must not miss any opportunities. Most importantly, there must be absolute ownership.

I thank the Member for Araluen for her positive comments. I found some of her remarks very sobering. It was a very sound reminder that we all have a positive ambition, but there will be some real challenges in doing it. If there was an easy option for this it would have been resolved a long time ago and we would not be dealing with the problems we deal with in this parliament. I took on board what she said. She pointed out to me, as Treasurer, that there is never enough money in the budget for everything you want to do, but it is about government setting its priorities. I do not think we could have made it any clearer when we went to the election that we were about kids, jobs and trust. Children are at the centre of all government decision-making. I think our priorities are clear and will make the delivery of our early childhood plans and initiatives a high priority.

I also took on board the Member for Araluen's comments about the challenges within the child protection workforce of recruitment and retaining staff. We have a very capable Minister for Territory Families, who knows they are the real challenges faced by many child protection ministers. With this plan, working together, we will look at ways we can face the very real challenges child protection workers face, day to day.

The Member for Araluen mentioned her drive as a minister to break down the silos. She could see that need, but she fully felt the challenges of doing it. In this case, given that we have committed to a subcommittee of Cabinet, it is working like a real Cabinet meeting. We have all the ministers at the table in the room, working through the issues and the delivery of this plan, but we will also work through the problems. We will break down any communication issues, streamlining issues or issues we need agencies to work together on in a more constructive manner. We will work together to do that.

That is why we thought it was very important to put the machinery of a Cabinet subcommittee together to ensure the Cabinet ministers responsible for driving this would sit around the table together. It was intended that the Deputy Chief Minister would not hold any of those portfolios. That way I can sit down with the ministers and say, 'Come on, guys. Let's get this sorted.' That was part of the plan.

I thank the Member for Araluen for her comments. I found them very constructive and wise, coming from her experience. I know she is passionate about this area and wants to make a positive change.

The Member for Nelson always has passion in this space for change. He, too, spoke about the importance of parental responsibility. We know this will be an important area, making sure we give the families the support they need. He also spoke about the focus of jobs and work. We agree that if you have a functional family with good housing, health, education and parents with a paid income from working, your outcomes are more likely to be better. It is important we create those role models and opportunities.

He was concerned about the interstate focus of the expert advisory panel that we announced today, but, as I have already outlined, we have up to six local experts coming on board. We should not say no to the opportunity of having some of the nation's and the world's leading experts in early childhood research and the application of early childhood programs. It is very exciting having these people here, especially considering some already have an extensive relationship with the Northern Territory and have done significant work here. It was wonderful to know we could get that calibre—when these people were contacted they were extremely enthusiastic about coming up here and taking on this challenge. They wanted to be a part of this change. That is fantastic to know because we have gone for the very best and we got it. All who were approached said yes. We are in a really good position to know we are getting fantastic advice and guidance working hand in hand with the experts from the Territory.

This will be a huge body of work for this government. It will be one of the main bodies of work that we want to be held accountable for. We want to be able to look back, going into August 2020, and say we have made the inroads and changes we wanted in this term of government, and get the support of the Territory to go another four years. For us this is a 10-year plan and we will make the best start we can. Whatever happens after 2020, we hope to hand over to the next government some fantastic programs that are getting results and making inroads. We hope that by then we are seeing better health outcomes for kids, better early development index results for these kids before they go to school, and vulnerable families getting the support they need.

We believe early childhood is a space where we can make some fundamental change here in the NT if we get it right from the start. Let us close the gap from the beginning. Let us not let those deficits in children's health, development and wellbeing get out of control. Let us give families and children the support they need, if it is identified in those first critical years before they go to school.

I thank all the members of parliament who contributed to this debate and brought their experience to the table, and for their passion and commitment to making a difference. I thank the opposition and cross bench members who contributed to the debate by sharing their concerns, hopes, experience and wisdom. It is important that we all contribute to this if we want to get it right.

I thank the public servants and NGO staff, who are playing an active role in getting this together, for the passion and enthusiasm they have contributed so far and are committed to contributing over the next four years.

This will be a very important body of work for the Northern Territory.

Motion agreed to; statement noted.

PAPER TABLED

Auditor-General for the Northern Territory's November 2016 Report to the Legislative Assembly

Mr DEPUTY SPEAKER: Honourable members, I table the Auditor-General for the Northern Territory's November 2016 Report to the Legislative Assembly.

MOTION

Note Paper – Auditor-General for the Northern Territory's November 2016 Report to the Legislative Assembly

Mr GUNNER (Chief Minister): Mr Deputy Speaker, I move that the report be noted and seek leave to continue my remarks at a later date.

Leave granted.

ADJOURNMENT

Ms FYLES (Leader of Government Business): Mr Deputy Speaker, I move that the Assembly do now adjourn.

Mr GUNNER (Fannie Bay): Mr Deputy Speaker, tonight I acknowledge the valuable contribution of Mr John Dinoris, known by many as Yuni, who earlier this year retired after 24 years as a fleet driver. Yuni made a significant contribution to the running of this House, and I will get to that soon.

Yuni was first appointed as a fleet driver on 7 February 1992, after commencing with the Department of the Chief Minister on 12 December 1988. I was still at school at that time.

Many of the fleet vehicles carry a special numberplate, and, for most of his career, Yuni drove vehicles with the numberplate 800 700. Often the schedule of the driver mimics the schedule of ministers and the Chief Minister, and they can be terrible hours, as I am sure many of us acknowledge. I am sure the Member for Blain would acknowledge that. Unsociable hours, you might call them. The drivers are responsible for ensuring we get to meetings, speaking engagements, media events and community events on time, sometimes at short notice, and all in one piece. For this we are extremely grateful.

Yuni has worked closely with protocol officers over the years to ensure dignitaries and special guests visiting Parliament House are able to take in the rich history and diversity the Territory has to offer, some of whom include the Governor-General, the King of Greece and the US Ambassador.

Yuni is a hospitable and personable character not only to dignitaries and special guests he has driven, but to the people he sees on a daily basis. I am also reliably informed that he has represented the Northern Territory in darts and still competes regularly in local competitions. Maybe the only person from our ranks who could compete with Yuni was the former Chief Minister, Paul Henderson, who is a very good darts player. Hendo wanted to add that chatting with Yuni on the way home after a long day in the Chamber or a day packed full of meetings was a great way to unwind. This is something I agree with. Yuni frequently spoke about his love for the Greek community and sport. That is something I will miss, but I am sure we will catch up at Glenti or other events around town.

The level of integrity and efficiency of the drivers is admirable. As we often get caught up in our own tasks, the hard work of the drivers can go under the radar, but perhaps it is also a testament to their professionalism and the fact they always get the job done without fuss. This integrity and professionalism is something that was displayed by Yuni under seven Chief Ministers in nearly 30 years working for the government. From me, and on behalf of my colleagues, Chief Ministers and members past and present, I thank him for his tremendous contribution, and I wish him all the best in his retirement.

Members: Hear, hear!

Mr GUNNER: Madam Speaker, it is also with pleasure that I inform the house of the fantastic achievement of a stand out Territorian, Mr Darryl Day.

Darryl was recently appointed as Managing Director of the International Centre of Excellence in Water Resources Management. He has taken 12 months leave to work with this non-government organisation based in Adelaide. The aim of the International Centre of Excellence in Water Resources Management is to deliver training and education in sustainable, collaborative water resource management, internationally and within Australia.

Darryl has given 35 years of service to the Northern Territory Government. His lifelong passion to address access to sanitation and safe drinking water supplies across the Territory was sparked in the first years with the Northern Territory Government back in 1981. Darryl was working at Gunbalanya with the Department of Transport and Works on a project to design a night soil washing facility. During this project he met the local health workers and community groups and watched as council workers collected night soil pans from rustic outside toilets in the steamy tropical build-up—clearly third world conditions. Through them he gained a deeper understanding of the importance of access to reliable, safe drinking water for the health and prosperity of remote and regional communities, and a career-long passion to address these conditions.

Over the last three-and-a-half decades Darryl has played an instrumental part in improving access to safe drinking water and sanitation in all major communities, and major and minor centres across the Territory. The improvements made are recognised as a major achievement in water quality monitoring in regional and remote Australia. Although Darryl sees these achievements as a team effort from all involved in these changes, it is important that we acknowledge Darryl's leadership role.

Darryl has also represented the Northern Territory, Australia and national and international water industry peak bodies, such as the Australian Water Association, the Singapore International Water Week convention and the International Water Association, where he has been a member for a decade and chair of the Australian branch of the organisation since 2010. Since 1983 he has been a member of the Australian Water Association, including a member of the AWWA Federal Council from 1986 until 1992, and Director of AWA from 2002 until 2009.

In May 2005 he was elected as President and Chair of the AWA Board of Directors for a two-year term, during which time he led AWA in a new direction with a focus on increased water literacy in the community, water education, water industry capacity development, young water professionals and specialist networking for knowledge-sharing and transfer of knowledge into practice. His significant contributions to the water industry nationally were recognised with the award of life membership of AWA in 2010.

He continued to work beyond our shores through a range of roles as part of the International Water Association. This includes representing Australia as a member of the Governing Assembly since 2003, a member of the Strategic Council 2005 to 2011, the Chair of the Australia Committee since 2011, as well as

roles as co- and deputy chair of the programming and organising committee at key international conferences.

He also continues to give back to the next generation through his work with Charles Darwin University, where he has been the chair of the industry advisory committee for the School of Engineering and Information Technology since 2006, which advises the school and industry standards. His work in this area has led him to be a key contributor to the Australian and World Health Organization's Drinking Water Guidelines.

Darryl Day is a Territorian we should all be proud of. He has dedicated his life to improving the health and wellbeing of Indigenous Territorians and some of our most disadvantaged community members. He has given 35 years of his life to this cause. I wish him the best of luck in his new role as the Managing Director of the International Centre of Excellence in Water Resources Management, and I look forward to Darryl returning to the Territory with the new knowledge and experience he will gain from this opportunity.

It is a hell of a CV. I do not know how he found time for a personal life amongst it all. Along the way he has attracted many admirers and colleagues who wish him well. They helped contribute to my remarks and I thank them for that.

I wish Yuni and Darryl all the best.

Mrs WORDEN (Sanderson): Mr Deputy Speaker. I wish to place on the record some of the wonderful work that is taking place in our schools in Sanderson as the year comes to a close. I have had the great fortune of getting to know them slowly over the last 12 months, but in depth over the last three months. I use the word 'impressive'.

I am fortunate to have three very good primary schools and some very good school leaders in Sanderson, as well as one middle school. I am lucky to share Sanderson Middle School with the Member for Karama; she allows me to do that.

Wagaman Primary School is ably led by Ms Michele Cody. Wulagi Primary School is an independent school, ably led by Ms Susan Kilgour. Anula Primary is ably led by one of my old netball sparring partners, Kerry Hudson—it has been a good opportunity to reconnect. Sanderson Middle School has the very capable and energetic Liz Veel at the helm, whom I had a meeting with today. The schools are all in very capable hands.

There are some exciting things going on at Wagaman Primary School. Big congratulations to the students in Ms Vavlas' class, Years 2 and 3, who performed a re-enactment of the Wave Hill walk-off at CDU in mid-November. It is a very neat way to teach and build respect for our shared history. I was excited to attend the final school council meeting for the school last Monday, where the whole-of-school improvement plan was presented for 2017. It was great to see all the passionate parents and council members having a say on areas like early years enrolment and school sustainability, which fits nicely into our government's early childhood development agenda. I also congratulate the school on its establishment of an edible garden this year under the Stephanie Alexander program, and I look forward to that growing over the coming years.

At Wulagi Primary School there are some great female students who have been busy competing this year in the T20 Blast cricket club, and they head to Melbourne next month to play in the T20 Blast School Cup at the MCG. That is very exciting for everyone involved, having been there myself. I wish them all the best of luck.

I am pleased to see the school supporting its students to play Wet Season netball. With the assistance of Ms Courtney and another of my netball friends of many years, Ms Sarah Bartlett, I understand this year they are undefeated. Big congratulations to those involved.

In late October I was lucky enough to attend what they call a board walk, which is literally a walk around the suburb with the board of the independent school at Wulagi. We were joined by some of the teachers and board members. It was a 7 am walk, just before our previous parliament. It was organised by a group called Blueearth, which is doing some great work at our primary schools, encouraging children to get more active, and fundraising in the schools. It was a refreshing opportunity, a neat way to meet some of our key leaders while we were trotting in our sneakers around the suburbs. Wulagi is not only in good academic hands but good hands physically. It is good to see.

Anula Primary has been busy with its annual swimming program. I arrived at an assembly the other day to see them half-clad in their swimming gear, raring to go. It is important they make sure our kids have a level of swimming competence that allows them to be safe in our community because water activities are so much a part of our lifestyle.

The school council at Anula is also involved in a massive infrastructure program, updating a lot of the school grounds and outside areas. It is looking good for them in 2017. I really look forward to watching that hard work pay off. It is interesting to watch a group of volunteers keeping an eye on the budget for those big infrastructure plans and making sure they meet the needs of the school. That ground-up approach is excellent. I think the \$300 000 commitment from our government will make a really big hit over the next four years. The teachers in all my schools are starting to think about what they will use that for.

A big shout out to all the teachers at Anula and the students who took part in their whole of primary school performance entitled *Shakespeare Rocks!* It was very well produced and entertaining. That they organised an entire primary school to give a performance of that level is very impressive.

I am happy to share Sanderson Middle School with the Member for Karama. It has warmly welcomed us not only into the school community but into the school council meetings. It has been fantastic—a group of dedicated parents and teachers who are working collectively for the betterment of their school and students.

Things have changed a lot since I was in primary school, with 12 Sanderson students recently travelling to Osaka, Kyoto, Tokyo and Hiroshima, in Japan. I can only imagine what a firsthand education of the potential effects of an atomic bomb on a civil population would be like. I am told that the students were reflective but came away feeling very informed. It is something they will never forget; the school has given them a life experience.

The students also spent time with a Year 6 group at Utano Elementary School, and they communicated in Japanese and enjoyed some cross-cultural learning. Well done to all involved.

Not only do our teachers have to teach our children the basics of maths, science and English, they also have to keep pace with emerging technologies and world changes so that by the time they graduate, after 12 long years, they are not left behind. We have digital learning and humanities in our schools, and in two of my schools they have robotics, which is fascinating. These subjects are now a core part of our children's curriculum, and it is great to see so many passionate people, including our school councils, driving those changes. They are introducing coding at a heap of schools. That makes sure our kids are involved and we can give those opportunities to our future generations.

As our teachers finalise their end of year reports, I thank each of them for their hard work this year and for accepting me into their school community. For those leaving Sanderson, I thank you for your energy and passion for our students.

I am very much looking forward to attending each school's end of year assembly in the coming weeks and celebrating with teachers and students on their achievements this year.

I wish all the Year 7 students luck as they transition into middle school, and all the Year 9 students all the best as they move from Sanderson Middle School on to high schools in other electorates—we do not have a high school.

I am also very much looking forward to meeting all the new early learning students in their first year of big school in 2017.

Ms PURICK (Goyder): Mr Deputy Speaker, I rise to talk briefly about an achievement in one of the schools in my electorate. It is to do with the Be Crocwise campaign and the Be Crocwise school award, associated with the Tidy Towns, Sustainable Communities and Eco-Schools Awards. I am not sure how Be Crocwise is associated with Tidy Towns; maybe the crocodiles eat the children and keep the towns tidy.

The documentation says that saltwater crocodiles are an important part of our life. That is an understatement. It is important that they turn into handbags and belts. That is a pretty good thing. As someone who grew up here—and I cannot swim in Milners Creek, Kings Creek or anywhere—I know they are part of life, but we have to be sensible about our waterways in the Top End anyway.

In April this year the government set up the Tidy Towns competition and had the inaugural Be Crocwise competition. It helps children in schools in communities understand the dangers of saltwater crocodiles, as well as what they can do and how they can set up programs and campaigns to make sure the young people in our community understand and are careful in what they do and where they do it.

I went onto the website when I was looking for this, and I was really impressed—no doubt they have done it in association with the Department of Education and teachers—with how there is a resource package for teachers to teach kids how to be croc wise. I went through it because I had done something similar when I was at the Minerals Council, developing resource materials for schools and teachers, and it has been done very well. I congratulate the people in Education and elsewhere who put that resource material together, because it really is wonderful. I am sure it will be very well used.

The inaugural award for Be Crocwise went to Humpty Doo Primary School. The special education centre snapped up—get it?—the inaugural award. It is a new prize category and is part of the ongoing program to warn of the dangers of estuarine crocodiles. There are about 24 students across four classes at the special education centre at Humpty Doo Primary School. Vanessa Lowe is one of the main coordinating teachers and she does a fabulous job. She has been instrumental in Come Walk with Me around the Palmerston area because she, sadly, lost her son a couple of years ago to suicide. She is a real champion for helping people become more aware of suicide and the issues associated with mental health, and she really inspires these children.

They made a crocodile out of wire, clad in straw and wool, using the fibre art techniques of the Central Australian Tjanpi Desert Weavers.

All the schools got involved, but they were the students who made it. Along the way they made a jingle; it goes like this:

*Be aware! Because they don't care.
You may not see them, but they see you.
Be Crocwise is not a myth, if you don't you'll be their dish.
Don't be a fool, swim in your own pool
Be Crocwise!*

I thought it was pretty cute. It may become a jingle used in all schools. Well done to those special education students; they have had a bit of a rough trot in life. The teachers are fabulous. I go to Humpty Doo Primary School often.

Outback Wrangler Matt Wright went to the school—he landed on the oval in the helicopter—and met some of the students. This was in March or April, but the award did not come out until recently. The minister is going to the school on Monday to present the school with their award and certificate. I will be there. It is nice that the minister has made the time to congratulate these students and the teachers.

Well done to Vanessa Low and all the students in the area involved with this. Parents would have contributed as well. Congratulations also to Sue Fisher, the principal, who does a wonderful job, as well as Geoff Gillman, the deputy principal. Congratulations to the students and teachers. Hopefully more students and more people, old and young, will be crocodile wise. You do not mess with a crocodile, because you will come off second best. Congratulations to Humpty Doo Primary School special education.

Be crocwise!

Mr SIEVERS (Brennan): Mr Deputy Speaker, today I want to talk about the importance of supporting men's health and the importance of Men's Sheds and White Ribbon Day.

Men's Sheds are popping up all over the country and are designed to be the modern day version of the shed in the back yard that has long been a part of Australian culture. Most men do not talk about their feelings or their emotions. Many do not take an interest in their own health and wellbeing. Most men are unlikely to talk about their emotions, and that means they usually do not ask for any help.

Good health is based on many factors, including feeling good about yourself, being productive, contributing to your community and connecting with your friends. Becoming a member of a Men's Shed provides a safe and busy environment where men can find many of these things in an atmosphere of old-fashioned mateship.

I visited the Palmerston Men's Shed a couple of weeks ago. They are doing a fantastic job out there, and a lot of great work with the Palmerston community. I congratulate Leigh and all the team there for doing the amazing job they do as a community service, and all the things they make in that shed that go to the community. They do such a good job.

Further, as the assistant minister for men's policy, I have the privilege of attending the White Ribbon Day breakfast tomorrow with the Minister for Territory Families, and many other colleagues and honourable members here today. This breakfast will be hosted by the White Ribbon Ambassador, Charlie King, who is a great anti-violence campaigner in the Northern Territory. He has been at the forefront of men's health for many years. I personally thank Charlie for all the work he has done; it has been a lot of hard work over many years. He has contributed a lot.

One woman dies every week in Australia from domestic violence-related incidents, which is a disturbing fact. We need domestic violence to stop, and for this to happen we need men to stand up, speak out and act. We need to make women's safety a man's issue too. Men speaking to other men about violence against women is a powerful tool for change.

Education, raising awareness, creative campaigns, preventative programs and partnerships like White Ribbon Australia provide the tools for men to stop violence against women in their community and beyond.

Men's health includes physical and mental health issues. As the assistant minister for men's policy, I again thank Leigh at the Palmerston Men's Shed, and Charlie King for driving these important programs to stop domestic violence, and for working with men's health issues.

White Ribbon Day is important, and I thank all the organisations and volunteers for the support that men's health gets across the Territory.

Mr KIRBY (Port Darwin): Madam Speaker, I have had the pleasure of visiting the St Mary's Catholic Primary School on a number of occasions over the last few months. The community has been extremely welcoming every time I have visited. I have been humbled by the warm welcome I have received when attending school assemblies, World Teachers' Day and the opening of a significant new walkway.

I have been afforded the luxury of a tour around the school to look through the classrooms at some of the art and recreation areas, and I was afforded the pleasure of presenting awards at the school assembly. The etiquette and manners shown by these children are a testament to their parents, teachers and the students themselves.

I will give the Chamber some context on why St Mary's Catholic Primary School is such an amazing part of our community. This school has had more than its fair share of hard knocks over the years. Ensuring the faith and resilience of all involved has been tested to its limits.

I am sure most would remember that in 2006 a young school goer had his life cut short, tragically, when a mahogany tree branch struck him when he was at lunch. He had a number of school mates with him and it was a tragic accident. There probably could have been more injuries that day, but thankfully the lads who were with him were quick enough to get out of the way. Unfortunately this lad could not.

Many things have changed right through that school and the Territory since that day. We have a much sharper understanding of how dangerous these large trees can be. In that courtyard, over the following years, a free-standing deck and shaded structure was created by award-winning architects Greg McNamara and Lena Yali.

What first stuck me, when I entered the courtyard the first time I went to the school, was how the structure was impeccably designed to make sure as much of the courtyard as possible was in shade, even in the heat of the day. It was clearly designed by people who understood the need of the tropical landscape, but at that time, I did not realise the significance of the structure and the people involved in designing it. This area, among other spaces designed by the same architects at that school, is used to shade the students and provide more usable spaces for teachers and students throughout the school.

Unfortunately, in 2011 tragedy struck again, when Greg and Lena were killed in a horrific accident. Despite these terrible setbacks, the school, now under the watch of Principal Jacqui Langdon and her dedicated staff, has continued to flourish and grow. In October this year the St Mary's Catholic Primary School held a blessing and then an official opening of the McNamara and Yali commemorative walkways. These

walkways are shaded, built in memory of the work Greg and Lena had contributed to the school over previous years. The ceremony was held under the shaded structure of that courtyard.

One walkway at the front of the school provides a kiss-and-go area for students to safely and securely make their way into the school after saying goodbye to their parents.

The ceremony included a blessing of the walkways by Bishop Hurley and an address by Senator Nigel Scullion. It is always a great pleasure to watch the very multicultural community that the Territory is famous for being on display, with such pride and inclusion within the school grounds. Afterwards there was a lovely morning tea to celebrate the opening of these commemorative walkways and a chance to meet Donald and Paul McNamara and some of Greg and Lena's colleagues.

I acknowledge the fantastic work St Mary's Catholic Primary School continues to do, and reiterate what an honour it was to be part of the opening and blessing of these commemorative walkways.

Mr PAECH (Namatjira): Madam Speaker, I want to speak about an important event not only across the Territory, but across the nation, and that is White Ribbon Day.

I am fortunate to have recently heard the Member for Brennan, the assistant minister for men's policy, speak about the importance of this event. Yesterday the Minister for Territory Families also spoke about the significance and importance of these events.

I recently attended White Ribbon Day in a community in Central Australia called Hermannsburg, a remote community about 130 kilometres west of Alice Springs. I was extremely proud when I pulled up in the community to see a number of children getting ready for the White Ribbon march. As we got ready for the march a range of stakeholders and community organisations from in and around the region, including Alice Springs, were present. The march was quite large; there were around 90 to 100 people who had made the time and commitment to come to this important event in a remote place in Central Australia.

The march consisted of organisations such as the NT Police; the No More campaign staff; DASA, which is the drug and alcohol organisation in Central Australia; Northern Territory Correctional Services; me; the Education department; and the Hermannsburg, Utju—also known as Areyonga—and Wallace Rockhole schools. The children had been working over the past few days to make individual posters to hang around the community to demonstrate what a harmonious community looks like.

For me, this experience was an eye opener because children at such an early age were talking to me about family violence. It was very powerful for many reasons. A number of people here today have experienced or have loved ones who have experienced some form of physical or emotional domestic violence. I am sure they could share a number of experiences. For many, White Ribbon Day brings many emotions. There is a lot of heartache, resilience and strength, but there is also a lot of pain.

The Northern Territory is not the only jurisdiction in the country with violent or dangerous offences. We are, however, inherently more prone to violence. It is my belief this is due to a large area of substance abuse and lack of services outside large and municipal boundaries, just to name a few. I am confident the Ministers for Territory Families, Children, Health, Education and community services are all working tirelessly to change this. For many other people, White Ribbon Day is an opportunity to come together, stand together and call out family violence.

For too long, instead of thinking about how we overcome the problem—this has become one of our most polarised and partisan debates, despite the fact there is general consensus in this Assembly and the wider nation about what needs to be done. We all need to work together to overcome the issues. How do we do this? We continue to roll out White Ribbon prevention programs and initiatives, reaching an ever-wider audience, network of communities and particular groups. We increase the reach of the campaign through events and communication channels, sharing the broad message of the campaign. We continue to develop strong and enduring collaborative working relationships with corporate organisations, non-government organisations and the wider Territory communities. We advocate for effective family violence prevention laws and services and support mechanisms. We call for people to become champions in particular areas to call this out.

This week I took an oath to stand up against family violence and call out family violence, but I found it interesting that, in a nation with in excess of 22 million people, only 195 000 people have taken an oath. That is not good enough. We need more people to take the oath.

I encourage my fellow members in this Assembly to log on to the White Ribbon website and take the oath. Enough is enough; we must put this to bed and overcome the issues of family and domestic violence. I will be attending the White Ribbon Day activities in Alice Springs, and I hope to see many other people also attending to call out domestic and family violence.

Ms NELSON (Katherine): Madam Speaker, thank you for the opportunity to speak a little further on the infrastructure announcements for Katherine that were made this week. I want to take the opportunity to reiterate some of my opening remarks on Tuesday in this Chamber in support of the infrastructure statement.

Katherine is a winner. Fast-tracking the infrastructure expenditure means an injection of \$15.2m into the Katherine economy. I will take this opportunity to speak about two of those commitments and what they mean for Katherine. In doing so I will hopefully provide clarification for my constituents and those concerned, and correct some information that was recently published in the local newspaper.

The \$10m committed by the previous government for the skywalk bridge was done without consultation. There were no costings, no plans, no impact studies, and, more importantly, nobody asked the traditional owners what they wanted. When I delivered my inaugural speech in this Chamber I stated:

To that end, one of my first official duties as the member for Katherine is to ask the Chief Minister to refocus the \$10m the previous government committed towards building a skywalk and instead investigate how that money could be better spent in Katherine, ensuring equity and sustainability.

Nowhere in my inaugural speech, or speeches since then, did I ever say or indicate that I asked that the funding be refocused or diverted towards social programs, welfare programs or any other specific sector. Yet I have heard and read several reports that that was my intention. Nobody has asked me to clarify that information.

I have also heard and read that the Katherine Mayor and Deputy Mayor, and apparently several business people and retailers, wholeheartedly support a skywalk bridge being built. It was reported in the *Katherine Times* that participants in the Katherine Customer Service Awards dinner also expressed support for the skywalk bridge. I think it is wonderful that all these people are so passionate about our community, and I support and encourage that passion. I imagine that with so many business people passionately supporting the idea of a skywalk bridge it would not be too difficult for an alliance of private enterprise to be formed and for them to raise the funds to pay for the construction of the bridge, with the assumption that they would consult with the traditional owners of the land prior to building something.

I am looking forward to working with those at the Jawoyn Association Aboriginal Corporation, the traditional owners of that land, and listening to them about what they would like to see developed, if anything, on their land.

Moving on to the \$10m for Katherine art galleries, this commitment was made during my campaign, and the announcement should not come as a surprise to anybody, except those who were not paying attention during the campaign. This infrastructure expenditure is new money; it is not money that has been diverted from the skywalk bridge commitment made by the previous government, as has been erroneously reported in the *Katherine Times*. I find it disappointing that while people have been quick to criticise and share their opinions on whether or not I lack fundamental understanding of budgetary allocations or fiscal commitments, not one of those critics has asked me to provide clarification.

A total of \$300 000 will be provided for each school in Katherine for infrastructure improvements. This will be in addition to the overall financial commitment as part of the Boosting our Economy stimulus package for 2016-17. This budget provides \$6.5m for upgrades in schools across the Territory, including the \$32.5m for various upgrades of government schools, which includes new playgrounds, drop-off areas, refurbishment of classrooms and car parks—the list goes on, which I can provide to people if they are interested. I am more than happy to provide it to them; they just have to ask for it.

I remind everybody that \$15.2m is being invested in Katherine sooner rather than later, because I have been working hard, advocating on behalf of Katherine in this government and in the private sector, lobbying on behalf of my constituents to ensure Katherine is being properly considered when funding decisions are made.

Mr McCARTHY (Barkly): Madam Speaker, as you are aware, effective communication is essential in delivering quality services to our clients. It is important we think outside the box so we are able to

effectively communicate with as many people as possible. For these reasons I acknowledge the great work of the Department of Housing and Community Development.

This year the department won a Chief Minister's Award for an innovative tenancy management resource in the category of Delivering Quality Customer Services. This resource breaks down the complicated and complex legal jargon so public housing tenants can understand their rights and responsibilities. It explains the 28 sections of the department's new tenancy agreement in clear and simple language. The resource also includes audio translations that are available in 15 Indigenous and nine ethnic languages. It is easy to use and compatible with iPad, iPhone, laptop and Android devices. This makes it widely accessible to all our clients, ensuring that we can reach a broader audience.

The tenancy agreement support resource is an important communication tool for our community. The support resource is part of the department's new tenancy agreement project that was rolled out earlier this year. This was a significant project that involved implementing the new agreement across all urban and remote public housing tenancies throughout the NT.

This year's Chief Minister's Award follows on from last year's award, which was won by the Public Housing Safety Officers for their work in preventing, de-escalating and responding to antisocial behaviour, another innovative example of the great work the department is undertaking to provide quality service to its clients.

I can confirm the great work undertaken by the Public Housing Safety Officers, which I spoke about it last night after accompanying them on their important patrols. They provide an important and invaluable service to our community. Winning this award was a very proud moment for the department.

I recently had the pleasure of meeting the team responsible, and thanked them personally for their efforts in producing this wonderful communication tool. Those involved—but these are not limited to—include the following: the corporate communications team; the tenancy support and compliance capability development team; the service delivery team; the information and communications technology team; the legal and risk management team; the Aboriginal Interpreter Service; Interpreting and Translating Services NT; the department executives; and James Carter from Big Picture Graphic Art.

Well done, everyone, on the hard work and success. I am sure next year will be just as fruitful, so we can make it three years in a row. It was wonderful to invite those team members to Parliament House to share in an afternoon tea, which was an acknowledgement of their hard, creative and innovative work, but also an opportunity to meet with the minister and staff from the ministerial office.

It was a really nice occasion on the veranda. For me, it was a great opportunity to engage in conversation, swap ideas, exchange information and learn about the work done in the department, which is so important for me, as the minister representing them.

Well done, everyone. You are always welcome at the people's House—Madam Speaker's House—the House of parliament in the Northern Territory. It is a beautiful venue that lifts people and inspires them, and it was a great opportunity to meet the team from the Department of Housing and Community Development.

Motion agreed to; the Assembly adjourned.