

The committee convened at 8.30 am.

Madam CHAIR: Good morning, everyone. Welcome to today's Estimates hearing.

I acknowledge that we gather on the land of the Larrakia people, and pay my respects to elders past, present and emerging.

MINISTER UIBO'S PORTFOLIOS

LOCAL DECISION MAKING

DEPARTMENT OF THE CHIEF MINISTER AND CABINET

Madam CHAIR: Minister Uibo, I invite you to introduce the officials accompanying you and, if you like, make a brief opening statement.

Ms UIBO: Good morning to the Estimates Committee. I also acknowledge we are meeting on Larrakia country in Darwin and pay my respects to the Larrakia elders past, present and emerging, the custodians of this beautiful country.

Before I do the formalities, I wish my husband, Corey, a happy birthday. Of the last eight years of Estimates I have spent six here at Estimates on his birthday; I have only seen him on two. Happy birthday to my husband, Corey, in Katherine who is listening today.

Madam Chair, I introduce the officials accompanying me today with the Local Decision Making portfolio: Mr Tom Leeming, Deputy Chief Executive Officer, Police and Reform; Ms Dorrelle Anderson, Deputy Chief Executive Officer, Territory Regional Growth; Mr Jake Quinlivan, Senior Executive Director, Northern Region, Territory Regional Growth; and Mr John Gaynor, Senior Executive Director, Southern Region, Territory Regional Growth.

Madam CHAIR: Will you make an opening statement?

Ms UIBO: I am happy to take questions now.

Madam CHAIR: There will be no questions to the statement as there is no opening statement. We will do whole-of-government budget and fiscal strategy-related questions before moving on to the outputs.

I will call the shadow minister to ask their questions first followed by other committee members. If you would prefer to ask a question in a certain output, indicate that to us. Equally, committee members, if you are unsure where your question might sit, please ask the minister.

The committee has also agreed that members may join in on a line of questioning, rather than waiting for the end if we are talking about a specific topic.

Agency-Related Whole-of-Government Questions on Budget and Fiscal Strategy

Madam CHAIR: The committee will now consider the estimates of proposed expenditure contained in the Appropriation Bill 2024–25 that relates to the Local Decision Making portfolio. Are there any agency-related whole-of-government questions on budget and fiscal strategy?

Mr EDGINGTON: Welcome to the minister and all the officials. How many local decision-making agreements are in place at the moment? Do they cover all aspects of housing, local government, education, training and jobs, health, children and families and law and justice?

Ms UIBO: We have 14 local decision-making agreements—15 if we include the Barkly Regional Deal. The latest one was signed off two weeks ago, which was the Maningrida local decision-making agreement. Yes, they cover all aspects you outlined. Each local decision-making agreement is different; it caters for the priorities of that community, homeland or region.

It has been the decision of the community, homeland or region what they would like to prioritise in the LDMA. Some may have three or four key priorities; some have long-term aspects that are staged over the implementation process. For example, Member for Barkly, you would be aware of the Anindilyakwa local

decision-making agreement that has five key pillars. That is staged over a nine or 10-year agreement. It is under way.

We also have a small homelands local decision-making agreement which has five key priorities, but they are not necessarily key areas. They are key priorities for that particular homeland. Each local decision-making agreement is varied, but they encompass all the aspects that you outlined in your question, depending on what the priority is for that particular LDM and the signatories who will look at that transition of service delivery.

Mr EDGINGTON: What is the financial commitment to all those local decision-making agreements that you spoke about?

Ms UIBO: This is a whole-of-government process. In terms of resources, when we talk about staff who do the work with community in preparation of the development of local decision-making agreements, that is part of our general business. It is a policy of the Labor government to talk about self-determination and to listen to Aboriginal Territorians' voice on empowerment in communities, with a particular focus on the bush. Since starting this journey in 2016 we have opened up to look at aspects of local decision-making in some of our urban areas as well. It is whole-of-government for us in terms of resourcing.

We have a list of some of the breakdown of financial costs that are external to government. We can provide that if you are interested.

Mr EDGINGTON: Yes, thanks.

Ms UIBO: We have a bit of a breakdown of some of the external costs, which is essentially consultants have been used to help formulate a local decision-making agreement. Often it is at the request of a community or an organisation that is going through the process of local decision-making. There are costs associated with any of those consultancies.

To date for the recently signed Maningrida local decision-making agreement, the cost of the consulting company external to the Northern Territory Government was \$5,700.

The other external cost is \$60,000 which was used for a regional local decision-making agreement development, not just for one community.

Mr EDGINGTON: What is the overall budget for local decision-making? What is the operational budget?

Ms UIBO: As I said, this is a whole-of-government approach because it is a policy, so we do not necessarily differentiate the costs for that. I can give you, if it is helpful, some of the breakdown for the regional director network in each of our regions. Many of those staff would be involved in that process—some may not—but it would give you an indication of how the regions are working to ensure that we have full coverage. We have some very large regions, as you know being a predominantly bush member.

The Central Australian regional office has 18.5 full-time equivalent staff. The Barkly regional office has six FTE. The Big Rivers regional office has 13 FTE. The East Arnhem regional office has 9.86 FTE. The Top End region has 15.7 FTE and the greater Darwin regional office has 12.27 FTE.

Each of those regional offices is involved in local decision-making. It depends on the priorities of the development of the LDM from the government's perspective and how many staff may be involved.

That is the general staffing allocation for each of those offices. It is part of everyday business for this government. We do not necessarily have a separate bucket that is used only for LDM.

Mrs LAMBLEY: Has that changed from last year? We were told last year that LDM had staffing of one or two people. Have you changed the way you do this?

Ms UIBO: This is basically if we were trying to break down and say—for example, if a region had five LDMs trying to differentiate how many staff had been used for the development of that five. It is now whole-of-government; it is general business for us through that policy.

Mrs LAMBLEY: But it has changed, has it not? A year ago it was not the case.

Ms UIBO: I do not believe so, but I will double-check.

Mrs LAMBLEY: I remember we asked that specific question last year. Some of you may remember.

Madam CHAIR: Member for Araluen, you felt last year that you were given allocations which were specifically for LDMs in each region?

Mrs LAMBLEY: You do not need to paraphrase what I have asked.

Madam CHAIR: No, I am just wondering whether you want to take a question on notice.

Mrs LAMBLEY: I can ask whatever question I feel like in the way I want. I asked it specifically how I wanted; I do not need you to provide the subtext or paraphrase.

Last year it was a different story. The same question was asked, and we are now being told that the local decision-making structure has been absorbed within the department.

Ms UIBO: I understand your point. I do not recall having that specific answer for you in last year's Estimates. I can check. Again, it is the whole-of-government, so because of the Estimates process we may have tried to break that down.

Mrs LAMBLEY: Or hide it.

Ms UIBO: No, not hide it ...

Mrs LAMBLEY: It was not impressive last year.

Ms UIBO: That is your opinion; that is fine. We have people who do an amazing amount of work in our regions who go out and do that. Being able to portion out a part of their daily job that may be on LDM versus what they may do in their other nominal role, you would call it—everything is encompassed now as the focus.

If someone is in a different department, particularly out of the regional network, not a Department of the Chief Minister and Cabinet staff member, they may be working on LDM. We would not be able to portion the amount of time they may spend in a regional local decision-making agreement development; it could be several hours of their week or many hours of their week. We would not be able to break that down for the Estimates process because that would all sit in other departments, hence why it is a whole-of-government approach.

Mrs LAMBLEY: Last year we had Bridgette Bellenger in front of us.

Madam CHAIR: Member for Araluen, do you want to take that question on notice?

Mrs LAMBLEY: No. Last year Bridgette was the person leading LDM at that stage. She told us it was just her and someone else, so it has changed.

Ms UIBO: Are you talking in terms of the senior leadership and executive officer?

Mrs LAMBLEY: I am telling you what we were told last year. LDM, the unit or the people responsible, consisted of her and someone else.

Ms UIBO: That would be incorrect because we do not just have one or two people working on LDM; it is a whole-of-government process. As you can see, we have senior officials, and it is part of their daily business.

Mrs LAMBLEY: There is no specific allocated LDM ...

Ms UIBO: No.

Mrs LAMBLEY: That is interesting. It is a change.

Mr MALEY: You are saying that because this is just all of agency, you will not be able to determine how much money is spent on local decision-making?

Ms UIBO: Could you repeat the question? I missed the start.

Mr MALEY: It has changed a bit from what the Member for Araluen said. Now, because it is an all-of-agency involvement, you cannot tell us exactly how much money is spent on local decision-making per month per year.

Ms UIBO: This is whole-of-government business. If you wanted to try to pull out the hours and the time attached to those hours for individuals across the six Northern Territory regions and break it down to look at different departments and the amount of time people spend doing regional coords—which happen every six weeks—that would not be a feasible process.

It is general business and a government policy, not just within the last year. Our Labor government has been on this journey since 2016, hence why some of our local decision-making agreements are now approaching the third iteration of their implementation plan. That ongoing best practice by our government has improved since this policy was endorsed in 2016, when Labor came to government, and we will continue that journey.

Mr MALEY: Basically, you cannot tell us how much money you have spent on local decision-making because of the structure you have set up; is that true?

Ms UIBO: It is not a structure we have set up. I understand you are in opposition, but 'whole-of-government' means the whole of government.

Mr MALEY: I am saying you cannot tell the committee today how much money your government has spent on local decision-making because of the way it is structured.

Ms UIBO: It is not structured in a way; it is a policy, which means all of government adopts it.

Mr MALEY: Can you tell us how much money is spent on local decision-making—yes or no?

Ms UIBO: What breakdown are you asking for?

Mr MALEY: How much money does your government spend on local decision-making per month per year?

Madam CHAIR: In terms of the line of questioning, it is a whole-of-government policy, so it comes through that lens. It is looking at the whole Northern Territory and listening to remote and voices in the regions and making sure policies ...

Mr MALEY: I am asking the minister to explain that to us.

Ms UIBO: It is the whole-of-government approach, which is the line of questioning. If we were ...

Mr MALEY: What I am getting at is ...

Ms UIBO: I will answer if you give me a second.

Madam CHAIR: Let the minister answer. I will come back to you for a follow-up question.

Ms UIBO: For the employee cost, the operational cost and the grants cost, our estimate in the budget is that we would be at \$102.974m. That is for the three—employee, operational and grants.

Mr MALEY: Is that the total cost of ...

Ms UIBO: Total.

Mr MALEY: Is that the total cost of local decision-making that you spent last year on this?

Ms UIBO: You must have missed the start of my answer, but that was the whole approach in terms of the employees, operational and the grants. That is for the Regional Development, Local Government and Aboriginal Interpreters output, which is what we are under. This is a shared output of the cost because it is one department.

Mr MALEY: What is the actual cost of local decision-making for the last financial year?

Madam CHAIR: It is a framework. The policy area says that we want people in this region ...

Mrs LAMBLEY: You are not here to answer questions, Madam Chair.

Madam CHAIR: We have a question.

Mrs LAMBLEY: There is a line of people in front of us who are paid to answer the questions and that does not include you.

Ms UIBO: To reiterate: it is the whole of government and it is a policy, so we do not have a separate bucket of money because it is ingrained in all the practices that we do across all our government agencies.

Madam CHAIR: Do you have a further question, Member for Nelson?

Mr MALEY: I do, but it is obvious that she cannot answer my question. You cannot tell us how much money is going to local decision-making each month each year because of the way it is set up. That is my understanding of your answer.

Ms UIBO: It is a whole-of-government approach. It is not just this department; every other government department is involved as well.

Mr MALEY: Because of the whole-of-government approach you cannot tell us how much money the government spent on local decision-making.

Madam CHAIR: It is a policy framework and then the services are delivered, so the health service would be funded and the building of houses would be funding. The Member for Barkly understands.

Mr MALEY: I know, but I am asking the minister to say that. Because of the way you have structured it, you cannot tell this committee how much money you have spent on local decision-making per month per year.

Ms UIBO: Government policy is about government business which means that ...

Mr MALEY: You cannot do it because of your reason; okay.

Ms UIBO: ... government senior officials and officials in our regions do the work that they do best, and they get on with the job.

Mrs LAMBLEY: Last year we were told how much it cost. Who was the minister last year? It was not you, was it?

Ms UIBO: I was.

Mrs LAMBLEY: You should remember what you told us last year. Maybe you have the notes there in front you, minister.

Madam CHAIR: Member for Araluen, we can do a quick *Hansard* search because this line of questioning will continue, and you can clarify that. The minister has one recollection, and you have a different one. Minister, you can respond, then I will go to the Member for Barkly who is waiting patiently.

Ms UIBO: We have just looked up *Hansard*. Thank you to the department for making sure that I do not differentiate from what I said last year. We have the copy of the *Hansard* here. I said:

Local decision-making is not a standalone budget in regard to the agreements. The negotiation and development of local decision-making agreements is progressed through the Department of the Chief Minister and Cabinet and the Office of Aboriginal Affairs as part of our working routine.

Then the Member for Barkly asked a question, and it was the same sort of response from me:

That is a difficult question to answer in the sense that it is a cross-agency approach. While the Department of the Chief Minister and Cabinet leads those discussions, consultation and the work that happens across our six regions of the Northern Territory, it also intertwines with other government agencies. For example, regional coordination committees meet every six weeks across each region ...

Which I said before:

... That involves all of our senior officials in that region across all government agencies.

Mr EDGINGTON: Is that the same brief?

Ms UIBO: It is the same answer because it is the same piece of work that we have been doing for seven, nearly eight years.

Mrs LAMBLEY: Perhaps you could scroll down and refer to what Bridgette Bellenger said when I asked her about how many staff there are and how much it cost.

Madam CHAIR: The Member for Barkly is waiting patiently. Member for Araluen, you can do some scrolling and searching on *Hansard* while we go to the Member for Barkly, then we will come back to you.

Mr EDGINGTON: What date was the local decision-making agreement in Tennant Creek signed?

Ms UIBO: That was signed on 16 March 2022.

Mr EDGINGTON: What progress has been made and how much money has been committed to that local decision-making agreement?

Ms UIBO: Are you after the Julalikari local decision-making agreement?

Mr EDGINGTON: I believe that is the only one.

Ms UIBO: We are making sure because there is the Barkly Regional Deal which I spoke about at the start.

I will take that question on notice.

Question on Notice No 3.1

Madam CHAIR: Member for Barkly, please restate the question for the record.

Mr EDGINGTON: The local decision-making agreement in Tennant Creek was signed on 16 March 2022. What progress has been made with that local decision-making agreement and what costs have been expended on that agreement?

Madam CHAIR: Minister, do you accept the question?

Ms UIBO: Yes.

Madam CHAIR: The question has been allocated the number 3.1.

Madam CHAIR: I am sure the minister whilst we are still discussing this topic will try to get the information, otherwise it is on the official record.

Mr EDGINGTON: The regional deal was signed on 13 April 2019. What progress has been made on the Barkly Regional Deal from your perspective, given you are the minister responsible for it?

Ms UIBO: I note that in your former role you were one of the signatories to the Barkly Regional Deal and have been closely following the progress ever since changing roles ...

Mrs LAMBLEY: Lack of progress.

Madam CHAIR: Member for Araluen, I will set the tone for the day. If you keep interjecting I will put you on a warning. Please let the minister answer. You are welcome to ask questions and interject on the line of questioning, but we do not need commentary.

Ms UIBO: I will keep on track because it is an important question. A lot of people are focused on the results in the Barkly and the continued work happening there.

So far across the 20 initiatives ...

Mr EDGINGTON: Twenty-eight.

Ms UIBO: The 28 initiatives. Six initiatives have been recognised as being completed and formally closed. Those initiatives are listed as seven, 17, 20, 21, 22 and 26. Ongoing priority actions are determined around the regional strategies.

Unfortunately, we have noted and have always acknowledged that there have been delays with some of the completion and the progress with the Barkly Regional Deal on particular initiatives for various reasons, mainly within the last couple of years being COVID and the delays on work for some of the regional communities in the Barkly. I am glad to say that we have stepped out of that and have started to regain momentum in that space.

The work that has been done—I know that you talk about this a lot in your questions, Member for Barkly—has been ongoing. Many different organisations are involved in the progress and the process of completing the initiatives under the Barkly Regional Deal.

Many of the changes that have happened over the past couple of years have been frustrating; I acknowledge that. We believe that good momentum has returned. We are halfway through the deal; it is five years in. There are another five years as it is a 10-year deal, so we will continue to work on the initiatives we have in progress and, of course, identifying some of the ones that are more complex and have had notable delays.

Mr EDGINGTON: I am not sure which ones are complex because I have not seen any complex initiatives in the deal.

Are you responsible for the implementation of the regional deal from an NT Government perspective?

Ms UIBO: Yes, I am the minister responsible.

Mr EDGINGTON: What is happening with the youth justice facility in Tennant Creek? It has supposedly been built in Darwin but still has not arrived in Tennant Creek. To help you, it is initiative four.

Mr GAYNOR: In regard to the youth justice accommodation facility, the aim was to establish alternative detention for young people in the Barkly. The site survey and the traffic study have been completed. The civil and electrical design have been completed. The assembly of the offsite modular units has been completed; they are ready for mobilisation to Tennant Creek.

A range of civil works inclusive of sewerage, electrical cabling and perimeter fencing are ready to commence when we have reached agreement with Patta native title. There is a consultative committee that has developed a cross-cultural training course that all people working on the site need to undertake. That cultural awareness training has not been signed off by Patta, but the contractors are willing to undertake that. This is all related to the cross-cultural training not being part of the original ILUA, but it requires the consultative committee to progress that key part of the implementation. The consultative committee has also had some problems forming quorum.

Mr EDGINGTON: It sounds like everything is ready to go, there just needs to be cross-cultural training.

Why is the government spending \$1.7m on the Juno facility if everything is ready to go with this youth justice facility? Your budget says that you are spending \$1.7m on Juno because apparently this facility is not ready to go.

Ms UIBO: Whilst I am the overarching minister for the Barkly Regional Deal, some of my colleagues are responsible for the implementation of those initiatives. The one you are talking about around Juno sits with Minister Ah Kit, so if you want to ask for more detail I would recommend that the question be placed within her portfolio.

Mr EDGINGTON: I am happy to ask. The point is that this youth justice facility has taken five years to build, and it does not appear to be any closer. It is sitting in Darwin, and we are constantly told that it is ready. Crime in Tennant Creek is the highest it has ever been in eight years, yet there does not seem to be any focus on working with youth in Tennant Creek.

Ms UIBO: I understand your frustrations, but we have the Tennant Creek Youth Centre which opened last year. That is clearly a focus on youth. It has been running. It has been quite successful since it was opened

at the end of last year—I think you have said that yourself—particularly for the Christmas holidays. If you are talking about focusing on youth, that is something we continue to do. I understand your frustrations with the delay for this aspect ...

Mr EDGINGTON: I am talking about programs and youth justice facilities.

Madam CHAIR: Member for Barkly, if you can let the minister respond, I will come back to you for a follow-up question or commentary.

Ms UIBO: If you want details for that initiative, I recommend asking Minister Ah Kit in her portfolio.

Mr EDGINGTON: What is the time frame now to complete the youth justice facility?

Ms UIBO: That would be Minister Ah Kit's portfolio.

Mr EDGINGTON: What is the time frame to complete the youth justice facility, which is initiative number four under the Barkly Regional Deal?

Madam CHAIR: The minister has just indicated to you that is ...

Mr EDGINGTON: Minister, you have told us ...

Madam CHAIR: I am speaking, if you could let me finish. The minister has just indicated to you that delivery is under the responsibility of a minister who will be here early next week. She has the overarching policy work, but getting into the nitty-gritty items is the responsibility of other ministers, so you can save that question for them.

Mr EDGINGTON: Who is responsible for the regional deal? You said that you were.

Ms UIBO: Yes, I said that I am because it is about the whole approach for the Barkly Regional Deal, but some of my colleagues, because of their portfolios, are responsible for the delivery of some of those initiatives. This one you are asking a question about will go to Minister Ah Kit in her portfolio under Territory Families because it is related to youth justice. I am not the youth justice minister, and you know that.

Mr EDGINGTON: It is very similar to the local decision-making policy; nobody has overall responsibility, it is the whole of government, everybody is involved, there is no leadership, nothing is getting done on time and no money is being put into this in a timely way.

Madam CHAIR: Is there a question, Member for Barkly, or is it just commentary? We get the sense you do not like local decision-making. That is fine; you can have your view. Do you have a specific question?

Mr EDGINGTON: I want to know who is responsible for it.

Madam CHAIR: The minister has just explained how it works. She has the overall policy and she works with her colleagues to get deliverables.

Mr EDGINGTON: It seems that nobody is responsible. That is what we are learning today.

Ms UIBO: That throwaway line is very disrespectful when we are talking about a government that has a whole-of-Territory approach. We do not just put all our eggs in one basket; we make sure that the deliverables are spread out by responsible ministers via whole-of-government ...

Mr EDGINGTON: It seems like a blame game. Nobody wants to take responsibility.

Madam CHAIR: Member for Barkly, if you interject again I will put you on a warning. You do not want that, because you have a lot of questions this morning. Minister, go ahead.

Ms UIBO: We have a whole-of-government approach. The Barkly Regional Deal is a tripartite initiative. We have three different tiers and, unfortunately, one organisation in one of those tiers is going through complex issues at the moment. You are in the foreword of the Barkly Regional Deal, in your former role as the mayor of the Barkly, so you know this deal very well.

Mr EDGINGTON: Exactly.

Ms UIBO: You know the complexities of having three different tiers of government. There are different areas of responsibility for the Northern Territory Government, the federal government and the Barkly Regional Council, which has had some troubles recently. Having the frustrations aimed at the NT Government is fine. You are in opposition; that is your job; it is what you do.

For those who understand the complexities of having three tiers of government working towards the completion of 28 initiatives for the betterment of the Barkly region, it is a huge exercise. It has not been done in any other part of the country, as I understand.

We continue to be committed to that process five years in. We will continue for the next five years. We will continue to put our resources where they are needed and make sure that we have the deliverables under each portfolio. Yes, I have the overarching responsibility for the Barkly Regional Deal, but I work with my colleagues—I like my colleagues; we all get along well and do our job—to make sure we have the best possible outcome under our responsibilities.

Mr EDGINGTON: When was the last time you sat down with all these ministers who are apparently responsible for different initiatives? When did you last sit with them in a formal meeting and got an update on where all these things are at?

Ms UIBO: We have the Department of the Chief Minister and Cabinet, which is our coordinating department. To make sure every other agency involved with any of the deliverables—at the helm. That is why we keep a close eye and tracking record on those initiatives and where they are sitting.

The department also reaches out to those other two tiers of government to make sure we have regular tripartite forums around the Barkly Regional Deal and what is on track, what has slowed for whatever reason and whether any initiatives are at risk with the progress that we would be expecting at this time, five years into the deal.

That work is done by the coordinating agency, which is the Department of the Chief Minister and Cabinet.

Mr EDGINGTON: When was the last time you sat down with your ministers who have responsibility for these initiatives and went through with them what they are doing and what the updates are? We all know what the department does, and it is doing a fantastic job, but at what stage do you sit down with your ministers and say, 'Hey, what is going on here? Where are these initiatives up to?', given that you are responsible for it?

Ms UIBO: When you are in government you will learn that Cabinet meets once a week. We sit down together every week, sometimes more.

Mr EDGINGTON: I am talking about the regional deal. You can sit down as often as you want. How often do you sit down and talk about the regional deal?

Madam CHAIR: The minister has answered the question.

Mr EDGINGTON: No, she has not.

Madam CHAIR: You can like or dislike the answer. If you do not have further questions, we will move to other members.

Mr EDGINGTON: I have plenty of questions.

Madam CHAIR: Please go ahead. She has answered that question a couple of times.

Mr EDGINGTON: Regarding initiative 14, Government Investment and Service System Reform, where is that initiative up to? What is being done under that initiative?

Ms UIBO: Initiative 14, Government Investment and Service System Reform, is looking at measuring outcomes. We have a working group that is chaired by the Backbone Team, which I am sure you are aware of. Our agency has been the lead for this initiative since June 2022. We work with the Australian Government on the data collection for this initiative.

The Barkly Regional Deal Governance Table has endorsed implementing case study models to increase the understanding of quality aspects of service delivery. This has included an end-user approach in delivering

the services that people request for the new Barkly Business Hub—which opened in October 2023—and the services that are in demand to identify any service gaps or duplication across government in the region.

The working group has also looked at the development and the vision of the desired end state of youth service delivery and crisis management to inform the further work of the working group, chaired by the Backbone Team.

Mr EDGINGTON: There has been lots of looking and talking. What has changed since this initiative commenced? What changes have been made?

Ms UIBO: We have the new Barkly Business Hub which opened in October 2023.

Mr EDGINGTON: That is a business centre.

Ms UIBO: That has changed because there has been a lot of money put into upgrading that facility to ensure that we have ...

Mr EDGINGTON: That is a separate initiative.

Madam CHAIR: Member for Barkly, please allow the minister to answer the question. I am allowing some latitude with commentary at the end but not interrupting the minister.

Ms UIBO: That is part of the system service reform because it is bringing together that business hub.

Mr GAYNOR: One of the other projects for the Government Investment and Service System Reform initiative was the establishment of a youth service mapping project. That has involved the establishment of a youth engagement targeted intervention committee that meets weekly. It provides enhanced case management across government and non-government support services.

There has been additional funding investment from NIAA to the Barkly Regional Council for development of delivery of programs at the Tennant Creek Youth Centre. That is on top of the BRD investments.

There has been funding to the Tennant Creek Mob Aboriginal Corporation to deliver additional targeted patrols and youth engagement diversion activities, on top of the original BRD investments.

There has been identification of gaps in youth, mental health and alcohol and other drug services. That has resulted in the employment of a new AOD staff member through the Department of Health.

Mr EDGINGTON: It seems that not a lot of the initiatives have been implemented. What will happen with the regional deal moving forward? We are five years into the regional deal; is there any intention to do a review? What is the plan moving forward?

Ms UIBO: You would be aware, as am I, of the calls for a regional deal review. We are five years in, and it obviously makes sense as we are at the halfway point, and it is a milestone. We have not had any confirmation thus far that the federal government will undertake a review.

I know you, as the local member, wrote correspondence calling for a review, as have other members of the Barkly region. We noted that. We are looking at processes we can control within the NTG's remit, as part of the signatories to the Barkly Regional Deal, and continuing some of the accountability measures and governance structures that we can control. There is the collaboration we have with the other tiers of government—the federal government and local government sector.

Mr EDGINGTON: You spoke to the other two tiers, the regional council and the Australian Government. Are they in agreement with you that there should be a review?

Ms UIBO: We have not landed on the confirmation yet. I met with the Barkly Regional Council; obviously it is a sensitive process at the moment. I have spoken to Senator Anthony Chisholm, the assistant minister responsible for the Barkly Regional Deal at the federal level.

I think a review will probably move forward, but it will be the process of how that will happen and who is best placed to do the review. There are some sensitivities in terms of the internal Barkly politics, and some organisations are in different strong footings as some have had some recent issues. We need to make sure that if the Barkly Regional Deal is reviewed, it is done as a fulsome process and not just a token item.

Mr EDGINGTON: When will that start?

Ms UIBO: Once we have the agreement between the three tiers of government as well as how an independent review can be conducted; what the reference points would be; why we would conduct a review through this process; what will be the outcomes; and how to move forward on any recommendations.

Mrs LAMBLEY: I was a part of the Public Accounts Committee inquiry a few years ago into local decision-making. It was the only inquiry we have done over the last four years, so it is memorable. Revealed through that inquiry was that there is a lot of merit, of course, in empowering Aboriginal communities and allowing communities to determine for themselves what happens.

There are clearly limitations on how much local decision-making the government allows communities. A pressing example of a local community in Central Australia that is not being allowed to determine what happens in their region and community is around the water allocation and environmental issues identified by local people concerning Singleton Station.

How does local decision-making work in a community like that, where people in Ali Curung are deeply upset by the largest water allocation in the history of the Northern Territory being given to Singleton Station? They have been active and vocal about it. How do you apply your local decision-making model to that situation?

Ms UIBO: The crux of local decision-making is the transfer of service delivery. When we are talking about delivery of services that government provides in a community, region or homeland, it is about providing the opportunity for that community, homeland or region to take on that service delivery.

Government may provide the services for housing—it is another of my portfolios, which I will use as an example. It might be about the repairs and maintenance. Often in a remote community you will see that if there is not a government provider for repairs and maintenance in the community, it is often contracted to an external provider. Whether they are from the community or outside, government pays for a contractor in or out of the community to deliver the repairs and maintenance of housing.

What we have seen through local decision-making agreements so far on this journey is some communities want to take on the responsibility of service provision. It is about who delivers the service; who is best placed to deliver it; and if government is providing that service, how we transfer it across to be Aboriginal controlled and determined by the community who the service provider will be.

What we have seen over the last few years is some of that more mechanical service delivery process. Obviously with R&M if something is broken in the house, it gets fixed and you are paid for delivering that service.

Other elements of service delivery have started to be discussed and developed through local decision-making, such as child protection and kinship care of children. Communities have said, 'If there is a provider who looks after kids who may be in trouble in the home, how can we then take on that responsibility, as a community, region, family or organisation, to take on that service delivery?' We are starting to see some more complex and very thought-out local decision-making agreements about that more sensitive area of government service delivery.

If we look at the Groote Eylandt example of service delivery, one of the processes they are going through currently is housing—I use that as an example as one of the five pillars. They established their own Anindilyakwa Housing Aboriginal Corporation to pull in all of the housing assets on island—government and non-government, including the industry and NGO sectors—to the one service provider. That is now AHAC. They then looked at the service delivery to go through that organisation—building new houses on Groote Eylandt, as well as repairs and maintenance and tenancy management. The costs associated with that have now been transferred from government through that process. We are still part of that process; it has not been completed. That is an example of service delivery.

The main part of your question was about making decisions locally. Where the NT Government cannot interfere is around land tenure. That is obviously a federal process. When land tenure is involved with land councils ...

Mrs LAMBLEY: Water allocation and environmental issues.

Ms UIBO: Water allocation, yes. Obviously that is not my remit; that is for Minister Worden under Water Security. In terms of the local decision-making aspect, which is the crux of your question, that is not a service delivery; it is an environmental process. There are other regulations for that ...

Mrs LAMBLEY: Are you saying that local decision-making does not include locals having input in decisions on environmental issues and water allocation?

Ms UIBO: Being clear ...

Mrs LAMBLEY: It is a specific question.

Ms UIBO: I will be clear for the answer ...

Madam CHAIR: Member for Araluen, if you could ...

Mrs LAMBLEY: You do not need to intervene; I am having a ...

Mrs MANISON: She is chairing the committee, doing her job.

Mrs LAMBLEY: You are interjecting because you are trying to gag these questions.

Ms UIBO: I would love to answer your question because it is important ...

Mrs LAMBLEY: I know you are, but she does not want you to.

Ms UIBO: That is okay; I want to be clear for the record because I do not want any of my words to be misinterpreted. It is important.

Our local decision-making policy is about the transfer of government services to local communities or a local organisation to deliver those services.

Madam CHAIR: That concludes consideration of agency-related whole-of-government questions on budget and fiscal strategy.

OUTPUT GROUP 1.0 – TERRITORY REGIONAL GROWTH **Output 1.1 – Regional Development, Local Government and Aboriginal interpreters**

Madam CHAIR: The committee will now proceed to Output Group 1.0, Territory Regional Growth, Output 1.1, Regional Development, Local Government and Aboriginal Interpreters. Are there any questions?

Mr GUYULA: How many full-time positions are funded under Local Decision Making? I am talking about Yolngu or whoever can have positions there.

Ms UIBO: I only have the overall full-time equivalents for each regional office, but if you are looking for the Aboriginal employee numbers, I can take that on notice.

Question on Notice No 3.2

Madam CHAIR: Member for Mulka, please restate the question for the record.

Mr GUYULA: How many full-time positions are available?

Ms UIBO: And Yolngu.

Mr GUYULA: Yolngu, yes. It is both, really. I am talking about everyone. How many full-time positions are funded under Local Decision Making?

Madam CHAIR: Minister, do you accept the question?

Ms UIBO: Yes.

Madam CHAIR: The question has been allocated the number 3.2.

Mr GUYULA: Can you provide a breakdown of LDM funding for the Mulka electorate for this financial year? What is budgeted for next financial year?

Ms UIBO: Similar to the answers to the questions posed by the Member for Barkly, in terms of the whole-of-government approach it is part of our everyday business. I can undertake to get further detail for you about some of the LDMs that have been signed in your electorate of Mulka. There is definitely the Djalkiripuyngu one, which is the Blue Mud Bay agreement that has been signed.

We do not have it broken down into electorates, but we will have a quick search and make sure that anything for detail can be taken on notice.

We have just checked and it is only the Djalkiripuyngu Local Decision Making Agreement that has been signed officially that belongs in the Mulka electorate. It was signed on 30 July 2022. There are eight key elements for that local decision-making agreement:

1. leadership capacity building
2. infrastructure and essential services
3. housing
4. community safety and resilience
5. business and jobs
6. country, culture and heritage
7. health and families
8. education and early childhood.

If there is a possibility of getting a breakdown of those costings, we could take that on notice. That is the only one that we have identified that is in the Mulka electorate.

Mr GUYULA: What work is being done to help government agencies transition to decision-making processes that rest with First Nations communities rather than the agencies and departments?

Ms UIBO: That is a great question in this setting. It has been a journey over seven-and-a-half years for us as a Labor government. The processes of government have changed, and I think for the better. I have a lot of faith in our public service. I think they have worked hard on the expectations of First Nations Territorians and how we look at the transfer of service delivery in regard to local decision-making so that it is not just a policy but there are outcomes. It is not just talk; there is action as well. When it comes to listening and incorporating the aspirations of our First Nations Territorians, that has been a positive journey of government to change the way that we do business.

As I mentioned earlier, a couple of areas in the Northern Territory are getting ready to sign off on their third local decision-making agreement and implementation plan. That speaks volumes because each three-year agreement in the two examples I am thinking of has been a process of adjustment. There is constant collaboration across government agencies with the organisation, land council, NGO or federal government—in some cases—that may be involved in a local decision-making agreement.

Being able to work to that aspiration of First Nations Territorians who are part of those agreements has been a journey of seven-and-a-half years. Our Territory Labor government will commit to continuing that past August 2024.

Mr GUYULA: The first question you took on notice, I want to add a bit more clarification to that. How many full-time positions are funded under local decision-making across the Yolngu-speaking country?

Ms UIBO: I accept that. That is a clarification. I do not know what number it was.

Madam CHAIR: We are amending question 3.2, for *Hansard* and for the minister. I will not get you to re-ask the question, but could you restate your clarification for the record, please?

Mr GUYULA: Yes. How many full-time positions are funded under local decision-making across the Yolngu-speaking country?

Madam CHAIR: Minister, do you accept that?

Ms UIBO: Yes, I accept the clarification.

Madam CHAIR: The question asked by the Member for Mulka has already been allocated the number 3.2. I am sure that is clear for the minister and her officials in responding to the committee.

That concludes consideration of Output Group 1.0 and questions regarding the Local Decision Making portfolio. I thank the agency staff who attended and provided assistance to the minister and the committee today. We will pause before the committee considers questions relating to the Office of the Commissioner for Public Employment, as we have a changeover of officials.

Ms UIBO: I say a big thank you to the officials accompanying me and all the agency staff who have spent many months in preparation for Estimates. It is a huge amount of work involving cross-agency collaboration. I thank the regional director network and all those in Central Australia, Barkly, Big Rivers, East Arnhem, Palmerston, Top End, rural and the greater Darwin regional crew. Thank you, everyone, for your amazing work on Local Decision Making.

Mr MALEY: I thank everyone as well. I know how much work it is, so thank you for all your time and effort. We appreciate it.

The committee suspended.

PUBLIC EMPLOYMENT

DEPARTMENT OF THE CHIEF MINISTER AND CABINET

Madam CHAIR: Minister, I invite you to introduce the officials accompanying you and, if you wish, make an opening statement regarding the Office of the Commissioner for Public Employment.

Ms UIBO: The staff from the Office of the Commissioner for Public Employment are: the Commissioner for Public Employment, Nicole Hurwood, who commenced the role on 11 April 2024; alongside the commissioner is Mark Hathaway, Manager, Employee Relations; Ursula White, Director, Aboriginal Employment and Career Development; Rachael Dunn, Senior Director, Public Sector Appeals and Grievances; and Kalotina Halkitis, Senior Director, Strategic Workforce Planning and Development.

Madam CHAIR: Do you wish to make an opening statement?

Ms UIBO: Yes. The commissioner's office is a small independent office within the Department of the Chief Minister and Cabinet and is identified as an output group of the Chief Minister and Cabinet's 2023–24 budget, with four standalone outputs reflecting the divisional responsibilities within the commissioner's office.

The commissioner has significant responsibilities for managing the employment arrangements for the public service, which is achieved through the efforts of a small, dedicated and extremely busy team of employees.

Under the *Public Sector Employment and Management Act 1993* the Commissioner for Public Employment is deemed the statutory employer of all public servants employed under the act. This means the commissioner, through her office, is responsible for enterprise agreement negotiations and has the power to set terms and conditions of employment for NTPS employees.

It also means the commissioner is the employer representative in matters pertaining to the Fair Work Commission, such as industrial disputes, general protection claims, bullying complaints and unfair dismissals.

The commissioner is responsible for four distinct roles, including:

- developing and managing strategic whole-of-government employment frameworks, arrangements and legislation affecting employee and industrial relations
- strategic workforce planning and development to build and grow employee capability across the public service workforce, including through the delivery of leadership development
- Aboriginal employment career development to develop strategies to attract, develop, grow and retain our Aboriginal workforce
- enabling merit, equity and fairness in the NTPS through effective, impartial and independent delivery of public sector appeals and grievances and delivery of merit selection training.

The commissioner's statutory role and the strategic whole-of-government employment responsibilities are distinct from that of her chief executive officer colleagues who are accountable and have the responsibility for managing their individual agency operational activities, employees and employment arrangements within the *Public Sector Employment and Management Act 1993* frameworks and within the approval budgets of the *Financial Management Act 2005*.

The commissioner's office is also administratively responsible for the Northern Territory's *Long Service Leave Act 1981* and the *Public Holidays Act 1981*, which apply to private sector industry employees across the Northern Territory.

The commissioner's office is now also responsible for implementing the framework and arrangements for the portable long service leave scheme for the community services sector, following the recent introduction and passing of the *Portable Long Service Leave (Community Services Sector) Bill 2024*.

I will reference a dozen significant activities of the commissioner's office during 2023–24:

- developing the *Portable Long Service Leave (Community Services Sector) Act 2024*, including undertaking initial consultations with community services sector that will continue until the legislation is fully implemented, which is expected in March 2026
- following amendments of the contemporisation of the *Public Holidays Act 1981* in early 2023, undertaking a review of the *Long Service Leave Act 1981* to consider how it could be modernised to meet the current and future needs of Territorians
- reviewing and implementing changes to ensure compliance with the *Fair Work Act* legislative amendments
- undertaking, in collaboration with relevant agencies, reviews arising from various approved enterprise agreements
- commencing negotiations for the teachers and educators enterprise agreement, which is due to expire in October 2024
- consulting on the development of the new disability employment strategy for the public service
- continuing to implement actions from the NTPS 2023 People Matter Survey responses plan
- implementing the Executive Leader Development Framework coaching panel, professional development and flagship leadership programs
- continuing delivery of programs such as Kigaruk and Lookrukin Aboriginal Leadership Development Programs and recognition programs for the public service
- delivering Aboriginal employment forums in Darwin, Alice Springs and the annual Aboriginal stay surveys to monitor and identify opportunities to overcome barriers to attracting, developing, retaining and growing the number of Aboriginal employees within the public service
- collaborating with the relevant agencies to implement legislative reforms under the *Anti-Discrimination Act 1992* to assist in the development, delivery and implementation of requirements relating to the introduction of positive duty requirements

- continuing delivery of merit selection training to employees across the public service, including implementing improvements to training to achieve positive selection outcomes including through the use of special measures.

It is important to acknowledge the work of the former acting commissioner, Adjunct Professor Joanne Norton, and her predecessor, Vicki Telfer, for their leadership of the commissioner's office during the months prior to Ms Hurwood's commencement in the role.

I commend the staff in the office—a small, robust and dedicated team—for their work undertaken over the last 12 months. I have enjoyed taking on the portfolio. They are an integral part of the Northern Territory Public Sector.

Madam CHAIR: Are there any questions relating to the minister's opening statement from the opposition spokesperson?

Mr YAN: Thank you, minister, for your opening statement and thank you to the public servants here today. I welcome the new commissioner to your first Estimates. Congratulations.

In your opening statement you mentioned that OCPE is responsible for employment arrangements and negotiating the enterprise agreements. How many EBAs are you currently negotiating, and what are they?

Ms UIBO: I am currently negotiating one.

Mr YAN: Which agreement is that?

Ms UIBO: As I said in my opening statement, that is the teachers agreement which is due to expire in October this year.

Mr YAN: Are there any other agreements on the horizon that work has commenced on for upcoming EAs?

Ms UIBO: No.

Mr YAN: How many negotiations have been completed in the reporting period and are awaiting approval from Fair Work?

Ms UIBO: None are awaiting approval. Six have been completed.

Mr YAN: Have six EAs been completed in the reporting period, and all have been approved by Fair Work and implemented?

Ms UIBO: Yes.

Mr YAN: What are those six enterprise agreements?

Ms HURWOOD: The six agreements are the medical officers agreement; the dentists agreement, which we completed in July 2023; the Territory Generation agreement; the nurses and midwives agreement; the Power and Water agreement in August 2023; and the firefighters agreement in October 2023.

Mr YAN: I notice that the firefighters agreement has finally been finalised. A number of things have come up regarding the firefighters recently.

In a Fair Work Commission case involving NT Public Sector firefighters relating to the payment of overtime hours worked by them, both past and current, it was found that they had not been paid appropriately for quite a number of overtime hours worked.

In a previous decision Mr Riordan of the Fair Work Commission found that the respondent—which is the Northern Territory Government and OCPE—acted contrary to its original agreement and found that the respondent had deducted 14 hours from the applicant's rec leave on an annual basis. Mr Riordan stated that he did not accept that it was a simple calculation and that the parties had to go back for further discussions on this matter.

The Northern Territory Government appealed that decision by Mr Riordan in the initial Fair Work Commission case. It went back before a full bench of the Fair Work Commission on 17 May.

Why did the Northern Territory Government firstly decide to appeal this Fair Work Commission decision by Commissioner Riordan?

Ms UIBO: Understanding that there is often quite a lengthy process when it comes to ensuring that work conditions are met and getting clarification legally, I will pass to Mr Mark Hathaway who will explain in a bit more detail.

Mr HATHAWAY: When the decision came there were doubts in our office regarding its correctness. That particular decision of Commissioner Riordan agreed with the main thrust of the Office of the Commissioner for Public Employment's argument about the composite allowance. However, Commissioner Riordan disagreed with our argument about the application of the 10 to 14 lost around the PDOs or leisure leave question—in other words, the 14 hours.

The thrust of our appeal was that the commissioner—and in his actual decision he expressed a degree of ambiguity. He thought that there was ambiguity there. Our appeal looked at that because there have been custom and practice for over 30 years where the cap of 90 hours for the PDOs had been applied.

The crux of the decision of the full bench was that custom and practice cannot be relied upon to negate the unambiguous and plain and ordinary meaning of the words of the enterprise agreement.

The full bench distinguished itself in its decision from the original decision in the first instance in that they felt there had been no ambiguity in relation to the words. They thought the words were clear and unambiguous on their face. Consequently, there was no requirement then to apply the principles set out in earlier full bench decisions, such as AMWU and Berri fruit juices, in which if in construing an enterprise agreement it is determined that there is some ambiguity, then you can rely on other matters such as custom and practice or things of that nature.

In a nutshell, the full bench said the words were clear and unambiguous on their face. Consequently, even though the Office of the Commissioner for Public Employment had been arguing that was never the intention of those words, they held against us.

Interestingly, the full bench also said that it was reasonable for the Office of the Commissioner for Public Employment to bring the appeal and that, essentially, there was no nefarious reasons for trying to bring the appeal.

We disagreed with the original decision and tested that in an appeal. The full bench ruled against us. We are now in the process of implementing that decision, negotiating with the parties.

Mr YAN: Now that the Northern Territory Government has lost this appeal by the full bench of the Fair Work Commission—Mr Hathaway mentioned that moves are afoot to deal with that decision—when will the Northern Territory Government be doing that backpay for the firefighters? When can they expect that backpay?

Mr HATHAWAY: We are in the early stages of negotiating; in fact, we have a meeting this afternoon with the United Workers Union. We had an initial meeting with the person who brought the matter, Mr Manny Koulakis. We are taking stock.

In the next couple of weeks we will be putting an offer as to how we might settle this matter. We are still doing a lot of internal research to make sure that we honour the decision, but in an accurate and lawful way. It is ongoing work. I am not in a position where I could say that it will be sorted by next week.

Mr YAN: Of course, this goes back a long way—my understanding is back to 1988. It affects a lot of firefighters. Have you, at this stage, calculated what that underpayment might be and what the estimated cost will be to the Northern Territory Government to make that backpay? By all accounts it could be up to \$20m.

Ms UIBO: No, we have not finalised any calculations, as Mr Hathaway has outlined in his response. That internal work is happening. The process of backdating and seeing which employees, current and past, it affects will be a huge volume of work. We cannot put a figure on that at this time.

Mr YAN: Will government look at paying the full amount owed to those employees, or will government be trying to negotiate a settlement of partial payment for those firefighters affected by this decision?

Ms UIBO: That is the work we are doing internally now to see what the determination requires and how, in effect, it will apply.

Mr YAN: Will it be full payment of moneys owed by determination of this decision by Fair Work Commission or will government be making an offer of part payment on those moneys owed?

Ms UIBO: Third time lucky—this is the work that is happening now to provide that detail at a later date.

Mr YAN: The firefighters will find out from OCPE in a reasonable amount of time what that offer might be, whether it be full payment or part payment?

Ms UIBO: Yes, that is correct. That is why the work needs to be done now internally, so those offers or the determination of what is then applied can be done through the processes we will follow from now on.

Mr YAN: In relation to this full bench of the Fair Work Commission, what was the cost to the Northern Territory Government for external legal representation in this matter?

Ms HURWOOD: The costs for legal representation are borne by the Parliamentary Counsel. They organised the legal representation for the office in this matter.

Mr YAN: Would Parliamentary Counsel be able to provide that cost, or would you be able to take it on notice and provide that cost to us?

Madam CHAIR: Can I clarify whether it is Parliamentary Counsel or AGD?

Ms HURWOOD: My apologies; it is the Solicitor for the NT.

Mr YAN: There would be an internal cost between OCPE and AGD because you contract them in, so there would be a cost to OCPE to contract those services from the AG. Do you have the cost for the legal representation for this matter?

Madam CHAIR: I think we discussed this yesterday. The department of Justice provides whole-of-government legal services and these questions were answered yesterday, but I am happy if the minister wants to provide further explanation.

Mr YAN: There is an internal transfer of funds for accounting purposes so that should be recorded.

Ms HURWOOD: The costs are actually costed to the Fire department. I just received advice that it was \$22,000.

Madam CHAIR: We have Fire next week, so we could ask further questions.

Mr MALEY: What was the \$22,000 used for?

Madam CHAIR: That was the legal fees for this case.

Mr MALEY: Was that for the whole case, including the appeal?

Ms HURWOOD: That was the cost for the full bench appeal.

Mr YAN: I know that an overtime audit was conducted in 2022–23 into overtime practices within the Northern Territory Fire and Rescue Service. Who conducted that audit?

Ms UIBO: I have been informed it would be the Fire and Rescue Service that does the audit.

Mr YAN: The audit was conducted into overtime. Was the outcome of that audit provided to OCPE?

Ms UIBO: We will have to take that question on notice. We do not have that information confirmed.

Question on Notice No 3.3

Madam CHAIR: Member for Namatjira, please restate the question for the record.

Mr YAN: For the overtime audit conducted in the Northern Territory Fire and Rescue Service, who conducted that audit, if you are able to provide that, and were the outcomes of the audit provided to OCPE for its consideration?

Madam CHAIR: Minister, do you accept the question?

Ms UIBO: Yes.

Madam CHAIR: The question has been allocated the number 3.3.

Madam CHAIR: Shadow spokesperson, you might like to repeat some of these questions when we have the Minister for Fire and Emergency Services, because they might be agency specific.

That concludes that concludes consideration of agency-related whole-of-government questions on budget and fiscal strategy.

OUTPUT GROUP 2.0 – OFFICE OF THE COMMISSIONER FOR PUBLIC EMPLOYMENT

Output 2.1 – Employee and Industrial Relations

Madam CHAIR: The committee will now consider Output Group 2.0, Office of the Commissioner for Public Employment, Output 2.1, Employee and Industrial Relations. Are there any questions?

Mr YAN: In your opening statement you mentioned the People Matter Survey. It closed in June 2023 and the responses are now in for that. Some areas of concern have been highlighted in that report. What areas are OCPE focused on, based on that 2023 report?

Ms UIBO: Obviously, it is important that we have real-time and relevant feedback from the Northern Territory public service around the processes within each of their agencies. That is why these types of surveys are conducted.

I will pass to Commissioner Hurwood to respond to your question and what the commission will be focused on following the results of that survey.

Ms HURWOOD: The People Matter Survey response plan for the whole of sector focused on three areas. Departmental agencies also have individual response plans specific to their own results which they focus on and report to the office on every six months.

The Whole of Sector Response Plan was developed in consultation with people from the sector. Key areas identified to be focused on were:

- employee voice, given that it is one of the highest drivers for employee engagement, and it is really about how people could have a say in the way their agencies operate and what we do
- senior managers, focusing on capability and capacity building of senior managers and executives in the public service
- feedback and performance management, so continuing to build on ensuring that all employees know what is expected of them and that there is a culture of putting documented performance plans in place to ensure that employees are receiving feedback on what they are doing well and what they can improve on.

They were the three focus areas.

Madam CHAIR: That concludes consideration of Output 2.1.

Output 2.2 – Workforce Planning and Development

Madam CHAIR: I now ask for questions on Output 2.2. I know the Member for Mulka has a question, but I will go to the opposition spokesperson first.

Mr YAN: I believe this may have been provided this morning. What is the number of NT public servants as at 31 March 2024?

Ms UIBO: Currently it is 22,220.

Mr YAN: How does that compare with figures from the previous year? Are we up or are we down?

Ms UIBO: We increased; it is 180 up from last year.

Mr YAN: Normally, the commissioner publishes staffing numbers on the OCPE website. The last update was only for the fourth quarter December 2023. I believe it was only updated today for the March quarter, nearly two or three months late. What is the reason for that delay?

Ms UIBO: Our apologies for the oversight, Member for Namatjira, and thanks for pointing it out. Obviously it has been updated. There were delays with the changing. We have a new commissioner. We will make sure that we keep our general business and those reporting duties on track quarterly, as it should be.

Mr YAN: It goes towards the ability for the Independents and the opposition to develop what we are talking about in Estimates. It has been very hard to drag those figures out, and to have them drop on the day that the OCPE is showing before Estimates is not that great.

Ms UIBO: I apologise for our oversight.

Mr YAN: Thank you, I take the apology on notice. I appreciate that.

In some written questions that we asked of OCPE in the last six months, we found that 959 NT public servants were subject to an assault or had been subjected to criminal behaviour whilst at work. Could I get a breakdown, please, of the agencies where those employees are?

You may have to take that on notice. If you do, I will change the question because I will ask for current figures as for the reporting period.

Ms UIBO: We will need to take that on notice because it would be reported through each agency individually and then we can collate it through the commission. It will not necessarily be reported directly to us.

Question on Notice No 3.4

Madam CHAIR: Member for Namatjira, please restate the question for the record.

Mr YAN: How many NTPS employees were subject to an assault or had been subjected to criminal behaviour whilst performing their work activities for the reporting period? Could I have that broken down by agency?

Madam CHAIR: Minister, do you accept the question?

Ms UIBO: Yes.

Madam CHAIR: The question has been allocated the number 3.4.

Madam CHAIR: We are aiming for a 10.30 am break. Member for Namatjira, do you have further questions on this output?

Mr YAN: I do. They may need to be taken on notice because they are following the original question.

How many employees required time off work due to being assaulted or subjected to criminal behaviour, broken down by agency for the reporting period?

Ms UIBO: We will need to take that question on notice.

Question on Notice No 3.5

Madam CHAIR: Member for Namatjira, please restate the question for the record.

Mr YAN: For the reporting period, how many NTPS employees required time off work due to being assaulted or subjected to criminal behaviour whilst in the workplace, by agency?

Madam CHAIR: Minister, do you accept the question?

Ms UIBO: Yes.

Madam CHAIR: The question has been allocated the number 3.5.

Mr YAN: From those written questions, there were 975 days off work recorded due to criminal behaviour or an assault whilst at work. I am after the numbers for the reporting period, again by agency.

Ms UIBO: We will need to take that question on notice.

Question on Notice No 3.6

Madam CHAIR: Member for Namatjira, please restate the question for the record.

Mr YAN: How many off-work days were recorded due to Northern Territory public service employees being subjected to an assault or criminal behaviour whilst at work for the reporting period, and broken down by agency?

Madam CHAIR: Minister, do you accept the question?

Ms UIBO: Yes.

Madam CHAIR: The question has been allocated the number 3.6.

Mr YAN: How many NTPS employees are currently off work due to being subjected to an assault or criminal behaviour whilst in the workplace?

Ms UIBO: Each agency would have that particular data. We do not have that, but we will take it on notice to collate the answer and get back to you.

Question on Notice No 3.7

Madam CHAIR: Member for Namatjira, please restate the question for the record.

Mr YAN: As at the end of the reporting period, how many Northern Territory public servants were or are currently off work due to being subjected to an assault or criminal behaviour whilst at work, broken down by agency?

Madam CHAIR: Minister, do you accept the question?

Ms UIBO: Yes.

Madam CHAIR: The question has been allocated the number 3.7.

Mr YAN: Comparatively, Territory public servants are 10 times more likely per capita than their Queensland counterparts to be subjected to an assault whilst performing their work activities. That is according to data from a 2020 Queensland Sentencing Advisory Council report.

We brought legislation into the Chamber to protect frontline workers with laws to toughen penalties for people who assault public servants. Was there any reason that this was not specifically supported by your government?

Madam CHAIR: Before you answer, minister, I caution we are talking about the Appropriation Bill 2024–25. I will allow some latitude if the minister wishes to respond. I am not sure that question is entirely on what we are focused on.

Ms UIBO: Obviously, we believe that every Territorian should be safe in their workplace, particularly if they are a public servant covered through the Northern Territory Government. We believe they should be safe at work doing their duties for the general public.

You are out of line with your questioning, Member for Namatjira, because you are relating outside the Appropriation Bill, which is the purpose of Estimates. I will not respond to that because it is a political question, not an Estimates question.

Mr YAN: What is the current average employment separation or turnover rate so far for the reporting period? How does that compare with last year?

Ms UIBO: It is 10.8% for this reporting period.

Mr YAN: How does that compare with the previous year?

Ms UIBO: Compared with last year, it is down. Last year it was 12.17%.

Mr YAN: It was 12.17% in the previous year, so that is a good outcome for our public sector.

Ms UIBO: I agree.

Madam CHAIR: I nearly fell off my chair—‘a good outcome’. Do you have any more questions with good outcomes?

Mr YAN: I do not know if I have any more questions with good outcomes, Madam Chair, but that reduction is a good outcome—or we are running out of public servants to leave.

Ms UIBO: No, Member for Namatjira! Come on, you were doing so well.

Mr YAN: Could you detail the exact number of resignations for the reporting period compared with the previous year?

Ms UIBO: We can provide this reporting period, but if you want a comparison with last year, we will have to take that component of the question on notice. Would you like to hear the response for this year?

Mr YAN: I will have the response for this year. If you can take the entire question on notice, that would be great.

Ms UIBO: For this reporting period the answer is 2,437.

Madam CHAIR: Member for Namatjira, please restate the question for the record.

Mr YAN: Can you detail the exact number of resignations for this year, and compared with the previous reporting period?

Ms UIBO: We found it; we can compare.

Mr YAN: There you go; we do not need to take it on notice.

Ms UIBO: To clarify for the record, this year’s reporting period is 2,437 compared with last year’s reporting period, which was 2,692.

Mr GUYULA: Across the public sector there is a very large language deficit for the majority of employees. What training is there currently and budgeted for to help frontline public servants increase their Aboriginal language capacity so that they can operate more efficiently?

Ms UIBO: Currently we do not have any particular policy or program that is focused directly on public servants learning First Nations languages in the Northern Territory. You are very aware and an avid supporter of the Aboriginal Interpreter Service, which sits within the Office of Aboriginal Affairs, but in terms of our public

servants going through a systematic process of learning Aboriginal languages in the Northern Territory, we do not have a program or a policy around that.

We have focused on ensuring that we have more of an emphasis on our language speakers in the public service, whether it is Aboriginal language speakers or other language speakers. We are starting work through my office and with the commissioner on identifying processes of accreditation that Aboriginal language speakers and other language speakers who are public servants can undertake to be recognised as language speakers and to enhance and acknowledge the work that they do as public servants with the community and the general public.

Having language accreditation has resurfaced. It already exists as an option, but we do not have many public servants who are aware of this accredited process where being a public servant you can be compensated for the language that you bring to your role. We are starting work on a really strong process on how we can get more public servants aware of this applied languages process for their general duties, with the enhanced role and the responsibilities they have as a public servant being recognised for bringing their language to their role and to be compensated for that through an accredited process.

Madam CHAIR: That concludes consideration of Output 2.2.

Output 2.3 – Aboriginal Employment and Career Development

Madam CHAIR: The committee will now consider Output 2.3, Aboriginal Employment and Career Development. Are there any questions?

Mr YAN: What is the current employment rate for Indigenous employees in the Northern Territory Public Sector? How does it look against last year's figures?

Ms UIBO: The current rate of Aboriginal employment in the Northern Territory Public Sector is 10.9%, which equates to 2,662 employees. That is a slight increase from last year's reporting period, which was 10.8% in March 2023.

Mr YAN: Some good news, minister, an increase by 0.1%. We want to see it improve and increase on that. Do you have any projected figures for next year, the next reporting period?

Ms UIBO: No, we do not have any predicted figures. I agree continuing that momentum and the work that Ms Ursula White and her team do on Aboriginal employment and career development is a centrepiece of what the commission is focused on, particularly driving that through each agency and the focus that they have on agency targets and figures.

Another area of focus with the commission through my office has been: what are the pathways? What are we doing to attract Aboriginal employees and the retention rates in the public sector? What are the processes for career development, particularly executive leadership? Our numbers are not as high in that area. What are we doing to focus on all of those areas—entry level to the public service, retention in the public service and pathways in career development to the executive level.

It will be an ongoing focus of the commission. Commissioner Hurwood in her five-year tenure has taken it on as a key area, with her background and many years of experience in the Northern Territory public service. With Ms Ursula White and her team and some of the Aboriginal career programs that we already offer through OCPE, we are proud of the continuation of that work.

Mr YAN: As part of special measures, how many grievances have arisen as a direct result of the program and, if any, how many remain unresolved?

Ms DUNN: We get a limited number of grievances relating to special measures. At their original inception when public servants were not familiar with the program, we received a few grievances in relation to other applicants being selected to positions over other people. As public servants have become familiar with the process—special measures plans have been in place since 2015—a limited number of grievances relate to those. If they do, they are about process.

Under the special measures plan, Aboriginal applicants are granted priority consideration for a vacancy prior to other applicants being considered. If a complaint comes in, they are generally related to a process question, not necessarily about the applicant who has been successful or not successful.

Any grievances we receive may be by an Aboriginal applicant seeking a review of a decision to find them unsuitable in that early consideration phase of the recruitment process, but they are limited.

Mr YAN: The core of my question was: how many grievances or appeals have been received for the special measures program, plan or arrangement for the reporting period?

Ms UIBO: We will take that question on notice.

Question on Notice No 3.8

Madam CHAIR: Member for Namaŋjira, please restate the question for the record.

Mr YAN: How many grievances or appeals have arisen as a direct result of a special measures program, plan or arrangement for the reporting period and, of those, do any remain unsolved and how many?

Madam CHAIR: Minister, do you accept the question?

Ms UIBO: Yes.

Madam CHAIR: The question has been allocated the number 3.8.

Mr MALEY: How many positions had special measures applied when they were advertised in the last reporting year?

Ms UIBO: The number is 3,290.

Madam CHAIR: That concludes consideration of Output 2.3.

Output 2.4 – Public Sector Appeals and Grievance Reviews

No questions.

Madam CHAIR: That concludes the consideration of all outputs relating to the office of the public employment commissioner.

On behalf of the committee, we thank the commissioner and her officials for joining us today and for their work in preparing for the committee.

Mr KIRBY: Madam Chair, I thank the hardworking staff at the commissioner's office and wish the new commissioner all the best in her role. It has been a hectic couple of years, and we have covered a lot of ground. I look forward to seeing you all soon.

Ms UIBO: Madam Chair, I express my gratitude and thanks to the commissioner and the senior officials who appeared with me today and also all the staff in the Office of the Commissioner for Public Employment for their amazing work. It is a back-of-house and hardworking group, and I had the opportunity to visit them recently. Thank you for your preparation for Estimates.

The committee suspended.

REMOTE HOUSING AND HOMELANDS

DEPARTMENT OF TERRITORY FAMILIES, HOUSING AND COMMUNITIES

Madam CHAIR: Minister, I invite you to introduce the officials accompanying you and, if you wish, to make an opening statement regarding the Remote Housing and Homelands portfolio.

Ms UIBO: Madam Chair, it gives me great pleasure to speak on the portfolio responsibility as the Remote Housing and Homelands minister. I will introduce the senior officials accompanying me at the table. First is Emma White, the Chief Executive Officer of the Department of Territory Families, Housing and Communities;

Brent Warren, Deputy Chief Executive Officer, Housing; Kim Charles, Acting Deputy Chief Executive Officer, Strategic and Enabling Services; Rachelle McMillan, Acting Chief Financial Officer; and Dwayne McInnes, General Manager, Housing Program Office, from the Department of Infrastructure, Planning and Logistics.

Madam CHAIR: Did you wish to make an opening statement?

Ms UIBO: Yes.

Our Labor government is firmly focused on investing in safe and secure housing to reduce overcrowding in remote communities and creating opportunities for regional economic development and sustainable local employment.

To enable this we have developed strong and sustainable governance structures which include partnerships with the Australian Government and the four Northern Territory land councils—Anindilyakwa, Tiwi, Northern and Central—as well as Aboriginal Housing Northern Territory.

Budget 2024–25 provides \$162m in operating funding to:

- manage a social public housing portfolio of 5,763 homes in remote Aboriginal communities, town camps and community living areas across the Northern Territory
- oversee new builds
- support waitlists and housing allocations through housing reference groups
- provide frontline tenancy management and support services.

We are delivering new homes through the HomeBuild program and renovating existing homes to increase bedroom and living space capacity through existing dwellings as part of our Room to Breathe program.

On 12 March 2024 the Northern Territory Labor government and the Australian Labor government announced a landmark joint \$4bn investment for housing for remote communities in the Northern Territory. The 10-year commitment will see up to 270 homes built each year, or up to 2,700 homes over the next 10 years, with the focus to halve overcrowding in the Northern Territory. The funding also includes continued support for repairs and maintenance for our existing homes.

This is in addition to our \$111.7m from the Australian federal government under the 2023–24 Northern Territory Remote Housing Federation Funding Agreement to jointly deliver 157 new homes in remote areas. I am proud to say that we have delivered on this commitment ahead of schedule.

There is \$100m over two years from the Australian Labor government to restore funding to the NT Homelands Program. The Homelands Housing and Infrastructure Program, which has been undertaken through the Joint Steering Committee for Remote Housing, has a \$40m per annum investment by the Australian Government for the next three years in homelands housing for essential infrastructure upgrades.

A partnership agreement will be established between the Australian Government, the Northern Territory Government, Aboriginal Housing NT—the peak Northern Territory body for Aboriginal housing—and the four Aboriginal land councils to support the delivery of this investment over the 10-year period.

We have a further million dollars over two years which is being provided by the Australian Government to Aboriginal Housing NT to support its role in this agreement and the delivery component.

It should also be noted that as a part of the 2024–25 federal budget, the Australian Government announced an additional \$20m to deliver 49 extra houses under the current 2023–24 Northern Territory Remote Housing Federation Funding Agreement. This will see over two hundred houses delivered in one year. This is a testament to the government's commitment to deliver housing in the areas that most need it.

This funding builds on the Australian and Northern Territory Governments' \$2.1bn investment in remote housing under the former National Partnership Agreement for Remote Housing NT which saw the completion of 1,950 bedrooms across remote communities in the Northern Territory.

The new 10-year agreement will be delivered under the 'Our Community. Our Future. Our Homes.' program. The remote housing program will be focused on delivering this across the 73 Aboriginal communities. We now have the opportunity to include homelands as part of that process.

The original \$1.1bn program is in its seventh year of the 10-year program. The remaining three years of the program will form part of the matching agreements recently announced as part of the \$4bn jointly funded 10-year program which will commence in July this year.

As of 31 March 2024 the joint government investment has resulted in 1,387 new homes being completed and 1,811 homes upgraded since 1 September 2016 when the Territory Labor government came power.

Through the remote property and tenancy management program, our government is making a difference in improving the lives of fellow Territorians in the bush. The 2024–25 budget totals \$161.6m. This includes the cost of tenancy management delivered by the Department of Territory Families, Housing and Communities and outsourced to Aboriginal organisations and jointly funded by the Northern Territory and Australian Governments; asset management costs; and maintaining remote dwellings managed by the Department of Infrastructure, Planning and Logistics. These services support our 5,763 remote public housing homes which are located across those 73 remote Aboriginal communities, 17 Alice Springs town camps and seven Tennant Creek community living areas.

The remote property and tenancy management program delivers social landlord responsibilities, including working with tenants to support management of their homes and providing information on house inspections and repairs and maintenance.

The \$2m per annum of our Healthy Homes program guides the investment into new approaches to housing that promote nine healthy living principles. It includes a partnership with a not-for-profit organisation, Healthabitat, to work with communities to improve health outcomes through improved conditions of housing.

Our Territory Labor government is delivering on our commitment to improve remote housing outcomes by developing Aboriginal business enterprises and creating sustainable long-term employment outcomes. Of the 55 contracts across both property and tenancy management in the Northern Territory, 41 of these contracts are with Aboriginal business enterprises.

Our colleague Hon Ngaree Ah Kit, the Minister for Urban Housing, is responsible for the successful Northern Territory Community Housing Growth Strategy 2022–32 which is building on a sustainable community housing industry across the Northern Territory and increasing social and affordable housing.

Our remote housing has not been forgotten. We are currently working alongside two of our Aboriginal housing providers with a plan to enter into agreements that we can transfer homes under management support that they can utilise for small-scale redevelopment opportunities. This is an exciting step forward in looking at self-determination and building the community-controlled sector of public housing and our Aboriginal housing providers.

Through local decision-making arrangements Territorians living in remote communities are increasingly having their voices heard and a genuine say about services and infrastructure they want to see in their communities. We remain committed to local decision-making and Closing the Gap commitments by providing appropriate affordable housing aligned with Aboriginal Territorians' priorities and aspirations.

My department is responsible for the establishment and operation of housing reference groups in our remote communities. There are currently 67 housing reference groups across the 73 communities. These groups provide recommendations to the department's regional offices about allocations of tenancies and other place-based matters and concerns that relate to the delivery of remote housing public services for remote Territorians.

These housing reference groups are also utilised by the Department of Infrastructure, Planning and Logistics to engage and consult with community residents in the planning of the future housing works, with HomeBuild NT and Room to Breathe programs in each of our communities.

The housing reference groups—or HRGs—are a key component of our government's strategy for reducing overcrowding in our remote communities and enabling tenants and residents of communities to have a say in decisions and actions that directly affect the wellbeing of their families.

Our Territory Labor government's investment in remote housing recognises the basic human right for people to have safe and secure housing, to reduce overcrowding in our remote communities across the Northern Territory and to support children and families to thrive on country and in community. We are creating employment opportunities and are continuing to support community-led decision-making through our processes.

Town camps and homelands are fundamental to Aboriginal Territorians' social, spiritual, health and cultural wellbeing. We are investing in repairs and maintenance to housing and improving the infrastructure across homelands in the Northern Territory.

We share responsibility for the delivery of the Australian Government's investment of the \$100m, which was provided over two years for the Homelands Housing and Infrastructure Program. There was \$25m in 2022–23 and a further \$75m in 2023–24 for housing and essential infrastructure needs for homelands—the first amount of money provided from the federal government since we came to government in 2016.

We have developed strong partnerships in this space and sustainable governance structures through the Joint Steering Committee for Remote Housing, which includes the four Aboriginal land councils, the Australian and Northern Territory Governments and Aboriginal Housing NT.

Our commitment to deliver the \$100m Homelands Housing and Infrastructure Program is well under way. All the current priority upgrades through that program have commenced.

This investment in homelands will be continued over the next three years between 2024 and 2027, with the Australian Government and the Northern Territory Government committing additional money to homelands.

The additional money from the Australian Government is \$120m to support housing and infrastructure upgrades on homelands, which is much needed and has been much called for over many years by our Territory Labor government and homeland residents.

Our investment in town camps and homelands infrastructure is an investment for Territorians and Territory businesses. We are investing \$129.4m in the 2024–25 budget to deliver programs that emphasise local decision-making, economic development and local employment opportunities across Territory town camps and homelands.

The homelands services program is delivering housing and municipal and essential services in 381 homelands and 18 non-leased town camps, and municipal services in 25 leased town camps and nine remote communities.

In July 2023 the Northern Territory Government introduced changes to the Homelands Grants Program, including consolidating and simplifying the number of grants being delivered by homelands service providers and improving the transparency of the program through public reporting on the Bushtel website. We are delivering critical frontline programs across homelands and town camps that emphasise local decision-making and connection to family, culture and country.

I will now speak about the government employee housing program, which supports the employment and retention of qualified and skilled staff in our regional and remote locations. The 2024–25 budget provides \$45.8m to manage our 1,862 government employee housing dwellings, which includes 1,403 government-owned dwellings and 459 private headlease dwellings.

Our Labor government is investing in increasing the number of staff in regional and remote locations to support the delivery of essential services, including by people who live in and have developed relationships within our remote and regional communities.

We have reformed our program with key areas, including establishing a centralised government employee housing management team who are based in the regions; ongoing cross-agency program governance and oversight; clear policy and operational guidelines to guide practice and program delivery, including support for local recruits; a sustainable rent collection model; and a program reporting and evaluation framework.

I am pleased to share that we have implemented a government employee housing rental concession for local recruits living in our remote public housing, which is a key pillar of our remote housing investment program. This program takes a flexible and equitable approach. From December 2023 local government recruits in remote areas can receive rental entitlements that are aligned with the current government employee housing entitlements.

In closing, our Territory Labor government's vision for every Territorian is to have a safe and affordable home that supports social and economic wellbeing and enables communities to thrive and to prosper. Significant progress has been made through the remote housing sector, and I applaud our partners for their combined effort in gaining some of the outcomes so far. I look forward to this continued progress across the Northern Territory.

I am happy to take questions.

Madam CHAIR: Are there any questions on the minister's statement?

Mr MALEY: Yes, there are.

Madam CHAIR: Are you the shadow, Member for Nelson?

Mr MALEY: Yes.

You mentioned in your opening statement having a safe and secure environment. Can you tell us what is the cost of crime on remote housing?

Ms UIBO: Yes, having safe and secure housing is pertinent to having a strong future. We believe the economic benefits as well as the social benefits of having safe and secure housing are invaluable.

The cost of crime is not acceptable, whether you are in a remote community, regional town centres or an urban community, but we will continue to do the work because we believe that no matter where you live in the Northern Territory you deserve safe and adequate housing.

Mr MALEY: What is the cost of crime on remote housing?

Ms UIBO: You will need to specify what you are asking for.

Madam CHAIR: Do you have a figure? Is it possibly in the repairs and maintenance breakdown?

Ms UIBO: Are you asking for the personal cost of crime or the property costs? You have not specified what you mean by 'crime'.

Mr MALEY: Let us start on the property costs of crime. What does it cost in relation to property repairs to damage in remote communities?

Ms UIBO: We do not specify in our reporting process the reason for repairs and maintenance around damage. We just have the budget for repairs and maintenance for damage, whether it is wear and tear or criminal damage.

Mr MALEY: If there is criminal damage to one of your properties, a house, do you report that to the police?

Ms UIBO: Yes.

Mr MALEY: How many times have you reported to police criminal damage to one of your properties in remote communities across the Territory?

Ms UIBO: We will take that question on notice.

Question on Notice No 3.9

Madam CHAIR: Member for Nelson, please restate the question for the record.

Mr MALEY: How many times have you reported to the police a criminal act on one of your properties?

Madam CHAIR: Minister, do you accept the question?

Ms UIBO: Yes.

Madam CHAIR: The question has been allocated the number 3.9.

Mr MALEY: What are you doing to reduce the cost of crime across remote housing in relation to property damage?

Ms UIBO: I will pass to Brent Warren, the Deputy Chief Executive Officer for Housing, to talk about some of the programs we are working on.

Mr WARREN: In relation to the work we do with tenants who are dealing with issues like damage, we have a tenancy team based in each of our regional offices that has direct contact with tenants. Their contact is in the form of things like programmed inspections and non-programmed visits. We work in conjunction with a number of not-for-profit organisations through what we call the tenancy support program.

We have a provider operating in most regions. In most cases we have tried to find an Aboriginal-controlled organisation to lead that work. They have a particular focus on what we call a living strong concept, which is helping people understand how to manage their tenancy, report damage and maintain the house well.

The last part is that we are increasing our level of reporting through those inspections of damage that we detect. We have rolled out a mobile inspection tool to help our staff do an online inspection form as they do periodic inspections. That allows us to streamline the reporting through to the repairs and maintenance system within the department of Infrastructure.

They are some of the ways that our staff are working directly with tenants.

Mr MALEY: You mentioned your tenancy team doing programmed visits and non-programmed visits. How many programmed visits have you done in the reporting period?

Ms UIBO: That would just be part of the general business of the housing teams. They go out to the communities regularly if they are regionally based and travelling out. If they are in a larger community they may have a housing officer in the community, so I would not be able to break that figure down.

Mr MALEY: If these people go out and do a visit, do they have any paperwork recording what they saw or an inspection report?

Ms UIBO: They do. We have a great story around that where we developed some digital reporting processes through an app on an iPad now. Whether you are in a community that has connectivity or patchy connectivity, our housing officers can report in real time. When they get to a place with reception, it can be uploaded to the system.

If you are in the Ngukurr community in my electorate, for example, you could upload. If you are travelling and out of range, once you were in range the upload would then occur. That upload can then be seen in the Big Rivers office based in Katherine.

Mr MALEY: How long has that digital program been up and running for?

Ms UIBO: Since the start of this financial year, so about 10 months.

Mr MALEY: How many reports into that system have happened?

Ms UIBO: That would be part of the normal reporting process, whether it is through that digital process or a written form that is entered back in.

Mr MALEY: That is what I am asking; how many reports have occurred?

Ms UIBO: That would happen daily. There would be hundreds of reports daily across all the regions of the Northern Territory. It is like asking how many times have you logged onto your phone this morning. It would be that kind of process.

Madam CHAIR: Maybe to help the member, would it be possible to get any further details or a breakdown of figures recorded?

Ms UIBO: We have the inspected dwellings rather than the amount of reporting, which may be helpful. The number of inspected dwellings is 2,446 in the year to date to 31 March.

Mr MALEY: Was that 2,000?

Ms UIBO: It is 2,446 for unique dwelling inspections.

Madam CHAIR: They might have been to a property twice, but it would only be counted once because it is unique.

Ms UIBO: Yes. That is an 11% increase from last year, so there is more of the reporting processes because more houses are being seen.

Mr MALEY: Out of the 2,446 dwellings that were inspected, how many were damaged?

Ms UIBO: We will have to take that on notice because it is part of a normal tenancy to get inspections, not necessarily around damage.

Question on Notice No 3.10

Madam CHAIR: Member for Nelson, please restate the question for the record.

Mr MALEY: Out of the 2,446 dwellings that were inspected, how many were damaged?

Madam CHAIR: Minister, do you accept the question?

Ms UIBO: Yes.

Madam CHAIR: The question has been allocated the number 3.10.

Mr MALEY: Of the houses that were inspected, how many were damaged by criminal behaviour?

Ms UIBO: As I explained earlier, we do not have the breakdown on damage; it is about what repairs and maintenance are required and fulfilling the safety aspect of repairing that. We do not break it down into how something is damaged.

Mr MALEY: Can you tell the committee how many houses are damaged in remote communities or homelands by criminal behaviour?

Ms UIBO: We can take that on notice.

Question on Notice No 3.11

Madam CHAIR: Member for Nelson, please restate the question for the record.

Mr MALEY: How many houses have been damaged by criminal behaviour?

Madam CHAIR: Minister, do you accept the question?

Ms UIBO: Yes.

Madam CHAIR: The question has been allocated the number 3.11.

Mr MALEY: What was the cost of the repair?

Ms UIBO: We will take that on notice.

Question on Notice No 3.12

Madam CHAIR: Member for Nelson, please restate the question for the record.

Mr MALEY: What was the cost of repair to the damage done by criminal behaviour on remote and homeland housing?

Madam CHAIR: Minister, do you accept the question?

Ms UIBO: Yes.

Madam CHAIR: The question has been allocated the number 3.12.

Mr MALEY: Has there been an increase in repairs and maintenance of remote housing over the last reporting period?

Ms UIBO: I will pass to Mr Dwayne McInnes from DIPL to speak to the dollars.

Mr MCINNES: There has been a budgetary increase in the levels of repairs and maintenance over the last couple of years for remote public housing. The current year allows \$41m of which we have spent \$32m. There has been a programmed increase for next year and that will go to \$44.3m. The year before there was an increase because of the activities that had occurred in Wadeye at the time, which we talked about at the last Estimates. In terms of providing additional budget for remote housing there has been an increase.

Mr MALEY: Did you say that \$32m was spent and now it will be \$44m?

Mr MCINNES: There was \$32m spent as at the end of March. The budget provision is \$41m and we expect that to be fully spent by the end of the year. There is a lot of commitment under way. Next year for remote housing repairs and maintenance there has been a budget increase.

Mr MALEY: What is the budget increase for next year?

Mr MCINNES: It is to \$44.3m. In addition to that we provide a minor new works component that forms part of the Room to Breathe program and a minor new works program that goes to improving remote public housing.

Mr MALEY: To confirm, you expect to spend the full \$41m on repairs and maintenance this financial year, and next financial year you are proposing to increase that to \$44m. Can you give a breakdown of the \$41m which is expected to be spent this year? Is it general wear and tear or is it criminal damage?

Ms UIBO: You are asking for this reporting period we are currently in. Obviously I do not want to hypothesise and give the committee something plucked out of the air ...

Mr MALEY: It is about the \$32m that has already been spent.

Madam CHAIR: Member for Nelson, let the minister respond and then you can follow-up.

Mr MALEY: I was clarifying that it is about the \$32m that has already been spent.

Ms UIBO: You have asked the question about specific areas such as damage and how that relates to the R&M budget. We have taken those on notice for you.

Mr MALEY: Can you tell the committee how much of the \$32m that has already been spent is for criminal damage or just general wear and tear?

Ms UIBO: I believe that is why you asked the previous two questions which we have taken on notice.

Mr MALEY: Have you recovered any money at all this financial year for criminal damage to any of your properties from the perpetrator? Has there been any cost recovery at all?

Ms UIBO: I am of the understanding not at this stage.

Mr MALEY: Why not?

Mr WARREN: We have figures from our repairs and maintenance program that explain what has been expended. Within those figures there is a need for a discretionary decision about the cause of the repairs and maintenance. There can often be situations where it is not clear how the damage occurred. There can be situations where the tenant has explicitly reported to police. Because of all those discretionary decisions along the way, we will need to take on notice and manually do some manipulation to understand what proportion has been allocated to repairs under each of those headings.

Mr MALEY: I am not talking about repairs; I am talking about cost recovery. Are you saying that you have not recovered any costs because it is a discretion used by the department?

Mr WARREN: I beg your pardon, Member for Nelson. We have the capacity to recover damages directly from tenants. We have ...

Mr MALEY: No, not from tenants; this is from criminal behaviour. Say you are living in your house and someone breaks in and damages your property and then you have to get it repaired—fair enough; it is your property because you own it and you are the landlord, essentially. How much money have you recovered from criminal behaviour, so people who have broken into a house, destroyed it or whatever it might be? The answer was nil, so why not?

Madam CHAIR: Did you want to clarify whether it is from tenants or non-tenants?

Mr MALEY: No, criminal damage.

Madam CHAIR: Yes, but is it from tenants or non-tenants?

Mr MALEY: If a person rents a house and criminally damages the property they become the defendant, I guess. It does not really matter. If it is damage done by a criminal or by criminal behaviour, you said that you have not recovered any of that cost yet. You spent \$32m on repairs and maintenance. We do not know how much. That is already taken on notice.

Let us say there is definitely some in that \$32m because not many people damage their own home; their homes are damaged generally because of criminal behaviour, like in Port Keats—Wadeye. People did not damage their own homes there. There were \$11m-odd spent on repairing homes damaged by other people.

How much of that money has been recovered? You said none. The reason it has not been is that there has been a decision made internally not to chase that money; is that correct? Is that what I am hearing?

Ms UIBO: As a point of clarification, we are saying that some of the specifics of your question rely on the response from police to determine whether something has been damaged criminally. We cannot determine that from our department. Our focus is on making sure our houses are safe for our tenants. If there is a criminal investigation and a process through police, then we are informed by police of the cause of the damage. If it has been from a tenant or a non-tenant that is something that comes from whatever the police have through an investigation. If there is criminal damage and prosecution involved, that is not our business. Our business is making sure that repairs and maintenance are done.

Mr MALEY: I get that. What I want clarification on is you said that you have not recovered any money at all. Why have you not taken steps to recover money? I am hearing it is because of a discretionary decision made internally. Is that correct—yes or no?

Mr WARREN: The clarification is that when damage is caused by someone who is from outside of the home—an offender causes a crime at the house—that is a matter for the police to investigate and lay charges. If the person is charged with damaging one of our properties our position is that we tell the police we would like to seek recovery of costs. That occurs through the criminal court process.

In my recent experience over the last 12 months we have notified the police on a number of occasions that we would like to pursue costs if an offender is identified and ...

Mr MALEY: How many times?

Mr WARREN: To the best of my knowledge there has only been a couple of times, but I will take the exact number on notice. In the ones that I can recall we have requested costs, and it is a matter for the court

whether they make an order of cost and that will depend on the offender's personal situation. That is the process and the external part of the pathway to cost recovery.

Mr MALEY: Can we take on notice how many times that you have sought cost recovery from the court?

Ms UIBO: Yes.

Question on Notice No 3.13

Madam CHAIR: Member for Nelson, please restate the question for the record.

Mr MALEY: How many times have you sought to recover costs from the courts in relation to criminal damage to one of your properties, within the reporting period?

Madam CHAIR: Minister, do you accept the question?

Ms UIBO: Yes.

Madam CHAIR: The question has been allocated the number 3.13.

Mr MALEY: Have there been any delays in building new homes due to crime?

Ms UIBO: Yes, there have been in certain circumstances. I will pass to Mr Dwayne McInnes, the general manager for our housing program, to give specific details.

We deal with delays of all kinds, not just about criminal damage or behaviour. We have had some severe weather events which have also delayed ...

Mr MALEY: Just focus on crime.

Ms UIBO: I am letting you know it is not all doom and gloom when talking about delays in housing.

Mr MALEY: I just want delays being caused by crime. You do not need to worry about weather events, just delays caused by crime.

Ms UIBO: I understand.

Mr MCINNES: There have been some instances over the last 12 months where work has been delayed because of criminal behaviour. There are a couple of communities and I can get those details for you. The extent of the delays have not been significant to halt the housing program as such. The delivery has been above expectations for the current year. There have been instances where crime has delayed either land servicing works or new build works.

Mr MALEY: Can you give us an idea of how long those delays were?

Ms UIBO: We will take that on notice.

Question on Notice No 3.14

Madam CHAIR: Member for Nelson, please restate the question for the record.

Mr MALEY: How long were the delays in new builds relating to crime?

Madam CHAIR: Minister, do you accept the question?

Ms UIBO: Yes.

Madam CHAIR: The question has been allocated the number 3.14.

Mrs LAMBLEY: In your opening statement you talked about repairs and maintenance on town camps. In Alice Springs the Tangentyere Council has the repairs and maintenance contract for all the town camps. They also have a local decision-making agreement with your government.

Approximately eight or 10 years ago Tangentyere Council lost their repairs and maintenance contract because they were not delivering for residents. There is an ongoing problem in Alice Springs whereby people feel that the state of the Alice Springs town camps does not meet a standard that is generally acceptable to most people.

Given that Tangentyere Council has a local decision-making agreement—you said earlier that it is about the transferring of that Northern Territory Government responsibility to, in this case, Tangentyere Council—and given that they have a history of not properly or fully delivering services, how do you deal with this situation? In the event that the government is not satisfied with the delivery of the repairs and maintenance contract for Alice Springs town camps, can you take the contract away from Tangentyere Council?

Just because an organisation has a local decision-making agreement with you, does it automatically apply that all procurement possibilities around the town camps go straight to Tangentyere Council? There are all sorts of ethical and integrity and possibly—there are a lot of questions about how it should function between government and a non-government organisation. There are a lot of questions, but it is a point of great curiosity in Alice Springs.

Ms UIBO: For clarification, the value-for-money and contracting processes still exist even with a local decision-making agreement in any circumstances. Even within a local decision-making agreement, a contract still needs to be managed, whether it is through a particular service provider or a select tender process. The procurement processes exist and are still maintained.

To alleviate your thinking in regard to the uncertainty of that, it still stays in place so that legal protection and the financial management attached to those contracts still remain in place. It is not like the money goes across, that is it and the hands are wiped clean of government. There are processes that we maintain, particularly through a local decision-making agreement where there are regular follow-ups through an implementation plan where it is a six to eight-week process of continued follow-ups through a regional coordination group about that local decision-making agreement and if it includes repairs and maintenance and housing, as in this instance for the particular question you are asking.

The process regarding contract management is between Housing and Infrastructure. The Department of Infrastructure, Planning and Logistics does that procurement process; basically, Housing is the customer. Procurement is run through the Department of Infrastructure, Planning and Logistics, and the processes are legally structured around the contract.

Mr WARREN: In relation to the Tangentyere town camps, the LDM is in place with Tangentyere Council Aboriginal Corporation, who have an alliance with Tangentyere Constructions, which is their independent building organisation, and Community Housing Central Australia, which is their supported community housing provider.

One of the things for us with the LDM arrangement and management of the town camps is there is shared responsibility. We have some contracts and agreements with Community Housing Central Australia which relate to inspections and tenancy services and tenancy support. The department of Infrastructure has a direct relationship with Tangentyere Constructions. We have another more generic relationship with Tangentyere Council Aboriginal Corporation in relation to some of the social supports that they provide, not just for tenants in town camps but across the whole of Alice Springs social housing.

There are a couple of aspects, and we have contract or grant management meetings in relation to each of those agreements. Where there is dissatisfaction or poor performance, it is raised and noted. We are trying to work with them to succeed. We want to call it early and figure out where they have gaps so that we can help them lift.

Mr MCINNES: Just to add to what Brent was saying, without being specific, the contract performance process is live throughout the contract. If a contractor is not performing that is taken into account in future contract assessments. If there is a performance issue and it is not addressed during the life of the contract, once the next contract comes up that is a key factor for consideration.

Mrs LAMBLEY: People do not understand how in the case of Tangentyere Council—does them having a local decision-making agreement automatically mean that they always have the repairs and management contract for the town camps? Is that part of the deal?

Ms UIBO: Whilst it is part of the agreement, it still has to maintain the quality of service, the contract obligations and the value for money. They still have to hit those key elements as a provider. The regular meetings are to make sure they are staying on top of and are meeting their obligations and are financially and legally meeting the responsibilities of the contract. If there was a case of a contract being pulled that would happen because those two things are not being met.

Mrs LAMBLEY: That contract could be pulled, like it was from Tangentyere about 10 years ago, if they do not perform to the required standards in the contract?

Ms UIBO: In any case, yes. In any local decision-making agreement or a service provision handover, yes, that could still happen.

Madam CHAIR: Member for Araluen, you made a point about a sense that it is not being maintained presently. Do you want to articulate on that further?

Mrs LAMBLEY: The minister probably knows about the concerns held by some in the community. I only have one town camp in my electorate. I visit every four to eight weeks. I drive around and have a look. Sometimes it looks okay and sometimes it looks bloody terrible. It is concerning for me and I have only one town camp and I live in a small community. I keep an eye on others, as do many other people. It is a source of concern.

Are you keeping an eye on what is going on within our town camps in Alice Springs in terms of fulfilling the contractual obligations held by Tangentyere?

Ms UIBO: Yes, we are. I definitely note your concerns within your electorate. One of the key aspects of the process with the handover and transition of services is also providing Tangentyere the ability to work with town camp residents regarding visitors, so having a visitor policy. If a town camp has a specific process or way it would like to manage visitors—Alice Springs is a hub for Central Australia, as you know being a resident—being able to put in processes that relate specifically to the residents of that Alice Springs town camp in visitor management is another aspect of how the Territory government is aiming to support an organisation like Tangentyere.

We have seen visitor management in some other parts of the Northern Territory. There are family obligations with a lot of different families across the Northern Territory.

How we support town camp residents to thrive, but also have the ability to manage visitors—family or non-family visitors—in the camp and provide the ability to have a visitor management process that is driven by the town camp residents is part of the learning process for us. How we support an organisation like Tangentyere is something we are continuing to work on—our ability to support that service delivery. That is just one aspect of what a town camp may look like physically, as well as operationally, what the other services are that we can support it with, like the wi-fi that happened recently, and that sort of thing in terms of access and service delivery.

Mrs LAMBLEY: I came to Alice Springs over 30 years ago. Part of my first job was working on the town camps. I hate to say it, but nothing much has changed on the town camps in 30 years. I say that for most of them. Some of them are better than others. The problem of visitors coming into town camps and causing chaos in the lives of residents has not changed. I hope you are aware that there has not been a lot of movement in that space for a very long time. It is a source of great sadness and frustration for people like me who have watched it and worked with people in town camps over the years.

Are you aware that there has not been a lot of change?

Ms UIBO: I understand your concerns. It has been a big journey, particularly in the last couple of years, under the Labor government that has seen up to 70 new homes. These are not tin shanty sheds. People are not living in some of the horrible conditions they were a couple of years ago. All of the new houses that are being built in the 17 town camps across Alice Springs are all built to code. They all have energy efficiency ratings. There has been a huge change in the condition and standards of housing. From memory, about 70 new homes have been built across the 17 town camps. It is a journey and we will continue that journey as a Labor government.

Improving living conditions has been a huge change that will also impact the social determinants and wellbeing for Alice Springs town camp residents. You have a long history and connection to the town camps. Hopefully, you will start to see some more of that change because we have houses that people can live in with dignity now rather than tin sheds.

I will pass to Dwayne McInnes, who has the exact number of new homes that have been built in the Alice Springs town camps under the Labor government.

Mr MCINNES: There are 79 new homes that have been built across multiple town camps and delivered by multiple contractors.

Mrs LAMBLEY: Is that in the last eight years?

Mr MCINNES: In the last two-and-a-bit years.

Mrs LAMBLEY: The roads have always been pretty bad in a lot of the town camps. I remember last year the budget that your government allocated was less than \$100,000 for the Alice Springs town camps' roads. What is the current budget for doing up roads on town camps?

Ms UIBO: I will pass to Mr Brent Warren in regard to the coordination and collaboration for the town camps' roads. He has more detail.

Mr WARREN: In relation to roads infrastructure in town camps and, to be honest, across the public spaces in town camps it is a complicated area because there are multiple responsibilities and fundings going on.

We were touching before on the level of service into town camps. It is important to note that whilst Tangentyere has its leadership role there is a role for the Alice Springs Town Council as well, which we provide some funding for things such as rubbish collection.

In relation to roads, the primary way that is dealt with inside the town camp perimeter is through the municipal and essential services funding that my department provides to Tangentyere. It is one of several pockets of funding that we are combining so that we can create this whole developed local decision-making, whole-of-town camp situation. We provide funding for them to manage the basic level of road service there.

Mrs LAMBLEY: What is the funding for the Alice Springs town camps' roads for this year?

Ms UIBO: We will take that on notice, but we think we might be able to answer it shortly.

Question on Notice No 3.15

Madam CHAIR: Member for Araluen, please restate the question for the record.

Mrs LAMBLEY: What is the funding allocation for the Alice Springs town camps' roads for this year?

Madam CHAIR: Minister, do you accept the question?

Ms UIBO: Yes.

Madam CHAIR: The question has been allocated the number 3.15.

Madam CHAIR: That concludes questions on the minister's opening statement.

OUTPUT GROUP 3.0 – HOUSING Output 3.3 – Remote Housing

Madam CHAIR: The committee will now move onto Output Group 3.0, Housing. Outputs 3.1 and 3.2 are the responsibility of another minister. We will now consider Output 3.3, Remote Housing. Are there any questions?

Mr MALEY: On 14 December you had a day trip from Ngukurr to Katherine for the purpose of stakeholder engagement and other portfolios related to housing. The total cost was \$10,230. Can you provide a breakdown of that cost?

Ms UIBO: Was that on 14 December 2023?

Mr MALEY: Yes.

Ms UIBO: Was it from Katherine to Ngukurr?

Mr MALEY: It was to Ngukurr from Katherine.

Ms UIBO: I will take that question on notice. Did you want a breakdown of the \$10,000?

Mr MALEY: Also, who was on that flight?

Ms UIBO: Off the top of my head, it would probably be air costs, but we will provide that in detail.

Question on Notice No 3.16

Madam CHAIR: Member for Nelson, please restate the question for the record.

Mr MALEY: Can you provide a breakdown of the cost of \$10,230 for the flight you took on 14 December to Ngukurr from Katherine?

Madam CHAIR: Minister, do you accept the question?

Ms UIBO: Yes.

Madam CHAIR: The question has been allocated the number 3.16.

Mr MALEY: Who travelled on that flight?

Ms UIBO: I thought you were going to put it all in one question.

Mr MALEY: You do not have to take that on notice, as you were on the plane.

Ms UIBO: I will take that on notice because I want to give you the correct information.

Mr MALEY: Do you not know?

Ms UIBO: I will take it on notice because I do a lot of travel as I am a bush member and a minister. I want to provide you with the correct information and not off the top of my head.

Question on Notice No 3.17

Madam CHAIR: Member for Nelson, please restate the question for the record.

Mr MALEY: Can you advise who travelled on the flight with you on 14 December to Ngukurr from Katherine?

Madam CHAIR: Minister, do you accept the question?

Ms UIBO: Yes.

Madam CHAIR: The question has been allocated the number 3.17.

Mr MALEY: In relation to remote housing, has anyone been evicted in this reporting period?

Ms UIBO: The answer is no. There have been transfers and changes with residents—public housing tenants—which also creates movement across different remote housing dwellings. That could be within a community or a transfer to another community.

Mr MALEY: Out of the 5,763 public homes in remote communities, no-one has been evicted in the last reporting year?

Ms UIBO: No.

Mr MALEY: Has there been outstanding rent in relation to those properties?

Ms UIBO: Of the 5,763 homes?

Mr MALEY: I will withdraw that question, as I have more questions on rent.

In 2020 you said that the Labor government had completed 10 two-bedroom government housing units in Elliott. How many two-bedroom units in Elliott are sitting vacant today? As part of that question, out of the 10 how many were completed?

Ms UIBO: You are probably asking on behalf of the Member for Barkly, but can you clarify whether you are talking about government employee housing or community housing?

Mr MALEY: Government employee housing. In July 2020 the Labor government said that once it had completed 10 two-bedroom government employee housing units in Elliott, it would free up an opportunity to recruit locally. There would be two Territory Families staff located in the GEH units. Government staff currently living in Territory Housing properties would be moved to the government employee housing properties, which would free up Territory Housing properties for locals.

How many of the 10 two-bedroom units were completed? How many people have moved into government employee housing to free up the Territory Housing properties for locals who are waiting for homes?

Ms UIBO: We have 26 government employee housing dwellings and assets in the Elliott community. We will have to check which ones are currently occupied through our department to see which other agencies have a lease for their staff in that community.

Mr MALEY: There are 26 government employee houses. Were all 10 two-bedroom units completed?

Ms UIBO: Yes.

Mr MALEY: Are any of the two-bedroom units sitting vacant?

Ms UIBO: We can take that on notice. Do you mean of the 10 new units?

Mr MALEY: Yes.

Question on Notice No 3.18

Madam CHAIR: Member for Nelson, please restate the question for the record.

Mr MALEY: How many of the two-bedroom units in Elliott are sitting vacant since they were completed, and how many Territory Housing properties have been freed up and allocated to locals?

Madam CHAIR: Minister, do you accept the question?

Ms UIBO: Yes.

Madam CHAIR: The question has been allocated the number 3.18.

Mr MALEY: How much funding has been committed to the upgrading of roads in town camps and the surrounding homelands in and around Borroloola?

Ms UIBO: I talk regularly to the Member for Barkly about this question. We have an update on a working group that we established specifically for the Borroloola town camps, which includes discussion on road access and the improvements for road access for the town camps in Borroloola.

Mr MCINNES: In terms of the current commitment for roads in Borroloola, as mentioned last Estimates, there was \$1.2m dedicated specifically for Garawa 2. There has been ongoing discussion. The Roper Gulf Regional Council has established the Borroloola town camp roads steering committee to focus on the upgrading of the roads in the four town camps. My understanding is that there was a meeting planned in early April, but it was postponed due to Tropical Cyclone Megan. However, on 9 and 10 May the Department of Infrastructure, Planning and Logistics undertook a visual inspection of the road networks in each of the town camps. Based on those site inspections we are now preparing a scope of works for future design to achieve the NT subdivision guidelines standard.

Mr MALEY: How long have the talks been happening about the road development?

Mr MCINNES: I would have to get more detail on that. The commitment was that once the housing program was finished we would progress the discussion on those roads.

Mr MALEY: Has the housing program finished now?

Mr MCINNES: It has.

Mr MALEY: When did it finish?

Mr MCINNES: I cannot tell you when the last house was finalised off the top of my head, but I can get that information.

Mr MALEY: How long has the program been going for?

Mr MCINNES: The program in Borroloola has been going for some time ...

Mr MALEY: Can you explain 'some time'?

Mr MCINNES: There has been a history of round negotiations around land tenure with the Borroloola community. That was protracted. It was not until—I cannot remember the year off the top of my head. Once we agreed about the scope of works in the Borroloola town camps those works were progressed. We spent \$45m to construct 39 new or replacement homes and upgraded 51 existing homes. Those works were completed in 2022.

Mr MALEY: The work was completed in ...

Mr MCINNES: The majority of the work was in November 2022. February 2024 was when it was finally finished.

Mr MALEY: In 2022 the majority of the houses were finished. Over the last two years there has been discussion about the roads, but nothing has happened yet; is that correct?

Mr MCINNES: That is correct.

Mr MALEY: Why has it taken two years to discuss what has happened with the roads and there has been no action?

Ms UIBO: There has been a bit of time on that because of the land tenure, as Mr McInnes has stated in his previous response to you. There are sections of the road, as I understand—the Member for Barkly knows this well because we speak about it quite regularly—which have different land tenure responsibilities. Therefore, the working group was established. I believe there are six different organisations, including the NT Government and the federal government. The Northern Land Council is part of that working group, amongst others, to ensure that everyone who is responsible for every piece of land/road reserve as well as the actual road has responsibility for and wherever the funding comes from—we have all the multiple entities involved, so we can get that road sorted.

The funding, as we mentioned already in the response, is collated in a way that we can get the best outcome possible for that road and the road reserves around the land tenure and the fixing of that road. Everyone who is responsible is part of that working group.

Mr MALEY: The next question is in relation to the remote housing work plan you touched on in your opening statement. You said that 157 new homes were built. In the last 12 months 157 new homes were built under that program and they are all completed. I think you said that they were completed ahead of schedule. Can you give me an update and expand on that?

Ms UIBO: This is a great story; I am happy that you are asking about good stories. I will pass to Mr McInnes to talk about the infrastructure side of that program.

Mr MCINNES: In terms of the 157 homes, that is under a one-year agreement with the Commonwealth. While a longer-term agreement was negotiated and has been recently announced, the 157 homes were completed in April this year. In terms of total construction this year, at the end of May we have completed 289 homes ...

Mr MALEY: Is that brand-new homes?

Mr MCINNES: Brand-new homes, yes.

Mr MALEY: Is that across the Territory?

Mr MCINNES: It is across the Territory. There are 289 new homes.

Because of the progress of the 157 we had conversations with the Commonwealth about potentially increasing the funding for the current year and increasing the number of homes to be completed. As per the Commonwealth budget announcement, it has provided an additional \$20m to supplement additional construction. We have agreed on 206 homes to be completed by the end of the financial year, so an extra 46 on top of the 157. We are well on track to achieve that.

Mr MALEY: Can you please tell us what the current outstanding rent is in remote and homelands communities?

Ms UIBO: The figure I have in the reporting period to date is \$10m of debt has accumulated.

Mr MALEY: To confirm, that \$10m is from 1 July last year to 31 March this year.

Ms UIBO: Yes.

Mr MALEY: What steps have been taken to recover that outstanding rent of \$10m?

Ms UIBO: With the changes to the Remote Rent Framework that were brought into effect in February 2023 we included a safety net which was to ensure that any foreseen, expected or possible rent stress for remote public housing tenants was addressed. It is a 25% safety net to address any concerns that tenants had about being able to adjust to the Remote Rent Framework.

I will pass to Mr Brent Warren to explain some of the mechanics and operational work that is being done by Housing to support tenants.

Mr WARREN: In relation to working with tenants who have rent arrears there are a couple of components to our response.

One of them is we have a reporting system that allows us to see quickly if they have missed a payment to us or made contact with the Department of Social Services, the Australian Government department, to make changes to their automated payments. One of the key challenges for us is people adjusting their payments unilaterally. That reporting allows our staff to make contact directly with the tenants and correct the changes if they have made them incorrectly.

When we identify a family who actually does not have the capacity to pay—because often these vulnerable remote families are dealing with financial stress—we have the safety net which allows us to move them off the standard rent rate onto a reduced rate to avoid them accumulating more debt.

The last part is when a tenant has accumulated a debt we have a payment program where we can sign people up on an agreement to pay. That is a legal agreement which sits next to their lease. It is a second payment that they make to the department. The challenge with these families is that, generally speaking, the amount they have available to make a repayment is very small, so we are sometimes talking about \$5 a week or \$5 a fortnight to make their repayments.

There are tools in place and we are using them. The main challenge for us is finding the right settings for a family who might not have much financial means.

Mr MALEY: Was any outstanding rent written off this financial year? Has the debt from last year moved into this year, and was any written off before it moved to \$10m over nine months?

Ms UIBO: No, nothing has been removed.

Mr MALEY: Nothing has been removed and there is \$10m, which is just over \$100,000 a month, of outstanding rent.

Ms UIBO: Across the 5,700-plus properties that we manage.

Mr MALEY: You said ‘unilaterally make decisions’ about cutting their payments. Can you explain what that means?

Ms UIBO: I will pass to Ms Emma White for the operational detail on that.

Ms WHITE: In terms of that unilateral decision the only person who can change their payment arrangements with Centrelink is the individual themselves. The Northern Territory Government, our department and other organisations cannot step in with that process. A tenant can put themselves on an arrangement one day and go back and change it the next. We have set up an alert so that we at least now know that it has occurred, but we do not actually have a way to intervene.

Mr MALEY: When did that alert get set up?

Ms WHITE: The alert has come in during this last reporting period. Brent may know the actual date.

Mr WARREN: The reporting system has been in place for a little while. What we have been doing is making the reports available more widely to our frontline staff so that they can check, monitor and respond. Also we are monitoring that at a central level at our senior executive level so that we can see the level of change. We have seen, through concerted pressure working with DSS and working with tenants, that the number has been on a slow decline. We are seeing fewer tenants do that as we have more contact with tenants.

Mr MALEY: Is there any chance you can set up an irrevocable authority so that they cannot revoke it?

Ms UIBO: We put that to the Commonwealth and the answer was no.

Mr MALEY: You said earlier that no-one has been evicted. I can assume that no-one has been evicted because they have not paid their rent.

Ms UIBO: That assumption is correct. NT Housing is the provider of last resort, particularly in remote communities, for people to access public housing.

Mr GUYULA: There are some significant issues about housing design in public housing. We continue to see hot besser brick designs with very little covered outdoor space being built in our communities. We also see new subdivisions like the one in Yirrkala where the houses are far too close together. These kinds of design flaws can create significant ongoing problems in the future, including community conflict.

The answer to Written Question 588 states:

Consultation continues to occur with the community around the ongoing construction of new housing ... through the Housing Reference Group.

Is this really happening? All we are seeing is the same besser block design that has been happening for the past 15 years. When will this design be reviewed and properly consulted upon? If real consultation is happening, why do we see the same design in every community across the NT?

Ms UIBO: This comes up quite a lot as I travel around the Northern Territory. We have never seen this number of houses built under any government. That is one great story.

Housing design is something that our attention has very much been drawn to while listening to concerns and ideas around how design could lead to some of those significant social and emotional wellbeing outcomes that we believe that good adequate housing delivers across all our communities.

Some of the work has been led through the Joint Steering Committee for Remote Housing, particularly from aspects of Aboriginal Housing NT, as the peak Aboriginal housing body, and the four Aboriginal land councils.

We are going through a process with the Fulcrum review, which is around architectural design for construction and some of the places we are building. You have a lot of coastal communities in your electorate, Member for Mulka, as do I in the Arnhem electorate. It is about looking at design, the materials and what is the best value for dollar as well as the designs that can lead to energy efficiency.

Some of our construction industry really turned around the narrative in improvements in energy efficiency. Some of our really hot climates are facing climate change with up to 40-plus degrees in some communities in the summer season or when it is the Build-Up. How do we make sure that those new houses have the standard national energy efficiency rating and have natural cooling, or provisions for warming in places like Central Australia and places that get to freezing levels?

The conversation about design will now start to shift even more with the 10-year program on remote housing and homelands investment. It is my expectation and aspiration that through the 10-year journey, with the certainty of the \$4bn funding from Territory Labor and federal Labor, we will get the opportunity to create more options around culturally appropriate design and energy and climate change appropriate design. We are starting to see a lot more of a shift in thinking from that.

In the finishing outgoing five-year agreement, with the remote housing and homelands we did not have the ability to look at change of design. We basically had to hit a milestone; if we did not, we did not get the money from the federal government.

This shift is giving us a bit more flexibility and agility to change the design of housing in the next few years. I hope in the next couple of years and in the long term that we have better designed and more climate appropriate houses and improved energy efficiency of houses. In coastal communities with rusting, what materials are used and the supply chain relates to what can be built in a coastal community versus somewhere in Central Australia. What are the building materials and the appropriate designs to provide the stability of housing and natural cooling or natural heating, depending on what materials are used.

Mr GUYULA: I have more to ask, but I remind people—in case you did not hear me say it—when I am asking a question and I look away I am not ignoring you. That is my respect. I can hear and listen, unless we are in dispute or something like that.

Do the current housing designs have hot water for washing machine outlets? This has been a significant problem for families trying to get rid of scabies which can lead to infection and rheumatic heart disease.

Ms UIBO: My understanding is yes, and I will pass to Mr Dwayne McInnes to confirm our response.

Mr MCINNES: The current designs provide for hot water for washing machines. There was an instance a while ago where hot water was not being provided, but that has been reversed and all designs now include hot water for washing machines.

Mr GUYULA: The answer to Written Question 588 states that the rate of overcrowding in Yirrkala in 2023 was 49%. How is this rate measured? What percentage of homes are overcrowded in Yirrkala currently?

Ms UIBO: There are 40 new houses and 34 have been delivered so far in that community. That is a great story for Yirrkala and the families there. I will pass to Mr Dwayne McInnes regarding the percentage for the community.

Mr MCINNES: In terms of Yirrkala, when the program began we had a baseline number of homes at 87. That has increased to 119 homes. The starting number of overcrowded homes was 56.9. We are now down to 52.3. There are a few more homes to be completed as part of our current program.

There is a commitment to halve the level of overcrowding across all remote communities by the end of the 10-year agreement. By then we expect the overcrowding rate to be about 27% across the Territory.

Ms UIBO: Member for Mulka, Ms Emma White also has an answer in response to your question about how overcrowding is determined. We will give you the formula.

Ms WHITE: The criteria for defining whether a house is appropriate or not in terms of occupancy was based on a Canadian National Occupancy Standard housing research piece. It is a model that was built and designed to incorporate household size, the different demographic composition of the household, the community and the remoteness. This is a consistent study with what the ABS uses and also the Closing the Gap reporting requirements or measures.

Ms UIBO: Mr Warren has the last piece of the response to your important question.

Mr WARREN: The last bit relating to the overcrowding figures that Dwayne mentioned is that we have also been capturing an increase in the number of tenants who live in houses. At the start of the program we had 348 tenants recorded. We now have 523. We are building new homes but not for a static population. We are seeing new people coming to town and we are also capturing people in our system who previously were not recorded. That is a good thing for our program.

Answer to Question on Notice No 3.15

Ms UIBO: The answer that has been provided with the support of the Department of Infrastructure, Planning and Logistics is that in 2023–24 the department is providing Tangentyere Council Aboriginal Corporation with \$1,704,072 to deliver municipal and essential services to Alice Springs town camps. Services include management of common areas, repairs and maintenance to water and power infrastructure and maintenance of internal roads.

Mr GUYULA: Could you please provide the overcrowding data for Galiwinku, Milingimbi, Ramingining and Gapuwiyak? Do you have this data for homeland communities as well? Can you provide it for any homelands in the Mulka electorate?

Ms UIBO: We have the data regarding overcrowding for the communities. We do not have it for homelands.

While we are getting the individual datasets for those four communities, we hope that through the Joint Steering Committee for Remote Housing, with the 10-year joint investment and the collaboration with Aboriginal Housing NT, the four Aboriginal land councils, the federal government and the Northern Territory Government, we will start to see more information and data to inform housing. This will not be just about repairs and maintenance for our homelands, but the ability to focus on new infrastructure, in particular housing infrastructure, for our homelands through this investment package.

We do not have the data on homelands numbers, but we know that homeland and remote community populations are growing and that we have an ageing population on homelands. We also do not have data to support that and the housing planning and future housing infrastructure needed for our homelands. That is what we hope and envisage that the 10-year investment will allow us to do in that partnership sense.

Mr WARREN: I will read through the overcrowding data from the start of the program to now for each of the four communities you mentioned. In Ramingining at the start of the program overcrowding was 82.4% and that has declined to 77.9%; for Galiwinku it was 75% and has declined to 70%; for Gapuwiyak it was 72.9% and has increased to 79.1%; and for Milingimbi it was 89.7% and it has declined to 80%.

Mr MALEY: If someone builds a property on homelands, not on a community, who owns that property?

Ms UIBO: We do not build homes on homelands. That is what the Joint Steering Committee for Remote Housing will look to do with the Aboriginal land councils. Aboriginal land is looked after by the land councils, so new investment on homelands cannot happen without the land councils. They represent traditional owners and that is the statutory authority provided through the Commonwealth.

Mr MALEY: Have you built any property on homelands or outstations?

Ms UIBO: Not through any of this money. It could be land council or land trust.

Mr MALEY: I have a question in relation to someone being evicted. Have you had any complaints about antisocial behaviour in remote communities or homelands?

Mr WARREN: The more likely scenario is where tenants have been complaining about family conflicts between different groupings in the community. Through our housing reference group process we sometimes are asked to facilitate things, such as making sure the next allocation of a house is the right family grouping for that area to minimise the conflict between families.

Another example we have seen is more about unrest occurring where some families have felt like they have been affected by the behaviours of external people coming into the community. We do not necessarily get the same kind of noise complaints between neighbours that you might see in town. It is not the same dynamic.

Mr MALEY: We were talking about Alice Springs town camps where other people are just outside the fence. Have you had complaints from those people about antisocial behaviour in remote homelands or town camp?

Ms UIBO: We cannot answer that on the spot here, but we can take that question on notice.

Question on Notice No 3.19

Madam CHAIR: Member for Nelson, please restate the question for the record.

Mr MALEY: How many complaints have you had in relation to antisocial behaviour from properties in remote communities or town camps?

Madam CHAIR: Minister, do you accept the question?

Ms UIBO: Yes.

Madam CHAIR: The question has been allocated the number 3.19.

Mr MALEY: Has anyone ever been evicted for antisocial behaviour in a town camp or on homelands or in a remote community?

Madam CHAIR: You said, 'remote' before. I am not sure whether town camp ...

Ms UIBO: We would have to check for the town camps; it is different from the previous question.

Question on Notice No 3.20

Madam CHAIR: Member for Nelson, please restate the question for the record.

Mr MALEY: Has anyone been evicted for antisocial behaviour from a town camp or a remote community or a homeland that you are in control of?

Madam CHAIR: Minister, do you accept the question?

Ms UIBO: Yes.

Madam CHAIR: The question has been allocated the number 3.20.

Mr MALEY: Can you please explain what the process is for someone to be evicted for antisocial behaviour from homelands or a town camp?

Mr WARREN: I will start at the back end of the question. The minister has mentioned that we do not have any direct landlord role or tenure responsibility in relation to homelands, so there is no direct department or government involvement in people coming or going from homelands. That is usually a matter for the traditional owners either directly or through their land trust or their land council representation. We provide

support funding to service providers that provide service regardless of who the residents are. Homelands is a separate legal situation.

Mr MALEY: You are talking about homelands. Is a community like Maningrida a homeland to you or is it an outstation where you do not have any property anyway?

Ms UIBO: Maningrida is counted as a community. Really it should be a township because it is very large, with over 3,000 people. We have 73 Aboriginal communities. They are the communities that we have lease arrangements with which and we can build remote housing through the Remote Housing Investment Package. When we are talking about homelands or outstations ...

Mr MALEY: It is the same thing?

Ms UIBO: No, it is a bit different. Often the homelands are residential full-time and then we talk about outstations being more seasonal or cultural use and accessibility. Most of our homelands are fully occupied and they have the repairs and maintenance program attached. They sit on Aboriginal land under the Aboriginal Land Rights Act.

Mr MALEY: Do you build homes on homelands?

Ms UIBO: No. That is what we are trying to do, but we do not.

Mr MALEY: There are no homes on homelands or outstations, only on communities.

Ms UIBO: Correct. There are houses on homelands and outstations, but they are not NT Government ones. There is a small amount of money for repairs and maintenance to support homelands residents.

Mr MALEY: Who would build those homes?

Ms UIBO: They have all been investment, basically through either federal government, land trust money or the land councils. That is the difference between a community and a homeland or an outstation.

Some homelands have other services delivered, whether it is government or non-government. Outstations often are a standalone cultural use of a dwelling on country, whereas homelands tend to be people living on country full-time.

Mr WARREN: I think the question on remote communities was about the process for taking action if someone is committing antisocial behaviour.

Our capacity as landlord hinges on the *Residential Tenancies Act* and the roles and responsibilities of the landlord and the tenant. The key provision there that links to antisocial behaviour is people who are causing very serious and consistent breaches of the peaceful enjoyment of their neighbours. It is a very high bar. We have found, through prior tests, to demonstrate that it has to be severe and persistent for an eviction order to be made.

In order to pursue that process we would normally expect to receive complaints from neighbours about the conduct. We would do an investigation, collect evidence and then prepare a brief that we lodge with NTCAT. That is the forum where decisions are made about evictions or intervention orders. For example, we can ask for an order to get entry to a house if a tenant is not agreeing to an inspection date. The tribunal is where we get those legal tools provided to us.

Mr MALEY: That process has not happened because you have never evicted anyone in a community.

Mr WARREN: We have used the tribunal process to seek access and to pursue people in relation to financial debts owed. In the reporting period—I think we have taken this question on notice—we have not used the tribunal to get an eviction in a remote community.

Mr GUYULA: I heard you say that homelands are just for fun or hunting with ...

Ms UIBO: No, I definitely did not say that, Member for Mulka.

Mr GUYULA: You did not say that?

Ms UIBO: No, absolutely not.

Mr GUYULA: They are real clan estates.

Ms UIBO: I will clarify. I said that homelands tend to be residential where people live full-time on country. Outstations tend to be seasonal, where people may go in and out from either a homeland or a community. Outstations do not tend to be full-time residential ...

Mr GUYULA: Even that I disagree with. Outstations are homelands; homelands are outstations.

Ms UIBO: Outstations are on homelands, but for the purpose of funding we put in repairs and maintenance money to homelands which are full-time residential. In some of the outstations across the NT—there are 200—we also put money into repairs and maintenance. Our priority is for the repairs and maintenance to go to where people are living full-time because that is where their home is ...

Mr GUYULA: No, it is not their home. I am trying to say that there are different clan groups living in a community. Those other clans, other than the TOs of that land, belong to the outstations or homelands. I wanted to clarify that.

Madam CHAIR: The minister has been articulating the funding. Perhaps we have some new funding agreements coming forward that will allow resources to go where they have traditionally have not been able to go. I am not sure whether you can articulate any of that for the members of the committee. It shows a shift in recognising the importance of country.

Ms UIBO: I agree that outstations are just as important as what we classify as homelands. Homelands tend to be the places where there are other services like a school, clinic or shop that is accessible for homelands residents ...

Mr GUYULA: It is English language that split this homeland country for the people out there. Whether it is outstations or homelands, they are still one; they belong to the sacred sites and the land where everybody belongs. I want to make it clear that is not what the government is getting a view of—moving everybody. It is not necessary to build housing on outstations, but we would rather see homelands being resourced with houses and infrastructure to move everybody back home so that we get less trouble. People need to be on their country.

Ms UIBO: I agree, Member for Mulka ...

Madam CHAIR: I will jump in ...

Mr GUYULA: I know what you can say ...

Ms UIBO: No, I am happy to answer, Madam Chair.

Madam CHAIR: Can you let the minister finish responding. This is important and I have a question as well, so let the minister respond and I will come back to you ...

Mr GUYULA: My point is important too.

Madam CHAIR: Can we let the minister respond uninterrupted.

Ms UIBO: Absolutely, which is why for the last seven years the Territory Labor government has advocated and hounded the federal government repeatedly to invest in our homelands and outstations. We have not had any new money since before August 2016 when Labor came to government, because the money that was allocated for homelands under the CLP was cashed in and used up—and not for homelands and outstations. Since then we have had no new money.

This is the first time ever—since March this year—that we have had an allocation for not just remote housing, but homelands to be included, which is why we set up the Joint Steering Committee for Remote Housing and homelands. My title and responsibility is not just remote housing; it is homelands minister as well.

We need to start with the housing infrastructure to support homelands and outstations. We have never had any money added to homelands. This is why we want to use some of this new money. The federal government is still not agreeing to new houses on homelands. The Northern Territory Labor government is

pushing. We want to use our money—part of that portion—for the homelands funding. There is \$40m a year for three years from the federal government and \$40m a year for three years from the Northern Territory Government. We want to use \$80m from that \$240m for the next three years under the 10-year agreement. We are pushing that we need to have new houses built on homelands and outstations. We have never had that ability.

We will continue to push to do that until the signing of that agreement, which will be soon. We have given the federal government a case. The four land councils, Aboriginal Housing NT and the Northern Territory Government all agree. The one that has not agreed yet is the federal government, but we are pushing constantly because we want to see new houses—not just repairs and maintenance—on homelands. Going to the Member for Nelson’s question earlier about land tenure, we cannot build on Aboriginal land—rightfully so—unless we have a lease agreement, which is why the JSC has all four land councils pushing for those new houses as well.

Mr GUYULA: I want to put this on *Hansard* to clarify that homelands and outstations—I call them country, the land we belong to—are very important. That is where housing, resourcing and infrastructure needs to go—back out there. There is overcrowding. Houses are still being built in small spaces in the hub communities.

I can understand your point. I want you to understand my point too—we work together on this.

Ms UIBO: I agree, Member for Mulka. The classic example is the four communities that you asked about. When we read out the overcrowding numbers for them three had decreased and one had increased, which was Gapuwiyak in the Arnhem electorate. Your family and my family live there. That is because of those beautiful new homes in Gapuwiyak. People are moving in from the homelands because they have shitty old houses that are not up to scratch. They are moving in because the families are getting nice houses built in those new subdivisions at Gapuwiyak. Because we did not have any money for new houses in homelands people are coming into those hub communities, as you call it. We did not have the ability to ...

Mr GUYULA: I do not agree with you ...

Ms UIBO: That is what the numbers show.

Mr GUYULA: There needs to be ...

Ms UIBO: The overcrowding has not decreased in Gapuwiyak even though the housing number has increased.

Mr GUYULA: The government needs to understand to move infrastructure and housing back—to build new housing on country where people can be safe and live a healthy life. That is all.

Ms UIBO: That is what I am agreeing to, Member for Mulka. We have not been able to build new houses on homelands, which is why families have moved from homelands into that hub. We want to make sure we have new houses on homelands so that people are not all drawn into a hub community. They can live on country where they rightfully have the ability to have a safe and adequate house on a homeland.

Madam CHAIR: The minister is explaining that because of the way the funding has come through it has not been able to be utilised in those outstations and homelands, so people are seeing the houses in the communities and are going there. She wishes the money could be used for that. There are some terrific examples where people are living on country year round. Kabulwarnamyo is a great example ...

Mrs LAMBLEY: You are leading from the Chair.

Madam CHAIR: I was going to ask a question, Member for Araluen; I gave you the respect of not interrupting when you were off on a tangent.

Mrs LAMBLEY: It is not your job to provide information. We have an expert panel here.

Mrs MANISON: She is chairing.

Madam CHAIR: That example of Kabulwarnamyo is a terrific one of education and employment.

I will pause to see whether the minister wants to respond, uninterrupted by anybody. Then I will see whether there are further questions from the committee.

Ms UIBO: I am happy to take more questions.

Madam CHAIR: Member for Mulka, do you have any more questions under this output? We are still in Output 3.3, Remote Housing. I think you had some under Output 3.4.

Mr GUYULA: Yes, Output 3.4.

Mr YAN: There was talk earlier about housing reference groups. I know that in Central Australia we have had a number of new houses built in communities. There has been an inability for the housing reference groups to meet to allocate those houses; some new houses have been sitting vacant for up to six months. Can you explain why there has been that inability for housing reference groups to meet with the communities to allocate the houses?

Ms UIBO: To clarify for the committee, when the housing reference groups—HRGs—meet they provide advice and guidance to the department on allocations. The department ultimately, as the landlord, then decides on an allocation.

Mr Warren will explain some of our work on the reviewing process of how housing reference groups operate in our communities. We are working to improve the working relationships between HRGs within the community and the department, and the processes that will continue to improve and support HRGs in their advice and guidance to government.

Mr WARREN: I understand the question was: do we sometimes have trouble getting an allocation decision?

Mr YAN: It was more to the point that Housing has not been able to make it to community to hold the housing reference group meetings; they keep getting delayed. That summarises my question.

Ms UIBO: Sometimes there is a delay on the department of Housing side, but there are also delays within the community. We have to find the balance to get HRG members together to ensure that decisions are made, and if it is something to do with an allocation that they are done in a timely fashion.

Mr WARREN: We have a commitment to try to run four housing reference groups a year. In the larger communities there is usually plenty of scope for that, but in the smaller communities there is less activity going on so there is less need to run that often. We have to give advance notice to the HRG of the date, out of respect, so that they can be there and be available.

We sometimes have situations where we cannot get a quorum with an HRG, and we have had situations where we had to run multiple rounds of meetings close together. Nauiyu springs to mind because recently we wanted to step with the HRG members through a very complicated process of allocating whilst there was an inter-family conflict. It can be both ways.

On the whole we have been able to get out to our communities to run HRGs a number of times per year. I am not aware of specific situations where allocation decisions have been blocked because of HRG meetings. Occasionally, there have been situations when we needed to make a controversial decision about allocation, and that will sometimes involve multiple meetings and a final decision in the department.

In terms of the building program we have a separate accountability back to the Commonwealth for those brand-new homes to make sure we have them tenanted within eight weeks. If there is an exception to that, we are challenged by the Commonwealth and we need to explain that specific situation.

Mr YAN: I understand that in your Remote Housing and Homelands role you travel regularly to some communities and hand over new builds. Is there any time when you would send another minister to do that for you?

Ms UIBO: Yes, sometimes other members of government do housing handovers.

Mr YAN: If you are travelling the cost sits with you and your department. If another minister is travelling to hand over a house would that cost go to your department or would the other minister's department wear that cost?

Ms UIBO: It would stay with me as the Minister for Remote Housing and Homelands, and it would be through my ministerial office that we bear the cost, not through the department.

Mr YAN: I raised the question because the Attorney-General handed over a house on 1 June at Finke and he took other non-government members with him. Would that cost be worn by your ministerial office?

Ms UIBO: If it was a chartered flight, it would be costed through my ministerial office. If it was personal travel with a personal vehicle, we would not cover that cost.

Mr YAN: The dwelling that was handed over on 1 June—was it a direction from your office for the Attorney-General to hand over the house at Finke?

Ms UIBO: The Member for Gwoja, as my nominated representative, handed over the house on by behalf.

Mr YAN: If it was a private vehicle the travel would not be costed to your agency, but if it was a charter plane the travel would be costed to your ministerial office.

Ms UIBO: That is correct.

Madam CHAIR: That concludes the consideration of Output 3.3.

Output 3.4 – Town Camps and Homelands

Madam CHAIR: The committee will now consider Output 3.4, Town Camps and Homelands. Are there any questions?

Mr GUYULA: Why has the remote housing partnership agreement not been included in homelands for the new builds? I know there is extra money for existing housing, but I have been talking to the government for the past seven years about the need for new housing. Ken Wyatt was very close to agreeing. Why is your Labor government, or colleague Minister Burney, not agreeing to housing in homelands? When there has been seven years to work out this issue, where does the problem lie? Who is holding up the funding for new housing in homelands?

Madam CHAIR: I know everyone is passionate about this, so we will turn to the minister and then I will come back to you, Member for Mulka, for a response and follow-up question. Can we let the minister answer uninterrupted, please.

Ms UIBO: Member for Mulka, I am of the same thinking as you regarding the last seven-and-a-half years of fighting for new houses on homelands across the Northern Territory, particularly in my electorate. This is the first opportunity we have to look at new homes on homelands.

I would not say the problem lies with the Commonwealth, but the reservation and the conservative outlook is sitting with the Commonwealth. Of the seven members that make up the Joint Steering Committee for Remote Housing, six members want new homes on homelands; the reservation sits with the Commonwealth Government. I have spoken about this publicly, so I am comfortable to explain that in this committee hearing.

My department has worked strongly on this. As the final pieces start to fall together on the final agreement, we want to sign off on it before the end of this financial year.

I propose that the Northern Territory Government takes on what the Commonwealth is a bit more reserved about, which is the risk, and use our contribution for homelands repairs and maintenance money—\$40m per year for the next three years—for new homes on homelands. The Commonwealth can sit comfortably with its \$120m over the three-year period for the continuation of repairs and maintenance.

I propose—I am strong about this, and I hope that you support it—that we mirror a similar structure to what we have done in the Remote Housing Investment Package with new works. We would do it on a smaller scale with new builds for homelands, using our \$40m plus \$40m plus \$40m from the Northern Territory Labor government for new homes on homelands and the Commonwealth can continue its \$40m plus \$40m plus \$40m for repairs and maintenance. That is what I push strongly to get.

We are close in negotiating and advocating in that space. We do not have a formal sign-off from the federal government on that because we have not signed the agreement yet, but we are very close to doing that.

I have been strong on this, as have other Labor members and particularly you. Member for Mulka, I acknowledge your advocacy and talking about homelands over the many years you have been in parliament and before you were in parliament. That is where we are currently at.

I have nothing further to add other than I agree that we need new homes on homelands. I continue to advocate that we can use some of that new money in the 10-year agreement for new homes on homelands.

Madam CHAIR: It is the allocated time for lunch. We will come back to this output after lunch.

The committee suspended.

Madam CHAIR: We are in Output 3.4, Town Camps and Homelands. Please go ahead, Member for Mulka.

Mr GUYULA: Why is Minister Burney not agreeing to housing on homelands? When is the deadline for homelands to be included in the remote partnership agreement?

Ms UIBO: I know that the federal government is keen to see where the federal funding goes in the remote housing and homelands investment. What we have diligently prepared from the NT Government's perspective is that proposal in the pipeline of how that money could be used.

With the three-year homelands funding, my understanding through my officials is that the first two years will be the process to look at those new homes and how that could be delivered. Again, that goes back into the Joint Steering Committee for Remote Housing to work on what I mentioned before the lunchbreak, which is a mirror image pipeline of works on homelands for new infrastructure with housing, then making sure the federal government is comfortable with that process.

We will also have to break new ground on the leasing arrangements and how it will be auspiced through the joint steering committee, which is why it is critical that the four Aboriginal land councils are part of the process for this new money.

One of the land councils, the Anindilyakwa Land Council, is already investing and putting its own money on homelands, which it calls satellite communities. The satellite communities on Groote Eylandt already have Anindilyakwa money that is being used. It is a land council, so it can already look at what the land tenure process is on behalf of TOs on country, which is a very different story from the rest of the Northern Territory. There are places that are already investing their own money in new houses on homelands.

Regarding your previous question about housing design, Groote Eylandt has looked at, for the past few years and will continue to do so, housing design for satellite communities where that satellite community money gets used. The housing designs on country are being driven through the Anindilyakwa Housing Aboriginal Corporation and the work that is being done with the Anindilyakwa Land Council.

This is to give you an idea of things which have already happened in the NT. The bigger picture over the next two years of that three-year homelands extra money from the 10-year agreement will provide us with a stronger footing and platform on what homelands new infrastructure for housing can look like for the Northern Territory and give the federal government safe thinking and comfort that it is a process being done in partnership with the land councils.

Mr GUYULA: When is the deadline for homelands to be included in the remote partnership agreement?

Ms UIBO: The homelands proportion of funding is definitely already included in the new agreement. The piece we have been talking about is the new homes on homelands. The homelands three-year funding is included to be signed off before the end of this financial year; we have the next few weeks to complete that. The extra piece of work we are trying to push is new houses on homelands to be part of that up to three-year process.

Madam CHAIR: That concludes consideration of Output 3.4.

Output 3.5 – Government Employee Housing

Madam CHAIR: We will now consider Output 3.5, Government Employee Housing. Are there any questions?

Answer to Question on Notice No 3.18

Ms UIBO: As at 31 March 2024, the reporting period, of the 10 new government employee housing dwellings in the Elliott community, nine are allocated and occupied by client agencies, so other government agencies. One dwelling was changed to industry housing and has been allocated to the Northern Land Council. No remote housing properties were made available as a result of the new GEH buildings being built. All dwellings are still utilised for GEH due to worker demand in Elliott.

Mr MALEY: Does that mean those houses or units were built for government housing and they are meant to be freeing up houses for public tenants but no public tenants were moved in as they did not free up because more people were moving in? More government workers moved in and no public housing was rented out because of that.

Ms UIBO: That is a part of that 26 in total GEH number. The 10 new properties added to that pool. We have built new housing stock in Elliott for community housing. That has definitely occurred. In terms of the GEH demand and industry demand we have maintained the 26 GEH properties as 25 for GEH plus the one industry house.

Mr MALEY: The units were built, but effectively no more public housing stock was made available because those units were used for employee housing.

Ms UIBO: Out of that GEH stock, that is correct. We have had the parallel works for Elliott communities for new housing stock.

Mr GUYULA: How many government employee houses are in Galiwinku, Milingimbi, Ramingining, Yirrkala, Gungahara and Gapuwiyak? How many of these houses have local Aboriginal government employees living in them?

Ms UIBO: We have a breakdown of those communities, except for Gungahara—Ski Beach. We will have to take that one on notice. I will pass to Mr Brent Warren who can provide four of the five community updates. We are working on some of the information regarding the GEH for those communities and how many local recruits are accessing that. If we do not have it, we will take it on notice. We will provide a response to the first part of that now.

Mr WARREN: In Galiwinku there are 41 GEH dwellings; in Milingimbi there are 28 dwellings; in Ramingining there are 28 dwellings; and in Yirrkala there are 25 dwellings. We do not have a separate breakout for Ski Beach. In Gapuwiyak there are 22 dwellings.

Regarding the breakdown by whether people are Aboriginal employees or not, we will have to take that on notice. But we could talk about the local recruits incentive that we have been providing for remote Aboriginal staff who already live in community when they take employment. We now have 69 employees across the remote public service who get a rent subsidy or concession to stay in their public housing house because of their public service employment terms.

Mr GUYULA: *Yow.*

Ms UIBO: I will add to that response. We will continue to undertake work to ensure that our remote Territorians working for the NT public service have access to the same entitlements in their community as the non-local recruits in that service delivery piece. That number of 69 is across all the different agencies, as I understand it. We do not have enough government employee houses for the demand of service provision. As to the previous question from the Member for Nelson, other industry stakeholders and service providers also require housing to deliver services in our remote communities. We will continue to work on that.

That is a big start because we were lacking, and we were slow in the progress to ensure that our Aboriginal local recruits in our communities have the same access to entitlements with government employee housing as the non-local recruits. That is a good step forward, but we will continue that journey.

Mr GUYULA: Will you take that question on notice?

Ms UIBO: We have confirmed there are none at Ski Beach for GEH.

Mr GUYULA: Did you want to take this on notice, what I just said before?

Ms UIBO: We will take on notice your question about how many Aboriginal employees within those five communities are accessing GEH. Gunyangara is obviously zero, but for the other five we will take that on notice, Madam Chair.

Question on Notice No 3.21

Madam CHAIR: Member for Mulka, please restate the question for the record.

Mr GUYULA: How many government employee houses are in Galiwinku, Milingimbi, Ramingining, Yirrkala, Gunyangara and Gapuwiyak? How many of these houses have local Aboriginal government employees living in them?

Madam CHAIR: Minister, do you accept the question?

Ms UIBO: Yes.

Madam CHAIR: The question has been allocated the number 3.21.

Madam CHAIR: That concludes consideration of Output 3.5. Output 3.6, Indigenous Essential Services, is the responsibility of another minister. Therefore, that concludes consideration of all of Output Group 3.0 relating to Remote Housing and Homelands.

On behalf of the committee, I thank the minister and the agency officials who assisted her today.

Ms UIBO: I give a big thank you to the senior officials who have attended from the Department of Territory Families, Housing and Communities; and the Department of Infrastructure, Planning and Logistics. I give a big thank you to the housing officers, particularly in the regions, who do an amazing job to support remote community housing and homelands residents. Your work does not go unnoticed. I look forward to the next 10 years of remote housing and homelands investment to keep you all busy.

Mr MALEY: On behalf of the opposition, thank you for all your good work. To all the people listening, you do a great job; thank you.

Madam CHAIR: That was an informative session with a lot of participation from all members.

The committee suspended.

**HEALTH
MENTAL HEALTH AND SUICIDE PREVENTION**

DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH

Madam DEPUTY CHAIR: Minister, I invite you to introduce officials accompanying you today and to make an opening statement regarding the Department of Health.

Ms UIBO: I introduce the NT Health officials who are appearing with me today: Dr Marco Briceno, Chief Executive Officer for NT Health; and deputy chief executive officers, Samantha Byrne, Cecelia Gore and Catherine O'Connell.

During the reporting period NT Health has focused on strengthening its foundations as one system, working in partnership with individuals, families, the community, Aboriginal health organisations and stakeholders to provide high-quality, evidence-based care to all Territorians.

Like health systems nationally and around the world, delivering health services is challenging and complex, with increasing cost pressures, more demand for services, staff shortages and changing demographics that are expected to see a rise in chronic conditions and acute illnesses. Having a strong and sustainable system that is equipped to address existing and future health priorities has been the focus of NT Health.

The collective strength of our agency is inspiring. I witnessed firsthand the collaboration across NT Health which employs more than 7,200 staff who operate across the five regions, six hospitals, 74 health clinics and seven corporate offices to provide a full spectrum of essential patient-centred health services across the life span of a Territorian.

Our people are our greatest assets, delivering health services with compassion and empathy, day-in and day-out. They see us at our worst and it keeps them at their best.

In the reporting period NT Health continued to implement a number of training, recruitment and retention initiatives. As part of the NT Health Aboriginal Cadetship Program, four cadets completed university studies in 2023 and are now employed in health roles. In 2024 there are 10 Aboriginal cadets being supported to complete university studies across a range of health fields. NT Health is also providing scholarship assistance in 2024 to five Aboriginal students to study in their first year of university. These students are completing degrees in occupational therapy, paramedicine and nursing and midwifery.

In nursing and midwifery the availability of undergraduate clinical placements has been increased. In 2023 there were 1,232 student placements provided, while 215 placements have been confirmed as of 31 March 2024. The registered undergraduate student of nursing and midwifery model has been expanded, with 27 of these staff employed across NT Health at the end of March. Increased accessibility to the graduate nursing and midwifery program has resulted in 260 nurses and midwives being employed in the program as of 31 March 2024, with further intakes that are planned across this year.

Nurse practitioner positions have also increased, while a streamlined employment pathway has been developed to enhance the process. There are currently 59 nurse practitioner positions across NT Health, with another two being established.

Our health workforce shortages are not unique to the Northern Territory but are exacerbated due to our diverse regional and remote locations. NT Health continued to deliver targeted recruitment campaigns and implement a number of initiatives, including expanding its job website to include additional workforce specialties.

Work is also being done to strengthen our ability to grow our own workforce because we know that if we train doctors and nurses in our regional areas they are more likely to stay and practise in these areas.

To enhance health services and expand capacity we are continuing to invest in health to ensure Territorians can receive the best care as close to home as possible. The \$2.1bn budget for 2024–25 highlights our investment to boost the capacity of our hospitals, recruit and retain our skilled workforce and to improve access to quality care for all Territorians.

The Northern Territory Government has provided an additional \$200m in funding to support NT Health operations in this financial year and an additional \$100m towards the 2024–25 budget.

Rising costs to deliver healthcare services, including the reliance on agency staff to relieve healthcare staff shortages, are creating considerable budget pressures. This is in addition to historic Commonwealth funding inequity across a range of services, including hospital, primary care, aeromedical retrievals and aged care, which we will continue to advocate from the Northern Territory perspective.

NT Health has been reviewing, assessing and investigating the ways it works to see what can be done to improve service delivery while enhancing efficiency and effectiveness. This has included looking at contract management, operational service delivery, the purchase of medical supplies, agency labour hire and patient travel. We also continue to strongly advocate and push for improved funding equity with the Commonwealth Government.

Our investment does not end there. When we are looking at our key initiatives that are under way to improve infrastructure across the Territory, it aims to support greater health outcomes for our communities. Key infrastructure projects include: \$22.9m for a new 32-bed modular multipurpose facility at Royal Darwin Hospital; \$24.8m for additional clinical spaces at Royal Darwin Hospital, as well as \$25.1m for the expansion of the mental health inpatient unit; \$22.6m for upgrades to the forensic mortuary pathology and bereavement facilities at Royal Darwin Hospital; \$1.3m for the construction of staff accommodation at Tennant Creek Hospital; \$26.9m to construct a new ambulatory care centre at the Alice Springs Hospital; and \$6.6m to develop a hybrid operating theatre at Alice Springs Hospital.

We are also investing in primary healthcare in line with our commitment to local decision-making and community control. Construction of the \$20m Jabiru Health Centre is expected to be completed by the end of July this year, with transition of the facility to Red Lily Health Board to occur in September 2024. A new \$20m health centre for Gunbalanya is under way with the design of the centre now complete. Ten health centres in Central Australia were endorsed as being in scope for transition to community control at the NT Aboriginal Health Forum.

We continue to build upon our efforts to recognise and enable Aboriginal leadership and local decision-making processes and are partnering with Aboriginal Territorians to achieve cultural security in the health system by co-developing and co-delivering culturally safe, secure, health services.

The demand for renal services continues to grow across the Northern Territory in tandem with the rapid growth of diabetes. We recently launched the NT Health Kidney Plan 2024–2029 to provide greater access to kidney care and more treatment choices for Territorians living with kidney disease.

The plan was developed through extensive consultation and engagement with those who provide and receive kidney care, including Aboriginal community-controlled health organisations—ACCHOs.

The key aim of the plan is to drive a shift towards more community-based care. This will see as much kidney care as possible being provided in our local communities, including the regional healthcare centres and at home. Community workforce models are also being developed as part of this new plan to train individuals to assist in the supervised revision of ongoing dialysis services in our urban, rural and remote areas.

As demand for mental health services continues to increase and reforms are initiated the contribution of people with lived experience is essential to ensure services are fit for purpose to address the unique needs of each community.

An NT mental health lived experience engagement framework is being developed to ensure that people with lived experience across mental health and suicide prevention are central to service planning and that individuals are at the forefront of the health and community care. NT Health is continuing to invest in mental health models of care that support people within the community and provide therapeutic responses which aim to prevent the need for hospital admissions.

A Head to Health kids' service is being established in Central Australia, with the aim to be operational later in 2024. An assertive community treatment team has been established to provide intensive, time-limited care across the greater Darwin region and to improve the outcomes of people experiencing a mental health crisis. These services resulted in about 70% of referrals being diverted from our emergency department in 2023, with treatment and care being provided in a more therapeutic way.

NT Health is also working to reform mental health legislation in the Northern Territory. An exposure draft of the Mental Health Bill has been developed and provides significant reforms on how treatment and care can be provided to people who experience mental health illness or disorder to enhance their rights and participation in the treatment and recovery process.

Suicide affects the whole of our community. The Northern Territory Government is committed to reducing suicide rates through empowering non-government organisations and community members to deliver important localised suicide prevention projects across the Territory.

The Northern Territory suicide prevention community grants support protective connections and linkages through sport, culture, education and community to reduce exposure to trauma, develop skills and emotional resilience and to manage strong feelings, encourage help and syncing and working together to make community safe and supportive.

NT Health will continue to implement actions to improve the effectiveness and the efficiency of service delivery; increase performance; drive financial sustainability; and enhance the provision of safe, effective and quality care for all Territorians. We are investing in health infrastructure, mental health access and aged-care and disability placements to better coordinate patient flow, improve safety and quality, patient access and service delivery. We will continue to navigate the challenges of health service delivery, noting that it also provides opportunity for growth and improvement as we look to and plan for the future of the Territory.

Partnerships are critical to the work that we do, and we will continue to work with individuals, families, communities, Aboriginal health organisations and other service providers, as well as other government agencies to strengthen our relationship and enhance the integration and innovation across all of our health

services. I recognise the hard work of all our staff, their remarkable efforts in health to deliver the highest standard of care possible, their leadership, the quality of improvement and the journey that everyone is on to ensure that we are getting best outcomes for all Territorians in health.

I am happy to take questions.

Madam DEPUTY CHAIR: I remind the committee that our Health department, like every other government's Health department, is the biggest and has the biggest budget items, so we have very extensive output groups. Minister, as the questions come in if they need to be directed to certain output groups where you have the information, I will take guidance in that regard.

I now open up for questions to the opening statement with the shadow minister first.

Mr YAN: Thank you, minister, for your opening statement. I also thank all the public servants from the Department of Health for taking time out of your busy schedules and for all the work that has been done in preparing for Estimates.

On your opening statement, I do not need to highlight some of the issues that we are facing in our health system as it has been regularly reported in the media. I refer to the recent ABC *Stateline* report. The headline states:

Health insiders say Royal Darwin Hospital in constant state of emergency, having 'normalised disaster'

There are a couple of clear sets of victims here, and they are the Northern Territory patients attending our hospital seeking care and the hardworking health sector employees delivering the services to the people who are attending the hospital. Even the CEO, Marco Briceno, is reported as saying that RDH is currently operating in emergency management-type conditions.

There is overcrowding, and the double-bunking in A&E is referred to. There are code yellows—18 since 2018, according to that report—and increased waiting times for elective surgeries and those times are blowing out.

Will you accept responsibility for this crisis in our health system? How do you explain this to Territorians, and what are you doing about it?

Madam DEPUTY CHAIR: This can be answered here or in Output Group 8.0, Hospital Services and Support.

Ms UIBO: Yes, as recognised in the opening statement, there are challenges that are not unique to the Northern Territory—the pressures we are experiencing in our hospital system and other parts of Health, including our clinics. The work that is being done was outlined in the opening statement. We take responsibility because we have a journey and a pathway to look at improvements.

There are multiple responses to your question. I will hand to the chief executive officer, but if the specifics are about particular hospital services we can go through the outputs in that sense. I pass to Dr Briceno to add some commentary around your question.

Professor BRICENO: To expand on the question on the recent media inquiry, some of the commentary that is being claimed to be made by me is true, but it was probably taken a bit out of context from the conversation about a broader and complex issue.

When we refer to emergency declarations—or codes, as we call them in the system—that is when our conditions of working normally are surpassed and we need to work under the emergency situation. We need to use different mechanisms to maintain safe services, which is when we call a code yellow. That does not mean that we are all the time operating under those emergency circumstances; it is when those code yellows are called.

I acknowledge that our services are experiencing an increased demand in recent times, but at the same time we are also experiencing significant shortages in our clinical workforce which makes these changes more challenging to manage. These challenges are unfortunately not unique to the Northern Territory. They have been experienced in Australia and worldwide, particularly after the pandemic. As the minister mentioned in the opening statement, some of the intricacies of delivering healthcare in the Territory makes some of these issues worse.

Most of the challenges in our case are concentrated at the Royal Darwin Hospital as it is the only tertiary facility in the Top End, and our largest hospital. Unfortunately, we do not have the ability to go on bypass like other hospitals could in a bigger city where if the hospital is overwhelmed, it is only a 20-minute or half-an-hour drive down the road. Royal Darwin Hospital does not have that luxury and we must provide care for Territorians when they need it and adapt to those conditions.

In response to some of these challenges is the investment and planning for increasing capacity at Royal Darwin Hospital by increasing our beds under the modular facility that is being commissioned. In the interim between now and then a lot of extra beds have been commissioned at Royal Darwin Hospital and operate on a regular basis.

This is an issue that is compounding and is not only related to hospitals. Hospitals are unfortunately receiving patients in the absence of primary care, aged care and disability services which are unable to meet the demands of the community. Those responsibilities normally sit with the Commonwealth and are normally operated by the private sector or non-government sector. In the case of the Territory, because of thin markets, a lot of those services are delivered by the Northern Territory Government by default, which adds to the pressures of spreading the staffing and being able to deliver services across the areas which normally go beyond the responsibilities of our jurisdiction.

Mr YAN: There were 18 code yellows since 2018 and I think four this year with three in consecutive weeks. Comparing our health system with other health systems in Australia—Dr Briceno related that these issues are across the health sector. I know the term ‘code yellow’ is used nationally across the health system to describe instances where we are under pressure. Are you aware of any other health systems in the country suffering these same issues of multiple code yellows?

Ms UIBO: My understanding is that yes, other jurisdictions are. I will pass to Dr Briceno to give the details of pressures which are being experienced in places such as South Australia.

Professor BRICENO: Today on the news there was a report that the whole of South Australia Health is in code yellow because the capacity of all the hospitals in metropolitan Adelaide and the countryside have been overwhelmed. The whole state is in code yellow, which is different from our case where it is usually only one of our hospitals in one region.

The main driver at the moment, in addition to the things we discussed before, is an outbreak of respiratory diseases—COVID, influenza and RSV—is overwhelming the system and causing pressure. That pressure translates downstream, so it goes from the hospitals into the ambulance service and also primary care.

There may not be as media action when they call the code yellow in different jurisdictions or different hospitals. If you close one hospital you can drive to the next one, so there is not such an impact on the community in those instances, whereas in our case when we have to call that code in a larger hospital then it is newsworthy.

Mr YAN: I understand that and appreciate the fact that those other jurisdictions have the ability and we do not. That is why I specifically asked the questions about our capacity and capability in the Territory because we cannot just drive somewhere else to go to a hospital. The health staff in Darwin have to deal with this on a daily basis, it seems to be at the moment. We have heard from staff—you have made comments—that we are nearly in a constant emergency management-type situation.

I need to know, and Territorians need to know, what will change in the near future to deal with those issues? This system cannot continue on this track. We are losing staff; we lost 800 in two years. I understand that we lost quite a few at the end of COVID because we did not require them anymore. In the last 12 months, Health lost the most staff out of any agency. That points to a system in crisis. If you have people leaving, they may be not leaving the sector but are leaving the Territory and going somewhere else.

Minister, what are you doing to deal with this specific issue? It cannot go on.

Ms UIBO: That is why, particularly in this budget, we have looked at the spread of Health infrastructure and increasing it. As I remarked in the opening statement, there are funding inequities, and they are historical, from the federal government where the Northern Territory Government is picking up a bit of a tab of what is covered in other jurisdictions by the Commonwealth.

With the complexities and the level of chronic disease in the Northern Territory, we are disproportionately and inequitably funded by the Commonwealth, but we have high proportions per capita relating to chronic disease and some of the irreversible long-term illnesses such as end-stage kidney disease.

The health infrastructure and the early investment, particularly the dollars that we have in this budget to increase bed capacity for places like Royal Darwin Hospital; the \$12m that we have for land servicing and preparing the site at the Palmerston Regional Hospital site for an aged-care facility—aged care is a federal responsibility—so that we can be shovel-ready for the feds to put in money for a 120-bed aged-care facility in the Northern Territory, all of that is focused on reducing that pipeline of downstream pressure.

That early investment in infrastructure creates an opportunity to alleviate the pressure at the end point, like some of our hospital wards, where we are seeing aged Territorians who have no other place suitable for their care. They are maintaining them in hospital, but if we could have more support through the Commonwealth partnership around taking on further responsibility for aged care in the Northern Territory then we could look at reducing some of those hospital pressures.

Dr Briceno will talk more about what we are doing in regard to workforce and some of the other elements of your question.

Professor BRICENO: The challenges of increased demand in hospitals are a symptom of the whole health ecosystem not operating in the way that it should. The challenges that we see in primary healthcare, aged care or the disability sector have an impact, relying on hospitals as the point of last resort.

We are working very closely with our partners in primary healthcare, the PHN, the Commonwealth Government and the Aboriginal Health Forum to increase capacity and capability in remote primary healthcare. They have been heavily impacted by workforce shortages in recent times, which means that fewer patients can be cared for closer to home in remote communities and need to be transported to hospital. Understanding and managing that demand in remote communities is an imperative for NT Health.

At the same time we need to increase hospital capacity. Territorians are living longer than they were 20 years ago, but unfortunately are getting sicker with more complex healthcare needs. We need to increase our hospital capacity and, as I mentioned before, bed capacity.

The investment in improving our capabilities in our hospitals is also a priority in not only Royal Darwin but also regional hospitals in Gove and Katherine. In the Top End the more patients who can be treated in those hospitals the less need there is for them to come to Darwin for treatment. At any given time, about 30% of the patients in Royal Darwin Hospital are from the regions. If we could offer care closer to home for these patients then we would have increased capacity in our hospital.

As the minister mentioned, the aged-care issue is being compounded for us. Even though we have a young population in the Territory we have the fastest-growing ageing population in the country. The sector has not matured quickly enough to keep up with demand.

People can no longer be cared for at home, particularly around Darwin and the rural areas more specifically. In the absence of a residential aged-care sector that can cater for that need those patients have been permanently placed in our hospitals. At the moment the minimum baseline number sits at around 45 patients in our hospitals in Darwin and Palmerston, but that number can be as high as 70 at times.

Increasing capacity in the aged-care sector long term and immediately has been a big priority. One of the short-term initiatives that we have put in place is working with the disability sector to provide alternative care for aged-care patients to be looked after outside of hospitals in an area that is not home but is not a hospital either. That pilot with a local provider in Darwin commenced in December. We started with seven patients and now that has been expanded to 14 to try to care for patients outside of hospital services.

These patients do not belong in hospitals. It is not only because of bed pressures; it is just because it is not the right place for them to be. We are committed to do that but, most importantly, addressing the root causes and working with the Commonwealth about that long-term investment in infrastructure and service provision for residential aged care.

The development of out-of-hospital care models is imperative to try to alleviate the pressure of people in emergency departments and hospital wards. An initiative we have developed in partnership with the Commonwealth Government is the establishment of urgent care clinics in Darwin, Palmerston, Alice Springs

and some remote communities has been expanded for next year. This is an initiative that is increasing capacity and capability locally away from hospital.

The development and expansion of hospital in the home services and the integration of services between hospitals and communities has been another imperative. This is particularly true in the renal area. We have seen an increased demand in patients requiring renal replacement therapy or dialysis. How do we provide that care closer home? That requires the development of different workforce models and different partnerships with community-controlled organisations, the Commonwealth and NT Health.

Mr YAN: You were talking about aged care. We know the pressure that aged care is putting on the hospital. There is a number of beds being taken up. Interestingly, I found out recently that some of those aged-care patients who are not able to be transitioned out are being charged to stay at the hospital. They have to pay to be there as they move in and out of acute and non-acute care at times. We know we have an ageing population and there has been pressure put on the hospital by the aged-care sector for quite some time.

Another report recently from the ABC was about the code yellows that are caused and those comments about a constant state of emergency, where 15% of our acute beds are not being used for acute care which leads to a situation where we are not able to provide business as usual for our patients.

Yes, you are right; the Northern Territory population growth rate of over-65s is the highest in the nation. That is causing those further pressures.

You only just announced the pilot that you are doing externally. We have a number of patients in it, which is good to see. We have only just now announced the new aged-care facility. Why have we not done this a number of years ago, knowing we had this rise in the number of aged-care patients and that we have a rising aged population?

Madam DEPUTY CHAIR: Regarding that, there is Output 5.3, Aged Care. Is the information ready to go? Okay, continue.

Mr YAN: Why are we just now announcing a new aged-care facility when we have known we have an increasing aged population and the pressures that are being placed on hospitals?

Ms UIBO: We do not want to wait around for the feds to decide to give us the money for an aged-care facility, so we are getting ready for that level of investment, as per their responsibility nationally. In the Northern Territory context, as the CEO outlined, we have seen this as an area where we have a portion of inpatients that can fluctuate in terms of the numbers. We are seeing that continue as a steady number. Therefore, rather than sit around and wait for the federal government to provide us with the timing of whatever funding they have for health investment, we are taking a proactive approach by doing this level of work within this new budget so that we can tell the feds we are ready for the investment we require in aged care, which is their responsibility.

We saw the issue, continued that process and there have been other processes, as the CE outlined, with other sectors to see where the care for those Territorians is best placed. It is obviously not in the long term in a hospital setting. We do not have an aged-care sector in the Northern Territory that has been able to alleviate the pressure of those aged-care numbers that the hospital is experiencing.

Mr YAN: Aged-care beds were promised by the federal government in 2021; that is my understanding. I believe I spoke about it in Estimates last year and the year before. Why have those beds not eventuated?

Ms UIBO: I will pass to the CE for that response, but it is around some of the processes. It was not a financially sustainable model, as I understand.

Professor BRICENO: In 2020 the Commonwealth Government had licences for aged care available for providers to apply for. In the Northern Territory there were no providers interested in those licences, so the Northern Territory Health department applied for the licences and got them with the intention to work with the sector locally and put incentives in place for them to build and run the aged-care facilities. We were holding the licences on behalf of the sector.

We had the pandemic, which put this issue on hold temporarily. Post-pandemic the aged-care sector had been significantly hit by the COVID outbreaks, and the royal commission into aged care made the sector nervous to invest and expand. The margins in the sector are very thin, so a 60-bed facility did not really hit

the mark to be a commercially viable venture, particularly with new requirements under the royal commission's recommendations.

We put out an expression of interest to attract the sector to partner with us in establishing a facility, which did not attract any viable or sustainable applicants at the time. It was discussed with the Commonwealth to expand our offering to a bigger number that, first of all, would futureproof the needs of the Territory—60 was basically our current need, so we were thinking a larger number will provide a bit of futureproofing—and also make the commercial proposition more viable for the sector.

That is when there were some changes in the Commonwealth and the commissioner of aged care stopped that licence proposal and said, 'If you run the aged-care facilities, we will fund them on a similar basis', so the licences are no longer a prerequisite. We have been waiting on the release of an infrastructure grant from the Commonwealth that we were planning to apply for on behalf of the sector to put some collaboration in place to make that venture even more viable and then call for a provider to partner with us. In the absence of a provider we will need to step into that space, but it would not be the first time that the Territory stepped up to cover these types of responsibilities and ended up carrying them on for longer than we originally intended.

That need has increased exponentially since the pandemic; therefore, there is an urgent need for us to take carriage of it.

Mr YAN: Thank you, Dr Briceno, I understand. Knowing the pressures on aged care and the pressures that aged care is putting on Royal Darwin Hospital—taking up those acute beds with people who probably do not need to be in there—I wonder why we have not moved on this faster. It is a growing issue that is putting pressure on our hospital with those beds being taken up by aged care when people could be looked after elsewhere. That is now having a flow-on effect all the way down through to our A&E.

You spoke about the budget in your opening statement. I want to clarify a few things because you are talking about an additional few hundred million dollars of investment. The budget papers do not reflect that. On page 141 we see a decline in the budget from 2023–24 to 2024–25 of nearly \$120m, most of which is in hospitals. What will that actual reduction in funding mean overall for our hospitals?

Ms UIBO: The work that is being done around health services is on where those pressure points are. We have spent a bit of time talking back and forth about that. We still maintain we have that inequity of Commonwealth funding for some of our key services, so the NT is providing a large proportion of our money for some of the primary healthcare services that the Commonwealth should really be taking responsibility for. We have had many conversations about that from the NT Government's perspective.

In terms of the actual dollar figures, I will pass to my senior officials to clarify some of the points that you have raised so that we can put it on the record. I will start with the CE and he might hand to some of his colleagues.

Professor BRICENO: The main challenge for us has been the historic inequity of the Commonwealth contribution to our hospitals. That is now being recognised and will be rectified. There was an increased contribution of the NT Government to hospital activity this financial year, which is decreasing next financial year in expectation that the Commonwealth contribution will increase from the existing baseline of 33% to the national average of 40.6% against hospital activity.

There has also been disproportionate inflation impacting health services. It is unknown whether that will be continuing into the next year, so there have been provisions to consider some of that but probably they were willing to go through another year to see whether those changes are temporary or longstanding.

Finally, there has been an expectation of improved revenue streams that Health has at its disposal under the existing funding agreements to minimise the gap that has been described in the budget papers.

I pass to Samantha Byrne, our deputy chief executive, for the finance side.

Ms BYRNE: There are some Commonwealth funding decisions that we are still waiting on as well. At the time of publishing the budget, there is a number of other agreements under way being negotiated. Some of that information has come to hand, so we are expecting at this point about an additional \$96m to come through for a range of Commonwealth funding agreements, like the National Health Reform Agreement, urgent care clinics, aged-care funding from the Commonwealth and some primary healthcare funding as well.

Mr YAN: You were saying there was a \$200m increase. By the budget papers it is a \$120m decrease, less the \$96m we are talking about additional. We are still down \$24m on the previous budget, so I do not understand where the additional \$200m you are talking about is.

Ms UIBO: The \$200m is around 2023–24 to cover off that, but I will ask the CE to talk about this.

Professor BRICENO: The \$200m was an increase on the base budget for 2023–24 in recognition of the increased cost of healthcare delivery in the Territory, mainly delivered by inflationary pressures that would impact on our consumables, contracts and personnel costs. Also, it is in recognition of the increased cost of the National Efficient Price, which is the price utilised to cost to our hospitals. That also reflected the need for us to engage in a disproportionate amount of agency labour hire.

As we described, the workforce shortage in the Territory has impacted us disproportionately compared with other jurisdictions. In order to maintain services we have been forced to go into the labour hire space. We are not alone in that area; the whole of Australia and probably the whole world were short of health professionals which meant that the price of this labour hire went about 40% higher in 2023–24 compared with what it was in previous years. There is not only an increased demand to use it but also a very significant increase in cost.

There were unforeseen pressures that NT Health experienced. When government was briefed on the matter then the extra \$200m came in the budget to try to alleviate some of those pressures.

Mr YAN: The claim of the \$200m is not from your revised budget, which was put in place in December. Are you saying it is from the initial budget at the start of 2023–24? It seems a little misleading, does it not?

Ms UIBO: As the CE outlined, when those extra costs, demands and pressures were realised the NT Health worked closely with the Department of Treasury and Finance to bring that matter to attention. There was not the cliff point essentially for the department to get to. Having done all the work on the anticipated extra pressures before we even get to the end of financial year that is where the extra increase in the department's budget—a decision that was made by government—to support the operations and demands came from, as well as looking at the forward planning which was the extra \$100m in the next financial year.

Mr YAN: The Chief Minister came out publicly in media and slammed the various NT Health executives for effectively a budget blowout and laid it at their feet for that increase of \$200m—not what has been explained now. That is why I am trying to get to the bottom of what this means.

It was \$2,180,526,000 to run Health at the end, with the revised budget, and there is actually a decrease. Although I take into account the \$96m top-up, by the look of this you will still be \$24m short. By your own admission, Dr Briceno, with that reduction in FTE in nursing you are having to bring in more and more labour hire which comes at an increased cost. Do you predict that you will exceed the budget that you have been allocated for this year?

Ms UIBO: I put on the record some of the work that NT Health is doing with some of our other agencies, like the Office of the Commissioner for Public Employment, on providing options and productive ways forward to look at not just the attraction piece for workforce in health for the Territory but also the retention. A lot of the feedback through NT Health is that our hardworking health professionals want more flexible work arrangements, which under the current model of the NTPS is not quite keeping in step with what we are seeing offered through, for example, the ACCHOs—the Aboriginal community-controlled health organisations—with the flexible work model.

There is a really strong piece of work that NT Health is doing in partnership with the commissioner about what models can be looked at and whether there are determinations within the Commissioner for Public Employment's powers under the PSEMA on flexible work models that could be used within particular positions in Health.

There is a longer piece we are working on to alleviate the cost and reliance we are seeing—not just in the Territory but across the whole country—on agency staff. As the CE pointed out, the cost of not just the purchase of agency staff but the general cost has also risen, hence the processes we have undertaken around the Health budget for the incoming financial year. Some of that work has already started—just to provide you with that insight, Member for Namatjira. There are other areas we are focusing on. It is not just about the dollars; it is about how we retain some of our health staff and provide more flexibility in their work arrangements. That is where they are leading that work with the Commissioner for Public Employment.

Professor BRICENO: I am happy to expand on that. The expectation is that this year, now that we know some of these pressures exist, is how we can minimise the impact that they will have on us in the next financial year. A number of efficiencies have been explored and will be developed in order to contain some of that extra cost in healthcare.

At the moment we are reviewing our existing contracts for suppliers and our labour hire arrangements with some of these companies that are providing a lot of the healthcare personnel to see if we can negotiate better rates and deals to reduce the cost associated with that.

By us improving our value proposition for people to be employees in Health it will reduce the number of agency staff we have to use. I just saw some data in preparation that we have seen an increasing number of FTE in our clinical stream, particularly medical and nursing. That has not yet translated into a reduction in FTE in agency staff. There is a lag between those two. We continue to work on, as the minister mentioned, flexible employment arrangements and improving the value proposition to make NT Health a more attractive employer and therefore decrease the need for agency utilisation.

There are also avenues that have been explored to increase our revenue capacity under the existing funding model, claiming bed or activity base in the hospitals to increase the Commonwealth funding against our activity. We are also finding alternative funding streams that we may not have tapped into in the past.

Finally there is the work that we are doing with Treasury and the whole of government about rebasing our understanding of the funding formula for Health to make sure that it gives us a base where we can, in conjunction with the cost containment and efficiencies, and with increased revenues, maintain a stable budget position.

Mr YAN: It will be interesting to see what that budget position looks like next Estimates, Dr Briceno.

I understand the work that OCPE and Health are doing to try to retain staff, particularly nursing staff. Through written questions asked earlier this year, we found that there was a high percentage of nursing and health staff who were being subject to assault and criminal activities in the workplace. That is, without doubt, having an effect on the workplace.

From talking to people within Health—Alice Springs is a small community and we all know each other—I know that the number of staff who have left Health because of what is taking place in that space and either moved on to other employment or left town and gone interstate is quite significant. I have no doubt that is probably the same for Darwin.

What is Health doing in that space to make sure it is providing a safe workspace for staff? Sadly, we are not seeing a reduction in these assaults. I will be asking further questions later on what those numbers are like. We cannot allow our health professionals and frontline staff to be punching bags for everybody else.

Ms UIBO: I agree it is unacceptable that any of our Health staff are put at risk when they are doing their important duties in caring for Territorians.

We have put in place a range of measures to support the safety and security of our staff. That is being done. You will be quite aware, particularly in the region that you live in, of the extra security options at our hospitals. Unfortunately, sometimes when people are heightened or unwell—the by-product is also our hardworking health staff and the administrative teams that support us in the hospitals and clinics. Being able to ensure that they have a safe place to work is paramount. Some of the extra processes and measures that we have put in place is to look at security and the working conditions for our health staff.

I will pass to the CE to speak in a bit more detail about some of the other processes we support within the department, particularly in hospitals because they tend to be the bigger place for patients, but also the regional and remote clinics and some of the safety measure we have installed.

Professor BRICENO: I echo the minister's words that staff safety is our utmost priority. If staff are not protected and safe they cannot care for Territorians. We have a zero-tolerance policy against aggression towards staff. We work closely with other government agencies and internally to ensure the safety of our staff is guaranteed at all times.

That has required investment in security and in de-escalation training for our staff. It requires addressing the root causes of these issues to do with access and demand. We have a very busy emergency department. It

is a heightened environment that will increase the frustration of patients and staff. Addressing the issue of overcrowding in hospitals will help that matter as well.

The impact that this has on retention and attraction of staff is something that we are painfully aware of. The root cause of that is the fact that the Territory relies heavily on importing a clinical workforce. That means that people do not have roots in our communities and therefore can just pack their bags and leave. Having a workforce that is locally trained, locally grown and has roots in the Territory will definitely help in ensuring that bit of extra resilience required. Not that we should tolerate violence at any time—that is not what I am suggesting—but the issue that people just pack their bags and leave is something that is historic in the Territory. Health professionals are transient here; the vast majority of them—we have a core of doctors and nurses who have been here for many years—come and go.

Growing our own is a big priority for us. That is a long-term strategy. It takes us five years to grow a doctor and three to four to grow a nurse. That investment that we do today we will not see the results until three to five years later.

The impact on attraction and retention that occupational violence has is something that we are working closely with our services and with other government agencies to minimise and understand the real impact, but also addressing the root causes.

Mr YAN: What is the total cost of security to Northern Territory Health? I will ask about regions, so you might need to take it on notice.

Ms UIBO: The total cost as of the reporting period, 1 July 2023 to 31 March 2024, is \$13.337m.

Mr YAN: Are we currently spending \$13.337m on security in Health across the Territory?

Ms UIBO: Yes. That includes security expenses—internal security, patient safety officers, security operational standard classes and some of the back-of-house infrastructure that leads that, like the enabling services such as business information services relating to security in some of our buildings.

It is not just the hospitals. It also includes health admin infrastructure like Manunda Place in Darwin, some infrastructure services and the Palmerston Health Precinct.

Mr YAN: Just over \$13m for security is a huge number. Do you have that by region?

Ms UIBO: Yes.

Mr YAN: Do you have it for Darwin?

Ms UIBO: I do not want to read the numbers wrong, so I will pass to Dr Briceno.

Professor BRICENO: The actuals for the reporting period are:

- Barkly region—\$380,000 from a budget of \$318,000
- Big Rivers region—\$396,000 from a similar budget
- Central Australia—\$3.995m, which was a significant variation from a budget of \$1.6m
- East Arnhem—\$171,000 from a budget of \$200,000
- Top End—\$8.2m, which was a slight deviation from a budget of \$7.898m.

The total actuals for the reporting period was \$13.337m and the budgeted amount was \$10.5m.

Mr YAN: The biggest increase, apart from Darwin with an increase over \$1m, is Central Australia which increased by nearly \$2.4m.

Ms UIBO: Yes, that is correct.

Mr YAN: Does the amount of \$3.95m in Central Australia include remote communities? Do you have a breakdown between the Alice Springs Hospital and remote communities?

Ms UIBO: It includes clinics and hospitals. If there is a particular area you want to focus on please outline that. If we can answer now we will, otherwise we will need to take it on notice.

Mr YAN: I have reports from health staff in a couple of areas who had to end up with security look after their homes as well as the clinics. The communities I am interested in are Papunya and Yuendumu.

Professor BRICENO: Those two communities have required the engagement of security personnel to facilitate services and secure the safety of our staff. The total amount of the expenditure on those two clinics was \$1.4m for the year.

Mr YAN: For both communities?

Professor BRICENO: Yes.

Mr YAN: Are there any other communities in Central Australia that had security requirements for the clinics and staff?

Ms UIBO: No.

Mrs LAMBLEY: In your opening statement you mentioned the ambulatory care facility for the Alice Springs Hospital. I have been tracking this for quite a while. It was first announced in 2019 with federal government funding of \$25.7m. In 2021 your government said that it:

... will deliver a broad range of services including renal dialysis, oncology, obstetrics and gynaecology clinical services and midwifery, to meet growing demand in the region.

That was in the 2021–22 budget papers.

We now have none of that apart from a renal dialysis unit, which you are moving from a community health base at Flynn Drive, where it has been for over 30 years, to an acute hospital setting. We have just heard from you and the executives that all the acute hospital settings in the Northern Territory are under enormous pressure, politically, financially and staffing-wise.

Why would you do this? It beggars belief. Why would you move a community health service from where it should be? Professor Briceno just said that renal dialysis needs to be closer to home and in the community. Why would you move our well-established Flynn Drive community health renal dialysis unit from the community to an acute hospital setting?

Ms UIBO: Member for Araluen, I note that you have been following this area closely and have asked many questions about it. We have some information about some of the processes that I know relate to the concern in your question. I will pass to the CE to start and then we will see if we have any other follow-ups.

Professor BRICENO: My understanding is that this project was a Commonwealth initiative that was promised to Central Australia in 2019, as you pointed out. Unfortunately the pandemic put that project on hold. When it was revisited the cost of infrastructure projects had significantly increased, so the budget allocated was no longer sufficient to build what was promised, even with a significant Northern Territory Government contribution to that build, which meant that the scope of the project needed to be revised and in a way reduced to what is being proposed.

With regard to moving dialysis services into the hospital, I agree with you. What we are trying to do is push dialysis and renal replacement therapy closer to home; however, there are patients who will always be required to live in Alice Springs or in Darwin or in the major centres of Katherine, Nhulunbuy and Tennant Creek to access dialysis services and healthcare more broadly. The expansion of dialysis services in Alice Springs, Darwin and Palmerston and so on is a part of our renal strategy, not only pushing those services out to the remote areas but also enhancing those services when they need to be provided in the urban centres.

My understanding is that the discussion was related to how we increase the dialysis capacity in Alice Springs and whether we continue on Flynn Drive or whether we expand somewhere else. Those are the discussions that the local teams are leading as to where those services are better located.

Also, the intention would be to gain some increased integration with hospital services. Some dialysis patients just come to access the dialysis and go home, but many of them come and need to access other hospital services. Also, there is the staffing between the satellite dialysis unit and the hospital.

Having proximity to the hospital is not entirely a negative thing, as long as we have a proper ambulatory care function where people come in and out and do not have to stay in the hospital. But it gives us some efficiencies and economies of scale for services like laundry, cleaning, maintenance of infrastructure and sharing personnel—clinical and non-clinical. There are some advantages to having that facility near the Alice Springs Hospital campus. It sort of defeats the purpose of being through community, but you can still gain the best of both worlds if the design is right.

Mrs LAMBLEY: Thank you for your frankness. That is the best response I have received in some time.

What do you intend to do with the Flynn Drive community health site, which currently houses all those renal dialysis chairs?

Ms UIBO: I will pass to the department on this because it would be about what the clinical need is.

Professor BRICENO: My understanding is that the discussions with the local teams are still in place and are engaging with the stakeholders. I do not think a final decision has been made on that space, but I am happy to take the question on notice and provide an update on what the latest considerations are for the Flynn Drive facility.

Mrs LAMBLEY: Thirty years of having renal dialysis in a community health setting at Flynn Drive has been developed because it was seen for many years, decades, and probably still is seen as a preferred location for the mainly Aboriginal clientele who use that. Bringing all those patients and their families, which would amount to hundreds of people attending Flynn Drive at the moment, into an already congested, overburdened hospital precinct really does not make a lot of sense.

There might be some synergies and efficiencies around staffing, laundry and things like that, but when there is a hospital like Alice Springs, which really does not have much spare space at all, now going to be the site for all these people, who are mainly Aboriginal people and do not generally like going to the hospital, who will be funnelled in through that horrific Todd Street entrance, which is notorious for all sorts of problems—antisocial behaviour, crime, accidents, incidents—I do not understand on balance how you can make that decision.

Is this about the terms of the funding from the Commonwealth? Is it about the fact that the Commonwealth has come up with this funding for ambulatory care and that renal dialysis fits into it? You need a new renal dialysis unit at Flynn Drive and this is where you have landed; it has to be spent in this way. Is that the reason? Is it related to the conditions of funding that this package of money has come to us with?

Ms UIBO: I will start off with a bit of a response to your question and then I will pass to the CE.

We recently released the next iteration of the NT Kidney Plan. That is a five-year plan. It includes a lot more work around on-country or closer-to-home care, particularly for renal dialysis. It is not an issue that is decreasing in the Northern Territory, unfortunately.

As a part of that Kidney Plan, the next couple of years are focused on some of the other support services, such as workforce support services. My understanding as a local member for a predominantly bush electorate, some of the pressures regarding having a workforce that is able to support Territorians with end-stage renal failure is a part of the pressure that you raised in your question.

We have worked on several different elements and key priorities within that plan. It does not necessarily address the current needs which is why we have to do some immediate planning on how we cater for those high numbers, particularly in Central Australia.

Ultimately, through NT Health, our ACCHOs and non-government organisations like Purple House, there is a huge shift towards a partnership in working on how we can get on-country care and close-to-home care. Some people may not be suited to ever returning home, if they do not live in a place like Alice Springs and are from a community in Central Australia, because they may have chronic illnesses aside from the renal failure. They may never be able to return home permanently because they need to be close to clinical care which is best provided in Alice Springs for that individual.

Professor BRICENO: To expand on my initial answer, this has been a complex space with the situation evolving rapidly and the funding not being able to keep up with what the original intention was. Also, the original intention may not have been what our current need or future predicted needs are.

My understanding is that the local teams have been working very closely with DIPL as the department that manages infrastructure projects to try to get the best out of what is possible within the constraints of the funding but also to meet the current and future demands of the Alice Springs and Central Australian communities.

I completely agree with you about trying to keep people away from hospitals. Hospitals are not a pleasant place to be in. If you can be treated anywhere else, by all means that is our preferred option. By the same token, given our numbers, sometimes you need to gain some of those economies of scale and efficiencies. That is when we need to find answers that are a compromise.

The team in Alice Springs have been working closely to see how they can maximise the benefit of the Commonwealth and NTG infrastructure investment to provide the best care in the ambulatory care setting. Renal fits the definition of ambulatory care or non-admitted care. The intention for outpatient clinics and any non-admitted care where people can access clinical services that do not require them to stay the night in hospital is an area we want to invest more in and provide more services in. Because the clinicians who offer those services tend to be the same ones who work in the hospital, being co-located offers significant advantages to the workforce that is already stretched.

My understanding—and I probably will take some on notice—is that a lot of these decisions have not been completely set, and details of some are still being explored in the conversations that we are having. There is potentially some room to move, but the existing thinking is moving in the direction of having renal dialysis on campus. Whether we need to continue with Flynn Drive and complement it here or replace it, those discussions are still being had.

We recently commissioned a clinical services plan that is helping us try to understand the demand in the next 15 to 20 years and how we prepare our infrastructure investment to meet that demand. In the clinical services planning there is also the intention to look into alternative models of care. We are trying not to do a linear projection that will have 1,000 more patients requiring dialysis and therefore we need X number of chairs. We are thinking that if this is where we are going, how do we decrease the incline by improving prevention? How do we provide alternative models of care that do not require haemodialysis and renal transplantation? Are there other ways of managing chronic kidney disease through conservative ways? Can haemodialysis be provided closer to home and, if not provided at home, can it be provided in a satellite unit or in a hospital? We are trying to diversify the way we offer services and meet that demand.

Madam DEPUTY CHAIR: We will take a break for 10 minutes.

The committee suspended.

Madam DEPUTY CHAIR: Welcome back. We will return to questions on the opening statement. Do we have any further questions or can we start moving down the output groups?

Mr YAN: I have finished with the opening statement.

Madam DEPUTY CHAIR: The committee will now proceed to consider the estimates of proposed expenditure contained in the Appropriation Bill 2024–25 as they relate to the Department of Health.

Agency-Related Whole-of-Government Questions on Budget and Fiscal Strategy

No questions.

OUTPUT GROUP 4.0 – DISEASE PREVENTION AND HEALTH PROTECTION **Output 4.1 – Disease Prevention and Health Protection**

Madam DEPUTY CHAIR: The committee will now consider Output Group 4.0, Disease Prevention and Health Protection, Output 4.1, Disease Prevention and Health Protection. Are there any questions?

Mr YAN: This relates specifically to health protection. This morning there was an *NT News* report on a 13-year-old study published by the University of Queensland which cited Darwin and the greater Northern Territory as one of 34 locations across Australia in which PFAS was present in drinking water. I understand this is primarily a Power and Water matter, but the article referred to NT Health approving a drinking water monitoring program. Are you able to provide me with the specifics on what role NT Health has in this process?

Ms UIBO: I will call on the Chief Health Officer, Dr Christine Connors, to join us at the table and provide some of the detail of this response. I will start by leading on two points before I pass to Professor Connors.

The work on water quality and safe drinking water is work we take seriously. It goes across a couple of different agencies. As you pointed out, Essential Services across the Northern Territory also plays a role.

A small commentary point before I pass to the professor is that some work has been done to eliminate PFAS in water in the Northern Territory. You referenced a report from today, and I apologise I have not seen that report.

Regarding the recent work on PFAS in the Northern Territory, I can talk from the Katherine perspective. Power and Water Corporation has done a phenomenal job and has built the largest PFAS water treatment plant in the Southern Hemisphere, we believe; we are just checking on that detail. It sits under Minister Kate Worden, so there may be some questions that you want to ask her next week.

The work that has been done has been a collaboration around the levels of PFAS in the drinking water. In a place like Katherine—on which the Northern Territory has had a large focus—in partnership with the Commonwealth Government through Defence we have been looking at a solution for Katherine and some of the affected areas for water quality.

We have been looking at drafting further safe drinking water legislation; Minister Worden may be best placed to ask any questions of next week.

Professor CONNORS: Member for Namatjira, can you repeat the question?

Mr YAN: The issue of water is primarily Power and Water, but the article references NT Health approving a drinking water monitoring program. Can you tell me specifically what role NT Health has in that process?

Professor CONNORS: NT Health has a formal memorandum of understanding with the Power and Water Authority, whereby we collaborate with them closely and provide advice to them in terms of any exceedances of the chemicals and aesthetic qualities and bacterial issues that they monitor routinely. They publish all that data on the website and produce a report each year. As part of our MOU they provide that to Health and the Chief Health Officer to approve the report to ensure that we consider the information they are providing is factual from the health perspective.

They follow—and we follow—the National Health and Medical Research Council drinking water quality guidelines. PFAS is not part of routine testing. It was specifically tested for in Katherine because of the Defence facility. It is being monitored through PAWA and through research studies that have been undertaken, but it is not part of that routine annual reporting.

Mr YAN: Thank you, I appreciate the answer. I have nothing further in Disease Prevention and Health Protection.

Mr GUYULA: What are the key performance indicators in relation to rheumatic heart disease for the NT? Are we continuing to see an increasing number of people with this disease?

Ms UIBO: Like you, I am a bit concerned about the high numbers of rheumatic heart disease across the Northern Territory; they are disproportionate to the rest of the country. Unfortunately, we have a lot of information and data about rheumatic heart disease in the Northern Territory because of our high level of cases. Young Territorians are experiencing rheumatic heart disease. You previously asked, in another portfolio, about what we are doing to alleviate the living and environmental health conditions which can lead to this disease in some areas, and you mentioned scabies.

I will pass to Professor Connors for some detail. We have a lot of data because of the disproportionate number of Territorians affected by rheumatic heart disease compared with the rest of the country.

Professor CONNORS: In terms of key performance indicators, NT Health has an agreement with the Commonwealth department and we report consistent data, along with a number of other jurisdictions, which looks at age of onset, whether it is a first episode of acute rheumatic fever or a recurrent episode and whether the person has rheumatic heart disease.

Within the primary healthcare space, both for our community-controlled health services and our NT remote health services, we also report on the number and proportion of people who require the penicillin monthly injection and what proportion are receiving that in a timely manner.

They are our main key performance indicators.

Mr GUYULA: Could you advise the number of patients across the NT who currently receive dialysis? How many of these people are from remote communities and how many of them receive treatment in their home community?

Ms UIBO: We have some answers which relate to your question in Output Group 8.0, Hospital Services and Support. We might wait until that output group, if you are comfortable, because it is particularly about renal.

Mr GUYULA: Yes.

Is the number of people on dialysis expected to increase? What is happening to prevent kidney disease?

Ms UIBO: Due to the time, we will address both questions which relate to Output Group 8.0. Could I clarify whether the first question was about the number of patients in the Northern Territory who are on renal dialysis?

Mr GUYULA: Yes.

Ms UIBO: The second question was about the increased numbers and what we are doing about prevention and support for current patients and prevent future patients.

Mr GUYULA: Yes.

Ms UIBO: I will start with an overarching answer before I pass to my senior officials.

Similar to some of the response I provided to the Member for Araluen, we have released our new NT Health Kidney Plan 2024–2029. That includes several key priorities for NT Health as well as a collaborative piece with other health providers in the Northern Territory, whether they are Aboriginal community-controlled health organisations or non-government organisations which provide care and support for renal patients.

Unfortunately, there is a growing number of Territorians who require end-stage kidney treatment. There are different ways to support and treat renal patients. In the Northern Territory there is a bit of a gap between the nurse-led care model and self-care dialysis patients. We have not been able to fill the gap in the middle around other health professionals and work.

A big part of the NT Kidney Plan is about supporting the workforce and growing jobs around what could be provided as an opportunity in the regional and remote Northern Territory as well as urban areas. A key part of that new NT Kidney Plan is about community health workers specifically for kidney care and renal dialysis. That includes prevention, as well as work on those high rates of diabetes. We are looking at micro-credentialing community kidney workers to get qualifications to purely focus on supporting renal dialysis on country or close to country and if not at home then close to home. That is a key focus. We hope that will also alleviate some of the pressure on the hospital system and the other services like Flynn Drive in Alice Springs. It is about providing the opportunity for people if they are not from a city or townships that offer nurse-led dialysis care to be back home or close to home and being able to access that life-saving renal dialysis care.

I will pass to Dr Briceno for some of those figures. Member for Mulka, there are two parts to your question, and we undertake to answer them as best we can in this session.

Professor BRICENO: The first part of your question with regard to how many Territorians are receiving haemodialysis treatment as of the reporting period is 793, so close to 800 Territorians. We have seen an increase of about 6% of patients every year in addition to that. When we talk about what the number will look like we can probably do some predictions with a 6% to 10% increase per year. We know that a large

proportion of Territorians are living with a degree of chronic kidney disease. We are concentrated on prevention, which is an area we could not address quickly enough for these Territorians, then our focus is on slowing down the progression of chronic kidney disease to make sure that they do not require haemodialysis or a transplant or peritoneal dialysis.

We probably can plan for a 6% to 10% increase per year in services, hence the need for us to have a diverse set of tools to offer that treatment for those patients as close to home as possible, not only haemodialysis at satellite units and in remote communities but also an emphasis on empowering patients to care for themselves and relatives as well. We have done that in the past. We used to train family members to provide haemodialysis to their father, mother, wife, husband, daughters or sons. We are trying to capitalise on that experience we had in the past and the renal ready rooms that were in many of our remote centres and instead of doing that as a carer responsibility create an employment pathway so that these individuals can help not only their relatives but also other community members.

With regard to the part of your question about where these patients come from, we know that 91% of patients receiving haemodialysis in the Northern Territory today are Aboriginal patients and the majority of them are from remote communities. We also know that proportion of 800 patients is almost a fifty-fifty split between Central Australia and the Top End, which is a disproportionate representation of Central Australia when we take into account the population size.

I do not have with me a breakdown of specifically where the patients are from. There is a caveat in trying to get that data because when people are displaced to an urban centre like Alice Springs, Darwin or Katherine they have to change their address for Medicare and Centrelink purposes and accommodation and housing support. Then it is difficult to capture where they are originally from because their address represents where they live now not where they came from.

One of the main focuses is to prevent people from having to relocate from remote communities permanently. They might need to spend some time in the larger centres for the initial after-doctor care but our aim is to push that care as close to home as possible.

Ms UIBO: Member for Mulka, I will add to the CE's comments in response to your question.

Something we have started to lobby the federal government on is the remote jobs program. They promised \$707m—off the top of my head—across the country for improving remote jobs and real employment pathways. I have already started lobbying, because of the pressures we have in the Northern Territory, about how we convert the skill set it takes to care for someone on dialysis, as Dr Marco spoke about, into a paid job and skill that is recognised.

Often we will see—you will see it too, Member for Mulka, in your electorate—a family member support a self-care dialysis patient. Sometimes it may then be two people taken out of the workforce: the renal patient may no longer be able to work for health reasons and the job they do may require them to be full-time, so that takes them out of the workforce; and the person caring for them often then has to either give up their full-time work or make different flexible arrangements about work.

How can we recognise that skill set as a medical skill? That caring can be trained, which is why we are doing that work on micro-credentials for community kidney workers—that is what we are calling it at the moment through the NT Kidney Plan—so we can see a pool of community members trained in that specialist area. They will obviously be supervised, credentialed and supported to deliver care on country for family members who may not want to do self-care dialysis, or to support self-care dialysis without putting extra pressure on the limited ability of nurse-led dialysis care. There is a shortage of renal nurses and doctors in the Territory and the country. How we make sure we are planning for not just the current cohort but the increased cohort in renal care is a big part of the focus NT Health has.

Madam DEPUTY CHAIR: That concludes consideration of Output Group 4.0.

OUTPUT GROUP 5.0 – COMMUNITY TREATMENT AND EXTENDED CARE

Output 5.1 – Alcohol and Other Drugs

Madam DEPUTY CHAIR: The committee will now move on to Output Group 5.0, Community Treatment and Extended Care, Output 5.1, Alcohol and Other Drugs. Are there any questions?

Mr YAN: How many people are currently on the BDR?

Ms UIBO: As of 31 March this year there were 3,365 people on the Banned Drinker Register.

Mr YAN: How does that compare with the figures for the previous year—more or less?

Ms UIBO: We will take that one on notice for now. We may be able to answer through this session.

Question on Notice No 3.22

Madam DEPUTY CHAIR: Member for Namatjira, please restate the question for the record.

Mr YAN: How many people were on the BDR for the previous reporting period? How does that compare with the current reporting period?

Madam DEPUTY CHAIR: Minister, do you accept the question?

Ms UIBO: Yes.

Madam DEPUTY CHAIR: The question has been allocated the number 3.22.

Mr YAN: How many sales events for the BDR occurred for each month for the last six months?

Ms UIBO: For the reporting period there were 4,004,986 Banned Drinker Register-related point-of-sale transactions across the Northern Territory from takeaway outlets.

Mr YAN: Do you have a breakdown by month?

Ms UIBO: We publish the monthly reports on the NT Health website. They are available. You could get all, up until last month's data.

Mr YAN: I can get those; that is fine.

How many BDOs—banned drinker orders—have been issued since 11 December 2023?

Ms UIBO: That will sit with the Minister for Alcohol Policy, Minister Potter, in his session next week.

Mr YAN: Those BDOs are linked to the BDR. Are you not keeping the data or do you not have the data?

Ms UIBO: No. We have some of the data, but the banned drinker orders are set through police and the alcohol policy process. It does not sit in NT Health.

Mr GUYULA: What alcohol rehabilitation services are there for people to attend based on country?

Ms UIBO: We have regional and community breakdowns of some of our remote alcohol and other drug treatment services.

Professor BRICENO: The officials may provide a bit more data if required, but I can provide you with the number of services that we commission in the regions to offer alcohol rehabilitation and all the other types of AOD treatment. For example, there are organisations like CatholicCare NT that are commissioned for counselling, information and education in Darwin but also on the Tiwi Islands and in Wadeye.

There is BRADAAG in Tennant Creek and the Barkly that offers residential rehabilitation treatment services as well as a sobering-up shelter and other services.

BushMob in Central Australia offers residential rehabilitation treatment and volatile substance abuse and AOD treatment services for young people and outreach and tele-support and case management. I have a list of a few more. There is CAAAPU, Congress and DASA in Central Australia. They are all commissioned to offer some of those services.

In the East Arnhem region, the East Arnhem Regional Council and the East Arnhem youth alcohol and other drug services are also commissioned to offer some alcohol and other drug treatment services in the region.

Kalano Community Association Inc in the Big Rivers offers residential rehabilitation treatment.

MacDonnell Regional Council in Central Australia and Kintore offer a youth contribution grant for engagement and education programs and offer the same program in Papunya.

Miwatj Health Aboriginal Corporation receives funding for the social and emotional wellbeing programs for mental health and AOD services in East Arnhem.

The NT Health AOD teams also offer outreach services for assessment and withdrawal management, as well as opioid pharmacotherapy, VSA and case management, education and capacity building across the five regions in the NT.

In the Roper Gulf Regional Council area in Big Rivers there is a youth contribution grant used for engagement and education.

Maybe, Cecilia, you can expand on that.

Ms GORE: In addition to the work that NT Health is funding directly there is also, particularly for young people, a number of providers that we offer brokerage for so that they can fund families to take young people on country for respite, healing and rehabilitation. That is often happening in East Arnhem, so they do not appear in these lists because it is part of an overall funding bucket. It is designed for the individual family or clan group and young people. We are working to expand that approach.

In terms of adults, the only place where we have genuine on-country supports at the moment is Tiwi Islands. There is a Tiwi respite project run by the TO group there which is funded through a small grants program, so it is not a big service; it is a very customised thing. We are working with local providers to do better at it.

Answer to Question on Notice No 3.22

Ms UIBO: The 2024 numbers were 3,365, which we answered. The 2023 numbers were 3,253.

Mrs LAMBLEY: The Integrated Withdrawal and Assessment Service in Alice Springs, by all accounts, provided an exceptional withdrawal, detoxification and rehabilitation service to people in Central Australia. I was discreetly informed by many people of their disappointment in losing this service. Why did you cut it?

Ms UIBO: The services are still being provided; the site is the difference. The location where the service is provided has changed. The integrated withdrawal service has continued, to clarify that for your comfort and for those who relayed concerns to you as a Centralian member of parliament. I will pass to Cecelia Gore for detail, but in terms of the change of location, we guaranteed a continuation of the service. The location where the service was is being repurposed, which I think you are aware of. We are continuing to deliver that service.

Ms GORE: The Paperbark service, as it was most recently called, provided an intensive service to a small number of people in a location that was quite isolated from the rest of the alcohol and drug services for Central Australia. We worked with the stakeholders in the local community to talk about how we can provide intensive withdrawal services closer to town and in a much more integrated way with other services.

The numbers of people who need a genuine medicated withdrawal are very small, so those people, for the most part, can be supported either in the community or hospital. We are then moving the longer-term or short-stay respite rehabilitation component that was at Paperbark into our community-based providers. You will be aware of a number of them in Alice Springs.

It is a much more integrated approach, is more comprehensive and builds the relationships between our clinical services and our non-government services, of which three are Aboriginal led. We feel that is a better service result for Central Australia.

Mrs LAMBLEY: How many people lost their jobs through that service closing in drug and alcohol?

Ms GORE: No-one did.

Mrs LAMBLEY: Were they reabsorbed into the hospital?

Ms GORE: They have remained part of Alcohol and Other Drugs Services Central Australia. The nurses and physical support staff are now deployed across the AOD response in the region.

Mrs LAMBLEY: The concern expressed to me is the flip side of what you said—the fact that it was in an isolated location and was discreet and private. It operated there for quite some time and must have worked well. Why the change?

Ms UIBO: There are two elements to this change. Because of those low numbers, as Ms Gore outlined, what is the better service provision for those individuals? It was looking at holistically the integrated service with some of the other service providers being a part of that process and the journey for that individual to get the best care possible in Central Australia.

The other part is the underutilised facility has been requested by the Department of the Attorney-General and Justice to utilise that location to alleviate some of the pressures that agency has in service delivery. NT Health and the Department of the Attorney-General and Justice worked together to make sure that we did not have a negative impact on the service delivery for those individuals needing the integrated withdrawal service.

Ms GORE: In anything we are doing in Health where we have a really high demand, a limited clinical workforce and a need to use our resources as best we can, we have to undertake quality improvement projects all the time.

We have been in discussions with the addiction medicine specialist in Central Australia for a number of months about his desire to bring the services closer together, both for his own sustainable working hours and to look at that continuum of people who sometimes need a place to have respite; they do not need a highly intensive clinical service. We work across that continuum with the Salvation Army, CAAAPU and DASA on how we can support people as they recover because it is not usually a one-off thing. We need to make sure all the bits of the system are working so that we have the right care in the right place at the right time.

The process was accelerated somewhat because of the request from the Attorney-General's department, but it was a direction we had been heading in for quite some time to bring those services back together and think about how we redeploy them. It gives us more capacity to focus on more services in remote communities through telehealth and other things because we now have a workforce that is not isolated with a small number of people who can work across the breadth of the community.

Ms FYLES: I have a question about VSA. It has been an issue in an area of my community, and there has been correspondence. I know it is a voluntary process in terms of working with retailers and school health nurses about making people aware of what is happening in that space and what we can do in communicating with the community stepping forward. It seems to go in waves. It was an issue when I was a teenager, but it has been a particular concern of late. Can you provide some information?

Ms UIBO: I am aware that you have been advocating as the local member in this space. It is an area of concern across our communities regarding the support networks that can be accessed and where the care is best led and the models and who leads that care. Is it a government or a non-government organisation or service that is best placed to provide that?

Ms GORE: The specific issue is about what has been going on in the Darwin urban area. What we often see in the urban areas are groups of young people who are seen in public or the remnants of sniffing is seen. What we try to do always is work across government so that we involve Territory Families youth engagement officers. We deal with non-government organisations. In Darwin there is one called Amity that receives specific funding for VSA work.

It is three-pronged. We talk to the retailers where we think the young people might be getting supplies from and talk to those retailers about responsible selling.

In this instance when we know that the young people are from a particular school we will provide extra information to the school for education about the health effects and the risks of the behaviours that the young people are engaged in. There are lots of resources available online as well.

Our AOD teams will also reach out to make sure that people know who to talk to. If they have concerns beyond experimental use to more concerning behaviours, they can be referred to the AOD teams in each region.

Ms FYLES: It is a difficult issue because it is a health-based issue. Thank you for that information; it is much appreciated. I have made some notes and will share that with my community.

Is there a way in which members of the public can share information, as they may notice young people doing it on a particular path or see the empty canisters? It is great if they come to us as members of parliament, but that piece of the puzzle I know is not straightforward because it is tricky.

Ms UIBO: The question is: where can members of the public report to and access that information easily if they have concerns?

Ms GORE: We do not have a centralised reporting mechanism. What often happens is that members of the public are concerned and will provide the information in a range of ways; they may let the school know, contact their local member, ring NT Health or ring the Police on 131 444. All those mechanisms will eventually lead them to us. There are some people in the community who are mandatory reporters who are required to report what they consider might be harmful behaviours of young people.

We would encourage people to tell whoever they think the young people are closest to, because we will bring those multi-agency responses together. There is a no-wrong-door approach to this. We want council rangers, Education and Territory Families involved in the response, as it is about reducing the supply and reducing the harm.

Ms FYLES: In terms of mandatory reporting, are you able to touch on the elements of that so that committee members can be aware?

Ms GORE: The Territory has a range of legislation which directs people that they are required to report if they see young people who they think might be at harm. If it is young people, it is to Territory Families. There is a child protection number people should call. Their central intake service will then triage appropriately and investigate.

Madam DEPUTY CHAIR: I would certainly say shopping centre managers and security guards are a wealth of information when we see those waves of VSA with our young people in particular.

That concludes consideration of Output 5.1.

Output 5.2 – Mental Health

Madam DEPUTY CHAIR: The committee will now consider Output 5.2, Mental Health. Are there any questions?

Mr YAN: In your own KPIs on BP3, page 144, it shows an increase in persons receiving non-admitted public mental health presentations for the forward estimates, from 8,900 up to 9,200. The variation in these figures has been attributed in the notes to attracting suitably qualified staff. Is it the case that persons are not being able to access mental health services for treatment because there is not enough staff?

In your opening statement you spoke about the peer support network and the lived experience workforce. There has been a decrease in funding over time by the NT Government to peer support services. Grow NT is a case in point with their funding ceasing in December last year. Why are you stepping away from supporting and funding the peer support community when they can provide that valuable service and reduce mental health presentations and issues for our major hospitals?

Ms UIBO: We are definitely not stepping away from peer support programs. We have mental health community grants, which I spoke about in my opening statement, to identify and provide the opportunity for whom may be best placed to provide those services within the community and community-led models as opposed to the clinical-led model. We have been focused on providing some of those opportunities.

In relation to the variation in the Mental Health output, the partial offset of a reduction is \$1.88m which is a transfer of Commonwealth funding from 2023–24 to the 2024–25 financial year to enable the implementation of the national mental health and suicide prevention bilateral agreement and \$0.76m of external agreements, so Primary Health Network Northern Territory and the timing of the agreement renewal.

Mr YAN: I was not specifically asking about funding. I was talking about the presentations and access to mental health treatment services. Why are you stepping away from supporting and funding the peer support community?

Ms UIBO: The answer was no, we are not stepping away from that.

Madam DEPUTY CHAIR: That concludes consideration of Output 5.2.

Output 5.3 – Aged Care

No questions.

Madam DEPUTY CHAIR: That concludes consideration of Output 5.3 and Output Group 5.0.

OUTPUT GROUP 6.0 – PRIMARY HEALTH CARE

Output 6.1 – Remote Primary Health Care

Madam DEPUTY CHAIR: The committee will now consider Output Group 6.0, Primary Health Care, Output 6.1, Remote Primary Health Care. Are there any questions?

Mr YAN: What is the current separation rate of staff in remote health?

Ms UIBO: I will take that question on notice.

Question on Notice No 3.23

Madam DEPUTY CHAIR: Member for Namatjira, please restate the question for the record.

Mr YAN: What is the current separation rate of staff in remote health?

Madam CHAIR: Minister, do you accept the question?

Ms UIBO: Yes.

Madam DEPUTY CHAIR: The question has been allocated the number 3.23.

Mr YAN: How many agency nurses are currently utilised to cover the vacant positions across the Territory's remote clinics?

Ms UIBO: The answer is 36.3 FTE.

Mr YAN: What is the cost of the 36.3 FTE to Health?

Ms UIBO: We have the breakdown per region. To clarify, that was for the Top End region; I apologise. We also have our other regions.

Mr YAN: I was after across the Territory.

Ms UIBO: We have everything broken down into the regions, so we will have to take that one on notice and provide it as a whole response to you.

Question on Notice No 3.24

Madam DEPUTY CHAIR: Member for Namatjira, please restate the question for the record.

Mr YAN: How many agency nurses are currently utilised to cover vacant positions across the Northern Territory's remote clinics, and what is the cost to Northern Territory Health for the agency staff?

Madam DEPUTY CHAIR: Minister, do you accept the question?

Ms UIBO: Yes.

Madam DEPUTY CHAIR: The question has been allocated the number 3.24.

Mr GUYULA: I will ask some questions about emergency patient retrievals in homelands. The Aboriginal Health Forum recommended a planning study for homelands in north-east Arnhem Land to look at primary healthcare delivery and emergency patient retrieval. What happened to this study? I understand that NIAA initially committed to funding the study, but was unable to fund the study through the PHN. Studies such as these fall under the jurisdiction of NTG funding; is this correct?

Ms UIBO: In the Northern Territory we have two providers for aeromedical retrievals. In the Top End it is CareFlight. In Central Australia and the Barkly region it is the Royal Flying Doctor Service.

This is one of the areas to highlight. It is an important question about the inequity of Commonwealth funding. The Royal Flying Doctor Service aeromedical retrievals are funded fully by the Commonwealth. The Northern Territory Government provides the funding for the Top End region. Somewhere along the line—crazy from Canberra—someone drew a line across the Northern Territory, so we are funded for the aeromedical retrievals in the southern part of the Northern Territory; however, we are not funded federally for the top part of the Northern Territory. It is astonishing that there is a magical line the Commonwealth drew at some point.

We have pointed this out many times to the Commonwealth. We still have not had that funding inequity rectified; it has not changed. We still continue to advocate that at the Commonwealth level.

Dr Briceno, having worked in that north-east Arnhem region as a clinician, is aware of some of the challenges and work that has gone on with that trial you are talking about, so I will pass to the CE for a full response.

Professor BRICENO: Yes, as the minister stated, this is an area that is close to me. I worked in Arnhem Land for many years and was part of retrievals in the Laynhapuy Homelands and across north-east Arnhem.

The study you may be referring to was commissioned by Developing East Arnhem Ltd in partnership with CareFlight, the PHN, the Department of the Chief Minister and Cabinet, Health and a few other key stakeholders in the area to explore the best options for emergency response and aeromedical retrievals in East Arnhem.

There was particular emphasis on the Laynhapuy Homelands, which were unable to be serviced by the existing contracts with the provider due to the regulations in aviation and the state of the airstrips. The planes for the retrieval service could not land in the majority of those homelands, particularly at night, which left the residents of the homelands—which could up to 1,000 at a time—with no access to aeromedical retrieval services.

Those clinics, as you know, do not have a nurse or clinicians onsite, which means that the tasking of those aeromedical retrievals also does not follow the traditional model. It follows a model more in tune with first response, emergency response or ambulance service, but they are too far away from the base in Nhulunbuy and also non-accessible in the Wet Season.

That study was trying to provide all key stakeholders with the current state of what is happening and who is doing what, and some potential solutions to address this gap in services for the residents of the Laynhapuy Homelands. There were many proposals about third-party retrievals that MAF and other providers could facilitate in partnership with St John and CareFlight.

There were also discussions about a rotary wing aircraft or helicopter asset in the area that could land on any airstrip throughout the year. The main challenge for that proposal is the amount of time that rotary wing assets are offline and not available to be used, which is unfortunately the majority of the time. To be able to offer a reliable service, probably two helicopters were needed in the region, which then makes the cost of that service quite significant. The other component is that they require specialised pilots and a specialised workforce that can organise rotary wing retrievals.

All these findings and recommendations have been discussed at length at the Aboriginal Health Forum and with key stakeholders. I am informed that the development of the next aeromedical retrieval contract for the Top End will be coming out later this year, to hopefully commence in 2025. It will also inform some of the services related to St John Ambulance and pre-hospital care in East Arnhem.

All the findings and recommendations from stakeholders have been taken into consideration in the signing, the future state. We have also worked closely with the TEMR service, CareFlight, RFDS, St John and other

key local providers to ensure we provide an interim solution to improve access for homeland residents to aeromedical retrievals and emergency services.

I will expand on what the minister said about the inequity in funding distribution and the way these historic arrangements have taken place. I was part of that 15 years ago when the retrieval service was flown by NT Health. I was one of the flying doctors coordinating retrievals there. Then we moved on to a third-party provider who has professionalised it and offers a fantastic service in the Top End.

The challenge for us has been that the regulations of the aviation authority have imposed significant requirements for infrastructure investment that we have not been able to keep up with, particularly in remote airstrips. Most importantly, this is technically and normally a responsibility of the Commonwealth Government anywhere else in Australia. The anomaly in the Top End is something that we have highlighted to our colleagues in the Commonwealth.

The arbitrary line was drawn initially at Tennant Creek and then moved to Elliott. Anything north of Elliott is not considered remote according to this distribution, which is obviously a misunderstanding of the geography and demographics of the Territory.

Ms UIBO: Dr Briceno has been very polite saying ‘misunderstanding’.

Mr GUYULA: Last year in Estimates Dr Briceno said:

I want you to know that the Top End Medical Retrieval Service is currently being reviewed in order to design a model in the future that will have a better answer to respond to homelands.

Could you advise what happened with the review and what the better model is in my electorate?

Ms UIBO: It is also quite pertinent to the line of questioning that you had for Remote Housing and Homelands around not just housing infrastructure, but the ancillary services or infrastructure investment for homelands. I get asked a lot, particularly when I am travelling across the Northern Territory, about road infrastructure; aerodromes or airstrips; upgrades for other services; and infrastructure related to clinics, schools and Indigenous essential services, like power and water systems on our homelands. It goes to that bigger picture of my previous portfolio and the line of questioning on homelands infrastructure.

Professor BRICENO: Member for Mulka, thank you for allowing me to expand on the answer from last year. The information we obtained through this paper about what is required in north-east Arnhem Land to ensure access to aeromedical retrievals and emergency services informs the development of the services going forward.

There are a few things that I cannot disclose today because there will be some that are commercial-in-confidence and some things that will come out in a tendering process in due course. But rest assured that the needs of the homelands and of East Arnhem Land were considered when the new model was designed.

Instead of us prescribing to the sector exactly how we want the service to be provided, we are providing what are our conditions for the service to be offered by the expert providers, letting the experts in the field tell us how they can provide the access in remote Arnhem Land, particularly in homelands where airstrips have restrictions that cannot meet particular aircraft conditions. One of the things that we will put in the tender will be that the homelands need to be serviced and need to be provided with access. As to the ‘how’, we are letting some of those questions be answered by the experts who will apply for that tender.

Mr GUYULA: In last year’s Estimates I mentioned the MAF plane that had been engineered to carry a patient. The response from Dr Briceno last year was that the plane is available to be used by anyone when needed. The problem with that response is that the plane is not on standby, so often it is not available to be used when needed. It is normally fitted with the normal passenger seats and used as a charter plane. To properly respond to the health concern, MAF need to have a pilot and a plane that is dedicated to health and reserved for flying for primary healthcare and which can also be diverted to emergency patient retrievals. Is there funding in this budget for this to happen?

Professor BRICENO: There are two answers to your question. The first one is the availability of a plane to be used regularly and to be on standby for health. The two barriers that we face to achieve that goal were not financial but were more to do with regulations related to aeromedical retrieval services from the aviation authority.

For a provider to be credentialled and licensed to offer aeromedical retrievals they need to fulfil a number of requirements. Also, the providers who jump on the aircraft need to be credentialled aeromedical service providers. That is work both MAF and St John personnel have gone through to gain that accreditation and credentialling to be able to do it on a more regular basis.

We can use that asset on what we call mercy flights. When we have an emergency and we need to respond, the aviation authority allows us to use ad hoc assets for those responses, but if we want to use that asset on a regular basis or have it on standby, we need to comply with the regulations.

There has been progress in compliance from both the aircraft and aeromedical provider point of view, and from the health personnel in St John and others to use that asset. I understand that is being progressed to be used more regularly, notwithstanding that we will have only six months of this next financial year before a new contract comes in. As I mentioned, it is an imperative of that new contract and new model that the homelands are serviced through this or any other provider that can meet the regulation requirements.

Answer to Question on Notice No 3.24

Ms UIBO: The number of remote full-time equivalent nurses that are utilised through agency nursing is 105.6 FTE. That is a cost of \$26.4m per annum.

Madam DEPUTY CHAIR: Thank you, everybody. That concludes Estimates for today and for you, Minister Uibo.

Ms UIBO: Thank you very much to the committee members, and a big thank you to the NT Health senior officials and all the officials in NT Health who have done an amazing job in preparation for Estimates.

I thank the agencies on standby that did not get to appear before the Estimates Committee today. A big thank you to the Parks and Rangers division of the Department of Environment, Parks and Water Security for being on call and being on standby for Estimates, and the Department of Corporate and Digital Development. Thank you to all the agencies for all your work ahead of Estimates, and I apologise you were not able to appear before the committee. Thank you for your amazing work that you do in the Northern Territory.

The committee concluded.
