

The Estimates Committee convened at 9 am.

## MINISTER EDGINGTON'S PORTFOLIOS

### HEALTH

#### MENTAL HEALTH

#### ALCOHOL POLICY

### DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH

**Mr CHAIR:** Good morning, all. Thanks for coming in today. Minister, I welcome you to introduce the officials accompanying you.

**Mr EDGINGTON:** Mr Chair and members of the committee, I am pleased to introduce officials from Northern Territory Health who are appearing with me at today's hearing: Mr Chris Hosking, Chief Executive Officer, and Ms Angela Brannelly, Acting Deputy Chief Executive, Regional Health Service. I will introduce other senior officials as required, and for ease of reference I will refer to the department as NT Health through the proceedings.

**Mr CHAIR:** I invite you to make a brief opening statement. I will then call for questions relating to the statement. The committee will then consider any whole-of-government budget and fiscal strategy-related questions before moving on to output specific questions.

I will invite the shadow minister to ask questions first followed by committee members. Finally, other participating members may ask questions. The committee has agreed that other members may join in on a line of questioning pursued by a shadow minister, rather than waiting for the end of the shadow's questioning on the output.

Do you wish to make an opening statement regarding the Department of Health?

**Mr EDGINGTON:** Yes, I do.

Before we delve into the specifics of the 2025–26 budget, I firstly thank for their tireless work all NT Health staff. Delivering healthcare in the Territory is challenging. Our population of around 250,000 is dispersed across 1.4 million square kilometres of rugged terrain. Many of our people live in remote or very remote communities. Extending our services to ensure that we reach all Territorians takes expertise, innovation and tenacity. I have witnessed firsthand the way NT staff, more than 8,000 of them, collaborate and work together across five regions, six public hospitals, 74 health clinics and our offices to provide the full spectrum of essential patient-centred health services to Territorians. Delivering healthcare in the Territory is not for the faint-hearted. It is, however, some of the most important work we do as government, and I am immensely proud to represent the portfolio as minister.

I turn to the 2025–26 budget. As we discuss the budget, I highlight that our government inherited a structural budget deficit in Health of more than \$300m. Our government addressed some of this shortfall in the 2025–26 budget with a \$100m ongoing increase to the NT Health budget. This year we invested a record \$2.33bn for NT Health services. This is a \$273m increase from Labor's 2024 budget and forms part of a broader \$2.5bn health-related budget for 2025–26. The 2025–26 Health budget includes \$1.536bn for hospital services and support; \$313.4m for primary healthcare; \$210.6m for community treatment and extended care, including \$16.5m for the fit-out and operation of a new mental health ward at Royal Darwin Hospital; \$2.1m for disease prevention and health protection; and \$26.2m for the National Critical Care and Trauma Response Centre.

Since taking on the Health portfolio after the August 2024 election, I have been working closely with the new NT Health chief executive to implement a range of measures to repair the NT Health budget. A target of \$100m in cost reductions over three years has been set, and we are on target to achieve the first \$30m of that by 30 June this year.

A structural deficit of around \$200m remains in our Health budget—a deficit that needs the Australian Government to step up and do its fair share. With the federal election now decided we are recommencing our advocacy with the Australian Government to address inadequate hospital funding under the National Health Reform Agreement, which sees the Territory with the lowest contribution rate of any state or territory at just 31.8%. Bringing us to parity with other jurisdictions would see the Territory's hospital funding improve

by close to \$1bn over five years. Disparity is how aeromedical retrieval services are funded in the Top End, a difference that sees the Territory bearing over \$50m each year, a cost met by the Australian Government in every other state.

As we discuss the budget, I am mindful of our government's three core objectives: reducing crime; rebuilding the economy; and restoring our unique lifestyle. These objectives are deeply embedded in the work that NT Health does each day to provide high-quality healthcare to Territorians, prevent illness and build resilience for the future.

When it comes to reducing crime, the work of NT Health plays a crucial role in dealing with the root causes to address crime and ensuring communities have access to critical services. Budget 2025–26 includes an uplift of \$20m in the Corrections budget to meet the emerging costs of healthcare in the prison system. This is a key element of broader and more comprehensive funding to support our government's commitment to reducing crime and making the Territory a safer place for everyone to live, raise a family and thrive.

A strong economy begins with a strong foundation and a stable and secure population. The investments made in health and ongoing funding to increase access to services, reduce hospital demand, invest in NT Health staff and improve infrastructure directly support our economy by ensuring our health services are not only responsive but also efficient and future ready.

When it comes to restoring our lifestyle, an effective, contemporary public health system is a key foundation for any society that is a great place to live, work, raise a family and enjoy a terrific lifestyle. By investing in NT Health and enhancing its health system capacity, we are ensuring that we can continue to enjoy our vibrant lifestyle in the Territory with confidence.

When it comes to service demand, increased demand for hospital services, particularly from an ageing population, is a significant challenge for healthcare providers the world over.

Emergency department attendances across our Territory hospitals have continued to increase over the last five years. The complexity of patients presenting to our emergency departments also continues to increase. During the reporting period, there were 15,655 presentations to Territory emergency departments, an increase of more than 200 on the previous year.

Royal Darwin Hospital was also plagued by code yellows. This is no longer the case. Our clinicians and hospital staff are driving improvement and ensuring the delivery of safe and quality emergency care through improved bed management practices, regional escalation protocols, real-time monitoring of patient flows and a clinically driven all-of-hospital response to capacity management. I am proud to inform the committee today that RDH has not experienced a code yellow due to bed capacity since August 2024.

Our government is also investing in infrastructure to ease demand and enhance healthcare service delivery. Work is well underway at Royal Darwin Hospital to construct an \$18.2m 32-bed multipurpose ward. The ward has been designed to allow for future expansion, with the ability to construct two additional wards above the new building in the future.

**Mr PAECH:** That is leadership.

**Mr EDGINGTON:** Increasingly, patients presenting at hospitals ...

**Mr CHAIR:** Apologies, minister. The minister will be heard in silence.

**Mr PAECH:** Sorry; I was just complimenting his fantastic leadership.

**Mr EDGINGTON:** Increasingly, patients presenting at hospitals require a mental health response as part of their treatment. This trend is not unique to the Territory and is increasingly adding a layer of complexity to our clinical care.

Our government is leaning in to support an enhanced mental health response. A new 24-bed \$86.3m mental health ward is under construction at RDH and will provide a dedicated space for patients experiencing acute mental health crises. As highlighted earlier, we are providing \$16m in new funding to meet the operating costs of the ward as well as an additional \$500,000 for the purchase of medical equipment.

The investment is not all going into RDH either. In Central Australia at Alice Springs Hospital we recently opened a new \$8.6m hybrid operating theatre. I was fortunate to have a tour before it became operational. It

is a fantastic surgical suite that combines a traditional operating theatre with high-end medical imaging technology. This new hybrid operating theatre has increased the range of surgical procedures available in Central Australia, allowing more patients to have better access to care closer to home. This is an impressive milestone for Alice Springs Hospital, as the new theatre reduces the need for multiple operations, elective surgery wait times and intrastate transfers, resulting in improved patient care and less requirement for patients to travel.

When it comes to improving access to aged care, NT Health is currently the provider of last resort. On any given day, many of our hospital beds in Darwin and Alice Springs are taken up with long-stay aged-care patients. This means that our hospitals have become the only place to care for older Territorians because there are no beds available in residential care facilities. As such, we have the highest aged-care occupancy rate at 92.2% and the longest hospital stays for older patients awaiting aged-care placement.

The NT also has fewer residential aged-care beds per capita with 47.5 beds per 1,000 people over 70 years of age compared to the national average of 67.5 beds. In Territory hospitals on any given day there are up to 80 patients who have been assessed as eligible for residential aged care, but we cannot send them anywhere because there are no aged-care beds available. This causes bed block in our hospitals and is significantly more costly than residential aged care. We estimate that it costs around \$40m each year for NT Health to provide this care.

During the reporting period \$2m in funding was allocated to design a new residential aged-care facility within the Palmerston Regional Hospital precinct. A further \$10m has been allocated to fund headworks and subdivision works to support future development. Construction of a new residential aged-care facility is estimated to require an investment of \$120m. The Commonwealth Government recently promised \$60m towards the this build cost and is engaging directly with private providers to attract interest in them building and operating a facility in the Top End. Submissions to deliver a new residential aged-care facility through the Australian Government Aged Care Capital Assistance Program closed recently, and proposals are currently being assessed.

Primary healthcare is critical for individuals and communities because it provides essential health services and is often an individual's first point of contact with the healthcare system. NT Health delivers primary healthcare services to 47 remote communities across the Territory, including visiting services.

In line with our commitment to community control, 14 health clinics has successfully transitioned to Aboriginal health organisations. Community control increases the involvement of Aboriginal communities in healthcare decision-making and improves service delivery and health outcomes. The Gunbalanya clinic is planned to transition to the Red Lily Health Board on 1 July. A lot of work has gone into this transition, and it will be a great outcome for the community.

The 2025 budget includes \$19.8m for the construction of a new health centre in Borroloola to enhance delivery of health services, which will deliver on our government's election commitment. The new centre will assist in attracting and retaining clinical staff. It will include clinical and pharmacy spaces, emergency resuscitation equipment, consulting spaces, morgue facilities and a separate patient and visitor entrance from staff.

Work is also being done to progress the transitioning of other health services in Central Australia and the Top End.

Effective primary healthcare, particularly in the bush, helps improve health outcomes, reduces pressure on hospital emergency departments and promotes a healthy lifestyle through its focus on prevention, early intervention and ongoing management of health conditions.

In our government's year of action, certainty and security we are delivering on the commitments that we took to the 2024 Territory election, including the meningococcal B vaccine program. In our first 100 days of government, NT Health delivered on our promise to ensure Territory families have access to vital protection against meningococcal B. In the past decade the NT has recorded 18 cases of meningococcal B, including three tragic deaths in the last five years. Survivors often face devastating lifelong disabilities.

On 1 January this year the meningococcal B vaccine became available to Territorians for free, providing vital protection for infants aged six weeks to two years and adolescents aged 14 to 19 years. Our government has committed \$1m to provide the first two years of the vaccination program and \$500,000 ongoing. This program marks a major milestone in safeguarding Territory families from this rare but potentially devastating

disease. As of 31 March 2025 more than 490 doses have been provided to teenagers aged 14 to 19 years and more than 2,290 doses of the vaccine to babies aged two years and under.

This free vaccination program is a game changer. It is helping Territory families avoid the unimaginable loss of a child or the long-term effects of this preventable disease.

When it comes to expanded pharmacy services, in our first 100 days we were also able to deliver on our election commitment to expand the services that community pharmacists provide to Territorians. This work started with pharmacists being trained to diagnose and treat uncomplicated urinary tract infections with a range of treatments, including Schedule 4 medicines such as antibiotics.

We have committed \$1m to the training subsidy, with around 30 students enrolled with James Cook University to undertake the required training to participate in an expanded scope of practice. Community pharmacists are highly trained and regulated health professionals who have the skills, knowledge and competence to provide additional services.

Last night I was at the Pharmaceutical Society of Australia SA/NT Annual Celebration of Excellence in Pharmacist Care. I had the honour of awarding Jaimee Anderson Pharmacist of the Year SA/NT. Ms Anderson is a Katherine local who completed her Bachelor of Pharmacy at Monash University before returning to the Territory to practise in her home town where she worked in the local pharmacy, supporting Katherine residents as well as servicing the surrounding remote communities.

Increasing the scope of practice for pharmacists works to alleviate pressure on primary care services and hospital emergency departments, as well as being more convenient for patients, reducing time and costs. Another 19 medical conditions are currently being considered for inclusion as part of the expansion of pharmacy services, further improving the availability of safe affordable healthcare for Territorians.

We are investing in our people. Delivering the best of care is only made possible by having the best people. NT Health is constantly working to attract, retain, develop, support, nurture and invest in our people.

The Nursing and Midwifery Plan increased student nursing placements by over 30%, introducing new fast-track pathways to transition students into graduate nursing programs and enhancing the graduate program to improve career pathways and future opportunities.

We grew our medical workforce through our investment in the Flinders NT Medical Program with nine additional places, and continue to support the establishment of the Charles Darwin University medical school that will commence in 2026. Our intern medical program and rural generalist program are providing career pathways and specialist training for our highly skilled medical staff.

NT Health also appointed the Territory's first-ever Chief Paramedic Officer. The Territory is only the second jurisdiction in Australia to do this. By expanding the scope of practice for paramedicine across a range of health services, including aged-care and remote health settings, NT Health aims to improve patient outcomes and experiences.

Increasing and enhancing Aboriginal employment, as well as recognising and respecting the centrality of culture to health, is necessary to enhance service access, equity and effectiveness. Other highlights include:

- 24 people enrolled in the NT Health Aboriginal Cadetship Program, which assists eligible Aboriginal NT university students to gain health qualifications and frontline employment
- a new Aboriginal enrolled nurse program model being developed for NT Aboriginal school leavers keen on a career in nursing, and this will be available from July 2025
- five Aboriginal staff members are participating in the Aboriginal leadership and development program.

On Groote Eylandt a new program to provide the Aboriginal health workforce with greater training opportunities was introduced. This pilot program enables Aboriginal people working in healthcare to train locally on country for the first time so that trainees do not need to travel to the mainland to continue their studies. Eight trainees, including school leavers and existing NT Health employees, recently commenced the first phase of this new program. I was fortunate to attend their orientation and induction session.

In closing, I would like to highlight that health services are vital for everyone at some point in their lives, and we are committed to providing a whole-of-society approach to healthcare that prevents illness and promotes and delivers high-quality healthcare for Territorians.

As Minister for Health I wish to extend a sincere and heartfelt thank you to all of the hardworking and dedicated NT Health staff. Your efforts, often at the front line of service delivery, play a vital role in keeping the Territory safe and providing great healthcare for all Territorians.

I am happy to take any questions.

**Mr YOUNG:** The Chief Minister has just got off radio and publicly admitted that OC spray will fall into the wrong hands and some Territorians will just have sore eyes. Can you confirm whether your department has done any modelling on how many hospital presentations this reckless attitude will cause or do you plan to just let emergency departments deal with the fallout?

**Mr EDGINGTON:** I have not had a chance to listen to the statement. When it comes to OC spray, that is a recent announcement by the CLP government. The policy, the changes, any discussion around legislation—look, nothing is in place at the moment. I thank the Chief Minister for making that announcement. It is a real opportunity to support people in the community who may want to protect themselves at some point.

We have not done any modelling at this point. As the policy progresses I am sure there will be some discussions about that, but at this point it is too early to focus on those issues. It is a policy announcement, and I look forward to that being delivered.

**Mr YOUNG:** There was no consideration to kind of model what hospital presentations may look like before the policy was even announced; is that what you are saying? You have not had any of those conversations.

**Mr EDGINGTON:** As I said, this is another strong policy announcement by the CLP government when it comes to delivering on our election commitment, particularly around reducing crime, rebuilding the economy and restoring our lifestyle. These ...

**Mr YOUNG:** I do not remember any policy in regard to OC spray, so where was that? I do not remember that announcement.

**Mr EDGINGTON:** The Chief Minister just made it. I think you might ...

**Mr YOUNG:** Was that before the election or after the election?

**Mr EDGINGTON:** She probably made it again on radio this morning.

**Mr CHAIR:** Gentlemen!

**Mr EDGINGTON:** You are the one who told me.

**Mr YOUNG:** You said it was an election commitment. I am just trying to figure out ...

**Mr EDGINGTON:** I did not say it was an election commitment.

**Mr CHAIR:** Member for Daly and minister, thank you; we will not be cutting each other off. The Member for Daly can ask his question and the minister will respond. I believe the minister had the floor.

**Mr EDGINGTON:** As I said, our election commitment was to reduce crime, rebuild the economy and restore our Territory lifestyle. Recently, the Chief Minister has made a policy announcement regarding OC spray. As you said, Member for Daly, you heard that on radio this morning. I have not heard that on radio this morning. There have been previous announcements. In fact, the Chief Minister was in Katherine last week to make that announcement.

When it comes to modelling of potential presentations into the health system, any of that work will be considered at a future point, but it certainly has not been considered at this point.

**Mr YOUNG:** Considering that the Chief Minister did say on radio this morning that if it does get into the wrong hands some Territorians—innocent Territorians—might just have sore eyes, has there been any advice from NT Health in regard to the use of this spray around respiratory distress, eye injuries or chemical burns with

OC spray misuse, or were you excluded from those conversations entirely when Cabinet decided that innocent Territorians having sore eyes is an acceptable side effect of the CLP policy?

**Mr EDGINGTON:** As I said, the policy announcement was made last week by the Chief Minister. We welcomed that announcement because, particularly over the last eight years, we have seen some extraordinary increases in crime across the board under the failed Labor government. We have seen extraordinary increases across not only property crime but also violence against people. We have seen significant increases in domestic, family and sexual violence.

That announcement, as I said, is a policy announcement. Any future consideration of any impact of OC spray will be considered at the appropriate time.

**Mr YOUNG:** Were you a part of any discussions around that policy announcement? You said that the Chief Minister just announced it last week, but I would have assumed that it was a Cabinet decision and you would have been part of that—or did the Chief Minister just leave you out of that decision?

**Mr EDGINGTON:** All issues are discussed in Cabinet. I know you have not been in Cabinet yet, but those decisions are made by them. The Member for Gwoja may be able to inform you what goes on in Cabinet, but ...

**Mr PAECH:** It sounds like this was the Chief Minister's call and shut you out.

**Mr CHAIR:** Member for Gwoja!

**Mr EDGINGTON:** All these things are discussed in Cabinet. At this point I am not here to go into what was and what was not discussed in Cabinet. I can assure you that this was a government announcement supported by all our members. The announcement was made last week.

The future of looking at what impact the OC spray will or will not have—there is no evidence before me at the moment saying what impact it will or will not have. Those things will be considered at the appropriate time.

**Mr CHAIR:** Minister, we will not reflect on who has and has not been in particular positions. Member for Gwoja, please no more interjections. Let us keep it to questions and answers.

**Mr YOUNG:** You have not been part of the decision-making regarding OC spray—is that what you are saying—or you have been?

**Mr EDGINGTON:** I think I have answered that question.

**Mr YOUNG:** Have you thought about the significant health impact this may create, especially if it gets into the wrong hands and innocent Territorians are sprayed with OC spray? Have you not thought to look at any modelling and the impact that may have on the emergency department or the hospitals?

**Mr EDGINGTON:** As I said, we will look at that at the appropriate time. This OC spray ...

**Mr YOUNG:** When is the appropriate time?

**Mr EDGINGTON:** As I was trying to finish in my answer, at the moment there is no OC spray on any shelf in the Northern Territory. We have opportunities to look at any impacts OC spray will have, and I will deal with that at the appropriate time.

**Mr YOUNG:** When is the appropriate time? Is it before OC spray will be available or after? When is the appropriate time for you to look at that? I would have thought it would be before you made the policy announcement.

**Mr EDGINGTON:** I think I have said it a couple of times. The policy announcement was made by the Chief Minister in Katherine last week. We will have ongoing discussions about that policy and the impacts, if any, that it may have.

**Mr YOUNG:** Given the Chief Minister has essentially green-lit misuse of a chemical weapon in public, will you direct your department to prepare a public health response strategy or are you comfortable waiting until the first innocent Territorian gets sprayed in the face before taking action?

**Mr EDGINGTON:** As I said before, we will be dealing with any issues around that. We have the best trained NT Health staff in the Territory; we have nurses on the front line; we have the very best doctors on the front line; we have St John paramedics on the front line. We have the very best people. If there are any impacts, they will respond accordingly.

**Mr YOUNG:** I suppose that is the issue. No-one is doubting the hard work from our health sector—from nurses, doctors and St John Ambulance—but this policy announcement will have a direct impact on their ability to run their hospitals and clinics and respond to emergencies. I am just trying to figure out how you have not decided to model the impact this may have on our emergency services. Have you taken into consideration the impact this will have on our health workers?

**Mr CHAIR:** Before you answer, minister, I will allow this question, but we are flirting with argumentative, under Standing Order 109.

**Mr EDGINGTON:** Firstly, the Member for Daly has indicated in his question that will have—he might have used the word ‘significant’—an impact on our staff. I think that is an assumption by the Member for Daly; there is no evidence to support that at all, that there will be a significant impact on our frontline staff. That is an assumption being made by the Member for Daly.

As I made clear, if there are impacts on the health of anybody, we have the very best nurses, doctors on the front line and paramedics out in the community every day of the week working 24 hours a day, seven days a week. If there are—and I say if—any impacts, we have the people in place to deal with those issues. I do not accept your assumptions that it will have a significant impact on frontline staff. We will deal with those issues if and when they happen.

**Mr YOUNG:** Do you have any evidence that it would not impact our health services, or have you sought a briefing from experts in this field?

**Mr EDGINGTON:** As I said, and I will keep answering that, we will deal with these issues if and when they happen. Prior to any policy announcement, yes of course there are considerations made. I have seen comments in the media from medical staff; there is a whole range of commentary ...

**Mr YOUNG:** Through the Chair, but you have not sought a briefing from any experts? The question was around ...

**Mr CHAIR:** Member for Daly ...

**Mr YOUNG:** He is not answering the question.

**Mr CHAIR:** Member for Daly, if you are unhappy with something, just come to me and tell me what it is.

**Mr YOUNG:** I said, ‘Through the Chair’.

**Mr CHAIR:** Yes, but say, ‘Mr Chair, I have this issue’ and then I will mediate.

**Mr YOUNG:** The question was: has he consulted any medical experts in this field, considering ...

**Mr CHAIR:** I will put it to the minister. We have been on this line of questioning for 12 minutes.

**Mr PAECH:** Just testing him for when he is Chief Minister; that is all.

**Mr EDGINGTON:** Can you repeat the question?

**Mr PAECH:** Yes, Chief Minister; we will.

**Mr CHAIR:** Member for Gwoja, I ruled that we will not reflect on any positions.

**Mr PAECH:** I was promoting him. Sorry; I will take that back and save that for Chief Minister Cahill.

**Mr EDGINGTON:** Sorry, Mr Chair. I think my question was: could the Member for Daly repeat the question? There were a few interruptions, and I cannot recall exactly what he said.

**Mr YOUNG:** Have you sought a briefing from medical experts on the impact that OC spray may have on our hospital departments?

**Mr EDGINGTON:** Not at this point. As I said, the Chief Minister travelled to Katherine last week to make the announcement. That announcement now has steps underway to implement that policy. I will seek and receive any briefings at the appropriate time.

**Mr O’GALLAGHER:** Can you confirm that it is an announcement about a trial and about an action undertaken within another jurisdiction, Western Australia, for many years?

**Mr YOUNG:** A point of order, Mr Chair! This is not relevant to the minister’s portfolio. I am talking about the health implications and the impact OC spray may have, not the actual policy announcement, so I do not know where this sits within the Health portfolio for the minister. He would have to rephrase his question.

**Mr O’GALLAGHER:** It was directly about OC spray, which you have been talking about.

**Mr CHAIR:** If it is in line with Health ...

**Mr YOUNG:** It is not in line with Health.

**Mr CHAIR:** Member for Karama, can you clarify if your question is in line with Health?

**Mr O’GALLAGHER:** I think it is picking up on the Health aspects, but is asking confirmation whether this is a trial, and has this OC spray happened within another jurisdiction, Western Australia, which may inform the minister at some stage about Health aspects.

**Mr CHAIR:** I will allow this question ...

**Members** interjecting.

**Mr CHAIR:** Okay, committee, we are already getting—we have had questions going for under 15 minutes, and it is starting to get disorderly. I will allow the Member for Karama’s question, then we will go straight back to the shadow minister.

**Mr EDGINGTON:** Yes, it is a trial. Yes, it is already happening in Western Australia. It is important to make the point that OC spray has been used by the police for significant periods of time. As I previously said to the Member for Daly, at the appropriate time I will seek information from my Health department as to any possible impact should someone come into contact with OC spray. At this point, the Member for Daly is making some assumptions about the impact of OC spray. I will look at that at the appropriate time.

**Mr YOUNG:** I do not think I am making any assumptions but ensuring that you understand the implications that this policy decision may have.

I will pick up from the Member for Karama, as it is a good point, that in Western Australia this has been in use for some time. Have you spoken to your counterparts in Western Australia on the impacts this may have on our hospitals and emergency departments, considering you seem to be following Western Australia?

**Mr EDGINGTON:** I remind the committee that the announcement was made last week. I have been preparing for Estimates and questions about the budget, and I would like to hear some questions about the budget. As I have said, when it comes to briefings and seeking information, I will do at the appropriate time.

**Mr YOUNG:** Can you confirm that no changes to the identification, notification and activation system of a code yellow have been made in the reporting period?

**Mr EDGINGTON:** From my perspective, I have been particularly impressed—I will ask the CEO of our department to speak about what goes on with code yellows—with the feedback from him on the work that has been done on the front line in the emergency area in Darwin. I constantly say that our staff on the front line working for NT Health are the very best. I have been visiting hospitals and speaking to staff, and their commitment and dedication and the work they do 24 hours a day, seven days a week is absolutely incredible.

I will ask the chief executive to give a run-down on what is being done differently at Royal Darwin Hospital. I can assure you that what is being done at Royal Darwin Hospital is making a significant difference to reducing the number of code yellows. Under Labor, I think there were 16 or 18 code yellows in the last few

years, which indicates that the former Labor government did not have control of these issues. There are certainly pressure situations working on the front line, but I will pass to the CEO to give the Estimates Committee an overview of what has been happening on the front line and the work being done to make sure that we have the resources available to prevent code yellows from happening. This does not detract from the significant pressure points at Royal Darwin Hospital.

**Mr HOSKING:** ‘Code yellow’ is a technical term that basically is used to describe when we are in bed pressure distress within the hospital. Generally, this happens when we get high numbers of presentations coming through the emergency department. For a range of very good clinical reasons, the length of stay in emergency is really important. Getting people who need to be in hospital out of the ED and into a ward is a time-critical function.

Where we have experienced code yellows in the past generally relates to when we have bed block in our wards and we cannot get people out of the ED and into a ward and bed where they can be looked after. In that immediate emergent care setting, ED is the place to be, but if you need to stay in hospital for any length of time, getting into a bed on a ward where a clinical care team can look after you is absolutely important.

Where we were not perhaps performing as well as we might have in the past was getting people out of ED and onto the wards. It was the bed block that was slowing that process down. People were spending too long in ED and it was causing pressures. Code yellow is really just the internal term we use to describe a situation of extreme bed distress.

**Mr YOUNG:** In the last reporting period, how many bed blocks—as you describe it as a measurement to call a code yellow—have there been since August last year? I note the minister in his opening statement stated that all of a sudden in August 2024 there were no code yellows, which I find very hard to believe. I am just trying to find out how many bed blocks there have been since August 2024.

**Mr HOSKING:** Bed pressures in a hospital ebb and flow, as you would imagine, based on presentations ...

**Mr YOUNG:** You would have that data, wouldn't you? It is just how many bed blocks. I would assume you would be ready for these questions.

**Mr CHAIR:** Member for Daly, we will allow Mr Hosking to finish his answer. Then please raise a follow-up or an objection if you feel your question is not being answered, and then I will address it.

**Mr HOSKING:** We experience bed pressures all the time. By way of example, in the last week or two we have had bed pressures at Royal Darwin Hospital, very much at 100% capacity. What is fundamentally different and why we are not having to call code yellows on those is that our processes to get people out of ED and into wards are working much more smoothly.

The way we do that is by coordinated care across all our divisions. We have daily, and sometimes two and three times daily, checkpoints where we bring our senior clinicians and hospital administrators together. We look at a whole-of-health-system approach to managing bed pressures. That can include using capacity in other regional hospitals where we can move patients around. It includes looking at our patients who are being triaged in terms of risk and when they can be discharged. It is fair to say we experience bed pressures all the time and it varies depending on the number of presentations to the hospital.

Since August last year we have not had a situation where we could not manage it. We have continued to manage those situations of extreme bed pressure and move people through the system and get them into hospital beds where they can be cared for. Calling code yellow is a sign that things are not working. We have not had to call a code yellow because we have not been in a crisis. We have had extreme operating pressures, but we have been able to manage those very effectively.

That is an absolute credit to the clinicians and administrators at Royal Darwin Hospital. Those daily huddle meetings where we come together are a short, sharp 15 minutes to look at how we can relieve pressures. I personally attend those on a regular basis to support our staff and get a read on the pressures that the hospital is experiencing.

I cannot say how impressed I am with the staff at Royal Darwin Hospital. I need to be really clear that the pressure on the hospital system has not gone away, but the way we are managing it is more streamlined and sophisticated. It means that those patients are getting the care they need in the time that they need it.

**Mr YOUNG:** Okay; I have heard enough. Can I ask a similar question ...

**Mr CHAIR:** Member for Daly, that is not how we will end questions. You can tell me that you are satisfied with the answer.

Mr Hosking, if you could bring this to a close in the next 30 seconds, and then it will be over to the Member for Daly.

**Mr HOSKING:** I am happy to rest there.

**Mr YOUNG:** Can you confirm there have been no bed blocks since August 2024—yes or no?

**Mr EDGINGTON:** As the CEO said, there are bed pressures every day of the week. If you are still focused on code yellow, yes we do have bed pressures every day of the week; the CEO made that clear. The same pressures exist at Royal Darwin Hospital that have existed there for quite some time.

What we have seen is that the day-to-day coordination, the prioritisation and the collaboration across the clinical streams have improved considerably. That is where we have seen the major changes at Royal Darwin Hospital, and that is what relieves pressure on the emergency department. I can only commend the CEO and the staff who have taken a more proactive approach to dealing with bed pressures at Royal Darwin Hospital every day of the week.

**Mr YOUNG:** The question was: have there not been any bed blocks since August 2024? I appreciate the answer you have given, but I just want a yes or no answer. Have there not been any bed blocks?

**Mr EDGINGTON:** I will ask the CEO to expand on that and give you the answer.

**Mr YOUNG:** It does not need expanding; it is a yes or no answer. You should have the data whether there is a bed block ...

**Mr EDGINGTON:** It is not a yes or no answer.

**Mr YOUNG:** Of course it is.

**Mr EDGINGTON:** It is not a yes or no answer. This is an operational issue that you are raising. I am asking the CEO to answer your question for you, if you could be patient with that.

**Mr YOUNG:** Can I just get the CEO to answer if there have been no bed blocks since August 2024—yes or no? I appreciate the minister for allowing him to answer that.

**Mr HOSKING:** The term 'bed block' is a colloquial term. It is not a defined set of conditions that are either achieved or not. We have bed pressures every day. Some days are better than others ...

**Mr YOUNG:** Just to clarify, you did state earlier that when there are bed blocks that is a measure to call a code yellow. I am trying to understand how many bed blocks, or if there have not been any bed blocks—because there have not been any code yellows, as the minister stated in his opening statement, does that suggest there have not been any bed blocks? Is that true—yes or no?

**Mr HOSKING:** I did not say that, Member for Daly. I need to be precise about this, I ...

**Mr YOUNG:** You did.

**Mr CHAIR:** Sorry, Mr Hosking. I think the Member for Daly's question is clear. We will now go into an uninterrupted response from the minister or his team.

**Mr EDGINGTON:** I will ask the chief executive to explain to the Member for Daly the issue about bed block. The Member for Daly indicated that it was an indicator of a code yellow. There are many indicators for code yellows. I will ask the CEO to explain what the term 'bed block' means.

**Mr HOSKING:** I did use the term 'bed block' in my previous answer. I was using it in the colloquial sense that it is used within hospital administration. It is another way for describing that we have bed pressures of a critical nature which, as I have said, is a regular occurrence in the hospital.

Bed block is not a predetermined set of conditions that is either achieved or not in a binary sense and, as such, it is not a trigger for a code yellow to be called. A code yellow would be called when we are simply not coping with the bed pressures. We have not had an instance since August last year where we have not been able to cope with or manage those bed pressures.

As the Minister for Health stated, the pressures on Royal Darwin are no different from what they were last year or the year before. What has changed is the way we manage that on a day-to-day basis. That is a credit to our clinicians and staff who do a damn fine job every day. I think that is the plainest answer I can give to your question.

**J DAVIS:** Thank you, minister. Thank you, Mr Hosking and all the health people for doing such a wonderful job. Just to clarify and get away from some of the terminology, can you tell us how many days RDH has been above capacity in the reporting period?

**Mr HOSKING:** We keep that data. I do not have it at my fingertips, but we could take that on notice and table it either later in this morning's session or after the hearing today.

---

#### Question on Notice No 7.1

**Mr CHAIR:** Member for Johnston, please restate the question for the record.

**J DAVIS:** How many days has Royal Darwin Hospital been above capacity in the reporting period?

**Mr CHAIR:** Minister, do you accept the question?

**Mr EDGINGTON:** Yes.

**Mr CHAIR:** The question has been allocated the number 7.1.

---

**J DAVIS:** How often was the emergency department double-bunked in the reporting period?

**Mr HOSKING:** Double-bunking in the emergency department happens on a regular basis. As a matter of necessity, obviously the doors are always open, and we will always treat patients as they present. It fluctuates during the day. Some days we are under quite extreme pressures. Today things are steady at Royal Darwin, so today is a good day.

I do not have a specific set of data I could table with the committee this morning because that data is fluid and changes throughout the day and from day to day. The best answer I can give the committee is it is an ongoing operating pressure at Royal Darwin. It happens with regularity. When it does, we manage it the best we can. Using some of the processes I spoke to earlier we try to get people out of ED beds and into wards where they can be cared for on a longer-term basis, and that helps significantly at reducing the double-bunking, but it is a necessary thing to make sure people get the care they need. It is hard to put a single set of numbers on it, but I acknowledge that it is an operating pressure we live with every day.

**J DAVIS:** Yes, I understand. Would it be right to say we are the only jurisdiction in Australia that routinely uses double-bunking in emergency?

**Mr HOSKING:** I am not sure I could make that call with certainty. Emergency medicine presentations around Australia are under extreme pressure. It is one of the things we regularly speak about within the interjurisdictional Health Chief Executives Forum. I attended the interjurisdictional forum last Friday. Emergency pressures are one of those things that are driving strain on the healthcare system more broadly. It is also one of those areas that we are advocating very hard with our Commonwealth colleagues to try to address some of the systemic funding problems where we think we do not get a fair shake from the Commonwealth. I would be very surprised if Royal Darwin Hospital is the only hospital where that practice was undertaken. When people present at ED they need to get the care they need, and if that means putting a couple of beds closer together so we can provide the care then that is exactly what we will do.

**J DAVIS:** You mentioned one of the ways that you have managed things better is through the use of care coordinators. Can you comment on how many care coordinators there are in remote settings?

**Mr HOSKING:** We do not use care coordinators per se; we use patient flow teams that manage the flow of patients across the wards. They have become an integral part of that response I spoke about earlier in terms of having real-time joined-up movement of patients across the health system, not just looking at Royal Darwin Hospital as one unit but leveraging the other parts of the health system. We have a tactical and coordinated approach to patient flow, but we do not attach care coordinators to specific patients. That is not a specific model that we have in place.

**J DAVIS:** For example—I am not talking about specific patients—I am aware that often people are flying across the Territory multiple times for appointments that are sometimes scheduled on different days when one would hope that there could be a care coordinator ensuring that was not happening. I believe the cost to the Territory would be huge. We can come to it later, but while we are talking about it now, is there anything in this budget to help establish a stronger workforce of care coordinators?

**Mr HOSKING:** Absolutely, the point you make about efficiently moving patients around to get them access to care, so they are not coming in for something one week and then an outpatient appointment the next week—one of the things we have been doing over the last few months is a review of our operating model for what we call patient logistics. That is just a fancy term for how we move patients around, whether that be in aeromedical retrievals, patient assisted travel or ambulance services.

We have developed a new operating model that will inform some of our renewal of service contracts. We are using at the moment the term ‘command centre’. I do not really like the term, but it is a centralised capability to look at how we move patients around and make the most efficient use of not just their contact with the health system but also the cost of the patient travel and movement. We will be embedding those in our new service arrangements with our partners who help us do that.

I acknowledge that we probably had instances in the past where we have not been as efficient as we might have been in that space. We had a thorough and comprehensive look at the way we do that and are moving to reshape the way we undertake that work over the next six to nine months. It is performing an essential adjunct to how we renew those service provider contracts.

We do the best we can within the current model, but some of our historical structures probably have not been as facilitative of those smooth and efficient moves, but we are hoping to have a much better operating model probably by early next year.

**Mr YOUNG:** Who makes the decisions to call code yellows?

**Mr EDGINGTON:** They are decisions for the Chief Executive Officer of the Department of Health.

**Mr YOUNG:** What would be the process at Royal Darwin Hospital for that decision to come up the chain to you?

**Mr HOSKING:** Generally those pressures intensify over a period of time—hours or days depending on the level of strain the hospital is under. The general manager at Royal Darwin Hospital will be chairing the daily—or two or three times daily—huddle process to look at our patient flows. If it reaches the point where we simply cannot move patients through the clinical workflows and get them into hospital beds then we need to call a code yellow. I will be contacted directly about that.

That will not be new information to me because I will have been attending the huddles and getting briefings along the way as that escalation happens. Then I will make a decision based on the advice I receive through the Top End Health Service, the regional director and the RDH general manager as to whether those conditions warrant calling a code yellow, in which case I will make that decision and then inform the minister of that decision, obviously. It is a decision made by me.

I have not had to do that since August last year. We have been close a couple of times when we have had really intense pressures, but we have not had a situation where we have not been able to deal with it.

**Mr YOUNG:** How many times has the general manager of Royal Darwin Hospital advised you that a code yellow should be called?

**Mr HOSKING:** I have not had a code yellow recommended to me and then refused to call it; that has not happened a single time.

**Mr YOUNG:** You have the ability to override the general manager to call a code yellow. From ...

**Mr CHAIR:** Member for Daly, I ask that you put the question through the minister.

**Mr YOUNG:** Yes, through the minister. The CEO of the department has the ability to override the general manager if that person advises the CEO that a code yellow should be called; is that true?

**Mr EDGINGTON:** As I said before, code yellows are operational decisions that are made by the CEO. I have no doubt the CEO talks to his staff, but I will let him explain how he goes about working with his staff, listening and—as I always say, looking, listening and learning; the three Ls. I am sure he looks at all these issues, but I will let him explain how that works from an operational sense.

**Mr HOSKING:** Generally, these things are managed by us talking about it and having a conversation. These things escalate over a period of time, sometimes hours and sometimes days. It will be talked about between me and the other senior people. It would be unusual for the general manager of the hospital to advocate one position. Theoretically, yes, I could overrule that. It is not something I would generally do. Generally, it is something we would work through collaboratively and talk about how we can solve those challenges, then make a decision about whether a code yellow call is necessary or not.

At the end of the day, it is the CE who is accountable for that. I do not flinch from that, but I have not had a situation where I have had to impose a decision on any of our senior hospital managers that has been inconsistent with their views or advice. We have generally worked through it sensibly and cooperatively and come up with solutions to the problem, which is ultimately better for the patient. Moving through those patient flows into a ward where their care team can provide the clinical care they need is what we need to be doing here.

Calling code yellow, other than sending up a flare in the metaphorical sense, really does not achieve much. It is about getting care to the patient.

**Mr YOUNG:** I completely disagree with that statement that it creates a flare. A code yellow ultimately looks at the impact of the capacity the hospital is at, and that allows the government to respond and the public has an understanding. Some people might have a small cut and go to the hospital—that is the reality—they may rethink it and go to a doctor or GP. I think it is in the public interest that a code yellow is called to ensure that is able to be managed by the government.

**Mr EDGINGTON:** Is this a statement or a question?

**Mr YOUNG:** I am still getting to my question.

When the former head of AMA is publicly saying staff have been told not to call code yellows and frontline workers are backing that up, are you seriously expecting Territorians to believe that no direction has been given not to call a code yellow?

**Mr EDGINGTON:** I want to address the statement you made. Anyone would think that the way you are talking, you have more expertise in this field than our frontline workers. I reassure you; you do not have the expertise. We have the frontline workers every day of the week, which is why often I refer you to the CEO, because these are the people at the front line 24 hours a day, seven days a week. For you to be telling the Estimates Committee that you have greater expertise than the people on the front line ...

**Mr YOUNG:** Just to be clear, this came from the former head of AMA. I am asking that question on his behalf.

**Mr CHAIR:** Member for Daly and minister, I will make a few rulings here. One, no statements. There was a question. We will break now.

---

The committee suspended.

---

**Mr YOUNG:** I go back to the former head of the AMA publicly saying that staff had been directed not to call code yellows, and I pick up that it has also been backed by our frontline workers. Are you suggesting that the AMA is lying, and those frontline workers?

**Mr EDGINGTON:** I thank the former President of the AMA; he was in the position for over 10 years. Thanks to Rob for all the work that he did in that position.

When it comes to code yellows, as I have said, I am certainly not at the coalface, but I have not been made aware of staff calling for code yellows on the front line. The issue around code yellows is an operational issue for the chief executive. It is the chief executive who is on the front line making those decisions.

I will ask the CEO to explain it again. You may have missed some of the previous statement that the chief executive made because I think when you look at this closely, the chief executive has probably already answered this question.

**Mr HOSKING:** As I understand the question, you are looking to confirm whether staff have been instructed that code yellows are not to be called. I can state unequivocally I have never received any direction from the minister not to call a code yellow—I say that knowing that this hearing this morning is on the public record, and that is a statement of fact—nor have I issued such an instruction within the Health department to any of my staff.

As I said, we have carefully considered whether a code yellow should be announced. There have been a number of times where we have had intense bed pressures and we have been quite close to that, but we have always been able to manage that and establish patient flows and move patients to where they can get the care. It has not been necessary to call a code yellow. I am not sure why the head of the AMA would make that statement; that is a question for the head of the AMA. I will state unequivocally that there has been no ban on the calling of code yellow and no such instruction has been issued within the Health department.

**Mr YOUNG:** I will take note that the CEO mentioned that there has been no directive given from you, as the Health minister, not to call a code yellow. Have you had any directions from any other ministers or the Chief Minister not to call a code yellow?

**Mr EDGINGTON:** Are you asking me whether I have had other directions?

**Mr YOUNG:** You or the CEO. Has a directive come from the Chief Minister not to call code yellows?

**Mr EDGINGTON:** I am the Minister for Health and I work very closely with the CEO every day of the week. In my responsibility as the Minister for Health I have had no direction from anybody. I have given no directions to the CEO. I have full faith in not only the CEO, but every member of NT Health working on the front line has gone about their business differently. I cannot reiterate that enough. When it comes to code yellows, nothing has changed when it comes to how busy the emergency area of Royal Darwin Hospital is. It is extremely busy. We do not shy away from that, neither do the staff.

What we have changed, and what the CEO has made clear, is that he is working closely with clinicians. He talked about huddles and being on the front line himself, working with the frontline staff and making decisions about whether a code yellow should be called. This is entirely an operational decision for the CEO, working with his staff on the front line. I have full faith in what he has been doing. To come in here today and challenge and suggest that the CEO is being instructed somehow to not make these calls is appalling. We have a CEO to run the Health department, and that is what he is doing.

**Mr GUYULA:** Constituents in my electorate have asked for better security at Gove District Hospital. Could you advise if there is any funding in this budget to increase the hours for security at the Gove hospital and when the current security contract expires? I would like to stress the need for local culturally appropriate employment in this area. The current contract says that security must respond within 20 minutes of receiving the phone call from the hospital, but sometimes there has been no response.

**Mr EDGINGTON:** It is an important question and we have security in place at Gove District Hospital, which has been there for a while. It is an important part of not only working to support staff but also visitors and patients. I understand that on the ground the security people are working closely with Gove residents.

I will ask the CEO to answer more specifically around what hours the security people work and give a bit more detail on the contract and provide more information. I ask the CEO to explain how that contract is working at the Gove hospital at the moment.

**Mr HOSKING:** I do not have the expiry date for the current security contract with me this morning. We will happily follow that up, and I think we will be able to answer that in session this morning. We will take that question on notice and, hopefully, have the answer to that back before we conclude this morning.

In terms of the security service at the Gove hospital, we take security for our staff and patients extremely seriously. The security presence at Gove is not a 24/7 model at the moment; it is 12 hours a day. We have had issues raised, looking to further strengthen those security arrangements. We are currently considering a proposal to make that a 24-hour-a-day security arrangement. That is working through a process at the moment and would be established through that contract for security service being expanded to a 24/7 service. It has not happened just yet; we are still on a 12-hour-a-day security service, but we are looking to expand that in the next little while.

---

### Question on Notice No 7.2

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

**Mr GUYULA:** Constituents in my electorate have asked for better security at Gove hospital. Could you advise if there is any funding in this budget to increase the hours for security at Gove hospital? Could you advise when the current security contract expires?

I also stress the need for local culturally appropriate employment in this area. The current contract says security must respond within 20 minutes of a phone call from the hospital, but sometimes there is no response.

**Mr CHAIR:** Minister, do you accept the question?

**Mr EDGINGTON:** Yes.

**Mr CHAIR:** The question has been allocated the number 7.2.

---

**Mr GUYULA:** Interpreters embedded in the hospital system are important. Does this currently exist in Royal Darwin Hospital? I understand Menzies conducted a successful trial some years ago. What has been done to implement this further?

**Mr EDGINGTON:** Interpreters are an important part of the services we deliver in all hospitals around the Northern Territory. I will ask the CEO to expand on your question at the operational level.

**Mr HOSKING:** I agree interpreter services are critical to the functioning of Royal Darwin Hospital. Obviously, Aboriginal people make up a big portion of patients in the hospital. Many come from different language groups. We rely heavily on our interpreters, both those on our staff and those within the Aboriginal Interpreter Service who form part of the onsite interpreter resources that are there to support our patients.

In fact, it is so critical in the daily huddles I spoke of in one of my earlier answers to questions—where we manage the patient flow across the various aspects of the hospital and look at where the operating pressures are. The availability of interpreters is dealt with as part of that daily huddle process. We have the senior person from the Aboriginal interpreter team attend those huddles. People get an update on what languages are available for interpreter services on a daily basis, and that assists our clinicians greatly.

The answer is absolutely yes, it is something we take seriously and dedicate both our own staffing and the use of the AIS (Aboriginal Interpreter Service) to meet that need.

**Mr GUYULA:** Every Estimates I ask questions about emergency patient retrievals for homelands. For years our communities have been told that this is being reviewed. Every year that I ask there is a new review happening, and at various times over eight years I have been told there will be an aircraft for this purpose.

Currently, the CareFlight plane is a twin-engine plane that cannot land on many homeland landing strips and is based in Darwin. We require an aircraft based in Gove for the homeland communities in Arnhem Land that can bring people to Gove hospital as required. This aircraft could be a single-engine plane, such as the one MAF (Mission Aviation Fellowship) has, and be outfitted for patient travel with the pilot on standby, or it could be a helicopter which would also allow access to the Central Arnhem Road, which last week, sadly, saw a car crash with two deaths on the road.

What is happening to address this issue? Inaction threatens our communities, and we have seen deaths occur due to the lack of medical response, so I am keen to hear what real action is happening to support homeland residents and health workers.

**Mr EDGINGTON:** This is an important issue regarding patient retrieval, and this is some of the work that we are doing in the department as we speak. There are a couple of things I want the Estimates Committee to be aware of. I alluded to this in my opening statement. Aeromedical retrieval services across the Top End at the moment are costing us anywhere in the vicinity of \$50m a year. That comes from the Health budget; everywhere else in Australia that is funded by the federal government. We are trying to identify the funds to continue to deliver the services which CareFlight are doing. This is one of the cost pressures that we face in the Northern Territory because of the absence of the federal government throwing in the \$50m that we need to not only deliver the services but also enhance the services in the Top End.

In regard to your question, that is one of the particular issues that we are looking at. The work going on in the department is looking at how best we can deliver those retrieval services in the Top End. I will ask the CEO to give a bit more detail around the work that we have been doing, not only to look at the service across the Top End but also in the specific area that you have mentioned.

**Mr HOSKING:** Aeromedical retrieval services in the Territory are an essential part of delivering healthcare. In fact, as an operating cost to delivering health, it is anomalously high in the Territory. We have an aeromedical retrieval cost that outstrips other states and territories.

The current arrangements we have for aeromedical retrieval in the Top End have been in place for almost 15 years. They are coming to the conclusion of the existing contract. We have done an extensive body of work over the last six months to look at the operating model for those services. We will shortly be going back to market in the second half of this year with a procurement tender for those services.

There are challenges in places like the homelands in the Mulka electorate and other parts of the Northern Territory where it is really hard to get an aircraft in. The shorter airstrips are problematic for the fixed-wing aircraft. Helicopters are an easier option to get in and out of some of those homelands. Unfortunately, they do not have the range of a fixed-wing aircraft. That brings additional challenges. They are also a more expensive asset to operate. Within that operating budget, you get better value out of fixed-wing aircraft than you do out of rotaries.

When we put those services back to market over the second half of the year—there is a competitive market for these services. There are proponents who are actively interested in pursuing that tender opportunity. We have had those discussions with our incumbent provider and notified them that we will be going back to a contested tender process for those services.

We will be specifying our requirements, from close proximity to our urban centres to our most remote communities and homelands. There are challenges in terms of the reach to get into the most remote homelands. Sometimes road transport is a more viable option. In Central Australia, where we do not have the Wet Season and the conditions that come with it, road transport is usually sufficient. In the Top End it is a real challenge.

Member for Mulka, you make the point about the utility of single-propeller planes and landing on a shorter airstrip. The fleet of aircraft that currently deliver those services are coming to the end of their operating life. They are now quite old. A new contract for aeromedical retrieval services will need to contemplate new aeroplanes. The successful bidder will have to deal with how they supply the assets for the contract. There are established models in the aviation industry for how you do that.

The short answer to your question is, yes, we absolutely understand the challenges out in the homelands. It is very difficult to land a twin-engine fixed-wing aircraft on those landing strips.

When we go back to market, we will be going out with an approach that specifies what the government's requirements are for aeromedical retrieval, number of patients, where they live, how we need to get in and out, where the hospitals are where we need to transport them to. We will ask those suppliers, those experts in aeromedical retrieval, to put forward their best proposal to show us on a needs basis how they will do that work and how they will be able to bring new aeroplanes to that contract because they are an input cost to those suppliers to deliver that service.

That will be a thorough and comprehensive tender process. Proponents will have to pass through a phase 1 to pass the due diligence that they are a bona fide aeromedical retrieval service and have the right CASA accreditations and all those other things. Then we will take a subset of those that qualify into a second round to choose a successful provider. Then we would transition to those new arrangements over the first half of next year.

I expect that process to be able to provide better outcomes in places like the Laynhapuy homelands, which has been a pressure point. We need to go through that procurement process and let those providers bring their proposals to the table and evaluate them.

We are working on it. We have been doing a tonne of work on it over the last six months. We will be taking tenders to market over the next few months. I would not expect to be in a position to announce any results until probably the end of this year or just after Christmas. We are focused on trying to get the maximum value on our spend in this area, the maximum penetration into those remote parts of the Territory where we know we have people who are dealing with chronic disease, and they are not well, and it is a long way to get them to a hospital when they need tertiary care. We understand that has been a challenge, particularly in East Arnhem for a long time. I am optimistic we will do better with that under the new contract.

**Mr PAECH:** Following on from the Member for Mulka's question about aerial retrievals—I cannot question your commitment to the bush, minister, as you have been out there more than many of your Cabinet colleagues. I acknowledge and thank you for getting out to two communities in my electorate, Haasts Bluff and Yuelamu, which do not have permanent medical clinics in operation. I acknowledge that work is being done at the moment. I think you and the CEO spoke earlier about potentially paramedics taking on a function there. Is work being done, in relation to this tender, to look at those communities as well for air retrieval services, given that they do not have functioning clinics at this stage, but acknowledging there is work in progress?

**Mr EDGINGTON:** In my opening statement I spoke about the appointment of our chief paramedic, but we did not speak about using paramedics in clinics. I can take a further question about that and the importance of remote clinics. You are right; I did visit Papunya and Haasts Bluff earlier this year, or late last year, to see firsthand the challenges on the ground. My electorate is similar to yours—I think mine is a bit bigger.

**Mr PAECH:** That is debatable.

**Mr EDGINGTON:** We share similar challenges when it comes to service delivery in the bush. We have not discussed having paramedics delivering those services in remote clinics.

**Mr PAECH:** In regard to the tender going out for air retrieval—is that what we call it?

**Mr EDGINGTON:** Aeromedical.

**Mr PAECH:** Aeromedical services. There are a few remote communities that are extremely remote—which you and I have in our electorates—but there are some where the Department of Health is working on clinics that are not operational seven days and might be five days a week at the moment. Will they be considered as part of that tender—the need for funding to look at those retrievals?

**Mr EDGINGTON:** All that work is happening. Given that it is a procurement process, I will ask the CEO to talk about it more. That aeromedical retrieval—I think you know already that the Royal Flying Doctor Service does a lot of that work in Central Australia. I think they operate up to Elliott, and then the remainder is covered by the Top End.

As part of that work, yes, the conversations I have had with the chief executive have been that this is the opportunity to review the service delivery when it comes to aeromedical retrievals. I want to ensure, just as the Member for Mulka does, we have those services in place to be able to meet those challenges of the bush.

**Mr HOSKING:** The short answer is no. Aeromedical retrieval south of Elliott is currently undertaken by the Royal Flying Doctor Service and therefore will not be part of that tender process I spoke about earlier. Ironically, the RFDS service in Central Australia is funded by the Commonwealth, and the Top End is funded by the NT Government which is anomalous, and the minister has spoken about that.

Certainly, the clinics you mentioned where we do not have a full-time presence—we are always looking at how we can do better in those remote localities. One of the areas we could potentially explore is how paramedicine professionals are used. We have not started using them in the bush at this time, but the establishment of the Chief Paramedic Officer role is a recognition that paramedicine has a broader role to play in clinical care and provides us with more options and opportunities. It is a relatively new initiative.

**Mr PAECH:** Yes, thank you very much for that.

**Mr EDGINGTON:** Going on from there, I really appreciate the work that the bush members are doing—the Members for Gwoja, Mulka, Daly, Arafura, Arnhem, Namatjira and me. We all know that there are some big challenges out bush.

I reassure you that we are constantly focused on continuous improvement, attracting staff. We know the challenges of getting staff to some of these remote clinics at the moment. What I have seen during my travels is an increase in agency staff—I am sure we will talk about that a bit later—but I want to reassure the Estimates Committee and the other bush members that I know, I listen to all the things you say as well, but we will continue to focus on getting the best health services delivered in remote areas.

**J DAVIS:** I believe you said there are embedded interpreters in the health system. Can you tell us how many, at what hospitals and what hours they work?

**Mr EDGINGTON:** We will see if we have that information in front of us. If we do not, we will get that.

**Mr HOSKING:** At Royal Darwin we have seven full-time-equivalent staff undertaking interpreter services. It is a combination of our own people and the AIS service. I do not have the specific break-up here, but I can obtain that for you.

**J DAVIS:** At any other hospitals?

**Mr HOSKING:** I would have to double-check that for you to give you a precise answer.

**J DAVIS:** Are you able provide details of what hours they work?

**Mr HOSKING:** To give you a precise answer, I think we best take that on notice and give you something that is by hospital, by operating hour.

**Mr EDGINGTON:** We can take that on notice, and we will come back with the answers for you.

---

### Question on Notice No 7.3

**Mr CHAIR:** Member for Johnston, please restate the question for the record.

**J DAVIS:** How many embedded interpreters are there across each hospital, and what hours do they work?

**Mr CHAIR:** Minister, do you accept the question?

**Mr EDGINGTON:** Yes.

**Mr CHAIR:** The question has been allocated the number 7.3.

---

**J DAVIS:** I heard you say that you were also working with the Aboriginal Interpreter Service. I am interested in what kind of strategy there is to ensure that it works well together, whether there is any work being done on developing that strategy, given, as you have both said, the crucial importance of access to interpreters.

**Mr EDGINGTON:** The interpreter service is essentially run by the Aboriginal Interpreter Service, which is part of the Department of Housing, Local Government and Community Development. The Department of Health and the Department of Housing, Local Government and Community Development work very closely in partnership to ensure that the interpreters are not only employed but also trained, developed and able to provide interpretive and translation services in a variety of different languages.

In regard to strategy, it is an ongoing partnership where we have interpreters on the ground doing what they do; that is, being the go-between to ensure that there is an understanding between Health and that Health understand what the patients' needs are.

**J DAVIS:** Is there a formal arrangement in place between the Aboriginal Interpreter Service and the Department of Health in relation to using interpreters?

**Mr EDGINGTON:** The interpreter service provides interpreters across many areas in government, including the Department of Health. There is no specific agreement or MOU in place as this is a longstanding

arrangement where interpreters are used, which includes the 000 call centre in Darwin. Interpreters are employed by AIS, which is a part of the Department of Housing, Local Government and Community Development. There is no specific agreement or written document as the Department of Housing, Local Government and Community Development provides interpreters on an as-needed basis.

**Mr GUYULA:** What oversight and responsibility does the NT Government have over health services provided in the homelands? How does the government know and ensure that residents in homelands are receiving appropriate healthcare such as regular visits from primary healthcare providers?

**Mr EDGINGTON:** Across the Northern Territory we have a number of health clinics which deliver health services on behalf of Northern Territory Health. We also have clinics, and their services are delivered by Aboriginal community-controlled health services.

In regard to the operational issues around having specialists and experts attending to help deliver health services, I will ask the chief executive to give a breakdown of some of those operational issues and how that works from a remote perspective.

**Mr HOSKING:** We touched on the challenges of servicing remote communities in an earlier question on aeromedical retrieval.

To the extent possible, we try to provide care on country; taking people off country to receive care is always less favourable. We mostly do that in the bush by providing nursing services within the clinic and visiting services from medical practitioners and specialists. The degree of remoteness impacts on our ability to get to those very remote places and provide that level of care, hence it is necessary to bring people to a clinic or hospital when they need a higher level of care.

We use a range of measures from on-call doctors to provide advice 24/7 to nurses and Aboriginal health practitioners in the clinic. Often, as a first point of treatment that is how we best handle those, because we can get the care to the patient on their home country in the bush through a phone call with someone who is medically qualified or a part of a multidisciplinary team working with the nurse or the Aboriginal health practitioner on the ground in the bush to provide that care.

Where people's clinical care requirements are more sophisticated or they have more challenging health conditions—I will use Maningrida as an example. Maningrida has extremely high rates of rheumatic heart disease. A lot of people in that community are unwell and need care from cardiologists and other medical specialists. We will send multidisciplinary teams out to that community. They might see 60 patients in a day. That will be a combination of cardiologists, a renal nurse, a team of people providing care to people who are suffering from a range of chronic diseases. That is a face-to-face service with the clinician.

When someone is really sick and needs to have a greater level of access to medical specialists, we are often faced with having to bring them to the nearest regional centre—whether it be Gove, Katherine or Royal Darwin—to provide that level of clinical care. That usually involves a family member or someone accompanying them when that happens.

Our first preference is to provide care on country using that telehealth and the digital tools we have available to us to inform the delivery of care on community. The next best option is when we send clinicians out into the bush to provide that care and treatment. Thirdly, when people are sick and they need a greater level of access to tertiary care, we bring them to town. We try, as much as possible, to keep people on country.

That area of leveraging digital delivery of expertise into the bush, particularly as we are seeing technology innovation now giving us much greater coverage in remote localities—things like the connectivity we get from Starlink and the ability to get a connection on a phone or laptop device in remote places gives us the ability to provide more care through virtual pathways. Long term we need to leverage that a lot more strongly to the extent we possibly can, and not move patients around unless we have to. The cost of putting a patient on an aeroplane and moving them to a hospital is not insignificant. People are always better cared for on country where their family, friends and community wraparound is in place to support them in their care.

That is the triaging of our model. Where we are placing our emphasis is trying to get that care delivered on the ground on country. If people need to go to hospital, they need to go to hospital, but they should not come there if they can be cared for at home.

Some of the things we talked about earlier about bed pressures in hospitals—another way of helping to ease that pressure is when people in the bush can get the care on country. It is not always possible to have

a doctor down the road in a clinic; that is not always a practical solution. However, we can use technology to extend the doctor's expertise into the bush and then only move the patient physically when we have to. Particularly in the Territory where we have a dispersed population, the challenge of distance will always be there. Exploiting technology is where we need to focus our efforts over the next few years.

**Mr EDGINGTON:** I will add to that. Member for Mulka, in your electorate alone there are services being delivered by the Miwatj Health Service. They are delivering services at Gapuwiyak, Gunyangara, Milingimbi, Ramingining and Yirrkala. Those services are being delivered by the Aboriginal-controlled health service. I reiterate that they work closely with NT Health, particularly through the Gove hospital. That ongoing communication is ensuring that all people living in those areas are getting the healthcare they need. The communication is constant. As the chief executive said, the decision about whether a patient needs to be transported to Darwin or another hospital are being made at the coalface, in combination with Miwatj, NT Health and our clinicians across the board.

**Mr GUYULA:** Especially in my electorate, the services are there in the communities—the vehicles, nurses and doctors ready to go—but there is a problem with the road that we have during the Wet Season. It is quite impossible to cross. That is where we need aeroplane retrievals as well as roadworks to fix the road.

**Mr EDGINGTON:** All of us who work in the bush are aware of these issues. As the chief executive explained, we are looking at how best to manage patient retrieval and aeromedical services, and all those issues are always taken into account. There will be times during the Wet Season where roads might be impassable and there will be other situations for other reasons that certain types of retrieval, such as by road, may be also problematic. I want to reassure you that these are at the forefront of our decision-making now to ensure that we get the contracts clearly in place to ensure that we can deliver those services moving forward.

**Mr PAECH:** Could you give us a percentage of what population of the remote nursing cohort are agency nurses?

**Mr EDGINGTON:** No doubt you have seen, as I have seen, agency staff there.

**Mr HOSKING:** The short answer is it is too high, and I need to acknowledge that. I do not have a specific number here today. We could give you a historical number for the reporting period.

To give it context, during the COVID pandemic the use of agency staff escalated. It was a necessary step to keep workforce stability during the pandemic, and we have been working our way to wean ourselves off that and get to a more sensible balance.

We have been quite effective in hospital-based nursing. We have been able to restore the staffing mix to a more sensible balance. In the bush it is still disproportionate. I do not have a precise answer, but I will say on the record it is the majority of staff in the bush. There is always a place for sensible use of agency staff for backfilling, leave relief and those sorts of things, but we need to shift that mix.

What has occurred over the last few years is the way that work is packaged in agency-based employment is quite attractive. It is shorter stints and people come in for a period of time. It has less utility than FTE employees on the books.

We have made some positive strides with hospital-based nursing. We need to do more in the bush, and that is certainly an effort of focus. We have recently established new panel contracts for nursing staff to try to get better price points and more efficiency. At one point it was contributing to some of our spending pressures, but, more importantly, having nurses employed on our books as NT Health employees makes them part of the organisation, to have more utility, they can supervise and exercise delegation, all those sorts of things, but we still have some work to do in that space.

In terms of getting you a precise answer we would have to do some work to get you a precise number, but the short answer is it is too high and we are working hard to do something about it.

**Mr PAECH:** I am happy to take it on notice if you are.

**Mr EDGINGTON:** We will take it on notice.

---

**Question on Notice No 7.4**

**Mr CHAIR:** Member for Gwoja, please restate the question for the record.

**Mr PAECH:** Could you provide the data on the number of remote nurses who are Northern Territory Government-employed versus agency nursing staff, and what that is in the hospitals?

**Mr CHAIR:** Minister, do you accept the question?

**Mr EDGINGTON:** We should be able to get that. I am happy to take that question on notice.

**Mr PAECH:** Just to confirm, because I do not want to cause more work for our hardworking CEO, would it be helpful if I gave you a particular moment in time, or is it easier for you to do a snapshot of the last financial period?

**Mr EDGINGTON:** I know we have provided answers to written questions. I am not sure if it was in those.

**Mr PAECH:** I am happy to do it as at 31 March, which is the closure of the reporting period.

**Mr EDGINGTON:** I think 1 July to 31 March, we can take that on notice.

**Mr CHAIR:** The question has been allocated the number 7.4.

---

**Mr CHAIR:** The time is 11.06 am. We will break for five minutes.

---

The committee suspended.

---

**Answer to Question on Notice No 7.2**

**Mr EDGINGTON:** Northern Territory Health has allocated additional funding of \$100,000 to security services at Gove District Hospital, with consideration being given to expanded services. The current security contract expires on 31 August 2025.

All requests for security attendance have been actioned by the contractor. There are no records or reports by the ordering officer or contract manager of security not presenting when called upon. At times, security is not called where it is determined a higher level of response or presence is required, such as the police.

---

**Mr YOUNG:** You knew in September 2024 that Healthscope would close its private maternity services, but waited eight months to write to your federal counterparts for help. What were you doing during those eight months? Why did it take so long to write to them?

**Mr EDGINGTON:** As I have previously said, NT Health and my office was advised in September last year of the possibility—I should say there was no certainty given to us—that they would be closing. It was flagged with us that Healthscope would be shutting down the maternity services.

The question that is often unanswered is that, yes, we were advised after coming into government, but when did Labor know about this? That is the thing that is often not discussed. Labor has some questions to answer when it comes to Healthscope which it has been silent on right from the word go.

When it comes to Healthscope, I will get to the issue of writing to the federal minister for Health in regard to that closure.

As it transpired, Healthscope presented a media release on 20 February advising that they were shutting down maternity services in Darwin. As a result of that media release on 20 February—I make that clear—that is when Healthscope made their final decision to close down the maternity services in Darwin. It would be well worth the Member for Daly going back and having a look at that media release that was presented by Healthscope, shutting down those particular services.

When it comes to writing to the minister—Royal Darwin Hospital has, on average, 2,000 births per year. We were advised by Healthscope that the number of births at Darwin Private Hospital had declined over the years from around 700 to 900 down to about 250 per year. We said at the outset that given Healthscope's decision to close the maternity services in Darwin, Northern Territory Health—being Royal Darwin Hospital—could cope with an extra 10% of births at Royal Darwin Hospital. Being able to cope with an additional 10%—no more than 15%—in the number of births at Royal Darwin Hospital, we stepped in where Healthscope stepped out. We made a decision to look at what could be done in the absence of private maternity services in Darwin. We developed two private maternity packages—one being a hotel package and one a return-home-sooner package with privately practising midwives.

When we talk about what date we wrote to the minister, the reason we wrote to the minister was the work being done within NT Health to look at our current situation at Royal Darwin Hospital to see what improvements could be done to the maternity ward in Darwin, given that facility is a number of years old; I think it is getting close to 50 years old. We wrote to the federal minister for Health after scoping what would be needed to improve the quality of the maternity service ward at Royal Darwin Hospital. We wrote to the minister—I do not have the date in front of me—asking for two options; one was \$35m and the other was \$10m to improve the facilities at Royal Darwin Hospital. It was not about coping with additional births.

We made it clear from the outset that an increase of 10% in the birth rate through Royal Darwin Hospital was manageable with the quality staff we have in the maternity area. The issue is how we can improve the facilities over the longer term.

**Mr YOUNG:** Do you accept that your delay of eight months in seeking federal support wasted valuable time and likely delayed a long-term solution for Territory mothers?

**Mr EDGINGTON:** No, I do not.

**Mr YOUNG:** Eight months, do you think that is acceptable? It took you eight months to write to the federal minister ...

**Mr EDGINGTON:** Let me ...

**Mr CHAIR:** Gentlemen, stop. The Member for Daly can finish his question, then the minister will respond.

**Mr YOUNG:** I think the minister heard the back end of my question. Do you accept that this delay put at risk a long-term solution for Territory mothers? Eight months it took you to write to the federal minister.

**Mr EDGINGTON:** Perhaps the Member for Daly did not hear my first response. I will reiterate it for him because he has obviously missed some of the important points I made.

Firstly, the unanswered question is when did Labor first know about Healthscope potentially closing down the maternity ...

**Mr YOUNG:** We were not in government in September 2024. You were in government then, so that is the real question.

**Mr CHAIR:** Member for Daly, I will put you on a warning. I ensured the minister would not cut you off, Member for Daly; I will ensure you do not cut the minister off. Any more interjections and I will put you on a warning. I do not want you to have to leave this room, being the shadow minister it is essential that you are here.

**Mr EDGINGTON:** As I said before, the unanswered question is Labor was in government up until August 2024. When did they find out that Healthscope was intending to close the maternity services here in Darwin? This is something that the opposition does not want to talk about. I am not sure why they do not want to talk about it, but they need to be very clear when they found out about Healthscope potentially closing their maternity ward.

Healthscope decided to close the maternity ward and made a media release on 20 February 2025. Were we concerned? Of course we were. We were concerned about maternity services closing at the private hospital and wanted to ensure that we have choices for all mothers and their families in Darwin and across the Northern Territory. Darwin Private Hospital is the only private hospital in the Northern Territory, so to hear that maternity services were closing was a shock to us and that the final decision had been made.

Importantly, we were able to step in where they stepped out. That is why we went about identifying other packages that could be used by families with private medical insurance. I have spoken about the hotel package and the return-home-sooner package supported by privately practising midwives.

There has been no delay. As I said from the outset, the NT Health service can cope with an increase of between 10% and a maximum of 15% in the number of births at Royal Darwin Hospital.

The opposition seems to think that writing to the federal minister is based on some decisions that were made, for example, in Tasmania where they have other private health services available. The Member for Daly is trying to compare apples with oranges, and it will not work. We have written to the federal minister in good faith asking for \$35m to improve the facilities available for birthing families at Royal Darwin Hospital. It is not about being able to cope with an increase in births; this is about providing a better facility for mothers moving forward.

I reject wholeheartedly the suggestion by the member that we have delayed by eight months; it simply does not hold water.

We can deliver babies. So far, in the last couple of days, as at Monday 16 June, four of the 61 families affected by the closure of Healthscope have birthed babies at Royal Darwin Hospital. That has been a positive outcome and shows not only that we have the current facilities—yes, they do need to improve and that is why we have asked for \$35m—and the professional staff, our midwives, obstetricians and services available at Royal Darwin Hospital to continue delivering babies in the Northern Territory.

I reject the suggestion by the Member for Daly. You cannot compare apples with oranges, and that is what he is trying to do.

**J DAVIS:** Can you comment on whether additional operational funding from NT Health was provided to Healthscope to maintain maternity services at Darwin Private Hospital after they notified you that they would be closing?

**Mr EDGINGTON:** I can confirm that Healthscope made a decision to close maternity services. This was not about operational money; this was about Healthscope informing us that they were no longer continuing to deliver babies at Darwin Private Hospital. We were informed that the number of births at Darwin Private Hospital had declined to a level where it was no longer viable to deliver maternity services. Going back to their media release, which I do not have in front of me, there were also difficulties in attracting and retaining staff in that particular area. The decision was solely made by Healthscope that they would close that service and they had plans in place to repurpose that area at the private hospital.

I will ask the CEO to expand on some of those conversations that were had at the operational level, if you would like.

**J DAVIS:** My question was whether there was any additional operational funding given to Healthscope.

**Mr EDGINGTON:** As I said, there was no additional funding given to Healthscope. The decision was made by Healthscope to close the maternity services. No additional money would have helped to keep that service going.

**J DAVIS:** To clarify, from the date that Healthscope informed you that they would be closing that service, there was no additional monies given from NT Health to Healthscope?

**Mr EDGINGTON:** No.

**Mr YOUNG:** Did you ever conduct any risk assessments or clinical consultations on the safety of discharging new mothers and babies into hotel rooms before publicly promoting this policy?

**Mr EDGINGTON:** Of course we did. We do not make decisions without the professional clinical advice to support the decisions that we make when it comes to birthing mothers and their families. Of course we got the proper advice to move ahead with those packages.

I can ask the CEO to give a bit more detail about some of the work that was done at the operational level to ensure the safety of those packages we put in place.

**Mr YOUNG:** Within that, can I ask who you consulted with, please?

**Mr HOSKING:** When we were advised by Healthscope of their plans to discontinue the service we were always going to have to plan to absorb those additional births into Royal Darwin Hospital, whether that be as public or privately insured patients. As the minister said, we have been able to establish some further options for privately insured patients, but in a practical sense it means those mums birthing within the facilities at Royal Darwin Hospital.

Early on in the process to plan that transition into Royal Darwin we involved a range of our own staff—on-staff obstetricians, senior nursing staff and midwives—who have all been involved in the planning of that transition and have informed the models of care and the way in which that transition is being managed. We have had our best maternity clinical professionals involved in that planning, including our Chief Medical Officer and directors of nursing.

I stress clearly that entering into one of those privately insured options, whether it be to go to a post-birthing arrangement in a hotel or the package to go home early with support, is only available to people where they have been assessed as clinically safe to discharge. People who would otherwise be safe to discharge and go home can hand off into one of those privately insured options and take advantage of those extra benefits. Anyone who is not, for any clinical-related reason—whether it be the mother or the baby—well enough to be discharged from hospital will stay in RDH and get the care they need until such time as they are ready to go home or to one of those options.

Who did we consult with? I guess the answer was we consulted with a range of our clinical professionals within NT Health. In fact, we mobilised our most senior clinically qualified people to work through that transition process and design those pathways. I will not name them on *Hansard* today, but these are our very senior medical and nursing professionals involved in maternity care. It has been a careful and considered process all the way through.

**J DAVIS:** I heard you say a couple of times that the public hospital can cope—I think you said first of all ‘easily cope’ and then you said ‘cope’—with an additional 10% of births. Can you explain how that happens, given that we heard of the huge pressures that the hospital is under? We probably have all heard medical professionals, hospital staff and obstetricians talking with great concern about the additional pressures that this will place on the public health system.

**Mr EDGINGTON:** Part of the answer I gave before probably did not go into the detail. The additional 250 births a year is in some ways taking us back to the pre-COVID numbers that the maternity section in Royal Darwin Hospital previously operated under. When I say that the maternity service at Royal Darwin Hospital can cope with that, and easily cope, what I am referring to, but did not give that explanation, is that the pre-COVID numbers were higher than that. We have seen over many years the ability of our maternity services at Royal Darwin Hospital to cope with those numbers over a long period.

In regard to comparing numbers and the pressures through emergency versus maternity, that is probably a more operational question. I can get the chief executive or one of our experts to give a bit more information about that.

**J DAVIS:** That is okay. Is that view supported by the people who are doing the work in the maternity ward?

**Mr EDGINGTON:** All the feedback I have received—and I have spoken with at least two of the senior midwives in that area who have reassured me that they are coping with that. The feedback I have received from directly speaking to the midwives is that not only are they coping, but they are safely delivering babies, as per usual. These are the experts on the ground every day of the week, delivering babies at Royal Darwin Hospital. I do not have any concerns on the information being provided to me.

**J DAVIS:** To be clear, I have absolutely no doubt that people are getting excellent care from the staff at the hospital and that they are doing everything they can. I have heard, and other people may have, that different people have a higher level of concern. They will continue to do that work because that is what they have to do, but the level of pressure it is putting them under—I have one other question in terms of the returning-home-sooner package. What is the cost for 2025–26 for that package?

**Mr EDGINGTON:** All those costs are borne by the private health insurer.

**J DAVIS:** Is there no cost from the NT Health system?

**Mr EDGINGTON:** No.

**Mr YOUNG:** Can the minister or department confirm if funding towards reintegrating the ambulance service back into government hands has been considered?

**Mr EDGINGTON:** The answer is no. We have looked at the Western Australian model and the cost of bringing it back under government control. We have considered it.

**Mr YOUNG:** What steps are you taking to address ongoing staff and union concerns about governance and transparency at St John Ambulance?

**Mr EDGINGTON:** We are working closely with St John. I will get the chief executive to explain a bit further about the work that is going on, because he is working closely with St John in regard to the issues.

**Mr HOSKING:** The department is working with St John in a range of areas related to strengthening clinical governance. Over the course of this year, we have instituted a new clinical governance committee, which I chair as the chief executive and has senior officials from NT Health and St John Ambulance. We are implementing a range of measures aimed at strengthening the governance of clinical matters and practice within St John, many of which were identified in an independent review undertaken by Dr Richard Ellis.

At this point in time, around three-quarters of those recommendations from Dr Ellis have been implemented and applied and some we are still working through. We work closely with St John. We meet with them every month and monitor our implementation of those actions, and I will continue to chair that governance arrangement until such time as those matters are all fully resolved and we are in a more steady state operation, at which point I will probably hand over to someone more clinically focused to maintain that ongoing clinical governance oversight of St John.

The short answer is that there is a range of activities. There is a very senior committee overseeing that action, and we are getting good partnership and cooperation with St John.

**Mr YOUNG:** Minister, I note you were forced to withdraw yourself from the Rural Medicine Australia Conference after doctors planned protests over your government's law-and-order policies. Why will you not listen to the concerns raised by health professionals about the health impacts of your justice reforms?

**Mr EDGINGTON:** You said I was forced to withdraw. I reject that statement from the outset. Suggesting that I was forced to withdraw from any conference is quite offensive. Being the minister, I make decisions in consultation with my team every day of the week ...

**Mr YOUNG:** It does not seem it.

**Mr EDGINGTON:** ... where my role can be best used across the Northern Territory. These are decisions that are made every day of the week, so I am not sure where you are coming from when you suggest that I have been forced to do anything. My decisions are carefully planned and sometimes even decisions that I make in advance chop and change at very short notice. That is part of the answer to what you seem to be suggesting, which I totally reject.

When it comes to justice I am not sure what you are suggesting, but I am listening to health professionals every day of the week, not only in remote areas. I co-chair the Northern Territory Executive Council on Aboriginal Affairs, dealing with APO NT representatives from AMSANT. These are constant conversations that I have across the board, often regarding justice issues, health issues, Aboriginal affairs issues, housing issues and local government. I am out and about every day of the week having conversations.

I have tried to give you guidance on looking, listening and learning, but that is what I am doing.

**Mr YOUNG:** I do not need guidance from you.

**Mr CHAIR:** Gentlemen, if you are addressing one another, it is through me. Minister, if you are addressing the Member for Daly, it is 'Member for Daly', as if you are talking to me. Likewise, Member for Daly, I want to take the 'you' out of it, so you will address through the Chair.

**Mr EDGINGTON:** I have often tried to explain to the Member for Daly the importance of looking, listening and learning; I do that every day of the week. When it comes to justice and health issues I am listening to people. I want to reassure the Estimates Committee that when it comes to justice and health issues, yes, there is a connection between both, but what we are ensuring is that from a health perspective not only are

we creating jobs for people in the Northern Territory, but we are doing our very best with the funding that we get to tackle some of the underlying health issues not only in remote areas but across the Northern Territory. That is where we are at when it comes to dealing with all those issues. I want to reassure that, yes, I am listening, and I am comfortable with the work that our government is doing to tackle these underlying issues across the Northern Territory.

**Mr PAECH:** Regarding travelling and remoteness, there has been a tender released around work for safe drinking water. Can you confirm it is the intention of the Health department to work on developing policy to create a safe drinking water Act? I acknowledge that work was being done under the previous government with the Health department. A tender was released, which was a Victorian company, but as a follow-up, is your department working on the development of a safe drinking water Act?

**Mr EDGINGTON:** No, we are not currently looking at legislation around safe drinking, but we are out working in the communities to tackle these issues about safe drinking water.

This is an ongoing issue that has been around for a number of years. We need to focus on making sure that communities have access to the basic essential services, being power, water and sewerage services in those communities.

At the moment I can give one example at Alpururulam—and I think Yuelamu is the same at the moment—where there is elevated fluoride levels in the water. At Alpururulam there is bottled water being taken to the community and made available to mothers with babies and young people, I think, up to the age of around teenage years because of the effects that fluoride may have on brain development ...

**Mr PAECH:** I want to confirm. I have the tender number here if you need it. Was a tender for request for services under the panel contract—assessment of economic and social impacts of safe drinking water Act; the outcome; an assessment of the economic and social impact of introducing a safe drinking water Act; and completion of regulation impact statement, as required under the Northern Territory Government's regulation-making framework. I acknowledge that is work that was being commissioned under the former Labor government with the Department of Health. Is that work still being developed? Does the CLP government have a commitment to introduce a safe drinking water Act?

**Mr EDGINGTON:** As I said before, we do not have a commitment to bring in a safe drinking water Act. I am not aware of the tender you are speaking about. We are actively out in the communities to try to ensure that safe drinking water is available in communities. We know that there is a number of communities that are water stressed and some of the challenges in remote areas.

In regard to that particular tender, I am happy to take that question on notice and find out more about it. We do not have that information in front of us today.

---

#### Question on Notice No 7.5

**Mr CHAIR:** Member for Gwoja, please restate the question for the record.

**Mr PAECH:** Can you confirm if the Northern Territory CLP government is committed to delivering a safe drinking water Act ...

**Mr EDGINGTON:** I have already answered it.

**Mr PAECH:** I am just putting it all on the record, so you can put it in writing for me.

Can you confirm what has happened to the tender that went out to look at the economic and social impacts around developing a safe drinking water Act and regulation? That was a tender to the value of \$62,000. It was AGC21–0265, Assessment of Economic and Social Impact of Safe Drinking Water.

**Mr CHAIR:** Minister, do you accept the question?

**Mr EDGINGTON:** I am happy to find out about the tender. I have answered no to the question in regard to whether we intend to bring in a safe drinking water Act. That question has been answered. If the member wants to restate the question in regard to the tender, I am happy to take that on notice.

**Mr CHAIR:** Member for Gwoja, are you happy to amend the question?

**Mr PAECH:** Yes, certainly; I am happy to give the minister a hand there.

**Mr CHAIR:** Minister, do you accept the amended question?

**Mr EDGINGTON:** Yes.

**Mr CHAIR:** The question has been allocated the number 7.5.

**Mr YOUNG:** Can you outline the official purpose and ministerial relevance of your trip on 30 January 2025?

**Mr EDGINGTON:** Can you please enlighten me where I was on 30 January 2025 and I can explain further? I have my diary in front of me which is called Facebook. I am happy to look on there if it is relevant to your question.

**Mr PAECH:** I bet you there are a few deadly selfies there.

**Mr YOUNG:** I believe it was in regard to a trip to Daly Waters.

**Mr EDGINGTON:** I am also the Minister for Essential Services. It is extremely important. I am also the Member for Barkly. Regarding my ministerial portfolios, as the Minister for Essential Services responsible for the operations of Power and Water, Territory Generation and Jacana—I am not sure if you understand—gas is extremely important to generate power in the Northern Territory. I wanted to reassure myself that we have a constant source of gas available to keep the lights on in the Northern Territory. That was the purpose of my trip.

**Mr CHAIR:** If we pursue this, make sure that it is health related. That is for all.

**Mr YOUNG:** The minister has clarified that trip. Can you explain the nearly \$3,000 in other expenses against your ministerial colleague for that trip? What were those other expenses?

**Mr EDGINGTON:** I cannot explain anything that another minister has done in his role as a minister. I can answer questions about my ministerial role, but I cannot answer questions regarding somebody else.

**J DAVIS:** In your opening statement you talked about the multipurpose or modular ward. I note that the budget last year allocated \$25m for that ward, but the contract was awarded for only \$18.2m. Can you explain the difference between those two numbers? Also, does the amount in this year's budget include any operational costs?

**Mr EDGINGTON:** Regarding those specific figures, as I said during my opening statement, work is well underway at Royal Darwin Hospital to construct a new \$18.2m 32-bed multipurpose ward. The ward has been designed to allow for future expansion with the ability to construct two additional wards above the new building in the future.

Your question was around whether it includes any operational ...

**J DAVIS:** Yes.

**Mr EDGINGTON:** I am not sure if we have the answer to that at the moment, given that the ward is not open yet. I will see if we can clarify whether the operational money is here for this year or for the following year.

**Mr HOSKING:** No, there is no operational money in the budget for the operation of the new modular ward. We expect that by the time that is online and able to accommodate patients at the completion of construction we will be in the subsequent financial year, so we will pursue that in the next budget round.

**J DAVIS:** When is it expected that ward will be operational?

**Mr HOSKING:** We expect the construction to be completed by the middle of next year and be ready to provide patient care, which is reasonably well aligned to the financial year cycle for the next budget.

**Mr YOUNG:** Can you provide a progress update on the staff accommodation block at Tennant Creek Hospital which was budgeted in 2024–25 an allocation of \$1.27m for this project?

**Mr EDGINGTON:** Sorry; can you please repeat that? I was just looking at a document.

**Mr YOUNG:** Can you provide an update on the staff accommodation block at Tennant Creek Hospital? The staff accommodation block was budgeted in 2024–25 with an allocation of \$1.27m for this project. I want an update on the project.

**Mr EDGINGTON:** The nurses' accommodation at Tennant Creek Hospital has been an ongoing issue for quite some time. The former Labor government announced in 2020 or 2021, so we are talking four years ago, that they would build 12 single-bedroom units on the grounds of Tennant Creek Hospital. In regard to that there is a Commonwealth contribution to that project. Over the four years under the Labor government not one shovel hit the ground in regard to that project.

Coming into government, the status of that project is that it has been out to tender. The costings, unfortunately, were above the budget we had for that project. It also goes back to the former government's infrastructure program. We often heard of the multibillion-dollar program that was apparently being delivered by the former government, but we found out, coming into government, was that there was only \$300m in cash to support a multibillion-dollar infrastructure program.

At the moment we continue to have the Commonwealth contribution to that project. Working with the Minister for Logistics and Infrastructure I have had conversations about how we deliver that project, given that the Labor government had no cash in their program to deliver on this important project.

We have a shortage of housing in Tennant Creek, and this is one of a number of issues that Labor left us with when we came to government. The one I often talk about is not only did we not get those 12 units delivered under the former government, but back in 2018 the former government promised \$5m to build a new BRADAAG facility—that is, an alcohol rehabilitation and treatment facility in Tennant Creek. When they made that announcement back in 2018 they also said that they were going to free up 19 public houses in Tennant Creek.

When you look at that commitment, that is 31 homes that they promised, not only in 2018 through the BRADAAG announcement; they also promised 12 units in 2020. Effectively, Tennant Creek has missed out on 31 homes coming back on the market. This has been an ongoing issue in Tennant Creek, and it has been severely hampered by the inability of the former Labor government to get things moving. When I talk about BRADAAG and the 12 units they promised as well, not one shovel has hit the ground in regard to the BRADAAG project, which was to free up 19 public homes, and not one shovel has hit the ground when it comes to delivering 12 one-bedroom units in Tennant Creek.

What we are doing is getting on with the job. We are looking at options now to ensure that we have a Northern Territory Government contribution to make sure that those 12 units are delivered in Tennant Creek because we have a critical shortage of housing. We have nurses and doctors currently residing in private government headleased properties. Having our own government employee housing, being 12 units at the hospital, will make a significant difference to housing in Tennant Creek. We are now looking at options through the private market to ensure those 12 units are being delivered in Tennant Creek.

**Mr CHAIR:** We will now break for 30 minutes. The time is midday, so we will reconvene at 12.30 pm.

---

The committee suspended.

---

### **Answer to Question on Notice No 7.3**

**Mr EDGINGTON:** Royal Darwin Hospital has Aboriginal interpreter staff available by booking 24 hours a day. There are five interpreters based onsite at Royal Darwin Hospital.

At Palmerston Regional Hospital interpreters can be booked for an in-person appointment or 24-hour Aboriginal Interpreter Service phone line is available.

Tennant Creek Hospital utilises telephone services with the Alice Springs Aboriginal Interpreter Service team, noting there are some Aboriginal interpreter staff in the Barkly business hub. However, there are no set hours for the hub.

Katherine Hospital has one Aboriginal Interpreter Service interpreter from 8 am to 3 pm Monday to Friday.

Alice Springs Hospital has five Aboriginal liaison officers who provide interpreting services Monday to Friday 8 am to 4.21 pm. Aboriginal Interpreter Service is engaged as required.

Gove District Hospital has one Aboriginal Interpreter Service interpreter available 9.30 am to 1.30 pm Monday to Friday.

---

**J DAVIS:** What were the hours at Royal Darwin Hospital?

**Mr EDGINGTON:** Royal Darwin Hospital has Aboriginal interpreter staff available by booking 24 hours a day. There are five interpreters based onsite at Royal Darwin Hospital.

Palmerston Regional Hospital interpreters can be booked for an in-person appointment or 24-hour Aboriginal Interpreter Service phone line is available.

**J DAVIS:** Do you have the hours for the onsite interpreters?

**Mr EDGINGTON:** We would have to get the hours. The Aboriginal interpreter staff are available by booking 24 hours a day. Five interpreters are based onsite. We do not have the hours, but there is the phone line service available.

**J DAVIS:** Would it be possible to get that? You have provided that for other sites, so if it is possible to get that I would appreciate it, thank you.

**Mr EDGINGTON:** I have an answer. It is 8 am until 12 pm, Monday to Friday.

**Mr YOUNG:** Were any experts or health experts consulted before the scrapping of the floor price, considering that many experts have said that this will lead to more drinking and more harm? If so, who was consulted?

**Mr EDGINGTON:** It is not relevant to the opening statement. It was not discussed in the opening statement. It probably sits in Output Group 3.0.

In regard to the floor price, that was a decision made in parliament. The legislation was passed. It does not specifically relate to my portfolio. It comes under the portfolio of the Minister for Tourism and Hospitality, who introduced that legislation.

**Mr YOUNG:** There is a health element to scrapping the floor price, making it cheaper for people to buy alcohol. I am wondering if you, as the Health minister, consulted any health experts on the impacts of scrapping the minimum floor price.

**Mr EDGINGTON:** The floor price was introduced by the Labor government back in 2019. There was an increase in domestic, family and sexual violence across the Northern Territory, alcohol-related crime. Even in my electorate I saw every day of the week a significant increase in violence, as well as a significant increase in secondary supply of alcohol.

There is a mistaken belief that in places like Tennant Creek there would be a return to cask wine or some commentary about that by the opposition. In reality, there has been no cask wine in places like Tennant Creek for I do not know how long.

The floor price saw an increase in secondary supply and people going from normal alcohol to hard spirits. The floor price was driving people to use more hard spirits. This included secondary supply where we saw people buying alcohol, for example, bottles of rum. I am sure there are bush members who have probably seen the same—where there was an increase in secondary supply. People were paying anywhere up to \$500 just for a bottle of rum. When people are paying that sort of money for a bottle of rum anywhere in the Northern Territory, it means that there is no food on the table for young people in those families.

This was a Labor policy that contributed to higher crime rates; higher cases of domestic, family and sexual violence; higher numbers of alcohol-related crime; and higher numbers of alcohol-related assaults and violence against people in the Northern Territory.

It is clear that the floor price drove people to harder spirits. We have implemented a range of changes, including nuisance public drinking laws, to tackle some of the real issues with alcohol. That is the work we did prior to removing the floor price in the Northern Territory.

**Mr BROWN:** In your opening statement you mentioned the Gunbalanya health clinic moving over to Aboriginal-controlled health, which I welcome very much.

I recently met with Red Lily. My question to you is on behalf of Red Lily. In regard to the health centre and the new build, is the tender being put out? Is there a date for that? Where are you up to in regard to discussions about it?

**Mr EDGINGTON:** In regard to Gunbalanya the plan to transition to Red Lily is on track to have it on 1 July. A lot of work has gone into the transition, and we are looking forward as a Health department to seeing Red Lily Health Board manage that health clinic because our government is focused on returning services to Aboriginal people in remote areas. We came to government saying that we are all about empowering communities, and we want to ensure that there are jobs on country for people living in remote areas.

In this budget we have not been able to deliver a new health clinic. I have spoken about this before and I would love to be here today telling you that we are going to build a health clinic, but the reality is that coming into government we were faced with a large deficit in the budget.

We have examined the infrastructure budget and, as we have said many times before, the former government was making lots of promises regarding the delivery of infrastructure right across the Northern Territory, and the program that everybody talks about was billions of dollars. It was nothing more than a wish list in many cases. The former Labor government only contributed about \$300m to that infrastructure program. The program sounded great, with billions of dollars' worth of projects in the program, but you need cash to deliver them.

We have not ruled out delivering that clinic, and I would love to be here today saying that we will deliver a new clinic at Gunbalanya. We will keep it on the program, but today I cannot give a specific date when we will deliver that.

Working together with Red Lily has been a great partnership so far, and we are looking forward to them taking over on 1 July and delivering services at Gunbalanya.

**Mr BROWN:** During negotiations between Red Lily and government it was identified that there was insufficient accommodation for identified staffing numbers, this is with the current system that is there now. At Gunbalanya there are 14 residential full-time clinical staff and approximately five specialist outreach staff who provide regular visiting services and around 11 available houses. There are similar issues that Red Lily manages on the islands of West Arnhem, including Minjilang on Croker and Warruwi on South Goulburn Island. Are there any discussions around expanding in this space?

**Mr EDGINGTON:** This has been an ongoing issue in remote areas for quite some time—the absence of government employee housing. There have been challenges, would be one way to describe it, in remote areas and the ability to house staff. When you cannot house staff it has an impact on attraction and retention of people in those remote areas.

From a health perspective we would like to be able to assist Red Lily in accommodating all their staff. At the moment, based on those numbers that you have given me, I am happy to look at that further when we get into the Housing portfolio, and I will have a better idea of what the plans are around future government employee housing. I cannot commit that there are plans for Gunbalanya, but we can take it on board when we get to the Housing portfolio. I am happy to look at GEH, not only at Gunbalanya but perhaps other remote areas.

**J DAVIS:** Can you say how much funding is allocated to SARC (Sexual Assault Referral Centres) to assist victim-survivors from remote communities with food, accommodation and support when they come to the regionally based SARC for forensic testing, treatment and counselling?

**Mr EDGINGTON:** Are you looking for an overall figure for when people come into town, what the costs are for ...

**J DAVIS:** I am wondering if there is budget allocated to support those costs.

**Mr EDGINGTON:** It is related to patient travel services, but I will ask the CEO to give a bit more detail.

**Mr HOSKING:** When someone needs to travel to access those services, there is provision in the budget for patient assisted travel services. It is not a specific line item with a particular allocation to it with that level of granularity, but it is certainly catered to in the budget that funds patient assisted travel for all sorts of reasons. There is funding available for that when people need to come to town to access that service.

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

No questions.

**OUTPUT GROUP 1.0 – HOSPITAL SERVICES AND SUPPORT**

**Output 1.1 – Hospital Services and Support**

No questions.

**OUTPUT GROUP 2.0 – PRIMARY HEALTH CARE**

**Output 2.1 – Remote Primary Health Care**

**Output 2.2 – Urban Primary Health Care**

**Output 2.3 – Territory-wide Community Services**

No questions.

**OUTPUT GROUP 3.0 – COMMUNITY TREATMENT AND EXTENDED CARE**

**Output 3.1 – Alcohol and Other Drugs**

**Mr CHAIR:** The committee will now move on to Output Group 3.0, Community Treatment and Extended Care, and Output 3.1, Alcohol and Other Drugs. Are there any questions?

**Mr GUYULA:** What alcohol rehabilitation services are there for people to attend based on country? We want to bring people back to country, but we need to have somewhere to help them recover from drug and alcohol dependency. What is happening to help people return to country?

**Mr EDGINGTON:** In regard to alcohol treatment services, we might just change over officials.

**Mr PAECH:** While we do that, I think the Member for Drysdale's daughter and wife are in the group, or he is blowing kisses at someone else.

**Mr EDGINGTON:** It was not me.

**Mr PAECH:** Welcome to Parliament House, Cosette and Alice.

**Mr CHAIR:** Thank you, Member for Gwoja. The Howes just love all things democracy.

**Mr PAECH:** That is great.

**Mr EDGINGTON:** I introduce Cecelia Gore, Deputy Chief Executive, Commissioning and System Improvement.

We have a range of services across the Northern Territory such as sobering-up shelters and residential rehabilitation beds. There has been \$900,000 committed to establish a new strength and healing service in the East Arnhem region aimed at expanding treatment capacity for youths across the Top End. The strength and healing service will provide support to young people experiencing moderate to high levels of vulnerability. The aim is to facilitate culturally driven support on country, improve accessibility to appropriate supports and provide respite as required. There are negotiations currently underway with Miwatj for service delivery to commence in the 2025–26 financial year.

In regard to services overall, I will ask our deputy chief executive to expand on what is happening in some of these remote areas when it comes to alcohol treatment and rehabilitation.

**Ms GORE:** We have about \$27m in this budget going forward devoted to funding for non-government and Aboriginal community-controlled organisations. We fund 165 residential rehab beds in all five regions.

In addition to that we are increasingly working with local organisations in remote areas to do exactly what you have been talking about, Member for Mulka, where they can apply for and get support to run on-country

respite programs and connection-to-culture programs through the funding received through the NTRAI agreement.

Communities are currently working on community alcohol plans where they can, as a community, decide what they would like to see to improve safety and reduce harm. Once they have developed that plan, they can then get resources for things like on-country travel and physical supports like petrol or camping equipment, as well as bringing in additional therapeutic responses, traditional healers and social and emotional wellbeing programs.

We have the remote AOD workforce program, which is also funded under the NTRAI. It employs about 59 people across numerous communities in the NT, both for NT Health and ACCHOs who are available to run men's programs, women's programs and programs for young people in those communities. They then link in with our more specialist tertiary clinical services for extra supports.

**J DAVIS:** In relation to the community alcohol plans that Ms Gore just referenced, how many community alcohol plans have been completed and implemented to date?

**Mr EDGINGTON:** As of 31 March 2025, 85 communities have received community alcohol plan information sessions. Of those, 84 are actively engaged in community alcohol management planning and implementation. From this number so far, 20 communities have community alcohol plans approved at the community level.

**J DAVIS:** How much has been invested in community-designed harm-reduction initiatives, and what support is being provided to communities to implement those initiatives?

**Ms GORE:** The total investment for what we call community-led solutions is \$1.7m across the two financial years, 2024–25 and 2025–26. What usually happens in the process is that after communities have thought about what kind of thing they want, the team on the ground, being nine staff members who work across the NT in those communities, will then help them to turn that into a project proposal and support them to fund it and go forward.

In many of the communities there are trusted organisations they regularly work with, whether they are justice groups or their local services. In others we will provide advice about how they can seek support through the various land councils or AMSANT or APO NT. The NT Indigenous Business Network are often a key source of advice about who would be good to do this work. We execute grant contracts with those providers to deliver what the community has asked for.

**J DAVIS:** What is the monitoring and evaluation framework in place to be assessing the success of those initiatives?

**Ms GORE:** The FFA (federal funding agreement), through which that money comes, has a broad monitoring and evaluation framework which mostly derives its indicators from community development—so how have we seen community participation; has the community's strengths and capacity been built over the time of the project? We also provide for communities to define how they would know that it has been successful. It is very local.

In addition to that, the overall NTRAI agreement as a whole has a monitoring, evaluation and learning (MEAL) framework being applied to it, which includes progress against Closing the Gap as well as what can be visibly seen as reductions in harm in the community.

**J DAVIS:** In terms of outcomes, are they publicly available once the evaluation is happening? Can you let us know whether and how that will be shared?

**Ms GORE:** Yes. When alcohol policy was transferred to NT Health at the end of last year, one of the responsibilities was to continue to develop what is called a portal or a website where community can agree to upload their stories and tell good stories about what they have done in their local areas. That will be the site of the broad-based alcohol indicators as well—road deaths, alcohol-related harm et cetera.

We are now working with Housing, Local Government and Community Development around what is an appropriate level of indicators at a community level which respects people's data sovereignty but also does not identify negatively small communities. That is still being worked through with the crime and research division of Attorney-General's Department as well around what is a data story that can be produced monthly or quarterly that everybody can see and what are the more specific things that a community might want to

hold and not share quite so broadly. The overall approach is to try to tell good stories of community action, so we will try to share as much as we can.

**J DAVIS:** In the public sphere and in terms informing the data from your work, I presume that is ongoing, and some of that will be available.

**Ms GORE:** Yes, we have a partnership group that involves Health, Police, NIAA and AMSANT. That group meets monthly and looks at what we know is happening. Then, it collectively talks about some of these dilemmas about where things should be shared and where it should not. That oversight continues through the NT Aboriginal Health Forum and other venues. Where we can we make stuff available publicly and let people know it will be public. Where people would like us not to do that, we have the ability to do that under the governance as well.

**Mr PAECH:** In the interest of time, the opposition will put all further Health questions through on written notice. I am just as eager as the minister is to get on to Housing, Local Government and Community Development and Aboriginal Affairs. No further questions from the opposition. The health spokesperson from the opposition has said that they will be placed on notice.

**J DAVIS:** You talked about the minimum unit price. This relates a little to my data question. When you removed the minimum unit price you said that it was not working to reduce harm. I am interested in what the government is doing to monitor the impact of the removal of the MUP and whether we will see harms increase as a result of this policy change.

**Mr EDGINGTON:** We are continuing to monitor crime across the Northern Territory. I spoke about the crime statistics that we had seen over a lengthy period under the previous government. We will continue to monitor crime across the board.

As we said before, we have introduced alternatives, which is nuisance public drinking laws. We will continue to look at what options we have, as a government, including the nuisance public drinking laws and the Banned Drinker Register. We will be looking at how to best utilise the Banned Drinker Register and issue banned drinker orders. All of those aspects and that work is constantly being monitored through the department.

**J DAVIS:** I am interested in how you are gathering data to look at the impact of the removal of the MUP. Maybe you can explain how access to \$6 bottles of wine and \$14 casks contributes to minimising harm caused by alcohol.

**Mr EDGINGTON:** How it contributes?

**J DAVIS:** How does it contribute to minimising harm? If our aim is to minimise harm, how does minimum unit price contribute to that?

**Mr EDGINGTON:** The minimum unit price was introduced by the Minister for Tourism and Hospitality. When it comes to the management of alcohol overall, our policy about nuisance public drinking, looking at the Banned Drinker Register and the impact of alcohol across the board is an ongoing cycle of work that is already happening within the department.

Our deputy chief executive may be able to contribute further to that about the monitoring of the impacts of alcohol across the board.

**J DAVIS:** I am particularly interested in relation to the MUP.

**Mr EDGINGTON:** We do not have an MUP.

**J DAVIS:** The removal of the MUP; apologies.

**Ms GORE:** The range of policy measures which look to limit supply are multifactorial. BDR reduces supply in one way, MUP did in a different way, alcohol management plans, and POSIs on bottle shops all make a contribution. The various evaluations which have occurred looking at those individual policy elements by themselves keep saying they interact with each other.

We will continue to monitor those key indicators that the minister has called out—alcohol-related emergency department presentations; domestic, sexual and family violence presentations et cetera.

The one thing that minimum unit price did was apply to Darwin in a way that none of the other measures did. We can compare Darwin to other areas of the Territory. We are not specifically looking just for minimum unit price, because as the minister has noted, other things have come in since it was repealed.

We are looking for a safer Territory where we can see a drop in consumption and a drop in those harms. We will continue to take advice on which bits, next, of the policy will best affect that.

**J DAVIS:** Given that, is there an intention to develop a coordinated alcohol harm reduction strategy for the NT, and if so, has any funding been allocated to that in this budget?

**Mr EDGINGTON:** Coming into government, as we have made very clear, we wanted to target alcohol-related harm and crime. We are working on our policy in regard to mandatory rehabilitation and what that might look like. We are also looking at a range of options to better utilise the Banned Drinker Register, and other options for how we can support people affected by alcohol and other drugs. We are focused on remote treatment service provision and workforce development. There is a range of alcohol policy that we are working through at the moment to move forward.

We will have further announcements as we work through that, but at the moment we have a team working on our alcohol policy moving forward. Over the next few months, we will have more to say on that.

**J DAVIS:** Can you indicate whether there will be a comprehensive alcohol policy, or will it continue to be the kinds of things you have described, as in specific areas of action?

**Mr EDGINGTON:** All of those form part of our policy. I do not think you can look at those in isolation to each other.

**J DAVIS:** A strategy; sorry.

**Mr EDGINGTON:** Part of our overall strategy will include the consideration of alcohol policy measures, how that will reduce crime and tackle problem drinking in a coordinated way across government. That will include mandatory rehabilitation. How that is applied and who it will apply to is still being worked through by the department, with consultation with me.

There is a lot of work going on at the moment to see how we can best tackle alcohol-related harm in the Northern Territory. We are not against responsible drinking, and I have made that clear a number of times. What we want is to work with people who are causing harm to others as a result of alcohol or other drugs being consumed. That policy is being worked on, and we want to focus on rehabilitation and treatment services at the local level. All of that work is being pulled together at the moment, and we will have further announcements over the next few months.

**J DAVIS:** I am specifically interested in—I am not sure what the right language is, but you have answered it for now.

**Mr EDGINGTON:** All of that will go hand in hand together. What we call it at the end might be just a matter of interpretation. I reassure everybody that all of these issues related to alcohol and other drugs go hand in hand, and we want to have a comprehensive policy in place to address those issues.

**J DAVIS:** What has the government committed to in the Health budget for the prevention of FASD and the assessment and treatment services for people living with it?

**Ms GORE:** The first thing this government is doing to work towards preventing FASD is all the work that happens in alcohol policy, which tries to reduce consumption broadly and to set messages to the community about responsible drinking and trying to drive down alcohol consumption broadly.

In addition to that, there is \$603,000 for five regional coordinators in ACCHOs across the NT. Those positions work with local communities on education materials, awareness-raising materials, engaging with men and women of child-bearing age to put out those health promotion messages and early intervention messages about not consuming alcohol during pregnancy.

Those service coordinators also assist with people who are trying to access assessment services and therapeutic services. We have work in Central Australian Aboriginal Congress where we work alongside them. The majority of the funding for CYATS—which most people are aware is their service—comes from

the federal government and through philanthropic support. NT Health provides the paediatricians and other allied health supports once the children are assessed.

We have a similar arrangement with Danila Dilba in Darwin where our teams work alongside them. They do not receive specific Commonwealth funding. It is an area of ongoing advocacy for them. Our job is then to provide the therapeutic supports once the children are assessed in those settings.

**J DAVIS:** Is there any current data for the NT in relation to FASD? There was a previous strategy that went 2018 to 2024, but I have not been able to find any evaluation or publicly available reports on that.

**Ms GORE:** Data for FASD is really difficult to collate because the search for a diagnosis is a complicated tool. In recent years we have been working closely with the department of Education and the now Department of People, Sport and Culture regarding functional assessment. Being able to assess neurodevelopmental delay for whatever reason, whether it is alcohol-related or trauma-related or poverty-related, is where we can get assistance for young people.

There is work underway now, particularly with the department of Education and the Office of Disability, around modelling the future needs of the Territory, under the change to what has been called foundational supports by the Commonwealth. The ability to work with whole communities to address children who have delayed development, rather than an NDIS-lite model where it is just based on an individual child. I think that will very much better serve the needs of the NT in addressing that generational disadvantage, particularly in our remote centres and where we do not have sufficient allied health workforce to meaningfully provide services in a way which will make a difference.

**J DAVIS:** Just to confirm, there was no evaluation of the previous 2018 to 2024 strategy?

**Ms GORE:** No. That is correct. The previous strategy tried to describe a range of activities occurring in a range of settings, from prevention to early intervention to treatment. As an overall, we do not evaluate the strategy, but we have looked at some of those specific programs, like the regional coordinator roles were evaluated through NT Aboriginal Health Forum and were considered a really worthwhile investment to continue. Most of what we are describing here is the provision of health services to children and their families.

---

#### **Answer to Question on Notice No 7.4**

**Mr EDGINGTON:** This relates to the number of remote nurses who are government employed versus agency nursing staff in hospitals and what the government versus agency numbers are.

Primary Health Care has utilised, year to date, 105 FTEs of agency labour. This represents 23% of total nursing staff. Alice Springs Hospital has utilised, year to date, 63 FTEs of agency labour. This represents 11% of total nursing staff. The Gove hospital has utilised, year to date, four FTEs of agency labour. This represents 6% of total nursing staff. Katherine Hospital has utilised, year to date, 14 FTEs of agency labour. This represents 15% of total nursing staff. Palmerston has utilised one FTE of agency labour. This represents less than 1% of total nursing staff. Royal Darwin Hospital has utilised 41 FTEs of agency labour. This represents 4% of total nursing staff. Tennant Creek Hospital has utilised 16 FTEs of agency labour. This represents 30% of total nursing staff.

Overall, NT Health has utilised, year to date, 139 FTE agency nurses across its hospitals. This represents 7% of our total nursing staff.

---

**Mr CHAIR:** That concludes consideration of Output 3.1.

#### **Output 3.2 – Mental Health**

No questions.

### **Output 3.3 – Aged Care**

**Mr CHAIR:** The committee will now consider Output 3.3, Aged Care. Are there any questions?

**Mr O’GALLAGHER:** You may recall during my maiden speech one of the issues I highlighted was the lack of investment in our aged-care facilities. I gave examples of wonderful people I know who could not get into aged care but were basically kept at Royal Darwin Hospital for maybe four months or more. That was quite sad.

At the time I urged our government to look at investing in new aged-care facilities across the Territory. You touched on it in your opening speech, but could you update us on what initiatives we have done to date or what is planned for strengthening aged-care facilities across the Territory?

**Mr EDGINGTON:** NT Health is currently the provider of last resort when it comes to aged care. On any given day, as I said in my opening speech, our hospital beds in Darwin and Alice Springs are taken up by long-stay aged-care patients. I previously quoted that might consist of anywhere between 60 and 80 aged-care patients who are utilising beds in our hospitals on any given day.

This means our hospitals have become the only place to care for older Territorians because there are no beds available in residential aged-care facilities. As such, we have the highest aged-care occupancy rate of 92.2% and the longest hospital stays for older patients awaiting aged-care placement. The NT also has fewer residential aged-care beds per capita, with 47.5 beds per 1,000 people over 70 years of age, compared to the national average of 67.5 beds—a difference of 20 beds per 1,000.

This is causing bed block in our hospitals and is significantly more costly than residential aged care. It is estimated that it costs about \$40m each year for NT Health to provide this care.

During the reporting period \$2m in funding was allocated to design a new residential aged-care facility within the Palmerston Regional Hospital precinct. A further \$10m, as I indicated before, has been allocated to fund headworks and the subdivision to support future development. We reliably estimated that a new residential aged-care facility will require an investment of about \$120m.

Leading up to the federal election, the current federal government promised \$60m towards the build cost and is engaging directly with private providers to attract interest in them building and operating a facility in the Top End. At the moment submissions to deliver a new residential aged-care facility through the Australian Government Aged Care Capital Assistance Program recently closed. There have been some submissions, and those proposals are being considered now.

Our government continues to work closely with the Commonwealth to progress this development in the Northern Territory. A big focus of our government is to ensure that aged-care facilities are provided in the Top End. It is costing our government \$40m a year to accommodate aged-care residents. We want to see aged-care residents in the appropriate facilities. Families do not want to see aged-care people in hospitals. We want to see them in the appropriate facilities where they are being cared for and receive the treatment and support they need to live a better life.

**Mr CHAIR:** That concludes consideration of Output 3.3 and Output Group 3.0.

### **OUTPUT GROUP 4.0 – DISEASE PREVENTION AND HEALTH PROTECTION**

#### **Output 4.1 – Disease Prevention and Health Protection**

No questions.

### **OUTPUT GROUP 5.0 – NATIONAL CRITICAL CARE AND TRAUMA RESPONSE**

#### **Output 5.1 – National Critical Care and Trauma Response**

No questions.

### **OUTPUT GROUP 6.0 – CORPORATE AND SHARED SERVICES**

#### **Output 6.1 – Corporate and Governance**

#### **Output 6.2 – Shared Services Received**

No questions.

**Mr CHAIR:** That concludes consideration of all outputs related to the Department of Health. On behalf of the committee, I thank the officers who provided advice to the minister today.

The committee will now move to consider outputs relating to the Department of Housing, Local Government and Community Development. We will pause for five minutes, and I will hand over to the minister for final remarks.

**Mr EDGINGTON:** In wrapping up, I thank our chief executive and our deputy chief executives, Angela Brannelly and Cecelia Gore, for coming in today. As a reminder, we have people on the front line, and they are performing excellent work 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Thank you to the department for all the work that they have put in preparing for Estimates today.

**Mr CHAIR:** Thank you, minister, and the committee echoes those sentiments.

---

The committee suspended.

---

## HOUSING, LOCAL GOVERNMENT AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

### ESSENTIAL SERVICES

#### DEPARTMENT OF HOUSING, LOCAL GOVERNMENT AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

**Mr CHAIR:** Minister, I welcome you as the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Community Development and the Minister for Essential Services, and invite you to introduce the officials accompanying you and to make an opening statement regarding the Department of Housing, Local Government and Community Development.

**Mr EDGINGTON:** It is a pleasure to introduce officials from the Department of Housing, Local Government and Community Development who are appearing with me today: Ms Amelia Vellar, Acting Chief Executive Officer; Ms Michelle Walker, Acting Chief Executive Officer, Programs, System Improvement and Reform; Mr Brent Warren, Deputy Chief Executive Officer, Corporate Strategic and Enabling Services; Ms Courtney Warr, Acting Deputy Chief Executive Officer, Delivery and Regional Priorities; and Ms Tamara Biro, who is our Acting Chief Financial Officer.

It gives me great pleasure to speak about my portfolio responsibilities as Minister for Housing, Local Government and Community Development. The department provides essential services and programs to Territorians in urban, regional and remote communities, including homelands. It is a privilege to get to know the hardworking staff in this department.

With a budget of \$856m, which includes repairs and maintenance and capital grants, as well as infrastructure funding of \$710m in 2025–26, which includes major and minor works, the department sustains communities across the Territory daily with a focus on supporting access and empowerment for Territorians. Having a house to live in is a fundamental building block that provides shelter and supports improved health, education and employment outcomes.

We are committed to fostering community voice and self-determination by strengthening regional and remote service delivery through local government reforms and a community development focus. Local control creates real opportunities for remote Territorians to have a more active role in community development and decision-making processes. It brings jobs and employment opportunities closer to where people live and is essential to rebuilding the economy and restoring our unique Territory lifestyle. Whether it is providing our 73 remote communities or 79 outstations with housing, water and sewerage services; delivering services to the 10,000 people living on 500 homelands, town camps and community living areas; or helping Territorians be heard and participate in the government system with interpreters and translators, the department's work is fundamental to many Territorians.

Our highlights in the department's program of work include:

- providing regulatory and funding support to 18 local governments delivering the third tier of government services across the Territory

- helping Territorians be understood with interpreters and translators, supporting people to speak in over 30 Aboriginal and 33 other languages
- providing a landlord service and directly managing and maintaining a growing portfolio of over 10,000 public housing dwellings across the Territory, accommodating nearly 32,000 Territorians
- providing affordable community and industry housing to non-government organisations, our diverse housing portfolio not only supports those in need but also creates pathways for tenants to transition into the private sector and/or eventually into home ownership
- enabling the delivery of core government services by providing government employee housing in 115 regional and remote locations across the Northern Territory, supporting the employment and retention of qualified and skilled staff
- partnering with the Australian Government to invest in new social housing across remote, regional and urban locations to reduce wait times, rental stress, overcrowding and to provide more Territorians in need with a home.

Access to safe, affordable and appropriate housing is essential to tenants' wellbeing and restoring our unique lifestyle for Territorians. Some of the key housing investments in 2025 include:

- \$147.9m to manage the urban housing portfolio of 4,074 homes, with the community housing sector managing 21%, and this includes supporting investment to deliver new homes; managing waitlists and allocations; providing tenancy and property management; and repairs and maintenance
- \$1.23m for the development of a site complex for affordable housing at Ozanam House, enabling community housing provider St Vincent de Paul to provide sub-market rental opportunities for income-eligible key workers
- \$11.5m to progress Housing Australia Future Fund commitments, the joint \$4bn Northern Territory Government and Australian Government investment in remote housing which will see up to 2,700 homes built over 10 years
- \$67m to deliver housing and manage 1,397 government-owned and 451 privately headleased tenancies, including repairs and maintenance for Northern Territory Government employees in regional and remote areas.

We contribute funding of \$40m on average in 2025–26 and 2026–27 as part of the Australian Government's Homelands Housing and Infrastructure Program (HHIP) to deliver housing, municipal and essential services to 381 homelands and 18 non-leased town camps and also for municipal services delivery in the 25 leased town camps and nine remote communities.

When it comes to public housing reform, I have spoken previously about the need to undertake key reforms in the social housing space, in particular the need to better manage the impacts of antisocial behaviour affecting social housing tenants and their neighbours. This is about reinforcing the terms and conditions of tenancy leases which require our tenants to be good neighbours and to take care of the homes and communities they live in.

In our year of action, certainty and security, I can assure the community that the department is making public housing safer and tenants more accountable. It is reviewing available powers and policies to ensure they deal with antisocial behaviour in a more effective way.

The department is also working closely with the Northern Territory police where criminal activity or crimes are taking place. This includes holding tenants accountable for their behaviour and their visitors, moving them out of the social housing system and into more suitable alternatives such as supported accommodation, including actively pursuing remedies for compensation orders and, if necessary, eviction through the Northern Territory Civil and Administrative Tribunal.

Our public housing safety officers will have greater powers to do their critical work of proactively patrolling social housing to prevent antisocial behaviour, responding to calls for assistance from tenants and the public, and taking action to deal with the situations they respond to. These frontline response officers do a fantastic job in dealing with troublemakers, attending social housing and taking action to hold tenants accountable,

removing unwanted and misbehaving visitors, issuing notices to repeat offenders and coordinating with police and night patrol in the areas that they work.

Our public housing safety officers recently underwent their annual refresher training. They are now equipped with upgraded body-worn cameras that are more robust and effective, ensuring that they can collect the best evidence available to substantiate any breach action.

We are currently reviewing the suite of powers available to our public housing safety officers to take action when they attend an incident, along with reviewing and strengthening the Red Card policy to ensure that swift action is taken against repeat offenders.

The other major area for reform in public housing is rent debt. More than 6,600 active tenancies across the public housing estate are in rental arrears by \$41.5m, with each household owing an average of more than \$6,000. Rental arrears is money that should be used to maintain and expand our public housing portfolio. This budget will enable the department to undertake work to ensure legislation and policies are enforced, with tenants being held accountable and provided with clear understanding of their obligations.

We are taking action against tenants who do not pay their rent, using NTCAT to ensure there are consequences, including obtaining compensation orders to recover unpaid rent and eviction for tenants who do not re-engage. Tenants have opportunities through the debt management process to sign agreements to pay off their debts in affordable amounts prior to reaching the point of eviction. Since announcing the public housing reform on 20 March 2025, the department has increased the number of agreements to pay with households in rental arrears by 376 as of 31 May 2025.

There have been positive developments in the construction of new housing stock across the Territory. Working in partnership with the Department of Logistics and Infrastructure, there are 216 new social housing dwellings under construction in remote communities in the Territory. Over the life of the remote housing capital works program since 2017 a total of 1,132 new homes were built. A further 551 received upgrade extensions. Combined, that is 4,351 new bedrooms.

A budget focus for an agency managing such a large asset portfolio of over 11,000 dwellings and bringing on so many newly built dwellings is appropriately accounting for depreciation of existing stock and asset write-offs for new stock, which includes items such as demolition, boundary fencing and driveway costs. We forecast a \$76.6m asset write-off and a \$45.5m depreciation expense in this financial year.

Building new homes in remote communities is not about the construction; it includes negotiating land tenure agreements and establishing leases with Aboriginal land trusts. As at 31 March approximately 544 leases covering 5,810 remote land parcels were negotiated. That work does not include the next steps of land servicing infrastructure to support these new builds.

For example, in Maningrida 85 of the planned 95 new HomeBuild homes are complete, bringing safe and modern homes to local families. Renovation and upgrade of existing homes under the Room to Breathe program is also well underway, with 55 out of 70 homes already improved.

Recently, I was able to congratulate Edward Mason and Rosita Ankin and their family members, who are now living in a four-bedroom, two-bathroom house that replaces their ageing 1970s home. Edward, who works as an interpreter, told me how happy the new house had made his family.

In Haasts Bluff, west of Alice Springs, three new homes were handed over to local families in March, part of a new build package that will ultimately see 10 new houses constructed in the community.

This work is part of the \$4bn 10-year commitment jointly funded by the Australian and Northern Territory Governments to deliver up to 2,700 new homes across remote communities, helping to create stronger, healthier futures for Aboriginal Territorians. The package includes \$141.04m in funding for tenancy and support services, with regional and remote service providers contracted to employ local people and provide support and mentoring to tenants to help them maintain a successful tenancy.

We are also building new homes in major centres, with construction underway on five new homes in Alice Springs as part of a project to deliver up to 100 new social housing properties across the urban centres of Darwin, Alice Springs, Katherine and Tennant Creek. These new homes will provide safe, secure housing for low-income households as well as create local jobs during construction, part of the \$50m partnership with the Australian Government via the Social Housing Accelerator payment.

In May I inspected 12 newly built social and affordable houses in Tennant Creek. These homes are a critical part of Tennant Creek being able to accommodate the key workers it needs to function. These homes were constructed as part of the Barkly Regional Deal in partnership with Housing Australia and Venture Housing, part of an innovative \$1.9m joint funding initiative.

Empowering communities includes ensuring Territorians have the option to live on their traditional homelands and outstations. A total of \$39.2m will be spent in 2025–26 on providing municipal and essential services to homelands residents.

Recently I had the opportunity to visit the Mungkarta community, about 80 kilometres south of Tennant Creek, to see the upgraded homes in that community. These upgrades are a great example of what we can achieve when we all work together in partnership with the homelands and the land councils.

Furthermore, as part of the \$120m three-year partnership with the Australian Government, the department is working with the members of the remote housing joint steering committee to identify priority homelands for a significant housing upgrade program, with 100 dwellings scheduled for upgrade in the 2025–26 financial year. A total of 365 homes were upgraded as of 31 March 2025. This work is delivered through grant funding packages which are targeted towards local and regional Aboriginal-controlled contractors, ensuring that employment and training opportunities are available for remote Territorians.

In the local government sector, the Local Government Legislation Amendment Bill 2025 was passed in May to ensure the Bill is contemporary, improves efficiency and transparency and strengthens effectiveness within the local government sector. The Bill is the first tranche of local government legislation reform, with tranche 2 now underway.

Three detailed discussion papers which tackle bigger issues, including the code of conduct for elected members, are out now for public consultation. Consultation sessions have already been held in Darwin, Alice Springs, Tennant Creek and Katherine, with sessions in Nhulunbuy and Groote Eylandt coming up. Discussion papers can also be viewed online. Anyone can complete the online survey to provide feedback.

We are also continuing to deliver on our commitment to empower bush communities in the Territory. The formation of the Groote Archipelago Regional Council was a proud and exciting time for local people. The new three-ward council will be able to deliver fairer and more localised representation to residents.

I know that restoring control of communities to Aboriginal people is fundamental to creating real opportunities for locals to have a more active role in community development and decision-making processes. To achieve this, a new community development framework is being created. The framework approach is designed to embed stronger local planning and ensure investment is better aligned to the unique priorities of each community. The implementation will be supported by regional Community Development staff on the ground who will play a key role in linking communities with government services, facilitating local governance arrangements and ensuring coordinated delivery across agencies.

The Central Australia Plan: Community Infrastructure Package is continuing to fund Central Desert Regional Council and MacDonnell Regional Council, guided by the Aboriginal leadership group, priority infrastructure projects across the region. Tranche 1 delivered early wins, including completed playground upgrades in Ntaria and Atitjere. Further works are underway in communities like Ti Tree, Laramba and Engawala. Tranche 2 commits to 23 new projects, including cultural centres, splash pads, oval lighting, recreational halls and community laundries, continuing to deliver local infrastructure that meets community priorities and creates employment.

I acknowledge our Aboriginal Interpreter Service which celebrated 25 years of service in April. An interpreter forum was also held in May in Tennant Creek and brought together Aboriginal interpreters from around the Territory for two days of training and professional development.

Recognising the power of preserving and supporting local languages, the Australian Government has agreed to partner with us through NT Remote Aboriginal Investment funding, providing \$54.98m over the next six years to support and grow the service.

The AIS team provide professional and essential interpreting services for Territorians, ensuring that people who speak an Aboriginal language as their first language can communicate with government agencies to access government services. Aboriginal interpreters work directly with clients in hospitals, courts and, most recently, with the NT Police Joint Emergency Services Communications Centre.

Another exciting initiative is the NORFORCE interpreter employment pathway program with the Australian Defence Force. This program provides the opportunity for NORFORCE reservists to become trained interpreters. This creates additional employment opportunities with AIS outside of their NORFORCE duties. The AIS also support the Northern Territory Emergency Service during declared emergencies to ensure Aboriginal language speakers are properly informed of events and evacuations.

In closing, I highlight in our year of action, certainty and security our approach to restoring control of communities to Aboriginal people and strengthening service delivery, empowering communities that want a greater say and enabling local government reform is measured and grounded in meaningful consultation. It is driven by what communities want and need and not a one-size-fits-all model.

I am happy to take any questions regarding my portfolio.

**Mr PAECH:** With the machinery-of-government changes in your department either picking up, losing or creating new EC positions, can you provide how many EC positions were created in the change of government, were transitioned over or were lost?

**Mr EDGINGTON:** In regard to the staffing overview of the new department at the ECO1 level there are four positions; the ECO2 level, we have six positions; the ECO3 level, we have two positions; the ECO4 level, we have three positions; and at the ECO6 level, we have one position.

**Mr PAECH:** When you came to government was the appointment of the CEO advertised or was it a direct appointment?

**Mr EDGINGTON:** When I came to government and was sworn in as a minister the CEO was already in place.

**Mr PAECH:** Are you aware that was a direct appointment by the Chief Minister?

**Mr EDGINGTON:** I am not sure what the process was, Member for Gwoja, but ...

**Mr PAECH:** Did you ask any questions?

**Mr EDGINGTON:** No.

**Mr PAECH:** Of your staffing in the department, how many are Aboriginal people?

**Mr EDGINGTON:** The Aboriginal workforce in the department, including casual positions, as at 31 March was 183 Aboriginal employees. Total paid staff in the pay period was 604. Aboriginal staff of the paid workforce make up 30% of the department.

**Mr PAECH:** How many of those are permanent versus casual?

**Mr EDGINGTON:** We are getting a breakdown of casual and full-time, but I can give you an indication of the levels of our Aboriginal workforce if that is any help while we are waiting for that information.

**Mr PAECH:** No, that is fine. I would like to know how many are casual and how many are full-time.

**Mr EDGINGTON:** We might have to take that on notice, but what I can tell you is that ...

**Mr PAECH:** I am happy to put that on notice.

---

#### Question on Notice No 7.6

**Mr CHAIR:** Member for Gwoja, please restate the question for the record.

**Mr PAECH:** Can you provide the figures on how many staff in the agency who are Aboriginal are full-time and how many are casual?

**Mr CHAIR:** Minister, do you accept the question?

**Mr EDGINGTON:** Yes.

**Mr CHAIR:** The question has been allocated the number 7.6.

**Mr PAECH:** Have any grants in local government been reprioritised since the Country Liberals came to government? I am happy to put it on notice if there is some difficulty in finding that information.

**Mr EDINGTON:** I am sure we have that information, but we will take that on notice.

---

#### Question on Notice No 7.7

**Mr CHAIR:** Member for Gwoja, please restate the question for the record.

**Mr PAECH:** How many, if any, local government grants have been reprioritised since the CLP came to government?

**Mr CHAIR:** Minister, do you accept the question?

**Mr EDINGTON:** Yes.

**Mr CHAIR:** The question has been allocated the number 7.7.

**Mr PAECH:** How many local government grants have been awarded to Palmerston City Council?

**Mr EDINGTON:** Zero.

**Mr PAECH:** Is that zero for the reporting period?

**Mr EDINGTON:** The information I have is that there have been zero grants during the reporting period.

**Mr PAECH:** I want to find out where in the budget there is funding to assist with the work that your government has made around de-amalgamating councils.

**Mr EDINGTON:** I will ask Deputy Chief Executive Brent Warren to provide detail on how the budget is structured this year.

**Mr WARREN:** I understand the question as: what money in the budget is being specifically allocated for the purpose of de-amalgamation of councils? There is no specific budget line in this year's budget regarding the amalgamation. We have our usual grant funding across a range of funding streams. The allocation will be determined in the new financial year. Beyond that, we have a community development workforce that will be involved in doing community consultation. We have a community development budget which is available for consultation and community development exercises.

**Mr PAECH:** Has there been or is there work being undertaken on the cost analysis of what it will cost Territorians to de-amalgamate? Where is the additional funding coming from to enable that transition?

**Mr EDINGTON:** When you talk about de-amalgamating, let me make it clear that, coming into government, our policy is to work with and empower communities to restore real local decision-making at a local level.

We only have to go back to 1 July 2008 under a ...

**Mr PAECH:** A point of order, Mr Chair! This is about the reporting period, not before then.

**Mr EDINGTON:** This puts it in context.

**Mr PAECH:** It is irrelevant.

**Mr CHAIR:** Minister, we will stick to the reporting period. You can provide context as to what led to your decision.

**Mr EDINGTON:** Speaking to the Member for Gwoja's comments, 1 July 2008 is particularly relevant because over the last 17 years there has been the gradual disappearance of a number of services that have

brought revenue into communities. The Member for Gwoja is interested in knowing where all the money is coming from to de-amalgamate local councils.

This will not be a one-size-fits-all approach. This will be working with communities through a proper consultation and engagement process. We will not be forcing change on any community. I need to make it clear that this is not about forcing change or de-amalgamating, as the Member for Gwoja would like everyone to believe; this is about working with communities to empower them and restore local decision-making and service delivery so that we can create jobs and build leadership in communities.

Therefore, 1 July 2008 is particularly relevant because that is when the Labor government of the day scrapped every local government council in the Northern Territory and brought them under a shire process and brought councils in together. Over the last 17 years there has been a loss of services and jobs. I will give you some examples.

**Mr PAECH:** A point of order, Mr Chair! The minister is misleading this committee. The CLP was in government for four of those 17 years when it could have done something about it.

**Mr CHAIR:** The minister did not place blame on any party in that. He simply said it was 17 years. That includes both Labor and CLP governments in that period.

**Mr EDGINGTON:** This is important to the question that was raised because when it comes to funding these proposals, I have said that there is a role in every community that wants to take on decision-making at a local level.

I am happy to go back to 2012 to 2016 when the West Daly Regional Council and the Victoria Daly Regional Council were created. There is a couple of examples of some of the changes that were made. Perhaps the Member for Gwoja has forgotten about that. That is what happened between 2012 and 2016. I know it was some time ago, but that is what happened.

We are working with communities to restore and empower those communities. Over the last 17 years those smaller councils that previously looked after sports and rec, CDEP—there was a program called CDEP. That was a federally funded program. Previously small communities used to deliver their own night patrol services, looked after roads and housing and delivered tenancy and property management services. These services generated revenue for those communities.

The Member for Gwoja suggested that we need all this money to restore local decision-making in communities. What we need to be looking at is how we restore services back in communities, because on 1 July 2008 it was not just the councils that disappeared; it was the leadership structure in every community. This is very important, because the leadership is the most important part of every community. As part of this process we are restoring a leadership structure in those communities that want to be empowered to take on those services. Having that leadership structure in a community is extremely important, and every bush member here knows that. Everyone knows that.

As part of that process we are working through a community development model that will work with that community, if they want to be empowered, to run their community as a small community government council. We would not only look at restoring that council, but look at what services can be returned to those communities. If that involves a night patrol service, a roads contract to look after roads, being responsible for repairs and maintenance, tenancy services in those communities, delivering sports and rec—some of those services that were taken away over the last 17 years. That is what we are focused on because we want to see people empowered in their communities; jobs back in communities; and, if possible, through consultation with the federal government, a properly structured CDP program back in communities that will create jobs for local people in local communities. That is our focus.

When it comes to delivering on that, we will be doing it a structured way. There is a role for ...

**Mr PAECH:** Come on—relevance. What does that have to do with local government? Get back to the point.

**Mr CHAIR:** Member for Gwoja, if you have an issue, please object through me.

**Mr PAECH:** Through the Chair, relevance. This question was about de-amalgamating, not a rose-coloured glasses history lesson from the Member for Barkly, the minister for Housing.

**Mr CHAIR:** Minister, if you could wrap it up in 60 seconds.

**Mr EDGINGTON:** Is the Member for Gwoja still on that warning from the other day?

**Mr PAECH:** No, it has expired.

**Mr CHAIR:** I confirm he is not on a warning.

**Mr EDGINGTON:** The red card system has expired, I suppose.

This is important because having local control in local communities creates other opportunities around community safety, alcohol management, law and justice committees—there is a whole range of functions that a smaller community can undertake themselves. When it comes to funding we will continue to work in a structured way through community consultation and engagement to deliver on our promise for Territorians.

**Mr PAECH:** You mentioned in your opening address honouring the previous commitment by the Territory and federal Labor governments' \$4bn housing program. Is the government on track to meet the 270 homes? What has actually been delivered in this reporting period?

**Mr EDGINGTON:** We will get that information for you. This is more of a question for DLI, but ...

**Mr PAECH:** They said it was for you.

**Mr EDGINGTON:** They are the ones that build houses. The program has delivered 161 new or replacement remote community homes, with a further 216 currently underway as at 31 March.

**Mr PAECH:** What will be the anticipated completion figure as of the closure of the reporting period?

**Mr EDGINGTON:** That is difficult to predict, but we have committed, under the 10-year agreement, 2,700 homes over 10 years. Given that we have delivered 161 already, with 216 under construction—as you know, being a remote member, a whole lot of factors need to be taken into account when delivering new homes out bush. It could be weather or road conditions; a whole lot of factors may impact the delivery of homes in remote areas. Over 10 years, 2,700 homes—and we are working on track to deliver those 270 up until 30 June.

**Mr PAECH:** You signed an agreement to do 270 homes this year, and you just said you are doing 161—I have written here. That leaves 109 homes that need to be built, basically tomorrow, to meet your agreed target of 270.

**Mr EDGINGTON:** What I am saying is that there are 216 new homes currently under construction. I do not have the numbers in front of me of how many of those will be completed. When we say 2,700 homes, that is under the life of the agreement. I have previously spoken about this in parliament. You are aware, from your previous role as a Housing minister, there are challenges in remote areas. The completion of houses will always depend on those factors regarding employment opportunities and the adverse weather conditions that we often see in some of those remote areas, so I do not have that specific information in front of me other than to confirm that there are 216 new homes currently underway as at 31 March.

**Mr PAECH:** Again, for the reporting period, it is 109. There is 161 to date that have been delivered.

**Mr EDGINGTON:** The reporting period has delivered 161 new or replacement homes, and there is currently 216 as of 31 March that are currently under construction. That is the reporting period.

**Mr PAECH:** I am very well aware—I delivered more remote housing in one year than any other minister. Let us see if you can meet that challenge.

**Mr CHAIR:** Member for Gwoja, we will not reflect on past things. Minister, please no clapping during proceedings.

**Mr PAECH:** Can you confirm how many evictions have taken place since you became the minister? I am happy to put it on notice if you cannot answer today.

**Mr EDGINGTON:** We do not have those figures specifically in front of us, but we can take it on notice and should be able to get the answer.

### Question on Notice No 7.8

**Mr CHAIR:** Member for Gwoja, please restate the question for the record.

**Mr PAECH:** How many evictions have taken place since you became the minister? Can I add, how many matters are before NTCAT?

**Mr CHAIR:** Minister, do you accept the question?

**Mr EDGINGTON:** Yes, happy to take that question on notice.

**Mr CHAIR:** The question has been allocated the number 7.8.

---

**Mr PAECH:** Are you able to provide us with a breakdown of the current vacant houses across the Northern Territory per region, and how long the longest one has been vacant? Just to confirm for your team, vacant as in how long it has been sitting empty awaiting a new tenant and vacant as in how long it has been a derelict or vacant block in an urban centre.

**Mr EDGINGTON:** As at 31 March 2025 there were 119 vacant properties in the greater Darwin area; 11 vacant properties in Nhulunbuy; 40 vacant properties in Katherine ...

**Mr PAECH:** What about the Barkly?

**Mr EDGINGTON:** As at 31 March there were 11 vacant properties in Tennant Creek and 83 vacant properties in Alice Springs.

**Mr PAECH:** You are also forgetting how many vacant properties there are across the bush.

**Mr EDGINGTON:** We can get that information for you. We have the information by region. As at 31 March there were 283 homes that were vacant ...

**Mr PAECH:** Across the Northern Territory in the bush, or is that ...

**Mr EDGINGTON:** By region—remote.

**Mr PAECH:** Yes. Is that 283 vacant homes in the bush?

**Mr EDGINGTON:** That is right. I can give you a breakdown if you want.

**Mr PAECH:** No, that is fine. What I want and asked for is the average vacancy time and the longest vacancy.

**Mr EDGINGTON:** We do not have a breakdown of that at the moment. We are happy to take that on notice.

---

### Question on Notice No 7.9

**Mr CHAIR:** Member for Gwoja, please restate the question for the record.

**Mr PAECH:** Can you please provide the committee with the vacancy rate for the regions, being Alice Springs, Tennant Creek, Katherine, Nhulunbuy, Darwin and remote? What is the average vacancy time and the longest vacancy time?

**Mr CHAIR:** Minister, do you accept the question?

**Mr EDGINGTON:** Yes.

**Mr CHAIR:** The question has been allocated the number 7.9.

---

**Mr PAECH:** I will ask a similar question which the minister may take on notice. I have a constituent who has been waiting in excess of eight weeks to have an air conditioner fixed. They reported it multiple times to Housing and have had no action yet.

What is the average time for repairs and maintenance in a remote community versus the average time for repairs and maintenance in an urban setting? I am happy to give you examples, acknowledging that for different repairs and maintenance there may be different issues. What is electrical; what is plumbing; and what is physical infrastructure?

**Mr EDGINGTON:** I am happy to take that question on notice.

---

#### Question on Notice No 7.10

**Mr CHAIR:** Member for Gwoja, please restate the question for the record.

**Mr PAECH:** Could you provide the committee with the timelines and timeframes on remote repairs and maintenance and urban repairs and maintenance? What is the average time to have electrical work completed, plumbing work completed and physical work completed—as in doors, locks and windows replaced—and what is the average waiting time for repairs and maintenance on air conditioning?

**Mr CHAIR:** Minister, do you accept the question?

**Mr EDGINGTON:** Yes.

**Mr CHAIR:** The question has been allocated the number 7.10.

---

**K McNAMARA:** What is the estimated value of the known maintenance backlog? How does this year's budget allocation address that?

**Mr PAECH:** Is that part of the question on notice?

**Mr CHAIR:** That is a standalone question. Minister, you can either answer it or we can put it on notice.

**Mr EDGINGTON:** I am happy to take the question on notice.

**Mr CHAIR:** Member for Nightcliff, please restate the question for the record.

**K McNAMARA:** What is the estimated value of the known maintenance backlog? How does this year's budget allocation address it?

**Mr CHAIR:** Minister, do you accept the question?

**Mr EDGINGTON:** We do, but we do not. It would be hard to estimate the cost of what is on the backlog without it being quoted. It is probably a reasonable question, but the question is asking for a cost of the backlog without us having those estimates or quotes in front of us. There may be a list, but there would not ...

**K McNAMARA:** It would not be costed, I understand.

**Mr EDGINGTON:** Not everything would have been costed at this point. Do you want to ask that differently? Thinking it through it would be difficult to cost that up. We know there are repairs and maintenance required to be done. We would not necessarily have the cost of that at our fingertips, given that some of the work would need to be quoted.

**K McNAMARA:** I will ask it this way. Is there a section in the budget that addresses the maintenance jobs that are waiting?

**Mr EDGINGTON:** We have a repairs and maintenance budget. I can give you the repairs and maintenance budget for 2025–26 if that is what you are after.

**K McNAMARA:** To save time, I will have a look myself.

**Mr PAECH:** In the last reporting period when did the department expend its repairs and maintenance budget?

**Mr EDGINGTON:** I suspect there is probably not a lot of difference between what has been going on for the last few years when it comes to ...

**Mr PAECH:** That is irrelevant; we are after this reporting period.

**Mr EDGINGTON:** It is very important. We will get that information.

**Mr CHAIR:** Gentlemen! Minister, let us get the info.

**Mr WARREN:** I understand that your question relates to the repairs and maintenance budget. In the reporting period to 31 March the department had expended \$19,196,000 on repairs and maintenance, against the budget of \$16,835,000.

**Mr PAECH:** They overspent by \$4m. When did the department reach or exhaust the budget of \$16m? What month?

**Mr EDGINGTON:** I am happy to take that on notice, Member for Gwoja. We will need to devote some resources to go back and identify that timing for you.

---

#### Question on Notice No 7.11

**Mr CHAIR:** Member for Gwoja, please restate the question for the record.

**Mr PAECH:** Could you please provide the committee with the date that the Department of Housing, Local Government and Community Development expended its repairs and maintenance budget of \$16m?

**Mr CHAIR:** Minister, do you accept the question?

**Mr EDGINGTON:** Yes.

**Mr CHAIR:** The question has been allocated the number 7.11.

---

**Mr EDGINGTON:** Would you like any previous years with that?

**Mr PAECH:** No, that will be fine; just that one. I want to know how well you have done.

There are a lot of conversations in the community with homelands, and homeland service providers have told us that they have been given a one-year extension. Can you talk us through why they have been given a one-year extension? Also, a number of them have been told that they are at risk. What does 'at risk' mean, and what is the department doing to manage 'at risk'?

**Ms WALKER:** We have done a review of the remote housing contracts as it relates to homelands, and we are ensuring that the services are provided closer to those communities. Some of the contractors are having performance issues, so we are working with them to build their capacity. None of those contractors are losing their contracts at this time.

**Mr PAECH:** Just to be clear, none of the contractors are losing their contracts at this moment. They have been awarded a one-year extension, where the department will work with them to either build capacity or find a different service provider.

**Ms WALKER:** That is correct.

**Mr GUYULA:** Is the government intending to meet priority 1 of the Closing the Gap Agreement, partnerships and shared decision-making? So far this has not felt like it is a priority for this government.

My belief has always been that treaty is how we will close the gap because through a treaty process we are treated as equals. This is what underpins our success and wellbeing. Given the CLP does not support treaty, how will you achieve this priority? When will we see and feel that we are part of the decision-making for our communities?

**Mr EDGINGTON:** I am happy to talk about that. It is probably more of a question for Aboriginal Affairs, but I take on board the local decision-making aspect of that.

I will give some background about treaty because it is an issue that has been spoken about for a number of years. In 2018 the then Chief Minister, Michael Gunner, announced that his government was willing to negotiate a treaty or treaties between the Territory government and Aboriginal people. He signed an agreement to do so with the NT's four Aboriginal land councils on the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of former Prime Minister Bob Hawke's failed promise for a federal treaty in 1988.

In the Northern Territory the inaugural Treaty Commissioner, Mick Dodson, was appointed to the role in 2019, but later resigned following allegations of verbal abuse against a woman at a football match in Darwin ...

**Mr PAECH:** A point of order, Mr Chair! The Member for Mulka has asked an important question about treaty. Now he is getting a history lesson from the Member for Barkly, which he already knows because he has been in parliament for eight years. The Member for Mulka asked a direct question. Give the Member for Mulka the respect and answer the question.

**Mr CHAIR:** Minister, could you continue and get to the Member for Mulka's question, thank you.

**Mr EDGINGTON:** I was answering the question because ...

**Mr PAECH:** Get on with it!

**Mr EDGINGTON:** ... this is important ...

**Mr CHAIR:** Member for Gwoja, that is the last informal warning. After that, we will be going to a formal warning.

**Mr PAECH:** Okay; sorry.

**Mr EDGINGTON:** As I said, one Treaty Commissioner was appointed in the role in 2019, but had to resign because of allegations of verbal abuse against a woman at a football match in Darwin.

The Treaty Commissioner position was vacant for over six months until the former government decided to bring in a Sydney-based barrister to take the reins in December 2021 to carry through with that report. So much for the requirement that the NT Treaty Commissioner must have strong connections to the Northern Territory.

If we go back to treaty it is important to remember that in tabling the Acting Treaty Commissioner's final report in July 2022 the former Minister for Treaty, who happens to be now the Opposition Leader, stated:

*Too often treaty initiatives have ended up languishing on a shelf collecting dust. That will not happen this time on my watch.*

That was said in July 2022 ...

**Mr PAECH:** A point of order, Mr Chair!

**Mr CHAIR:** Minister, I ruled multiple times that we will not speak about past parliaments and what has been said. Can we bring it back to now.

**Mr EDGINGTON:** The point of this is that in December 2022 the former Treaty minister closed the treaty office, citing an inability to fund the commission. That was closed in December ...

**Ms UIBO:** Excuse me, Mr Chair, that is incorrect and is misleading the committee.

**Mr CHAIR:** As I have said multiple times, minister, can we please move on from that. We can pause and go through the *Hansard*, but that is a waste of everybody's time ...

**Ms UIBO:** So is this right now.

**Mr CHAIR:** Leader of the Opposition, please.

**Mr EDGINGTON:** Thanks again to the Member for Mulka for raising this because it is important to put on the record the inability of the former government to progress treaty.

Coming into government, our policy has always been about empowering communities with a practical pathway of self-determination via local government reform. We made that clear leading up to the 2024 election. We made it clear through our discussions out bush with many remote voters that our policy was not about treaty; it was about empowering bush communities through local government reform. Coming into government and winning 17 seats, we are progressing our policy of empowering remote communities. We want to restore control of communities to Aboriginal people.

The Aboriginal people who live in those communities have been asking since 2008 for their self-determination and restoration of decision-making at a local level. I have previously outlined the history of where the former Labor government took away local decision-making at the community level on 1 July 2008. They took away the leadership structures in those communities.

We are not adopting a one-size-fits-all approach. We are about consulting and engaging with remote communities to empower those communities to move forward with a model that works for those communities. This is not a one-size-fits-all model. We want to work with each community to determine the best structure for that community and what the leadership structure would like in that community, because the people are telling us that they want to see leadership positions back in their communities.

Getting back to the original question, treaty was basically shelved by the former government. Our policy is to empower communities. We will be out and about working with communities to restore that power in the smaller communities.

I have already given one example of the Groote Archipelago. The Groote Archipelago Regional Council has been established. That is a breakaway council from the East Arnhem Regional Council. Three wards have been established on the Groote Archipelago. We will continue to work with that council which has recently been elected. Those councillors were elected to represent the people on Groote. It is an important step forward because that is what the people there have been asking for, for a number of years.

There is one thing that sticks in my mind very clearly. When I was over on Groote, there was one lady there who sat behind a number of people. I think she was in her seventies. She was able to quote to me how happy she was that we were bringing back the regional council for the Groote Archipelago ...

**Mr PAECH:** You are welcome. I did that.

**Mr EDGINGTON:** In fact, she knew the date of 1 July 2008 ...

**Mr CHAIR:** Member for Gwoja, this is the formal warning. I do not want to eject you from this room, as you are the shadow minister. It is vital that you are here. You are on a warning. It is up to you where it goes from here.

**K McNAMARA:** Mr Chair, can we check with the Member for Mulka if this is answering his question? Otherwise, these massive portfolios have not been given enough time.

**Mr CHAIR:** Member for Mulka, are you satisfied with the answer?

**Mr GUYULA:** Yes. I am listening to that story and what happened—the history of it—where we are going and what we will do. My question is that we still want to see a treaty stand alongside or step in.

**Mr EDGINGTON:** Sorry, Member for Mulka. The short answer is that our government will not be pursuing treaty. We were elected to empower remote communities. Our policy is to start at the grassroots level, working with communities to bring back that self-determination in communities, to establish new leadership structures, to work with community on a place-based approach to ensure that community has the capacity and capability to deliver services and make decisions through that structure in the best interests of their community.

**Mr GUYULA:** The question I raised was on treaty. I was one of the people who stood on a platform of treaty. We ran, and that is how me and my people in my electorate won. It has been thrown like a football between parties, and no-one has respected the treaty that the people from the ground have called for. Now, I am calling again on behalf of my people, we want to see what this government will do with treaty. That is all we want to know. If you do not accept it, that is the answer you are giving us. That is all I want to know.

**Mr EDGINGTON:** That is exactly what I am saying. We have not supported treaty, but we have supported empowering communities at the local level so that there is a leadership group in every community to take control and make decisions in the best interest of the community. It is also to bring back the services that have gradually disappeared over the years so that we can create local jobs on country to make the community more stable, build capacity and capability to engage with people in those areas.

**Mr PAECH:** Were there any planned urban housing redevelopments cancelled or deferred during the reporting period?

**Mr EDGINGTON:** Whilst my staff are looking for some information, I can give an answer to a question on notice.

---

#### **Answer to Question on Notice No 7.6**

**Mr EDGINGTON:** There are 97 full-time Aboriginal staff ongoing and 12 for a fixed period, which is a total of 109. There is a total of four part-time and 70 casual Aboriginal employees in the agency.

**Mr CHAIR:** Minister, the floor is back to you for the Member for Gwoja's question.

**Mr EDGINGTON:** We are happy to take that question on notice.

---

#### **Question on Notice No 7.12**

**Mr CHAIR:** Member for Gwoja, please restate the question for the record.

**Mr PAECH:** Where there any planned urban housing redevelopments cancelled or deferred during the reporting period? I am talking about projects such as the Shiers Street development and Westralia Street development.

**Mr CHAIR:** Minister, do you accept the question?

**Mr EDGINGTON:** Yes.

**Mr CHAIR:** The question has been allocated the number 7.12.

**Mr PAECH:** Do you have plans to sell any public housing?

**Mr EDGINGTON:** No.

**Mr PAECH:** Are you aware that the Member for Karama put out a four-point plan during the election, which spoke about selling off public housing to first homebuyers?

**Mr EDGINGTON:** I am aware that the Member for Karama has advocated for a number of things in his electorate, and I commend him for the work he does. He is always out and about looking, listening and learning. He has been a strong advocate for a number of things.

The short answer to the question is that we have no immediate plans to sell any public housing.

**Mr PAECH:** Is the department doing work about drug dealing in houses and you are out?

**Mr EDGINGTON:** You may be aware that drug dealing in houses is a criminal offence.

**Mr PAECH:** Usually there is a sign put out the front to notify the tenant; they are not automatically kicked out.

**Mr EDGINGTON:** I am not sure what you mean by a sign being automatically put out in front of houses. Perhaps give me a bit more information so that I can answer.

**Mr PAECH:** I will table this so that it is on the record, and you can see whether the department is meeting the commitments made by the Member for Karama.

**Mr EDGINGTON:** You can table what you want, but can you ask me the question that you started asking? You backtracked for some reason. I am happy to answer the question if you would restate it.

**Mr PAECH:** I did not backtrack at all.

**Mr CHAIR:** Gentlemen, I will look at what the Member for Gwoja is tabling.

**Mr PAECH:** I am happy to table this.

My question was around the Member for Karama made commitments that if you use your house as a drug-dealing house, you are out. What is the process in the department? In some circumstances police or so forth would usually put a sign on the house.

**Mr EDGINGTON:** Drug dealing is a criminal offence. From my perspective, we do not want to see drug dealing in any community, let alone from a public house.

**Mr PAECH:** Absolutely not.

**Mr EDGINGTON:** Whether you are talking about signs out the front—I am sure there is legislation that the police apply when it comes to arresting and charging or a drug dealer being convicted in court, where there may be a sign placed at the front of any residence. I am not aware of any of those.

If a person has been drug dealing from their house and the police have investigated, and the person has had their day in court, so to speak, and been convicted of that type of offence, we would want to know about that. We expect all public housing tenants to provide a certain level of responsibility in a public house.

**Mr PAECH:** I absolutely support the comments you are making in regard to drug dealing. The Member for Karama made some specific commitments; is the department meeting those commitments?

**Mr EDGINGTON:** The Member for Karama is a strong advocate for his electorate. He has made a number of commitments to the people in his electorate. I have been out to public forums with the Member for Karama and heard from people the concerns that they have about the antisocial behaviour not only in public housing but some houses managed by community housing providers as well.

**Mr PAECH:** That is very important, but are you meeting those commitments?

**Mr EDGINGTON:** Listening to ...

**Mr PAECH:** A point of order, Mr Chair!

**Mr CHAIR:** Sorry, minister. Member for Gwoja, thank you for the correct way of interjecting.

**Mr PAECH:** Minister, you are giving me a broad statement. It is a yes or no answer. Is the department meeting the commitments made by the Member for Karama?

**Mr CHAIR:** We are not here to tell any minister how they are to respond.

**Mr EDGINGTON:** Member for Gwoja, thank you for your commentary about whether it should be a yes or no answer. You can have your opinion and I will have mine.

We are in constant contact with all members of parliament, and I listen to all members of parliament about their concerns.

**Ms UIBO:** People do not listen to you and support your electorate.

**Mr CHAIR:** Members of the committee, please. We have 17 minutes on what I think is—it does not matter what I think; it is an important issue.

**K McNAMARA:** Can I ask some questions?

**Mr EDGINGTON:** I am still trying to answer.

**K McNAMARA:** I got your answer, if everyone else has it.

**Mr EDGINGTON:** No, I have not finished my answer, Mr Chair.

**Mr CHAIR:** You have the floor, and then I will give the Members for Nightcliff and Karama the floor.

**Mr EDGINGTON:** I listen to all members of parliament. The Member for Karama has expressed many concerns from his electorate. We are listening to the Member for Karama. We are revising all our policy at the moment regarding antisocial behaviour in public housing, and we are looking at how best to tackle those issues.

**K McNAMARA:** How many Territorians are currently on the public housing waitlist?

**Mr EDGINGTON:** As at 31 March 2025 there were 5,439 applications on the urban public housing waitlist, and 40% of those were for priority housing.

Regarding the ongoing demand in remote areas across the Northern Territory, as at the reporting period of 31 March we have 3,619 applications for remote public housing across the Northern Territory.

There are also a further 275 current tenants on the transfer waitlist.

**K McNAMARA:** Do those numbers include children, or would they be the adult applicants and then there could be many more children who are included?

**Mr EDGINGTON:** Those numbers relate to actual applications, so it does not indicate the number of children who may be with that family. It is just a waitlist for applications.

**K McNAMARA:** I understand.

**Mr EDGINGTON:** Many of those may involve families.

**K McNAMARA:** What is the average wait time for these applications for an individual or a family to be allocated public housing in Darwin?

**Mr EDGINGTON:** I will give you firstly the estimated urban public housing wait time as of 31 March 2025. In Darwin and Casuarina for a one-bedroom home, it is eight to 10 years; a two-bedroom home is six to eight years; and a three-bedroom-plus home is eight to 10 years. These are the general wait times.

In Palmerston, it is eight to 10 years for one bedroom; four to six years for two bedrooms; and four to six years for three bedrooms and above.

In Katherine there is a wait time of eight to 10 years for a one-bedroom home; six to eight years for a two-bedroom home; and eight to 10 years for a three-bedroom-plus home.

In Nhulunbuy the wait time is eight to 10 years for a one-bedroom home; a two-bedroom home is also eight to 10 years; and a three-bedroom and above home is also eight to 10 years.

In Tennant Creek the wait time for a one-bedroom home is eight to 10 years; for a two-bedroom home the wait time is six to eight years; and for a three-bedroom and above home, it is six to eight years.

In Alice Springs the wait time for a one-bedroom home is eight to 10 years; for a two-bedroom home the wait time is eight to 10 years; and for a three-bedroom and above home the wait time is also eight to 10 years.

**K McNAMARA:** Those numbers are staggering. People are having to wait on average eight to 10 years. During this time they are quite possibly having to sleep on a street or in temporary or unstable housing, yet the CLP government did not think it was necessary to allocate any additional funding. In fact, you decided not to supplement the expired Commonwealth funding; is that right?

**Mr EDGINGTON:** Which expired Commonwealth funding are you talking about?

**K McNAMARA:** I will change my question. What is the government doing to urgently address these wait times?

**Mr EDGINGTON:** These waitlists are clearly out of control, and the wait times for a family or an individual to take up housing in the Northern Territory is clearly unacceptable.

Last year the Territory government of the day signed a \$4bn agreement with the federal government. That is a combined agreement between the Northern Territory and the Commonwealth to deliver 2,700 houses across the Northern Territory over the next 10 years.

In my initial opinion, if we are to make any headway in regard to those wait times of anywhere up to eight to 10 years it will be a big challenge for the Northern Territory. We need to be constantly advocating with the Commonwealth Government for additional funding to put towards housing across the Northern Territory. We said many times that the revenue that goes into our budget is about 70% of Commonwealth funding. I do not think there is anyone here who would disagree that \$4bn over the next 10 years clearly will not make the difference we would hope it would.

**K McNAMARA:** With these numbers it is even more shocking that you would have members of your party advocating to sell off public housing in a public housing crisis ...

**Mr EDGINGTON:** Is that a comment or a question?

**K McNAMARA:** It is a comment, but I will move on to a question ...

**Ms UIBO:** It is a backstory, like all of the history ...

**Mr CHAIR:** Committee members!

**K McNAMARA:** I might put this on notice. I have the next one, but it will involve stats and I am aware of time. Can I put this on notice?

**Mr EDGINGTON:** If you ask the question we will let you know whether we have the information. We may be able to answer or we might need it on notice.

**K McNAMARA:** How many new public housing houses are planned to be completed in 2025–26 or started? Both those numbers—completions and starts.

**Mr EDGINGTON:** I have previously answered the question in regard to remote housing. Does this include remote housing, which I have previously answered, or would you like other statistics?

**K McNAMARA:** The number that you gave before was the long-term projection over the course of your government ...

**Mr EDGINGTON:** I answered the Member for Gwoja and indicated that we have delivered 216 houses—sorry, I gave a number of how many houses had been delivered under the remote program ...

**Mr PAECH:** It was 161.

**Mr EDGINGTON:** Okay, 161 ...

**K McNAMARA:** I will change it then to urban.

**Mr CHAIR:** Member for Nightcliff, please!

**K McNAMARA:** I will alter my question. How many new urban houses are planned to be—hopefully some—completed or on track to start being built?

**Mr WARREN:** In relation to your question about new construction in the urban space, we have a number of programs that are underway. The Social Housing Accelerator payment, which the minister touched on in his opening speech, is a Commonwealth-supported urban social housing plan. We are working in partnership with community housing providers who have been funded to deliver up to 25 new dwellings. Working with our partners at DLI, who have been funded to deliver up to 75 new dwellings.

We also have a partnership with the Commonwealth in relation to the Housing Australia Future Fund round 2. We are engaging in that process by providing serviced land that can be provided to community housing

providers who then bid for Commonwealth funding. I am aware that 102 dwellings will be delivered under that program using NT Government land and delivered by community housing providers.

The third major line item is the Barkly Regional Deal. The NT Government in partnership with the Commonwealth funded approximately \$1.9m to Venture Housing, who then obtained further lending from Housing Australia to deliver 12 new social and affordable housing dwellings in Tennant Creek.

**K McNAMARA:** I am aware that people often hear from governments, 'We have programs. It is coming. We are putting money into it.' In any of the programs you just mentioned, will shovels hit the dirt this year? Will any of those new homes have construction started? I want to know a timeline because people are desperate.

**Mr EDGINGTON:** There is work underway. I will ask the deputy chief executive officer to expand on the answer he has given because under that program there is work happening.

**K McNAMARA:** In the interests of time, could I get that detail on notice? I am aware that we only have five minutes.

**Mr EDGINGTON:** We are happy to provide the answer.

**K McNAMARA:** I also have a lot of other questions.

**Mr CHAIR:** It is up to the minister to decide. Minister, it is up to you, noting we have five minutes.

**Mr EDGINGTON:** We have the written question process. There is always an opportunity to put questions forward to the government. We want to make sure that we address this question properly today. It is important for listeners to hear the work that is happening in the Territory.

**Mr WARREN:** I will provide a bit more detail about those programs.

In relation to the Social Housing Accelerator payment, most recently in May 2025, working with the Department of Logistics and Infrastructure, they have awarded a contract to construct eight more dwellings in the northern suburbs. Construction of another package of eight dwellings is anticipated for completion in June 2025. They will be going out to market for 14 more packages of work during the course of this year.

In relation to the Housing Australia Future Fund round 2, we have advised the relevant community housing providers that we have supported their request for land. The Commonwealth has concurred with that in order to allow them to start building. They have to deliver over a number of years.

Lastly, regarding the Barkly Regional Deal, most recently Venture Housing finished and delivered their houses earlier this year. The minister might recall that he visited those after they were finished.

**K McNAMARA:** I have another question.

**Mr CHAIR:** Sorry, Member for Nightcliff, I have three other people banked up with a question.

**K McNAMARA:** With Dorothy Dixers, though.

**Mr CHAIR:** Member for Nightcliff, I will give ...

**K McNAMARA:** Do they have the opportunity to ask their own government members that any other time? That is a genuine question. Do they not have the time to do that?

**Mr CHAIR:** Member for Nightcliff, we are just wasting time. The Member for Karama notified me in the morning that he would like to ask a question today. It will be the Member for Karama, then the Member for Mulka and, if there is time, the Member for Blain.

**Mr O'GALLAGHER:** Just for clarification with the document that has been tabled in my name, I stand by it, but let me get this right. I developed that document and circulated it into my community over three years ago when I was a councillor because I was responding to the needs of people in my community who found their community being destroyed.

I am all for public housing, but I do not accept public housing ...

**Mr CHAIR:** Is there a question for the minister?

**Mr O’GALLAGHER:** Yes. I just want it on record that it is not government policy, but I will continue to advocate for this as a personal representative of my community.

The big issue I want to know about—there is a number of them—is that residents say they go to make a report to Housing complaints and are often told, ‘No, you need to go to police’ or ‘No, you need to go to someone else about this’. Can you tell us if there is a one-stop-shop approach that we are looking to develop to handle complaints so that residents are not shuffled from one agency to another?

**Mr EDGINGTON:** Since coming to government this has been one of the concerns raised with me. For a number of years now there have been tenants who have been keen to report antisocial behaviour, breaches of tenancy agreements and disturbances in and around public housing. There has been a process in place where, on different occasions, some of those neighbours have been asked to call the police. Some have been asked to call a 1800 number within the department to report that matter. There has often been this shuffling of people to different responses. We are trying to have one number to report antisocial behaviour or disturbances in those public houses.

When it comes to non-urgent things I do not have an issue with reports being made to the department, but the reality is that when a disturbance is happening in and around public housing my advice has always been the same, that the reporting person should report that to the police.

**Mr GUYULA:** Is there flexibility in the local government model, because we would like to be properly consulted? In East Arnhem Land we talk about village councils, but we do not want these to be controlled by a CEO from outside our communities. We want to have representatives from all clan groups, and we do not want to be involved in balanda voting system because voting is not part of our governance system. Basically, we do not want an assimilated system; we want to have our governance system connected to our self-determination and decision-making. Is the local governance vision of the government flexible enough for different models in different communities and something that reflects what we want to see?

**Mr EDGINGTON:** I appreciate you sharing that with me because when it comes to governance in communities there is no one-size-fits-all approach. We are happy to not only engage with you as the local member, but we will come out and consult and engage with communities. We want to make sure we have the governance structure right, and if that involves the description you have just presented, ensuring there is cultural representation in those communities and good governance structures in place, there is no one size fits all. We are quite happy to come out and talk to you about that.

We want to make sure communities are empowered and can make decisions in their communities in the best interest of their communities. We want to make sure we have a long-term sustainable model moving forward and that is why we are not rushing into this overnight. This will take time, but we are happy to come out and discuss these very issues with you and representatives from your communities.

**Mr CHAIR:** That concludes this hearing. I thank all the staff behind the work today. I would like to give a special thank you to the staff in NT Home Ownership and Aboriginal Affairs for the body of work they would have done in preparing and did not have the opportunity to present. My sincere thanks to them.

Question time went for 310 minutes. Government members spoke for eight minutes, which accounted for 2.5%, which I think is a record, so well done.

**Mr EDGINGTON:** I want to thank all the staff here today who put in many hours to prepare for today’s Estimates, not only in this department but certainly the members of the Chief Minister and Cabinet, who were prepared to come along and answer questions regarding my Aboriginal Affairs portfolio. Unfortunately, they have not had the opportunity to speak today, but I thank all the departments and staff involved for the incredible work they have done.

**Mr CHAIR:** We will resume at 3.30 pm with the Minister for Trade, Business and Asian Relations.

---

The committee suspended.

---

**MINISTER CAHILL'S PORTFOLIOS**

**TRADE, BUSINESS AND ASIAN RELATIONS**

**WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT**

**ADVANCED MANUFACTURING**

**INTERNATIONAL EDUCATION, MIGRATION AND POPULATION**

**DEPARTMENT OF TRADE, BUSINESS AND ASIAN RELATIONS**

**Mr DEPUTY CHAIR:** Minister, I welcome you to today's hearings and invite you to introduce the officials accompanying you.

**Ms CAHILL:** Mr Deputy Chair and members of the committee, I am pleased to introduce officials from the Department of Trade, Business and Asian Relations who are appearing with me today: Ms Hayley Richards, Chief Executive Officer; Ms Kelly Ralston, Deputy Chief Executive Officer; and Ms Joanna Frankenfeld, Chief Financial Officer. I will introduce other senior officials as required for ease of reference.

**Mr DEPUTY CHAIR:** Minister, I will invite you to make a brief opening statement. I will then call for questions relating to the statement. The committee will then consider any whole-of-government budget and fiscal strategy-related questions before moving on to output-specific questions.

I will invite the shadow minister to ask their questions first, followed by committee members. Finally, other participating members may ask questions. The committee has agreed that other members may join in on a line of questioning pursued by a shadow minister rather than waiting for the end of the shadow's questioning on an output.

I remind everyone that when you are speaking to please push the button on so that it can be recorded.

Minister, I invite you to make an opening statement regarding the Department of Trade, Business and Asian Relations.

**Ms CAHILL:** Before I begin, I thank the CEO of the department, Hayley Richards, for her dedication, leadership and management of the department and her team in the preparation for Estimates. It takes a lot of time and effort to do this work, and I am grateful for the work that has been put into this. I thank them for their support.

Turning now to the 2025–26 budget, the CLP government has three main priorities that Territorians voted us in to deliver: reducing crime; rebuilding the economy; and restoring our unique Territory lifestyle. My portfolios have a vital part to play in these three areas.

It has been my honour to represent Territory businesses as the Minister for Trade, Business and Asian Relations over the past nine months. I spent my first few months listening to businesses. I have met with businesses and hosted roundtables across the Territory in Alice Springs, Tennant Creek, Katherine, Nhulunbuy and Darwin. Wherever I go I make time to meet and speak with owners, staff and customers of businesses across the Territory. The message has been loud and clear: businesses want change and need change.

Since coming to government we have been unwavering in our focus on our three key priorities. These are all linked. Without reducing crime our lifestyle does not improve, and without improving our lifestyle, attracting the people we need to realise the incredible opportunities in the Northern Territory, is an even more challenging task.

When we came to government we established the new department, the Department of Trade, Business and Asian Relations. This department is focused on strengthening Territory businesses and creating an environment for businesses to thrive; attracting investment to grow and realise our potential; and securing the workforce we need now and into the future. In just nine months significant process has been made, and I acknowledge the hardworking staff who contribute tirelessly to supporting Territory businesses every day across our regions.

Small to medium businesses are the engine room of the Northern Territory economy. They are the drivers of job creation, innovation and economic diversification. Ninety-five per cent of businesses in the Territory are classified as small businesses; they employ over 40,000 people. As at June 2024 the Territory had 16,380 operating businesses. As we rebuild the Territory economy it is critical that we have a thriving business sector.

Supporting business is at the core of the agency's purpose and priorities, and significant reforms are underway and are already delivering, including the payroll tax cuts that make it so much easier for businesses to grow and apprentices to be taken on. Building licensing and a suite of other reforms are underway to make it easier for businesses to conduct business, and we have digitised services currently being delivered by our Territory Business Centres so that businesses can progress applications at their convenience. These changes improve the environment for business and make it easier to succeed.

I will continue to tirelessly drive change to ensure our environment is the best in the country for business, including acting on all the feedback I received at my industry roundtables on procurement.

We do not just deliver programs; we also listen, learn and act. The department is working closely with businesses to identify red tape, address structural challenges and develop reform initiatives that reduce complexity and enable sustainable growth.

We are reforming government procurement policy to make it simpler, more transparent and more accessible to Territory-based businesses. Our aim is to boost local participation while delivering better value and outcomes for the community.

We continue to back local businesses through government procurement. Government contracts are worth on average \$1.5bn annually. Since 1 July 2024 to the end of March 2025 the Territory government awarded 859 contracts at tier 2 or above valued at \$850m. There was \$711m awarded to Territory enterprises and \$129m awarded to Aboriginal enterprises.

Looking ahead, we are developing an ambitious reform program that will make it simpler, easier and more efficient for both business and government to undertake procurement activities. We are focused on cutting red tape and making it easier for local businesses to get on with their projects and services and catalyse local employment opportunities.

We are reviewing our programs to ensure the support we provide to local businesses is contemporary and delivers the best value to the Territory. We will not just do things because that is what we have always done.

Since 1 July 2024 more than 580 local businesses have accessed \$4.6m in grant funding to grow, diversify and reinforce their businesses. We are also supporting Territory businesses to grow and be more resilient through the Business Security and Safety Audit and the Business Security and Assistance Program.

Regional delivery is essential for our businesses. In each of our regions the department has teams working tirelessly for businesses in those regions.

Territory Business Centres provide a one-stop shop for advice and assistance to businesses and the general public on a range of topics, including licensing and registration, government grants and other general business-related queries. We are making it even easier to do business at the centres with the implementation of a new online ID verification system, saving applicants time and getting on with the job more quickly, and the commencement of accepting and issuing temporary traffic management cards on behalf of civil services, cutting down the wait time for applicants receiving their licence.

Between 1 July 2024 and 31 March 2025 for the Territory Business Centre there were 20,109 call centre calls; 34,938 emails; 10,282 in-person application lodgements; 11,714 licence ID cards issued; and 1,371 applications lodged online.

Our on-the-ground regional business advisers are delivering targeted support and engagement to ensure businesses understand how to access grants and programs to achieve sustainable growth, capability, resilience and competitiveness. They work closely with regional towns and remote communities to assist with current and future workforce and business needs; support businesses to develop their workforce through the Flexible Skills and Training Response program; provide support through the community-based childcare program; deliver Boosting Business in the Bush and jobs and training expos to the Barkly and Central Australian regions; and deliver the popular October Business Month, encouraging Territory businesses and employees to learn new skills, undertake professional development and build local networks.

In the aviation sector, the CLP has been working hard to improve aviation access to the Territory, with several new services announced this year. We recognise that aviation access supports the backbone of both our trade and tourism industry. It is vital for essential travel such as health and education, a pathway for people moving here to live, work and study.

In the last nine months, we have seen unprecedented growth in connectivity, choice and competition with the launch of four new direct services to key domestic and international markets—AirAsia Darwin to Bali, AirAsia Darwin to Malaysia, Jetstar Darwin to Gold Coast and Airnorth Alice Springs to Cairns.

Three of these new routes have been supported by the Territory government's Territory Aviation Attraction Scheme. The TAAS allows airports to target new routes that will expand aviation connectivity and access affordable airfares. That is why the Territory government has committed funding to support the TAAS until 2028, and we are working with airlines to support commercial decisions that will benefit Territorians.

Qantas commenced a direct service between Darwin and Singapore, allowing choice of two airlines flying into one of the world's biggest aviation hubs. Qantas Group announced 95,000 new seats for the Northern Territory in 2025, which is up by 11% for the same time last year. Virgin Australia added almost 15,000 seats on its Brisbane to Darwin and Melbourne to Darwin routes. Increased aviation capacity and connectivity will grow our visitor economy, rebuild the Territory economy and restore our lifestyle.

There are significant opportunities for economic growth in the Territory, particularly through development of our supply chain sector in significant industries like gas, mining, agriculture, tourism and Defence.

The full economic benefit of large-scale resource projects is not limited to just the construction phase. Ongoing operation and maintenance of these projects generate enormous economic opportunities for the Territory. Service and supply spending of offshore and onshore gas developments—for example, the Beetaloo and Amadeus sub-basins—could deliver hundreds of millions of dollars to the local economy each year.

Through industry and trade delegations we are positioning Territory businesses to take advantage of these opportunities to enhance industry capability and capacity. Ensuring Territory-based businesses and workers are well placed to service these supply chains is critical to the Territory's ongoing economic growth.

Territory businesses already deliver critical services across energy, mining and Defence, demonstrating resilience and cross-sector agility, but there is room to further develop and increase local participation, support advanced manufacturing and build a competitive, future-ready local supply chain across industries. This is the future I want to see for the Territory.

In relation to workforce and population, as at December 2024 the Territory had 139,105 employed individuals with an unemployment rate of 4.3%. As at August 2024 the five largest employing industries in the Territory were healthcare and social assistance with 26,000 employees; public administration and safety with 21,500 employees; education and training, 14,200 employees; construction, 10,700 employees; and retail trade, 10,500 employees.

The highest youth—15 to 24 years old—employment sectors constitute 17.8% in accommodation and food services, 15.3% in retail trade, 15.1% in public administration and safety and 10.1% in the healthcare and social assistance sector. The highest employment sectors for individuals aged 55 and over were 18% in public administration and safety, 14.8% in the healthcare and social assistance sectors and 11.8% in education and training.

Employment is forecast to grow by 1.2% in 2024–25, 0.8% in 2025–26 and up to 1.6% by 2027–28.

To attract the workforce, increasing the supply of workers to meet demand will be critical to deliver employment, economic and population growth. The Finocchiaro CLP government is delivering on its commitment of 2025 being a year of action, certainty and security by assisting Territory businesses to recruit and retain overseas workers. We will deliver an annual \$2m package over the next two years to attract workers and international students to the Northern Territory, growing both our population and our economy.

Across Australia and around the world there is intense competition for skilled workers. The Territory faces unique workforce challenges, including remoteness, a small population, a limited talent pool and strong national and global competition for skilled workers. These challenges are felt more acutely in sectors such

as hospitality, healthcare, aged care, trades and agriculture. The Territory requires an additional 14,200 workers by 2030—around 2,800 new workers per year—to meet economic demands.

We have established the Office of Workforce Development to focus on building initiatives that grow, attract and retain the workforce that the Territory needs now and into the future.

The Global Worker Attraction initiative remains in market to position the Territory as a preferred destination for skilled workers. By raising the awareness of the Territory's unique lifestyle opportunities and career prospects the worker attraction initiative delivers another pathway for employers to access the workforce they need.

The WorkerConnect online platform remains an important tool, connecting local, national and international jobseekers with employers in the Territory. To date almost 14,000 jobseekers have signed up to the jobs platform. Online seminars delivered alongside industry to the UK, Ireland and South Africa attracted more than 2,000 registrants interested in learning more about living and working in the Territory.

We will continue to advocate with the Australian Government to ensure the Territory's interests are recognised and implemented in migration policies that reflect our unique context.

The Office of Workforce Development is helping to identify skill shortages, shape policies to improve workforce outcomes and advocate for the Territory's workforce needs. A new strategic framework will be delivered in late 2025 to identify employment pathways, workforce participation and attraction and retention opportunities.

The 2025 NT skilled occupation priority list will also be available from quarter 3 this year, identifying occupational shortages to assist government to prioritise funding for apprentices and trainees.

The Pacific Australia Labour Mobility (PALM) scheme will continue to deliver targeted partnerships with the Australian Government to help strengthen workforce capacity and capabilities in our regions.

Earlier this year it was my pleasure to meet early childhood educators from Papua New Guinea participating in a pilot project deploying educators into childcare learning centres in Katherine and Alice Springs, right where we need them.

In skilled migration, for 2024–25 the Territory was allocated 1,600 skilled visa nominations, including family members. This means up to 3,000 new Territorians. For the period 1 July 2024 to March 2025 a total of 1,229 skilled workers were issued nominations in key sectors such as accommodation and food services; healthcare and social assistance; professional, scientific and technical services; construction; and financial and insurance services. Top source countries include Nepal, India, China, Sri Lanka and Vietnam.

The NT Designated Area Migration Agreement III (NT DAMA III) was signed on 19 March this year. It is a targeted, bespoke regional migration solution developed to address the Territory's specific workforce challenges. The new NT DAMA III delivers a record 325 eligible occupations across all skill levels; an expanded annual cap of 1,500 places; a streamlined five-year endorsement for businesses; concessions for salary, age and English; and flexible pathways to permanent residency.

We will continue to advocate with the Australian Government to ensure the Territory's interests are recognised and implemented in migration policies that reflect our unique context.

The Territory government also values the significant contribution of the international education and training sector and international students to the Territory. We are committed to growing the number of international students choosing the Territory to study, live and work.

International education is a significant contributor to the Territory economy, with each student estimated to contribute \$41,841 to the economy each year. International education was the second-largest export in the Territory in 2023, generating \$236.5m in export revenue. International education is also the Territory's sixth-largest export.

Attracting higher numbers of international students to the Territory is a key focus to diversify and rebuild our economy and to build a bigger, better workforce. As at December 2024 there were 5,664 international students enrolled with Territory education providers. We want to see this number grow, so we will continue to advocate with our local international education sector to the Australian Government to ensure certainty in relation to Australian Government policy settings.

Critical to rebuilding the economy is facilitating private sector investment, increasing trade and securing the workers we need. The work the department undertakes to attract private sector investment, attract workers and students and ensure we have a strong business community is important for improving our economic outlook.

Global uncertainty presents challenges and opportunities. We must continue to adapt to remain a competitive place to invest, work, live and study. The Territory's trade and investment initiatives are tailored to adapt to changing global dynamics and shifting global supply chains. Efforts to de-risk from overconcentrated markets gives the Territory a chance to position itself as a reliable trade and investment partner, particularly for critical minerals, energy security and Defence supply chains.

After Labor dismantled the Asian Relations portfolio and weakened our ties with key regional partners, the CLP government is restoring these vital relationships, recognising the strategic and economic importance of strong, respectful engagement with our closest neighbours. The CLP government is renewing connections with our Asian neighbours by engaging with both government and industry to build lasting partnerships and promote investment opportunities in the Territory—opportunities that were long overlooked under the previous Labor government.

For the Territory to grow and prosper, we must again advocate for the opportunities and the advantage the Northern Territory presents. The Territory government's Asian engagement activities are focused on improving the lives of Territorians. We build enduring relationships with our Asian neighbours that translate into jobs, business growth and investment attraction.

In 2024 we signed a critical minerals memorandum of understanding with Indonesia, a vital step in positioning the Territory as a key supplier of strategic minerals to global markets. In May 2025 we hosted a major mining delegation from Indonesia to support immediate commercial opportunities flowing from that MOU.

We have made significant progress towards implementation of our strategic partnership agreement with Timor-Leste, further strengthening people-to-people, economic and governmental ties.

Inbound and outbound delegations are a necessary part of Asian engagement. Face-to-face interaction is culturally important and essential to building trust and rapport. It is an investment into stronger economic relationships, more trade and a more prosperous Territory.

I have led three high-level outbound trips to progress international engagement. I was in Timor-Leste from 7 to 8 November 2024, Indonesia from 17 to 23 February 2025 and Singapore from 30 March to 2 April 2025.

It is essential that the Territory maintains these key relationships to secure strong economic outcomes for Territorians.

To coincide with the inaugural flight connect Kuala Lumpur to Darwin, the first non-stop route to Malaysia in almost a decade, I will travel to progress vital engagement opportunities, trade, international students and investment.

Later this year the Northern Territory Government will travel with businesses to the World Expo 2025 in Osaka, Japan. The World Expo offers significant opportunities to engage with influential trade and investment audiences and grow in-market literacy for emerging businesses looking to enter new markets.

In addition to ramping up international engagement in Asia, the Northern Territory Government is leading efforts to accelerate investment and intensify trade. This includes identifying and optimising strategic opportunities, centralising investment lead management and establishing systems and processes to support consistent investor reporting, performance, tracking and pipeline visibility.

As at 15 May 2025 the Territory government had an active private investor-led pipeline of 75 projects at a median capital expenditure value of \$300m, including mining, energy, agriculture, Defence, space and digital projects.

From 15 to 17 July this year the Northern Territory Government, in partnership with the Darwin Major Business Group, will deliver an inaugural investment summit in Darwin, showcasing investment opportunities in the Northern Territory.

The Territory is open for business with a focus on innovation, investment and partnerships. We are unashamedly spreading the word that the Northern Territory is a dynamic and forward-thinking region that presents a wealth of opportunities. With our strategic location and proximity to Asia, the Northern Territory is poised to be a cornerstone of global digital connectivity. Reclaiming our position as Australia's gateway to Asia reinforces our role in regional security and economic stability, paving the way for a secure, resilient and interconnected future.

Despite our small jurisdiction the Northern Territory punches well above its weight when it comes to trade. Leveraging our strategic location, abundant natural resources and engagement with key global markets, the value of the Territory's merchant exports totalled \$12.3bn for the year ending March 2025. The majority of the export value came from the minerals and energy sector.

The total value of the Territory's merchant imports was \$9.2bn for the year ending March 2025, with almost half of the import value coming from manufactured items such as aircraft parts and passenger vehicles, along with refined petroleum.

Our services export industry for the Territory, inclusive of tourism and international education, was valued at \$1.6bn.

In 2024 the Territory's live cattle export saw more than 378,000 live cattle through the Port of Darwin, up 65% compared with the prior year, with Indonesia being our largest market.

In the past financial year 35 businesses shared in a pool of \$170,000 under the Global Trade Scheme.

The Territory's advanced manufacturing sector continues to grow from strength to strength with the Territory government's Advanced Manufacturing Ecosystem Fund allocating \$5.56m to 14 projects since 2021. Advanced manufacturing is an important enabler in rebuilding the Territory's economy. Investing in advanced manufacturing, automation and innovation on high-tech processes enables the Territory to compete with jurisdictions that have larger populations and cheaper labour. Enabling our local businesses to focus on niche markets creates value-added goods and responds rapidly to changing industry needs.

This year Rise Project Consulting, for example, moved forward with the commercialisation of a fit-for-purpose unmanned surface vehicle to measure and map wastewater ponds. Wurrba, a local Indigenous business, became the first business in the Territory to offer advanced laser surface cleaning technology. We have a lot to be proud of in the Territory.

Our government is supporting growth ...

**Ms UIBO:** Mr Deputy Chair, will we get a chance to ask questions? We have had a 27-minute opening statement so far. I believe it was supposed to be a brief opening statement. They are very important portfolios you hold, minister, and we have some really good questions that we would love to talk about.

**Mr DEPUTY CHAIR:** Leader of the Opposition, as has been traditional, I accept your comment. Minister, I ask that you try to wind up within five minutes.

**Ms CAHILL:** I can do that.

Our government is supporting growth and development of the Territory Innovation Ecosystem, a dynamic and growing network that brings together government, industry, research, education and investment partners. The Territory Innovation Ecosystem connects local capability with national and international opportunities.

The Business Innovation Program has supported seven clients to achieve over \$50,000 in sales or investments in their innovation.

Businesses that have completed the Business Acceleration Program report 44% higher revenue growth in the four years following the program, creating an additional \$383.4m in revenue.

We are facilitating investment via co-loaning partnerships with Paspalis and the Northern Australia Infrastructure Facility and leveraging the strengths of research and training institutions, including Charles Darwin University, CSIRO and Menzies School of Health Research. These partnerships support transformational projects, increase employment, impact positive GSP movement, facilitate or crowd in private finance and inject new capital into the Territory.

In closing, our goal is to build an economy that is the envy of the nation. Our Asian neighbours are taking note of the Territory's potential, and our CLP government is supporting business growth, building our workforce, attracting new investment and rebuilding the Territory economy to benefit and enhance the lifestyle of all Territorians.

**Mr DEPUTY CHAIR:** Are there any questions relating to the statement?

**Ms UIBO:** As I said, you hold important portfolios. Have the machinery-of-government changes been fully bedded down? If so, what change management processes have you followed?

**Ms CAHILL:** The short answer is yes, we have bedded down the MOG changes. As I am sure you appreciate, it was a complex process. To oversight that there was a change management committee put in place who worked closely with the teams to make sure we had it right. As I am sure you will also appreciate, there were some shifts and changes in approach as that process was rolled out. The committee was good at overseeing that. We have just had the final component of that, which was settling into all of the office spaces, and now everybody has their home, their desk and chair, which is important. We are pleased with how that has now landed.

**Ms UIBO:** That answers my next question which was whether staff have filled and been placed in their positions.

**Ms CAHILL:** Yes.

**Ms UIBO:** These are significant machinery-of-government changes. What has been the total cost of the changes?

**Ms CAHILL:** Essentially, we made sure we continued business as close to as usual as possible through the change process. Until everything had been totally bedded down there was a conscious decision made not to, for example, change business cards and signage because we wanted to know exactly where people would land.

The main cost we have experienced has been in the relocation of offices. With some of the fit-out costs still coming in that has not been finally quantified. The team has been working hard to stay within budget parameters and work within existing funding arrangements and making sure, at the same time, that it did not diminish the service aspect of what they were required to do.

**Ms UIBO:** Is there no specific breakdown of costs around the changes?

**Ms CAHILL:** It is not something that was quantified. The final piece of the move only occurred about two weeks ago, so, as I said a minute ago, the final costs for those changes—the obvious ones like the moving truck and making sure everybody has their furniture—are being finalised now. That will be reported on to me once that is all done. We have been keeping informed as we have gone along to make sure we managed that within budgetary frameworks.

**Ms UIBO:** How many staff are dedicated to internal and external communications?

**Ms CAHILL:** We have four staff who are dedicated to external media and communications, but, more broadly, the staff work together. I am sure you will appreciate a lot of what the Department of Trade, Business and Asian Relations does is outward communication; that is a core part of its business. For example, the regional business officers spend quite a bit of time moving outward. It is embedded in their roles that they have that communication focus.

**Ms UIBO:** Did you have a number of dedicated internal comms staff that you could share with the committee?

**Ms CAHILL:** The four people I mentioned before, who look after media communications more broadly, also handle all the internal communications.

**Ms UIBO:** Thank them for their good work because that is obviously double what they probably expected.

Earlier in the Estimates process Minister Charls said that you were the minister directly responsible for the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art Gallery; is that correct?

**Ms CAHILL:** We are responsible for the business case. The build is the responsibility of the Department of Logistics and Infrastructure.

**Ms UIBO:** Thank you for that clarification. Who did you consult with before downgrading the ATSIAGA and its business case?

**Ms CAHILL:** The obvious response to that is the concerns were evident when we came to government that there was funding available for that project of \$149m, and the projected cost at the point in time when we came to government was nearly \$300m. We have experienced across many of the sectors, as we have been unravelling the budgetary process, that the general rule of thumb appears to have been, under the previous Labor government, to make announcements that had budgets attached to it, but no funding attached to it.

In the event that we were facing down yet another significant overrun—as we have seen with the state gallery located at the front of Parliament House, with a blowout from \$47m to \$143m—it was simply not something that could be sustained. The decision was made to go back to the drawing board and ensure that we could deliver a project on budget. That also meant we had to look at the footprint, and there has been a minor decrease. That work is currently underway with the Department of Logistics and Infrastructure.

Those discussions are ongoing with the federal government, and once those discussions are finalised and a decision has been reached as to what the project will look like, that would be when our department will come back into the discussion.

**Ms UIBO:** I am interested in the reference group and whether you had an interface with that regarding the business case. Why were the terms of reference updated in December 2024, and what were those changes?

**Ms RALSTON:** The reference group has been part of the project for its duration. With the changes to the scope of the program in late 2024 and setting ourselves up for the next phase of work—which is the construction phase and detailed design for the operating model for the gallery—it was a chance to reset the focus of the reference group. Some members of the reference group departed as well, so it was a chance to re-engage with the group.

The focus for the last six to nine months has been on the construction piece of the work. We are now regrouping on the design piece and talking to the reference group about commencing meetings in the near future.

**Ms UIBO:** That leads to my next question. Why has the reference group not met in the reporting period?

**Ms RALSTON:** Fundamentally, the work has been focused on the design work. The Department of Logistics and Infrastructure had a big program of work to rescope the project on the new site and to look at the redesign of that. They are now at the 30% design phase; now we have material to start talking to the reference group about. We are conscious that community engagement is an important part of the project going forward, so it is time for the reference group to regroup, and there are some things to talk to them about.

**Ms UIBO:** Modelling shows that the ATSIAGA would grow visitation in Alice Springs by 53,000 and inject an estimated \$64m into the economy. Have you done modelling yourself through the business case? How much economic benefit of that original \$64m that was anticipated will be reduced now that the business case has been reduced and downgraded?

**Ms CAHILL:** I will make the observation that I had initial discussions with the original team about what the agenda was and had the opportunity to talk to a number of businesses in Alice Springs about the potential for the project. At this point in time, because we are not at a point where we can consolidate what the new business case will look like, it is difficult to build on those projections.

Kelly has done some work on that, so I will pass on to her to let you know where we are at with that point.

**Ms RALSTON:** We have not done the remodelling. We considered doing it last year. I think we wanted to get to the point of the design work to do that. The last modelling was done a number of years ago and given that, the COVID context had not been fully fed into some of those numbers. As the project goes forward that will be an important part of the next phase of the work. We were not sure last year was the right time to do it, so we held it over for a little bit longer as some of the uncertainty sorts itself out.

**Ms UIBO:** I have been to Alice Springs several times in this term in my new role as the Leader of the Opposition and met with businesses regarding their own economic development and business cases for the

ATSIAGA. You mentioned that you have met with businesses in Alice Springs. What has been the feedback, considering that some businesses have created their whole business model and some of their investment pieces over the last few years have been specifically tailored to the ATSIAGA? Businesses I met with are feeling very disappointed with the downgrading of the scale of the project. What is the sentiment around businesses if you have not done economic modelling since the downgrade?

**Ms CAHILL:** I think in the first instance when I have been speaking to businesses, not just in Central Australia but across the Territory, the main focus has been how we can ensure that we drive our economy forward. Very few of them in Alice Springs have raised specifically the issue of ATSIAGA. What they have raised with me is to ensure that our government spends its money wisely, that we maximise every opportunity we have and that we make sure that what we commit to can be delivered efficiently and effectively.

The driver, I think, of any project of major significance in Alice Springs needs to be revitalising the mall area. A couple of businesses I talked to said they want to see any development. If you look at ATSIAGA as an example, how does that drive business into the main CBD sector of the Alice Springs area, and how does it then flow on to the opportunities beyond that area? They are very appreciative of the fact that we have said we will not commit to something that we do not have the money for and that we will not enter into a project that was projected to double in expenditure with no financial backing behind it.

The concerns they expressed to me in this space were that they had learned that there was no operational budget for the gallery either, so we potentially could have ended up with a fabulous building that cost us twice as much to build as we had hoped it would and that had no money to operate it. Their main goal is whatever we do in the Alice Springs central area, they have said to me, is to be sustainable, able to be supported through good business initiatives and it links in to where they see the town should be driven.

**Ms UIBO:** I am happy to pass on some of the businesses that I met with and the specific concerns they raised with me.

Did you liaise with, meet with or consult with the federal government regarding the downgrading of this project, considering there was an \$80m contribution from the federal government for the ATSIAGA?

**Ms CAHILL:** As I observed before, the role of the Department of Trade, Business and Asian Relations is around the business case and looking to see about the viability of the project. The discussions concerning the decision to ensure that we built to budget was undertaken by the Department of Logistics and Infrastructure. Minister Yan led that process, so that was a question that really should have been addressed to him.

**Ms UIBO:** There was disappointment from the same people who had engaged with Minister Yan as they had not seen him for some time.

Tourism Central Australia Chief Executive Mr Danial Rochford said:

*... the gallery was a 'critical' part of strengthening the town's economy.*

Have you engaged with anyone else in Alice Springs about the downgrade of the project? What tourism industry bodies have you engaged with? You mentioned local businesses already, so I will take that part out of the question.

**Ms CAHILL:** I have met with Danial on more than one occasion about more broadly the things that need to occur to revitalise not just Central Australia but the Territory as well. I must confess the main topics of discussion with Danial have not included ATSIAGA specifically or even generally. Most of the discussions I have had with him have revolved around connectivity and increasing people's ability to access.

For example, one of the critical elements he raised with me and that we are working very hard on is the fact that you cannot fly from Alice Springs to Uluru. It is something that just defies logic in my understanding of what would be the best way to drive the economy in Central Australia. The fact is the only supported routes negotiated under the previous Labor government were from Melbourne and Brisbane to Uluru. If you live in Alice Springs and you want to fly to Uluru, you need to fly to Melbourne or Brisbane first. It baffles me.

The other area he is particularly focused on is how we can ensure that people who are travelling who come and stay in Alice Springs feel safe in the community. His focus in the discussions we have had have revolved around that.

I can categorically say that he has not raised with me specifically any issues around ATSIAGA, but next time I see him I will make sure to ask him if that is something he would like to explore with me.

**Ms UIBO:** The question did quote Mr Rochford, but it was specifically about what other tourism bodies or industry bodies and tourism businesses that you have met with about ATSIAGA?

**Ms CAHILL:** Danial Rochford has been very helpful connecting me with a number of the local tourism businesses, particularly in the Alice Springs region, and I have had the opportunity to sit down and speak with them. Again, the main issues they raised with me related to connectivity, how we get people to Alice, how we keep them focused on coming here, how we broaden the opportunities for them once they land here to explore the beautiful areas around Alice Springs and how we ensure that we dispel that myth that Alice Springs is not a safe place to visit.

**Ms UIBO:** Your comments are very much appreciated.

Did you make the decision to go to the expression of interest process for the Darwin State Square art gallery?

**Ms CAHILL:** That is not within my portfolio process, so the decision was taken in Cabinet.

**Ms UIBO:** To date has your department received any expressions of interest for the Darwin State Square art gallery in the process that has been announced by your government?

**Ms CAHILL:** My understanding is that there is a multi-agency approach for this EOI. I am not aware of any expressions having been received to date, but they would not necessarily come to me as it is an operational matter.

**Ms UIBO:** The Darwin Major Business Group was the brains behind the idea of the State Square art gallery. Have you had any representation from them as the minister for Business on the master plan provided, and the economy and jobs attached to that master plan? What is the latest update you could share with the committee?

**Ms CAHILL:** The short answer is no, I have not had any representation from the Darwin Major Business Group on the issue.

**Ms UIBO:** It is very refreshing to have a minister who can answer a question and cut straight to the question. I appreciate it.

The State Square art gallery was obviously built as a fit-for-purpose art gallery. Is there something that your department is looking at through any business case models? Obviously, ATSIAGA in Alice Springs is a business project around the economy. That was the purpose of the State Square art gallery as well. Is there something your department has focused on in that multi-agency relationship or partnership about what could be the future use or purpose of the State Square art gallery? Since the announcement there has been no leadership in your team—not by you, of course, but by some of your teammates—about what the government intends to do with that purpose-built space.

**Ms CAHILL:** I question your interpretation of what a purpose-built space is. I do not know a lot about the art gallery. I know, for example, that there is no storage capacity in the art gallery, so it is questionable whether it is a purpose-built space that was fit for purpose. I will park that to one side.

The bottom line is the EOI is out there; those expressions will come in. I expect at that point in time if there is the opportunity for us to investigate what the business opportunities might be in that space, that would be when we would be involved as a department.

**Ms UIBO:** You spoke about some of that engagement across your Asian Relations portfolio which is exciting. How many international trips have you undertaken since becoming the minister, from August 2024 until the reporting period—31 March 2025?

**Ms CAHILL:** Thank you, Leader of the Opposition, for the opportunity to talk about this. You might be sorry you asked the question.

**Ms UIBO:** No, never sorry.

**Ms CAHILL:** I already detailed the trips I undertook. I have taken three.

The first trip was to Timor-Leste in November last year. It was an incredibly fruitful and important reconnection with Timor-Leste which enabled us to discuss with Timor-Leste the opportunity to look at the strategic partnership, refresh it and explore what other opportunities there may be for us to engage with the Timor-Leste government.

I met with about 180 people on that visit. They ranged from ministerial colleagues to government officials to not-for-profit providers of services. I make it my business whenever I go anywhere, as much as possible, to not just focus on one of the conglomerate of my departmental ministerial portfolios like Business and Children and Families.

I actually was fortunate when I went to Timor-Leste to have a look at a number of programs that are working in empowering women's space. I was excited to bring back information to some of the team in Darwin in the Department of Children and Families.

That trip was important because it sent a clear message to Timor-Leste that we are strong in our partnership with them and we believe that we have a future together.

The second trip I undertook was to Indonesia, which was an intense trip. I was fortunate to meet with the vice foreign minister of the Indonesian government, who, I am advised, does not ordinarily meet with government officials from states and territories. His interest in our MOU for critical mineral and strategic supply chains was encouraging. I can advise that I have had regular contact through the Indonesian Ambassador to Australia from the vice minister to make sure that those discussions and negotiations are on track.

We also had the opportunity to meet with a number of businesses. Of the total number of engagements, the number of people we met was about 500. We hosted a number of business lunches. The most exciting thing that came out of that was within three, four or five days after arriving back, two of the businesses we met with reached out to us with direct connections to businesses in the Northern Territory.

We had a delegation travel from Indonesia to Darwin to progress those discussions, particularly about the mining industry. We are fortunate. It may seem a little odd, but Indonesia and the Northern Territory are almost in the identical position of where we go from being good at taking stuff out of the ground to what we do with it once we take it out of the ground. Do we just sell it or do things locally? We are in a parallel pathway where we have been able to support each other.

I also had the opportunity to speak at the Indonesia Economic Summit, which put us front and centre on the stage there to a number of businesses.

The third trip I took was to Singapore, which was a different focus. It was very much focused on the digital economy, which is an exciting area for the Northern Territory. We have the opportunity and the capacity, particularly with the securing of a cheap energy supply, to become the digital capital of Australia and into the Southeast Asian region. The geopolitical instability that is occurring across the globe provides us with some unique opportunities. That was very helpful.

The number of people I met with was not quite as great as the previous two meetings because that sector is highly innovative with a low number of employees in the businesses. I met with about 50 people there. That included meeting with the SunCable project people and SEEDS Capital, who are partnered with the Paspalis innovation centre in the Territory. We were able to progress discussions about the other opportunities we might have to build upon making Darwin not just the gateway to Asia in terms of people coming and going but the actual gateway to Asia in terms of infrastructure, port access and looking at and exploring things that we currently do not have. For example, should we have a bond warehouse here, which would really secure our space in that area to be able to build on that opportunity?

International travel sounds exotic, but I can tell you it is not. It is hectic, but the great thing about it was that we know that if you want to build relationships into Asia they have to be face to face and they have to be personal. You have to make the effort. It was critical, having closed the door on that region back in 2016, that we sent a clear message to them that our door is open and we want to re-engage. The number of ambassadors who have come to the Territory and visited me, the Chief Minister and a number of my ministerial and legislative colleagues and have expressed their absolute desire to continue to build those relationships is very reassuring. I think it only augurs well for the Territory's future.

**Ms UIBO:** Thank you for that comprehensive update. Can you provide a breakdown of the cost for each of these three trips?

**Ms CAHILL:** I cannot find my page with the bigger writing, so bear with me; it is very tiny.

I make sure that we keep costs as low as possible. The total cost of the trip to Timor-Leste for me was \$2,057.55. My trip to Indonesia—which included a two-pronged approach with Business; we also did a lot of work around the International Education space—we were away for just on a week, was a total of \$8,647.39. The Singapore trip was a total of \$6,913.33. The total for me is \$17,618.27.

**Ms UIBO:** I wish some of your colleagues were as diligent in keeping records of their travel.

In terms of the return to investment in the Territory you spoke very highly of the relationship, and I very much appreciate that. In terms of dollar figures is there a way that the department can create a process to see the return for the dollar—the bank for buck, essentially—that we get for the Territory’s business perspective or engagement perspective? Is there a pro forma or a calculation that we could look to or is something that the department is thinking to do if you do not already have something in place?

**Ms CAHILL:** It is very early days, as I am sure you will appreciate. Rebuilding a relationship that was shattered takes time and encouragement, but what is encouraging is the return on investment in the first instance, not necessarily financial but in terms of interactions.

So far, in the work we have done, we have had 41 active leads come in for further exploration, so 34 early-stage investors. That is significant when you consider the fact we have only been to three countries. This includes the work we are doing to support the implementation of the memorandum of understanding with Samsung, working closely with investors such as Crowley.

The work we are doing in the Indonesian MOU space is also critical, and there is commitment from the Indonesian Government to see that progressed. We have what they need, which is lithium and copper, to build their EV (electric vehicle) agenda. They are planning to be the largest producers of electric vehicles within the next decade, which is quite a lofty target given the dominance of countries like China in that field, but they see clearly that we will have a role to play in that partnership. The next lot of work will give us a strong indication of where that will take us—progressing the working group, which has been set up, and there will be follow-up delegations, including businesses into Indonesia, to consolidate those relationships.

We have an active investor-led pipeline of 75 projects, which is capital expenditure of about \$300m. What that will look like down the track is not just about taking out of the ground; it is also about how we turn that into industry that brings people to live and work here on a longer-term basis. That work will continue as those projects start to become realised.

**Ms UIBO:** In your department, how many international trade delegation trips have been undertaken in the reporting period, to which countries, and what were the associated costs?

**Ms CAHILL:** Since June 2024, which is a bit before we came to government, we have had 15 departmental trips. As I am sure you will appreciate, before a ministerial trip can occur, you need to do the groundwork. A number of these trips have related to the preparation for our participation in the Osaka World Expo, which is a significant event for the Northern Territory. That event started in April and runs until October. There are 150 countries participating, so we are literally showcasing on the world stage, and they are expecting about 28 million people to attend that event.

I have just been told I double counted some trips.

**Ms UIBO:** I was just going to ask—you might clarify the number now—about the 15 delegations, which countries and the associated costs. They were the three parts to that question.

**Ms CAHILL:** There were nine trips; lucky I am not the Treasurer.

The information for all the costs of these trips were provided in the written question answer. I can list them all if you like, each person and the cost associated.

**Ms UIBO:** That is all right; I know we got them back this morning. We do not always get a chance during Estimates to read the questions when they are delivered two months after the due date.

In terms of funding allocation to the department travel budget in 2025–26 in the financial period, is there a breakdown of trips which have been planned for countries in the next CLP budget?

**Ms CAHILL:** One thing I have learnt very quickly in developing our agenda for this role is what I think I might be doing next week is probably not what I am going to be doing next week, so whilst we have a targeted agenda of where we would like to go, and that has been negotiated and discussed with the department, I have already had that adjusted three or four times.

There is no forward projection per se, but please rest assured I have sent a clear message that wherever we go it must be as economical as possible. I recently became aware there was a policy of booking flexi fares for a lot of travel. I have said, no, best fare on the day with that. We need to make sure that we are maximising the value for money for taxpayers. As we develop the forward plan, there are some obvious countries we would like to engage with—for example, Vietnam, China, Taiwan and the Philippines; the list is potentially endless—but we must be very smart about what we are doing and make sure that where we go has a very real opportunity for return on investment for the Northern Territory.

The only definite trips booked forward is one where I will be travelling to Malaysia at the end of the month, because we have the flight coming in from Malaysia, and I will be travelling to Osaka. Even that trip started out at a period that I did not think was appropriate, so we have reshaped that and are making sure we can get the best value for money.

We recently put out for expressions of interest for businesses to attend with us, and the response has been phenomenal in a short space of time. Businesses see that this opportunity to travel with department staff and have ministerial input into their trip does add value and supports what they are doing in the export/import space.

At this stage, they are the only two definitive trips in the pipeline. I would be very happy if it stayed that way because travel takes a lot out of you. I do not think we will be doing much beyond that for the rest of the year.

I am going to Timor-Leste for the Darwin–Dili yacht race and to progress the discussion around what we can do to support the Timor-Leste Government in their efforts to look at how they manage their gas production.

**Ms UIBO:** I think the Deputy Chief Minister could learn a lot from you and your department. You are diligent. I very much appreciate it.

Can you provide a breakdown of the Territory Aviation Attraction Scheme and the funding that has been extended in the reporting period?

**Ms CAHILL:** I am sure you will appreciate that I cannot go into details in terms of specific routes because they are commercial-in-confidence arrangements. I can tell you that the expenditure year to date for 2024–25 was just under \$0.5m which will increase significantly by the end of the financial year because we have invested quite a bit into marketing for those routes. It is one thing to say we think this is a good idea, has the benefit and we want to get bottoms on seats into the Territory, but we also need to let people know they are available. We have taken a lead on that because we felt the airlines were not taking a lead on promoting those routes.

The budget for 2025–26 is currently sitting at \$8.589m. As I am sure you will appreciate, the money does not go out unless someone occupies the seat, so we have a quantum of funding and then once the seat is occupied, the money is paid to the airline. If the seat is not occupied, it is not paid. It allows us to carry that forward and make sure we can maximise the opportunity to look to other routes we might want to support into the future.

**Ms UIBO:** Are there any details you or your department can provide regarding specific airport routes or airline services that are being targeted through the Territory Aviation Attraction Scheme?

**Ms CAHILL:** I can tell you the routes I am targeting that are not part of the scheme, but there is nothing at the moment being discussed. I am, however, targeting a number of international routes that I am hoping will be commercially viable and will not require any support from government.

**Ms UIBO:** In the May sittings of parliament, you declared ‘mission accomplished’ on the airfare affordability for Territorians. Can you please explain why you think it is acceptable still that Territorians are paying upwards of \$600 one way for non-direct flights to domestic destinations.

**Ms CAHILL:** I have been here for 30 years, and I can tell you there were days 30 years ago when a flight was going to cost \$3,000 one way, then I booked it for a different time and place, and it was going to be \$600 return. The reality is the earlier you can book the better; we are now at peak season for the Northern Territory.

I had a colleague last week book two return flights for his parents from Brisbane to Darwin three weeks out and he got the two return flights with Qantas—which surprised me—for \$1,600 for two. There are definitely economic seats there.

The sad reality is if you have to do things at the last minute, it has always been the case in the Northern Territory that it will cost you more. I have had that experience; I have also experienced booking a very inexpensive flight at short notice. It really depends on the route.

Qantas have added 95,000 additional seats into the network for us and Virgin an additional 15,000 seats. If we are talking about trying to book a flight in the middle of June when there are the V8s, Barunga, GleNTI and a bunch of other exciting things on, it will be a little bit expensive.

Generally speaking, I feel we have moved back to a much closer parity of where things were when I moved here, where you know that if you were organised and booked ahead you could get decent prices for your aviation. You have choice. We have some much better direct flights available now, which is great, but the reality will always be in our peak seasons it is going to be tough.

**Ms UIBO:** In terms of direct routes across our major cities interstate, are there any that you are focused on? I know you mentioned some international ones you are working on, but are there any domestic routes that you are focused on, other than key holiday destinations, such as Gold Coast and Cairns, which I know you have already mentioned.

**Ms CAHILL:** Most definitely; I think we absolutely have to. We are discussing with Qantas, Virgin and Airnorth the opportunity of expanding their networks. For example, we have the seasonal Canberra flight that has just been reinstated. I believe we have a good case to put forward to say that should be all year-round, and I think the federal government have a role to play in that. I think we need to be arguing for much better connectivity between our major capital cities. Sydney and Melbourne seem to be routes that are very hit and miss. I have a meeting coming up with Qantas where I will be raising these issues with them, and I will also be following up, as I do on a regular basis, with Virgin.

The main thing we have to do is give people a reason to come to the Territory; if the demand is there then the flights will come. I absolutely appreciate that, at the end of the day, it is an economic decision, but we have to make it so the economic decision is an easy one to make.

The other route that I am focused on improving is Darwin to Adelaide, because the loss of Virgin direct flights there was significant. We will continue to advocate for that as well.

**Ms UIBO:** As I know you can appreciate, often Territorians are finding it really difficult to travel to see family but also in terms of business and conducting processes that may encourage more business in the Territory; that can be quite an inhibitor.

When it comes to some of the permanent routes in the Territory versus seasonal—I know you mentioned the Canberra one—are there any others that you are focused on that could possibly become permanent?

**Ms CAHILL:** One of the first things I will observe is it was of a lot of interest to the aviation sector that the aviation responsibility came into the Business portfolio—historically it has been in Tourism, because that has been the focus—sitting down with them and explaining we believe that in order for aviation to be ongoing and secure and routes not to be at risk, business has to be its bread and butter and tourism becomes the icing or the cream in the mix. Working with them and talking to them about the opportunities we have in growing our economy and the major investment projects on the horizon, it is a matter of advocating for consistent regular routes between Darwin and all the capital cities.

One of the things I have heard anecdotally is people saying over the past few weeks that when they are coming back the planes are full and when they are flying out the planes are full. We have not had an opportunity to get any statistics on this from the airlines, but we will be asking them to give us their view on what is happening. That is fantastic, because if the planes are full, it shows greater demand and encourages us to put the case forward to the major airlines that they should be looking at increasing the routes available, not just on a seasonal basis but on a consistent basis. If the bread and butter is business, which is year-round, that will alleviate the view that it has to be seasonal.

It is early days. We have had some strong and robust discussions with the airlines. We know there have been lots of discussions about the innovative ways we can approach it. We are dealing with a situation where technology, for once, is not in our best interests, because aircraft that are faster, more efficient and do not have to land in Darwin in order to fly to Bali, means we do not get that regular Adelaide–Darwin–Denpasar route. We need to give people a reason to fly in, and one of the benefits of increasing the international routes into Darwin is that people land here, they spend their two or three days in Darwin, then they want to go somewhere else and that is the other selling point for us with the airlines to improve the daily connectivity. That is what we will continue to advocate for.

**Ms UIBO:** You mentioned business and connection and the regular travel that can be sustained because of business. In regional towns like Nhulunbuy in the Member for Mulka's electorate, and Alyangula on Groote Eylandt in my electorate of Arnhem, residents and businessmen and businesswomen, as well as contractors, are paying nearly \$800 one way just to get to Darwin—a 120-minute flight. Do you think this is acceptable for intra-Territory airfares? What are you and the government doing about it?

**Ms CAHILL:** It comes back to demand. We have to increase demand if we want to reduce prices, and we have to continue to work with not just the airlines but also the federal government. There has been a lot of discussion with the federal government about their support of regional airlines in other states. The federal government have not had those same discussions with us, and I do not think that is good enough. We will be taking that discussion to them as well. If they are prepared to support and subsidise regional airlines in other states and territories, we have critical requirements of connectivity within the Territory, where it is expensive for airlines if they do not have a full flight. There has to be a way to support that. We will continue to advocate in that space and to work with our regional airline to see how we can maximise opportunities for them so that costs are minimised.

We also need to work with the Airport Development Group around the costs associated with the redevelopment of the runway, where a private company has been expected to foot the bill for what was essentially a Defence Force requirement. There is a lot of work to do in that space to advocate for the Defence Force to have a greater pick-up of the cost of that runway upgrade, as opposed to a private sector company.

**Ms UIBO:** In keeping in line with my question about regional and remote areas, are there specific companies or conversations or meetings that you will be focused on to make sure Territorians in remote parts of the Territory get the best deal possible for that remote travel?

**Ms CAHILL:** The challenge in this space is when you talk about remote communities, small populations and low demand I think there has to be an approach where we work with the communities and businesses in those communities to see how we can maximise the opportunity for them, and then work with providers to see what is inhibiting them in providing what many might consider to be a more appropriate fare.

Then we need to look at how we advocate in that space in regard to the costs of doing business and how the federal government—one of the challenges in this space is that we do not have oversight or coverage of the relationships in those contracts with the federal government and the aviation sector, because it is managed at a federal government level. We need them to advocate on behalf of our regional and remote areas to make it more affordable.

**Ms UIBO:** I specifically picked Alyangula on Groote, basically the richest island in Australia with the GEMCO South32 mine there, and Nhulunbuy with Rio Tinto. In terms of demand, I have not picked a random small community, just for your noting. Those are two big business opportunities. The supply and demand there are probably the anomaly in the rest of the Territory in being two major economic drivers in the Territory, being those two regional towns. In regard to support for regional airlines, will we be able to expect lower airfares and more service reliability for particularly those routes of Darwin–Nhulunbuy and Darwin–Groote Eylandt?

**Ms CAHILL:** I think I have generally answered the question. The real issue is competition drives down price. Yes, they are rich in resource businesses and suppliers. One of the real challenges for the Northern Territory in the regions—we think of our different areas as regional and remote when, in fact, our whole Territory, if you look at the rest of Australia, would be classified as such. When you do not have that regular ongoing demand where you can get competition in, we will continue to have discussions with the airlines about what we can do to improve that. We will continue to have discussions with the Airport Development Group in regard to the costs associated with this and how we can make it a more attractive environment for other people to come into the sector. We will also continue to advocate where we can for getting those prices to be what we consider more reasonable.

**Ms UIBO:** Again, those two examples have way over the demand that the single carrier can afford to meet, which is why they have to outsource extra carriers purely for the purpose of both mines in Nhulunbuy and on Groote Eylandt.

In regard to the work your department is undertaking on air travel affordability in the Northern Territory, is it your commitment to also consult with regional and remote communities in regard to the essence of what you have been speaking about—frequency needs surrounding connections that could be put through a regular or permanent route—and, if so, when will that consultation be occurring?

**Ms CAHILL:** I have already started those conversations, and they will continue. I have done my first go-round of the Northern Territory, and I have been to a couple of the more remote areas. I have not been to Groote yet, but I am working on that.

**Ms UIBO:** I can help you out.

**Ms CAHILL:** We will continue to engage with the businesses and communities in those areas to see what we can do to assist them in that space. The conversation is always there. One of the things I say to everybody, every business and organisation I meet with is that they do not have to wait for me to reach out to them; they can reach out to me.

**Ms UIBO:** I have some Groote Eylandt constituents who are definitely keen to meet and reach out to you.

You mentioned the federal government and the conversations that you flagged or anticipate to have in terms of meetings. What has so far been confirmed is that the federal government is willing to approve a trial for cabotage and removal in northern Australia. What concrete steps has your government taken to find an airline that is willing to participate?

**Ms CAHILL:** I know that the federal government has made a song and dance about that, but the fact is that capacity has always existed; it is not a new thing.

The reality is that an international airline needs to consider that it is not just about picking up passengers in one space; it is about the ability to consistently do that and then en route to other places. There have been stakeholders recently who have said this will fix everything. The reality is if it would fix things and if we had airlines which thought it was viable, they would have already done it. We need to look to routes that are not currently serviced that may provide that opportunity. If we do not get it right, if cabotage comes in and it is not done in a space where it adds value as opposed to detracts, it could very well damage the existing routes that we already have. It is a fine line.

As I said, it is not a new thing; it has always existed. Any airline can put a case for that now. The fact that they have not done so ever tells me that they probably do not think it is worth their while.

**Ms UIBO:** Will those conversations officially occur? If so, when?

**Ms CAHILL:** As I am sure you will appreciate, every conversation that an airline has will be based on economic sustainability. Airlines we have engaged with are aware of the opportunity for doing that. None of them have indicated that is something they would like to take up.

**Ms UIBO:** With the work that has happened with the Designated Area Migration Agreement, which is great news for the Northern Territory, there were concerns that you, as minister, and your office approved the use of department resources to promote the CLP federal candidate on a government-run Facebook page, which is meant to be nonpartisan. What do you say to that, minister?

**Ms CAHILL:** I am not sure what that has to do with budget Estimates or operational outputs and connections to pretty much anything, sorry.

**Ms UIBO:** I will table the photo, so the committee has a record.

The photo was obviously about government business. It was through the Industry Northern Territory Facebook page, which has the Northern Territory Government logo, which is not supposed to be political. The post has the wording, 'Northern Territory and Australian Governments sign new Designated Area Migration Agreement (DAMA III)'. There is some more text there, but in the screenshot I tabled there is a photo of you with the Territory flag, as the Northern Territory minister responsible; the Australian

Government representative; the Member for Fong Lim; the Member for Solomon at the time and now the current Member for Solomon; and the CLP's candidate for the seat of Solomon.

Is there justification why Industry Northern Territory used propaganda? Was it approved to have the CLP and federal Liberal Party represented rather than being bipartisan, as a Territory government should be when using Territory funds from taxpayers?

**Ms CAHILL:** Asked and answered.

**Ms UIBO:** Can you please table the cost of the department's use of that photo and outline who in the department was responsible for that photo? What was then done in alerting that it had a political candidate in the photo?

**Mr DEPUTY CHAIR:** Minister, it is up to you whether you answer.

**Ms CAHILL:** It has been asked and answered.

**Ms UIBO:** Did you personally request that Ms Lisa Bayliss, the CLP's candidate for Solomon, attend the official government event, and if so, why? What public funds were used to invite her to the event?

**Mr DEPUTY CHAIR:** Leader of the Opposition, the minister has already answered this question. Can we move on.

**Ms UIBO:** It is a different question. I am now asking how much it cost to invite Ms Bayliss to a government-funded event.

**Ms CAHILL:** That event was organised through the federal government. You might want to ask them.

**Ms UIBO:** If it was a federal government event here in Parliament House, which is an accessed facility once you go through security, who in your office or the Chief Minister's office approved the invitation for Ms Bayliss to attend a government event?

**Ms CAHILL:** Asked and answered.

**Mr DEPUTY CHAIR:** Can we stick to budget questions around this department.

**Ms UIBO:** I did not get a response on how much it cost. How much did it cost to have the CLP's failed candidate for Solomon, Ms Lisa Bayliss, attend a government event in Parliament House?

**Mr DEPUTY CHAIR:** Leader of the Opposition, the minister has already answered.

**Ms UIBO:** You just said it has to be about funds.

**Mr DEPUTY CHAIR:** Leader of the Opposition, please move on.

**Ms UIBO:** It sounds like the Chair is also shutting down the answer for the minister who is not answering the question.

In terms of justifying taxpayer-funded money for communication by your government department, who is responsible for that decision?

**Ms CAHILL:** I have already explained that the whole event was organised by the federal government and the Member for Solomon was invited, even though the DAMA was very much a Northern Territory Government-driven process. The photos were all taken by the federal government's photographer, is my recollection.

**Ms UIBO:** Will you table all correspondence between your office and Industry NT staff regarding the DAMA media event and Facebook posts that feature the CLP's candidate for Solomon, Ms Lisa Bayliss?

**Ms CAHILL:** Leader of the Opposition, this is a budget Estimates process. I did not extend any invitation to anybody in that room. If you have a question about the budget or if you have a question...

**Ms UIBO:** Will you answer the question?

**Mr DEPUTY CHAIR:** Leader of the Opposition, can you direct it through the Chair, please.

I absolutely agree that we are getting off track. We need to get back on to budget Estimates questions or move on to someone else.

**Ms UIBO:** How much did it cost taxpayers to have a photo of the CLP candidate put on the Industry NT Facebook page?

**Mr DEPUTY CHAIR:** Minister, do not answer that, please. I will warn you again, Leader of the Opposition.

**Ms UIBO:** You just said it was up to the minister how she answers, and now you are answering for her.

**Mr DEPUTY CHAIR:** I beg your pardon. I have asked you to move on from this line of questioning. I will not ask again.

**Ms UIBO:** What is the point, Mr Deputy Chair, of asking a question if you are answering on behalf of the minister? I did not realise you have just become a minister in the last minute.

**Mr DEPUTY CHAIR:** Leader of the Opposition, let us calm down. You have mentioned this. We have gone through this line of questioning. The minister has come back a number of times with an answer. We are now getting off track from our budget Estimates, which is where we need to focus. Can we all come back to the budget Estimates Committee.

**Ms UIBO:** Minister, because there were taxpayer dollars for a political candidate, will your department issue an apology and reaffirm that it is nonpartisan for the purpose of Territorians' belief that government communication platforms should not be politicised by government departments?

**Mr DEPUTY CHAIR:** I am not going to do this, so I will say that I am giving you an early warning. We move on from this line of questioning.

**Ms UIBO:** Am I allowed to ask any questions that do not have your prior approval when I am asking about taxpayer-funded dollars in the budget from the CLP and a question around political spending and nonpartisan government spending that has become political?

**Mr DEPUTY CHAIR:** You have gone through this a number of times. As I have said, I have made a ruling. Can we move on, please. I will not ask again.

**Ms UIBO:** Can I ask what your ruling is, then?

**Mr DEPUTY CHAIR:** My ruling is that we move on to other questions.

**Ms UIBO:** You do not want your minister to answer this important question for Territorians.

**Mr DEPUTY CHAIR:** Leader of the Opposition, this is your last chance. You will go on an official warning straightaway if you ask again.

**J DAVIS:** Can you advise how many new surveyors have been registered in the Northern Territory over the past five years and 10 years?

**Ms CAHILL:** I will just make the observation that we can answer questions relevant to the current budget process, so I cannot go back five or 10 years because that is not relevant. I am not sure if we have that number, but bear with me.

We will take it on notice. We can provide you the numbers of surveyors registered since August in the reporting period.

**Mr DEPUTY CHAIR:** Member for Johnston, please restate the question for the record.

**J DAVIS:** How many new surveyors have been registered in the Northern Territory in the reporting period?

**Mr DEPUTY CHAIR:** Minister, do you accept the question?

**Ms CAHILL:** This may answer your question, but if it does not we can take it on notice. The number of applications that have been processed, in the current reporting period, of surveyors is 45.

**J DAVIS:** When you say 'processed', are they people who have been registered?

**Ms CAHILL:** Their applications have been processed. Whether they have actually become surveyors, whether they have finalised the process—so they have applied—and whether they were approved I could not tell you that. I can tell you that number were processed.

**J DAVIS:** Is it possible on notice to get the answer of how many were approved?

**Ms CAHILL:** Yes, we can do that.

---

#### Question on Notice No 8.1

**Mr DEPUTY CHAIR:** Member for Johnston, please restate the question for the record.

**J DAVIS:** How many surveyors were approved in the reporting period?

**Mr DEPUTY CHAIR:** Minister, do you accept the question?

**Ms CAHILL:** Yes.

**Mr DEPUTY CHAIR:** The question has been allocated the number 8.1.

---

**Mr KERLE:** During your opening statement you referenced the cattle industry and negotiations you had with our neighbours to the north. Do you mind talking about the prospects for growing the cattle industry, as it is a very important industry to the Top End? A lot of our communities' and pastoralists' livelihoods depend on this industry. Could you enlighten me on our negotiations to increase the market for our cattle industry?

**Ms CAHILL:** My detailing of the success in that space was about the opportunity that we can realise. The opportunities for growing the sector, that rests with Minister Maley, so unfortunately—but what I can tell you is that from my discussions in the sector, from my visit to Indonesia, there is great interest in expanding that. We know that there are other markets that are very keen to see live exports from the Northern Territory to their markets. I have passed that information on to Minister Maley, so he is aware of those interested parties, and I have no doubt he will progress that.

**Mr PAECH:** With the machinery-of-government changes following the August election, can you confirm how many EC positions were transferred out, transferred in or created within the department?

**Ms CAHILL:** As I am sure you will appreciate, the previous department was quite large. As a brand-new department we had people transfer in as opposed to transfer out. We had 18 in total. As of today, six who were previously with DCMC, 11 who were previously with DITT and one new position, so 18 in total have been allocated into the new department.

**Mr PAECH:** What levels are those EC positions?

**Ms CAHILL:** We have seven ECO1, six ECO2, three ECO3, one ECO4 and one ECO6.

**Mr PAECH:** Could you confirm, within the last reporting period, how many external consultants have been engaged?

**Ms CAHILL:** It is the splitting between when we came in and when we were not in that is the challenge. Altogether, for the whole reporting period, there were 17, but of those only five since we came to government.

**Mr PAECH:** Are those 17—did you say 17 plus five?

**Ms CAHILL:** Including.

**Mr PAECH:** Of the 17, how many of those are Territory consulting businesses?

**Ms CAHILL:** Seven external to the Territory and 10 internal to the Territory.

**Mr PAECH:** One last question from me. Are you the minister responsible for Desert Knowledge?

**Ms CAHILL:** I am told no.

**Mr PAECH:** Not a problem, thank you.

**Ms UIBO:** I have had someone text me while we have been doing this session. The latest fare from Groote Eylandt to Darwin is \$900 one way, appreciating that many people can probably get a return trip to Bali from Darwin for less than that, if not for two people.

Will you commit to a visit—you said that you have been thinking about it—to Groote Eylandt in the second half of the year to meet with the residents, businesspeople and contractors, who frequently fly to and from Groote for personal and professional reasons, to talk about airfare affordability?

**Ms CAHILL:** I have not been but not because I have not wanted to go; we have had three tentative dates which all had to be changed due to different conditions. I have a tentative booking coming up in the next two to three weeks, is my understanding. We are just finalising the arrangements because when I travel, I do not just travel for this portfolio; I make sure I do as much work as possible across all my portfolios.

I almost got on a plane at one stage, so I am very disappointed that I have not been there yet. It is most definitely on the agenda, and I am very keen to talk to the community members there and the businesses on the ground.

**Ms UIBO:** You are the first minister who has committed to travelling out to my electorate on my invitation, so thank you; I appreciate it.

**Mr DEPUTY CHAIR:** There being no further questions on the opening statement, we will take a break for five minutes.

---

The committee suspended.

---

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

**Mr DEPUTY CHAIR:** The committee will now consider the estimates of proposed expenditure contained in the Appropriation (2025–2026) Bill as they relate to the Department of Trade, Business and Asian Relations. Are there any agency-related whole-of-government questions on budget and fiscal strategy?

**Ms UIBO:** Can you explain the change in customer satisfaction key performance indicators with business support services and programs? Why has the target decreased from 90% to 75%? Do you think you are unable to meet a higher customer satisfaction target, hence it being decreased?

**Ms CAHILL:** With much of what will occur, I am sure, through the discussion around the outputs, we are not comparing apples and apples; we are comparing apples and oranges. We have a new department, so we looked at what was a reasonable approach to measuring outputs. If it would be of some assistance we can provide you with the definition as to how we arrived at that number. It was a view that, as a new department, it was an appropriate target to aspire to.

**Ms UIBO:** Has your government conducted any diplomatic damage control following the backflip on the Darwin Port lease, or is it just expected that our Asian neighbours will ignore the fact that the CLP has done this deal, and the new government has now been publicly campaigning against it?

**Ms CAHILL:** That is a question you should direct to your federal government colleagues; they are the ones driving this discussion. All my discussions in this area have focused on the fact that we are the best place to do business in Australia for foreign investment, and everybody I have spoken to is happy to utilise the infrastructure we have in place.

**Ms UIBO:** It is your Chief Minister, Lia Finocchiaro, who said that the Port of Darwin should return to Australian hands and has been dealing with a potential US buyer. Further to that, how do you expect to maintain respectful and productive relationships with our neighbours in China, who bring billions of dollars of

trade, money, to the country, when the CLP has now labelled their involvement in the critical infrastructure of the port as a security threat? Is this not a direct insult to that major trading partner, China?

**Ms CAHILL:** As you are aware, the port is overseen by the Department of Logistics and Infrastructure. You should have addressed the question to the responsible minister when you had that opportunity.

**Ms UIBO:** You are the Minister for Trade, Business and Asian Relations. China is in Asia, which is why I am asking you about the relationship with China and Asian relations in regard to the port.

**Ms CAHILL:** As I said in my previous answer, all of my interactions with colleagues, including China, have been positive.

**Ms UIBO:** Let us hope they listen to you and not the Chief Minister.

Given that your own party negotiated the original Port Darwin lease deal, do you accept responsibility for the damage to our trade reputation with our international partners, particularly in Asia? Is that why damage repair is now part of your work, with the relationship with the Southeast Asian neighbours, and the sudden reversal by the CLP government on the agreement and looking for another lessee?

**Ms CAHILL:** If you wanted to interrogate this question you should have done so with the relevant minister. All of my interactions with all our Asian neighbours, including the recent visit with the Chinese Ambassador, have been positive. They are very interested in doing business with the Northern Territory.

**Ms UIBO:** It is strange that the Minister for Trade, Business and Asian Relations is not the minister to speak to about Asian trade relations.

Is it a standard CLP foreign policy to ink multimillion dollar deals with foreign powers one day, then vilify them for political gain the next? What impact does this have on the Northern Territory's ability to attract long-term investment from our Asian neighbours, in your portfolio of Asian Relations?

**Ms CAHILL:** The greatest damage that was done with the Northern Territory's relationships with our Asian neighbours occurred in 2016 when the previous Labor Chief Minister Michael Gunner slammed the door shut in their face and said, 'We no longer want to do business with you'.

What I said in my opening statement stands. We have worked hard to re-engage with our Asian neighbours across the sector and they have welcomed us with open arms. They are willing to do business with us. They understand the Territory is a place to do business, and that is all I have to say on the matter.

**Ms UIBO:** Obviously you are trying to rewrite history with things that did not happen. We will go past that insinuation because I respect that you are in a difficult position trying to defend your portfolio and the actions of your government, which are obviously ...

**Mr DEPUTY CHAIR:** Leader of the Opposition, do you have a question?

**Ms UIBO:** I have asked the questions. I did not get all the answers I wanted, but I have asked them.

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

## **OUTPUT 1.0 – TRADE, BUSINESS AND ASIAN RELATIONS**

### **Output 1.1 – Business**

No questions.

### **Output 1.2 – Workforce and Population**

**Mr DEPUTY CHAIR:** The committee will now consider Output 1.2, Workforce and Population. Are there any questions?

**Ms UIBO:** How many people have moved to the Territory since August 2024 versus how many Territorians have left since August 2024?

**Ms CAHILL:** As you would be aware, we have not got to the end of the reporting period. We are almost there, but not quite, so we do not have those numbers in comparative data yet. If you would like, we can take it on notice but it will not be until after the end of the financial year.

**Ms UIBO:** I would like to put it on notice for the end of financial year data.

---

### Question on Notice No 8.2

**Mr DEPUTY CHAIR:** Leader of the Opposition, please restate the question for the record.

**Ms UIBO:** How many people have moved to the Territory since the start of the financial year versus how many people have left since the end of financial year?

**Ms CAHILL:** Yes.

**Mr DEPUTY CHAIR:** The question has been allocated the number 8.2.

---

**Ms UIBO:** Has the government developed a new plan for growing the population in the Territory or is it still pursuing the population strategy released by the previous government in 2018?

**Ms CAHILL:** The entire approach to rebuilding our economy, restoring our lifestyle and reducing crime constitutes the basis for growing the population. If we create an environment where it is easy to do business, where people feel safe in their homes, where people are comfortable and able to enjoy the fabulous Territory lifestyle, they will come to us. We create an environment where the red tape is reduced, we provide incentives encouraging people to move here—the HomeGrown home owner grant scheme is a good example. Everything we are doing is designed to grow the Territory population.

The work we are doing in skilled migration similarly contributes to that—the work we have done with the DAMA and in the international education space, encouraging people from overseas not to go to the east coast of Australia for their tertiary education, but to come to an environment where they are welcomed with open arms, where they are well supported and have strong representation of their community and cultural groups. All of this is part of our growing the population strategy.

**Ms UIBO:** The Treasurer stated that your government will grow the Territory population by 4,000 per year. That was reported by the ABC on 9 April 2025. What new initiatives or programs have been funded in this budget to meet this target under your portfolio?

**Ms CAHILL:** We know we have a skill deficit in the Northern Territory, as we do across the country. One of the best ways we can attract and grow the population is to create the employment and education pathways, so we have invested in the workforce strategy and the workforce attraction area to the tune of \$2m per year for two years.

We have already seen some fantastic uptake of the opportunities to learn about the Territory through our innovative approach to recruiting from overseas through our online forums, where we had 2,000 people register to participate in the online forums in Ireland and we also have the UK and South Africa. We are also working very hard. We have increased the number of the General Skilled Migration program.

The other thing we are doing is making sure that we are supporting businesses to actually attract the workforce in, but are very much focused on selling the Territory as the place to come and live and work and have your family and stay.

That investment, we believe, over the next two years will actually have a significant impact on growing the population.

**Ms UIBO:** The Treasurer said that your government will move more fly-in, fly-out (FIFO) workers from the gas and mineral sectors to settle in the Northern Territory. What are you doing specifically to get those companies to scrap FIFO work in the Territory and put down long-term roots?

**Ms CAHILL:** You are absolutely right; if we want to grow the Territory one of the things we have to do is look at why businesses felt that FIFO was the response and not bring people here, have them live here, have their families here and have them commit to being part of the Northern Territory community.

I think there was a significant opportunity lost under previous governments to instil that approach in those enterprises, particularly if we look at INPEX. The fact that INPEX were able to build their entire facility in the Northern Territory and there was nothing done to convince them that they needed to have their head office here, again, is one of those things that I find truly baffling.

With every business we are talking to in the investment space we are making it clear that local is key, and 'local' does not mean having a call centre where somebody answers the phone and then transfers the call to your head office to another part of the country. We are having those robust discussions with those enterprises that are looking to invest in the Territory and making it clear that it is not a matter of just conveniently locating your industry here, then flying your workforce in and out.

You are right; the number of FIFOs that are coming in and out is way too high. We accept there will be occasions for highly skilled workforces where that may not be practical, but when we are talking about growing the workforce and population, it is a critical component, and it is front and centre of all the discussions we are having. That will be a major target for us. Even businesses who are currently here that do not have their head offices here, we are working to convince them that they need to change that.

**Ms UIBO:** The target is set at 4,000 people per year for the growth of the population in the Northern Territory. Who exactly is responsible in the government for delivering that target, and what happens if they do not reach that target?

**Ms CAHILL:** It is an across-government responsibility. Every minister, MLA, department and person who lives and works in the Territory already—that is our driving factor. We all live here for a reason because we believe this is the best place in the country to live, so we will all work together to drive that.

Clearly, the Department for Trade, Business and Asian Relations and me, having the portfolio of International Education, Migration and Population—I have a total commitment to seeing that happen, but all of my colleagues feel exactly the same way, and we are working hard to promote that the Territory is the place to come to live and work. It is the place to come and invest and it is the place to come and study.

We are working with organisations such as Charles Darwin University to make sure that they can realise their potential by ensuring that the federal government does not restrict the number of students that they can take on board in the beautiful new campus being constructed in the city. They are able to accommodate 8,000 students. Just imagine if half of those decide, 'Target reached—4,000 people; there you go', or maybe double because they may have their families with them as well.

We are all working together to make this happen. We are all committed to doing this, and we will be held to account by the Territory population.

**Ms UIBO:** Will you take the responsibility for reaching that target?

**Ms CAHILL:** As I said, it is a joint effort. I will drive my colleagues as hard as I have to in order to see that we realise that effort.

**Ms UIBO:** We look forward to asking you for the numbers this time next year in Estimates.

Regarding the record interstate departures, which your government has often talked about, the declining birth rate and little to no regional infrastructure investment seen in the CLP's first budget, is this target seriously achievable or should Territorians prepare for yet another backflip on the target numbers?

**Ms CAHILL:** As I have already indicated, the skilled migration process will be a significant component of growing our population. We have been allocated 1,600 General Skilled Migration nominations for 2024–25. That carries forward, obviously, into 2025–26. Critical to that is that the federal government does its part. That means they have allocated those places to us, so they must process those visa applications in a timely fashion. That has been a struggle for them in the past. I have been fortunate to have some discussions with the Assistant Minister for Immigration, Matt Thistlethwaite, about that. He is committed to ensuring that his department sees those visa applications progressed.

With that 1,600 people, that is about 3,000 people potentially in the population. There you are; before you do anything else, that skilled migration might actually see a lift and uptake in our population.

The other thing is that we have a significant push into not just the international sector, but interstate. Anybody living down south at the moment in their –5°C woolly underwear conditions is looking to the Territory and the magnificent weather we have now. We have a big push happening about encouraging and convincing people living in chilly Victoria or New South Wales—particularly in those workforce shortage areas that we know we desperately need to address to ensure that our industry continues to grow—that the Territory is the place that they could come and live and work and enjoy a beautiful lifestyle. We will give them a grant for their new home and make sure that they can take their weekend trips to Bali and enjoy the magnificent lifestyle that the Territory has to offer. That, hopefully, will pick up the other 1,000.

**Mr KERLE:** In terms of population, have we started to see green shoots yet of population starting to recover after the disastrous policies of the last eight years?

**Ms CAHILL:** I believe I can say yes, we are starting to see those green shoots poke their way through the frozen earth—that is not frozen because we are in the Territory.

**Mr KERLE:** Baked clay.

**Ms CAHILL:** The red clay.

There is a real sense that the work that has been done to reduce antisocial behaviour makes people feel that they can bring their families to live and work in the Northern Territory and the opportunities and the business support that we are seeing. The Chief Minister recently spoke about the fact that we have had a 48% uptake in new home building applications. That tells us that something is moving in the right direction. Yes, those green shoots are there. They are fragile, and we will continue to nurture them. I believe that we are seeing that shift come through.

**Mr DEPUTY CHAIR:** That concludes consideration of Output 1.2.

### **Output 1.3 – Trade and Investment**

**Mr DEPUTY CHAIR:** The committee will now consider Output 1.3, Trade and Investment. Are there any questions?

**Ms CAHILL:** In regard to the question on notice about the population in and out, we have just had clarification that most of those numbers will not be available until December, just to let you know. It is the way that information is gathered and reported.

**Mr DEPUTY CHAIR:** Which question was it?

**Ms CAHILL:** That was the question on notice in relation to the population and the departures and the incomings.

**Mr PAECH:** That will be on notice for a while.

**Ms CAHILL:** You could consider it a Christmas present.

**Mr DEPUTY CHAIR:** Leader of the Opposition, did you want to take that question off the list or take that as the answer?

**Ms UIBO:** We might leave it on, but we might submit it as a formal written question, then we will remove it through the committee.

**The COMMITTEE SECRETARY:** You cannot remove it once it has been taken. It will be on there, and if it does not get answered by the due date for answers, it will just go unanswered.

**Ms UIBO:** That is all right. We will just write it again. I do not want it to be forgotten; it is important.

**M DEPUTY CHAIR:** The question stands.

**Mr KERLE:** What measures is this government taking to strengthen local content in procurement? The Member for Karama is passionate about local content.

**Ms CAHILL:** You are right; if you want people to invest in business, grow their businesses and look at the opportunities you need to make sure that there is clarity and a good robust system that goes hand in hand with it. In the lead-up to the election, generally talking to businesses and hearing their concerns about trying to do business in the Territory and how complicated they felt it had gotten—perception is often everything.

When appointed to this portfolio I made it my business to get out and talk to businesses on the ground. We have had a number of roundtable discussions, specifically on procurement and business more generally, to get a sense from people what they thought the challenges were. The consistent message across all the businesses we spoke to—big, small, Indigenous and non-Indigenous—right across the board was they felt that the local focus had been lost. Lots of people were concerned that the local content was not being followed through on well enough.

We have undertaken a review of the procurement space to make sure we have that strong focus on local and get good clarity for people about what they need to do to secure business, particularly with the government. First and foremost, business must go to Territory businesses. Particularly when you are talking about government interactions with business there must be a good reason or something that cannot possibly be sourced or supplied within the Northern Territory, only then will departments be able to go beyond the borders of the Northern Territory. That work is still being undertaken. We have had a lot of consultation with business in that space. The feedback has been robust and clear about what their expectations are.

We are also reviewing the various layers and the one-size-fits-all policy because that does not really make sense. Anybody who has been involved in business knows that is not true. We want to make it as simple as possible for local businesses to do business in the Northern Territory.

The red-tape taskforce has just handed down their report. There is a number of areas they looked at in procurement which we have already addressed. There has not been a review of procurement policies for the last eight or nine years, so it is overdue because the environment has changed significantly. We are anticipating that will be completed and the new procurement oversight will be in place by the end of the year.

**Mr DEPUTY CHAIR:** That concludes consideration of Output 1.3 and Output Group 1.0.

**OUTPUT GROUP 2.0 – CORPORATE AND SHARED SERVICES**  
**Output 2.1 – Corporate and Governance**  
**Output 2.2 – Shared Services Received**  
**Output 2.3 – Shared Services Provided**

No questions.

**OUTPUT GROUP 3.0 – INTERNATIONAL EDUCATION**

**Mr DEPUTY CHAIR:** The committee will now proceed to Output Group 3.0, International Education. I note that while this output sits with the Minister for Education and Training, who is responsible for the delivery of education services to international students in NT Government schools, Minister Cahill is responsible for international education strategies. Are there any questions?

**Ms UIBO:** The International Education and Training Strategy 2019–2025 is due to finish at the end of this year. How many FTEs are currently attributed to the development of a new strategy within your government?

**Ms CAHILL:** There are currently three people who are working in the Study NT team looking at that strategy, which is a reasonably small component of the work being done in that space. The good thing about a strategy is it drives the actual agenda, and the agenda is deeply embedded in Study NT and the work they do. Three people will be involved in that review.

**Ms UIBO:** What will be the process of consultation for the new strategy?

**Ms CAHILL:** The early work is being completed, and the terms of how that consultation will be undertaken is currently being formulated.

**Mr KERLE:** I acknowledge that you are not responsible for the delivery of education.

Before being elected, I was working for Charles Darwin University, so I have a deep understanding of the benefit of international students to that institution. We were incredibly disheartened and shocked by the cuts made by the federal government to the number of international students who are allowed to come and study.

Do you have any updates on progression of negotiations to increase the quota for Charles Darwin University so that we can have international students coming back again?

**Ms CAHILL:** The good news is that cap—the bad news is that it is still on the table and still being discussed—at this moment in time, is not being enforced.

There is a tendency at the departmental level in terms of visa applications to view it as if it is in force, but I have had the opportunity to meet with the assistant minister, Matt Thistlethwaite, on the issue. He has given a commitment that he understands that regional universities—CDU falls into that category—have a very different need from the situation that occurred which led to the discussion of a cap on the east coast. He is well aware that for Charles Darwin University and the Northern Territory more generally, the ability to bring those international students into our community is critical. They play a very important role in our economy and are an important part of our workforce, particularly in the hospitality industry.

I am looking to catch up with him again in the next couple of weeks to see where we are sitting with that so that we can, hopefully, bed down that the cap will not be implemented in the way they intended and we get a bit more movement. We were able to get some increase in the original concept, but we are hoping we can have it removed altogether.

**Mr KERLE:** That will be fantastic.

**Mr DEPUTY CHAIR:** Speaking as the Member for Karama, I am a passionate supporter, as you know, of international education, particularly vocational education and training. Can you give us an understanding of the priority markets we might be targeting and the sectors we will be targeting to get more international students here?

**Ms CAHILL:** Study NT drives the agenda in this space. In 2024–25 the ideal international student education markets for Charles Darwin University and the private advanced education training sector include India, Nepal, China, Vietnam, Indonesia, the Philippines, Bangladesh, Colombia and Brazil. We are getting a lot of interest from those areas.

Our greatest advocates are our Study NT ambassadors. They are proactive in speaking to their contacts back home who are considering coming to Australia to study—and hopefully live and work beyond their study time—and persuading them that going to Sydney and Melbourne is not the optimal place for them, that the Northern Territory feels more like home and the work opportunities are significant.

The last stats I saw were about 98% of students who complete their training can find a position and continue to work in the Territory economy for a period of time. They all contribute significantly to the economy. That is a workforce we need to build upon. The areas that benefit from this sector are healthcare and hospitality. In the accounting sector we have a really good profile and in the IT sector, which the Member for Blain would have experienced in his time at university.

**Mr DEPUTY CHAIR:** We often do marketing by going overseas, but it is also about getting international agents to come here. Can you update us on any progress you have made in that regard?

**Ms CAHILL:** Yes, we had three familiarisation tours undertaken with education agents throughout Darwin, where we have showcased the educational offerings. In the travel I have undertaken, education and skills exchanges have rated highly in the discussions, particularly with the Indonesian Government. We had the Australian International Education Conference in Melbourne, where the department had a strong presence. They also attended the ICEF ANZA trade fair, which was held on the Gold Coast in April.

At every opportunity we possibly can, we are out there talking to agents and encouraging them to consider the Northern Territory as a place where they should be guiding the international student population to come to. We have lots to offer those students.

The greatest message we can give is that the students who are advocating for us say that they arrive in the Territory and feel like they are home, because it is a familiar environment to them. The fact that it is a smaller environment means that they are welcomed into the community much more strongly, so that is a message we are selling to the education agents because they need to understand if they are recommending people come to live and work in the Northern Territory, they can do it confidently.

**Mr DEPUTY CHAIR:** That concludes consideration of Output Group 3.0 and consideration of outputs relating to the Department of Trade, Business and Asian Relations. On behalf of the committee, I thank the departmental officers who provided advice to the minister today.

**Ms CAHILL:** I again thank the team from the department who have worked extremely hard to ensure that we had the necessary information. They have worked really, really hard pulling all this information together and putting the budget together and looking to ensure that we can deliver for Territorians. Thank you to Kelly, Hayley and Jo for the work that they have undertaken. There have been a lot of people behind the scenes who have worked very hard. This is a huge amount of work to ensure that we know that we are delivering for Territorians, and I have faith in this team to be able to do exactly that.

## **CHILDREN AND FAMILIES**

### **CHILD PROTECTION**

#### **PREVENTION OF DOMESTIC VIOLENCE**

#### **DEPARTMENT OF CHILDREN AND FAMILIES**

**Mr DEPUTY CHAIR:** The committee will now consider outputs relating to the Department of Children and Families. Minister, I invite you as the Minister for Children and Families; Child Protection; and Prevention of Domestic Violence to introduce the officials accompanying you and to make an opening statement regarding the Department of Children and Families.

**Ms CAHILL:** It gives me great pleasure to speak to my responsibilities as Minister for Children and Families; Child Protection; and Prevention of Domestic Violence.

I would like to introduce the members from the Department of Children and Families who appear with me today and will assist me to respond to your questions. I have Ms Karen Broadfoot, Acting Chief Executive Officer; Ms Rachelle McMillan, Acting Deputy Executive Officer, Strategy, Programs and Enabling Services; Ms Nhi Tran, Acting Executive Director, Families Programs; and Ms Seranie Gamble, Executive Director, Domestic, Family and Sexual Violence Prevention. We will be joined at some point by Ms Kelly Hunter, Manager for Homelessness Programs.

Before beginning I acknowledge and sincerely thank the acting CEO of the department, Karen, for her management of the department and her leadership of the team in preparing for Estimates. As I have said, it is a huge amount of time and effort to put all of this together, and I am really grateful for the work that has been undertaken to assist us to share the information here today.

Budget 2025–26 will invest \$373m in the Department of Children and Families, including \$71.5m to respond to domestic, family and sexual violence, including prevention, early intervention and recovery; \$73.1m to support people experiencing homelessness; \$204.1m to protect children and support families, including out-of-home care and family support services; \$0.7m for emergency services in disaster recovery; as well as \$23.4m for corporate, regulatory and shared services.

This money plays a critical role in our government's strategic agenda to reduce crime, rebuild the economy and restore our lifestyle, particularly as it relates to addressing the root causes of crime and building safer families and communities. Every dollar spent on services that support vulnerable families, victim-survivors and those experiencing homelessness provide much-needed support and is an investment in the safety and future of all Territorians.

The department has a budget of \$400m allocated as \$373m in operational funding and \$27m in infrastructure program funding.

In the last year we have invested \$239m in key supports for Northern Territory children and families, including \$8m in child and family centres; \$26m in family support; \$138m in out-of-home care; \$67m for homelessness services; and \$37m for domestic, family and sexual violence services.

In 2024–25 we established and invested \$6.9m in the Circuit Breaker Program with this investment growing to \$9.2m per annum in ongoing funding from 2025–26. Circuit Breaker is an intensive, wraparound response that supports at-risk young people, holds families accountable and connects families needing specialist support to get the help they need, breaking the cycle of violence before it starts.

In the last six months, we established the program in three urban centres and worked with 184 families, with 110 establishing family responsibility agreements. These agreements make it clear that to stop repeated bad behaviour, you must set boundaries and address its drivers, which more often than not are occurring at home.

Our government is committing to holding parents and families to account, to address their own issues that impact on their children, whether that is domestic violence, drug and alcohol misuse or housing instability. With this increased investment, Circuit Breaker will continue to be stepped up to ensure supports are in place for people who need it, while also enabling firmer interventions for parents who fail to act in their child's best interest.

Our government has secured significant funding from the Australian Government, \$842.5m to be exact, under the national partnership agreement on remote Aboriginal investment, a significant increase compared to the previous agreement. Of that, \$135.9m will fund remote safe spaces, family support services and child and family centres from 2025 to 2031. The investment in 2025–26 of \$22.7m will see coordinated place-based services in place to support the safety and wellbeing of remote children and their families.

Over 2024–25 this government has invested \$8m into child and family centres. In 2025–26 we will grow this model as a result of the national partnership agreement on remote Aboriginal investment that we negotiated. Because of our investment, a ninth child and family centre will soon be in operation in the Territory. By the end of June 2025 residents of Gapuwiyak and the surrounding homelands can expect child and family centre services to be delivered through an outreach model.

Child and family centres provide a front door for families, offering safe and welcoming spaces where parents and children can begin their journey towards support, connecting with services like education, health, parenting and family wellbeing. I am pleased to report that our government is growing the impact of these centres by expanding eligibility from families with children aged nought to five years old to those with children up to nine years of age. We have also commenced work towards an evaluation to inform further improvements that will maximise impact for community and deliver greater value for the Territory.

In 2025–26 our government will invest \$44.5m into family support, providing targeted family support to families and children with high levels of vulnerability. Any family can access these supports because we want to empower families to seek help when they need it, not wait for child protection intervention.

Through the family support portfolio the department undertook 195 Strengthening Families and 93 family support cases in 2024–25. This casework is essential for ensuring parents take responsibility for their child and for identifying the support needed to prevent their child entering care.

In the homelessness space I am proud because tomorrow—you are all getting a preview of this—we will have our Northern Territory's first Homelessness Strategy since 2018. I know we are not supposed to have things, but we are very proud of it; here it is.

It is a portfolio that has long been neglected, and we are backing this strategy with a record \$73m investment in the homelessness sector for 2025–26 funded through the Northern Territory and Australian Governments' National Agreement on Social Housing and Homelessness 2024–2029.

The NT Homelessness Strategy 2025–2030 is a bold forward-looking blueprint shaped through extensive consultation right across the Territory. We worked closely with service providers, Aboriginal organisations, and critically with people with lived experiences of homelessness. Their voices have been central in designing a strategy grounded in innovation, cultural safety and place-based solutions. At the strategy's core is a strong commitment to prevention and early intervention, ensuring that people get the right support well before reaching crisis.

This strategy is not just about housing; it is about restoring stability, dignity and opportunity for Territorians. Our homelessness rate is more than 12 times the national average and we know that this has a significant impact on individuals and communities.

Homelessness does not cause crime, but the conditions surrounding homelessness can increase vulnerability to it. When people are forced to live without stable housing, they are more exposed to victimisation, more likely to be criminalised for minor survival behaviours and more often drawn into cycles of interaction with the justice system. Addressing homelessness is therefore not just a matter of compassion, but a smart approach to improving community safety and reducing pressure on policing, health and justice services.

Through our investment and early intervention focus, the NT Homelessness Strategy gives us the tools to break entrenched cycles of housing insecurity and build lasting pathways to safety, dignity and connection across the Territory.

Our government is investing \$20.9m into child protection in 2025–26. Removing children from their families is never taken lightly; however, we all have a responsibility to ensure that kids grow up safe. Every child deserves a chance to thrive, and we will work to make that a reality. Our government is committed to providing the services families need to improve the safety and wellbeing of themselves, their children and their community.

Our government is investing \$138m in an out-of-home care system that supports vulnerable children and where possible supports their reunification to family. We cannot support vulnerable children without the support of our foster caring community which is why in 2025–26 we are investing \$2.7m in non-government organisations to help find, assess, train and support carers.

I take this opportunity to reiterate the best interests of the child is our number one priority.

Everyone in this room appreciates the gravity of domestic violence in the Territory. What is clear is that for years what we have been doing has not been enough. That is why our government committed a record ongoing \$36m in annual funding for domestic, family and sexual violence prevention and responses—the most sustained investment the Territory has ever made in this area. Historical funding for domestic violence was time-limited and insufficient to meet growing need and demands.

Our government's commitment will support the sector to intervene earlier and address the root causes of domestic violence. This is also aligned with the recommendations of the recent coronial inquest into the deaths of four Aboriginal women—Miss Yunupingu, Ngeygo Ragurk, Kumarn Rubuntja and Kumanjaji Haywood—because of domestic violence.

The allocation of these funds from 2025–26 includes:

- \$5.2m annually for specialist domestic, family and sexual violence services to strengthen an integrated response, including case management, counselling, court support, therapeutic services and outreach
- \$1.5m for a domestic, family and sexual violence training and resource centre offering skill development, resource hubs and practice supervision to uplift local sector workforce capability
- \$3.4m in community-based behaviour change programs to deliver evidence-informed interventions for people who use violence, to change their attitudes and build accountability
- \$1.9m for rehabilitation and behaviour change programs for perpetrators in our prison settings, such as the Step Up program and caring for mum on the inside
- \$0.85m for improving outcomes for victim–survivors, including specialist prosecution and witness support, and improving court safety through the Director of Public Prosecutions
- over \$2.5m for whole-of-government policy coordination and governance functions, ensuring joined-up leadership, evaluation and clear accountability.

We are also investing:

- \$1.4m for the primary prevention grants program, funding local initiatives that challenge harmful gender stereotypes and support education on respectful relationships
- \$0.25m for implementation embedding of domestic, family and sexual violence risk assessments in universal services
- \$0.5m annually to support improvements for remote safe houses
- \$0.25m for innovation and community engagement events, including small grassroot grants and the expansion of the Men's Places programs.

These are Territory government investments, not Commonwealth funding, and they demonstrate our commitment to long-term reform, sustainability and local service delivery.

Our budget also includes \$0.5m to support women’s counselling and healing in prison; \$0.4m annually for after-hours domestic, family and sexual violence specialist health responses, including mental health support and referrals from our hospital emergency departments; and more than \$2m each year for court and community-based programs for people who use violence.

Crucially, this funding will not only provide support to victim–survivors but also deliver programs to hold people using violence accountable for their behaviour and create transformational change to prevent and reduce domestic violence in our community.

In closing, I want to reaffirm our government’s intent in forming the Department of Children and Families. It was established with purpose, recognising the clear and complex overlap between domestic violence, homelessness and child protection, and the urgent need for foundational preventive support across these domains.

Our government’s investment in these services reaffirms our commitment to reducing crime by funding the interventions needed to address the root causes of crime and prevent child abuse and domestic violence. Every dollar invested in my department is therefore an investment in the safety of all Territorians and redirects pressure that impacts frontline workers in police, courts and Corrections.

Looking forward to the next 12 months, our priority is clear: to reinforce family responsibility and ensure domestic violence services are funded where and when they are needed. We will modernise and innovate, always keeping the safety and wellbeing of children, families and our community at the centre of everything we do.

I acknowledge the dedicated staff of this department, especially those on the front line. Their work is complex, often confronting and demands a level of resilience that does not go unnoticed. We also recognise the work cannot be done in isolation. Our partners in Health, Police, justice, Housing and Education are critical to our success.

I am now happy to take questions.

**Mr DEPUTY CHAIR:** Before I open up for questions, I remind people we will take a scheduled meal break at 6.30 pm. Are there any questions on the opening statement?

**Mr PAECH:** You mentioned evaluations in your opening statement. I want to get an understanding of the domestic, family and sexual violence evaluations of behaviour change, Circuit Breaker and co-responder programs. Will those evaluations be done externally? Will they be made public, as a way of having surety that what is being changed is based on the evidence of those evaluations?

**Ms CAHILL:** One of the things I have learnt in my long career is that you should be continually evaluating a program. One of the challenges we had in the past is that we often looked to evaluate something after it has been in place for a long period. We get external providers in and pay huge amounts of money on consultants to tell us what they think we did or did not do right, and by the time we get the report, so much time has passed it almost becomes irrelevant. What is critical to what we are doing is that we have to build in an ongoing evaluation process. The work being done needs to have built into it a component of evaluation to determine if we are hitting the mark, being agile and able to adjust our pathway if we are not achieving the results we were hoping for.

Some programs are committed to external evaluation because it is a Commonwealth joint-funded project, and that is built into the project when it is funded. Where we can, we are looking at how we can evaluate what we do with an independent view—someone external to the program who can cast their eye across what is happening and have clear outcomes defined. I feel that we were very output focused. It is easy; you can count 1,000 encounters, but did those 1,000 encounters actually achieve any positive outcomes?

We have an evaluation schedule for 2024–25, and we will likely replicate it through 2025–26 with some modifications.

The internal evaluations that were done were the minimum age of criminal responsibility On the Right Track evaluation—some of these have now moved into other areas, so we are sharing the results—and the Aboriginal carer services program. Both of those evaluations have been completed. An evaluation of the Safe, Respected and Free From Violence Prevention Grants is currently underway.

An external evaluation of the Men's Behaviour Change program has been completed. An external evaluation of the medical and allied health specialist services is near completion. The evaluation of the child and family centres is a Commonwealth-funded external evaluation, which is currently being planned. The Domestic, Family and Sexual Violence Housing Pathways program is being externally evaluated, and planning for evaluation of the Safe and Together Model is currently underway.

If I have an option of gaining the expertise and talent and embedding that in the department at a lower cost—compared to, say, spending a million dollars a year on external consultations—where I could spend most of that money on delivering services that is the option we will take. Where we do not have the expertise, obviously we need to bring that in.

We have excellent people working in the governance section of the department, so we are looking at how we can bolster that so we can keep this ongoing evaluation, because everything we do should be a living process, and every document should be a living document.

**Mr PAECH:** We had the Corrections minister before us this week. When he spoke about DV programs and evaluation, he said that it was a decision of the government to continue to have those programs exempt from the relationship with the department around the evaluation framework. I am trying to ascertain whether work is being done internally within Territory Families in regard to what the evaluation framework will look like around the decision of what will be independent and what will be external. I am trying to understand, given that there is no domestic, family and sexual violence advisory body anymore, who would you imagine—I am not wanting to create a hypothetical, but what calibre would the department need to engage to get that third party but not involved in the decision-making process?

Sorry, that is a really longwinded way of trying to explain. Will you be doing work to do an updated evaluation framework? Who would then be consulting on that? Will there be a relationship with Corrections in regard to its DV programs?

**Ms CAHILL:** Spoken like a true legal person.

I think the critical element is that there is a lot of work being done in this space. The advisory forum did not do evaluations; most of the evaluations were contracted out at great expense. What I have found as I have got to know the people working in this space is there are some incredibly talented people who are very skilled to do this work.

There will be another group that replaces the advisory forum, plus we also have the Aboriginal advisory forum, who I have elevated in the work they are doing. I have met with them already to talk about how they would like to approach this and see how we can measure what is and is not working from their point of view.

Shifting the focus away from outputs to outcomes makes an internal evaluation process more straightforward. We are currently developing the next iteration. We are not having any more action plans; we have a road map to get to the end of the journey of the framework. That will include a discussion on how we evaluate programs and processes. We have given ourselves 12 months to work on that. We did not want to rush into anything, and we want to ensure that we gather as much expertise as possible.

That is a longwinded response to your longwinded question. Where we identify we do not have the expertise, we will bring it in; where we identify that we do, we will harness that to maximise those opportunities.

**Mr PAECH:** Have there been any changes or are there any particular requirements that you will build into funding agreements that go out to the sector so that we are not duplicating responses or evidence that we might need in terms of an evaluation?

**Ms CAHILL:** The primary focus change is about making it clear when we put grants out the door what the outcomes are that we expect so that we can give clear direction about how we work with those organisations. You are right; they will bring back to us their data and evaluation of their programs, and then we will work with them to see where we are achieving the results we are hoping for. Where we are not, we will work with them to adjust and modify as necessary.

A change from outputs to outcomes will drive that evaluation process. All the organisations I have spoken to, and said that is where our gaze is shifting to, have welcomed the opportunity to be involved in that process.

**Mr DEPUTY CHAIR:** We will take a break now and come back at 7 pm.

---

The committee suspended.

---

**Mr PAECH:** Will Corrections DV programs be evaluated against the domestic, family and sexual violence Monitoring, Evaluation and Accountability Plan?

**Ms CAHILL:** The Monitoring, Evaluation and Accountability Plan is the document that goes with the reduction framework. The answer is yes, the programs that are being delivered in other spaces as a service level agreement because it is an external program will feed into that process.

**Mr PAECH:** It will be evaluated against that framework.

**Ms CAHILL:** Yes.

**Mr PAECH:** Will the Corrections domestic violence programs come under the minimum standards for domestic, family and sexual violence rehabilitation programs?

**Ms CAHILL:** No, because the men's behaviour program have their own core logic processes. The evaluation and accountability plan is linked to the minimum standards declared under the Act.

**Mr PAECH:** Can I confirm that particular behaviour change program you are talking about are the CatholicCare Men's Behaviour Change and the Tangentyere men's family violence men's behaviour change programs?

**Ms CAHILL:** Yes, that is correct.

**J DAVIS:** I want to thank everyone for all their work in this incredibly important portfolio. How wonderful it is that there is ongoing funding; it is something to celebrate. Thank you to all the people who work so incredibly hard in this portfolio.

Thank you, minister, for outlining the approach to evaluation. Is there an internal evaluation framework, when you said some things will now be evaluated internally? Is there a framework that is publicly available?

**Ms CAHILL:** As in my previous answer to the Member for Gwoja, we are developing a road map for the last three years of the framework to drive that agenda forward. Part of that process will include how we look to evaluate programs. In the sector they have been advised that they will be invited to feed into that road map process.

The critical element for us will be that unlike what appears to have happened in the past—it is often quite difficult to have a situation where you are continually monitoring and creating a living process within these frameworks—we want to make sure that whatever we put into place can respond to the changing environment. Where we see we may have potentially not got things heading in the right direction, that ongoing evaluation embedded into those processes will be critical, but it will be articulated in the road map.

**J DAVIS:** When will that be available?

**Ms CAHILL:** The road map is intended to be completed by the end of July. We are working at the moment for the draft process to be sent out to get feedback and some ideas from the sector. The good news is that whilst it will be completed in July, it will not be set in stone. If it needs to be adjusted or varied, there will be the ability to continue to have that as a living approach.

**J DAVIS:** For some of the evaluations I think there was previously funding committed. Under action plan 2 I think there was \$250,000 allocated towards an independent review of the RAMF. Has that happened?

**Ms CAHILL:** As I alluded to previously, where we have the expertise within that is what we will use. That \$250,000 will be the cost of that evaluation should it be done externally. It seems to be that is the figure that is plucked out of the air every time you ask for an external consultant to evaluate something. I think it is quite pricey, to be honest. We have identified we have the capacity within to do that evaluation and work across that program to see how it is going. In the discussions I have about the RAMF previously, there is continual feedback that comes into that process as well. At this point in time it will be evaluated, but not by an external consultant at the cost of \$250,000.

**J DAVIS:** What has happened to that \$250,000?

**Ms CAHILL:** It is redirected to delivering services on the ground.

**J DAVIS:** It sounds like there is ongoing feedback, but there will be an evaluation process for the RAMF as well; is that correct?

**Ms CAHILL:** The scope for that evaluation is being undertaken currently. It will be a formal process.

**J DAVIS:** Will that be available as part of the road map?

**Ms CAHILL:** The road map is separate to the evaluation processes. As with everything, they are forming the basis for how that evaluation will be approached. How that then is delivered will be determined as part of that process.

**Mr PAECH:** Can you provide the committee with the data of how many children are in out-of-home care and how many children are in kinship care?

**Ms CAHILL:** As of 31 March there were 876 children in out-of-home care with the department. As of 31 March 2025, 123 children were Aboriginal and 29% of those were placed with foster or kinship carers.

**Mr PAECH:** Can I confirm—I apologise—you said that there were 876 children in out-of-home care and 123 of those are in kinship care arrangements?

**Ms CAHILL:** Of the 876, 123 are Aboriginal children who are in kinship or foster care.

**Mr PAECH:** Is it 123 of the 876?

**Ms CAHILL:** For clarity, the majority of children in care at this point in time are Aboriginal. Of those children, 123 are placed in foster or kinship care. The rest of them are in paid out-of-home care places.

**Mr PAECH:** There are 876 children in the remit of the agency and 123 of those are in foster or kinship care arrangements. The remaining number are in a funded placement with an external provider?

**Ms CAHILL:** The 123 related specifically to Aboriginal children, so 305 children and young people were in foster care overall, 87 children were with kinship carers and two of 143 households had one or more children in their care. Altogether we have 202 foster care households and 41 kinship care households.

**Mr GUYULA:** First of all, it is good to hear that you are supporting my family and home at Gapuwiyak about what is happening there with support with the children. It will be good to see it that way so that children do not lose their identity and know who they want to be and who they can be, so thank you.

Is there an independent facility of a family responsibility agreement or is it created by the department?

**Ms CAHILL:** Can I just clarify whether you are asking if the family responsibility agreements are created independently or it is a process that is being developed by the department? That is so I can make sure I am answering correctly.

**Mr GUYULA:** Yes, that is exactly what I am saying. Are responsibility agreements created by the department or privately? How is that working?

**Ms CAHILL:** The family responsibility agreements are part of the *Youth Justice Act*. How they are designed and how they are to be utilised are embedded in Part 5, Division 1, section 64B of the *Youth Justice Act*. When we were looking to be able to engage with families to work with them and to have a slightly more formal arrangement with them as we continued to help and assist where there were children who were risk, we were able to receive an instrument under that Act to utilise that framework with the Department of Children and Families.

It is a voluntary process. When we have children who come to our notice, who are struggling for whatever reason, and then we follow up with the families, there is a discussion with them with the youth workers. If we need to have that more formal understanding of what the expectations are we use that same process, but it is not enforceable under law, which is why it is a cooperative approach.

Apart from the family responsibility agreements we also do safety planning with the families and their usual networks, so we can make sure that everybody in that environment is doing okay.

**Mr GUYULA:** Working with the families, are there any interpreters used when these agreements are made? Are these agreements provided in a person's first language?

**Ms CAHILL:** They are not necessarily entered into in first language. We use our Aboriginal community workers where we may need some assistance in that space. To my knowledge we have not actively needed to use Aboriginal interpreters. Most of the youth workers who are working in this space are familiar to the communities and well-known in the communities and have existing and very strong relationships, so the families are quite comfortable working with them.

**Mr GUYULA:** How many employees are there on the Circuit Breaker Program and at what salary level?

**Ms CAHILL:** In Alice Springs we have 24.82 full-time equivalent workers in the program; in Darwin we have 27.29; in Katherine we have 16; and in Tennant Creek we have three working in the program. In total, we have 71.11 full-time equivalents in the Circuit Breaker Program. I am not sure how you get 0.11 of a person, but there you go.

**Mr GUYULA:** What qualifications do employees of the Circuit Breaker Program have?

**Ms CAHILL:** I am sure you would appreciate that people who work in the youth worker environment have a variety of expertise and skill sets. I would have to take that on notice to give you an exact breakdown of the range of skills of the people who are currently working in that program.

---

### Question on Notice No 8.3

**Mr DEPUTY CHAIR:** Member for Mulka, please restate the question for the record.

**Mr GUYULA:** What qualifications do employees of the Circuit Breaker Program have?

**Mr DEPUTY CHAIR:** Minister, do you accept the question?

**Ms CAHILL:** Yes.

**Mr DEPUTY CHAIR:** The question has been allocated the number 8.3.

---

**Mr GUYULA:** How many employees on the Circuit Breaker Program are Aboriginal?

**Ms CAHILL:** In Alice Springs, seven of the employees in the Circuit Breaker team are Aboriginal; in Darwin, 14; in Katherine, 10; and three of the team in Tennant Creek are Aboriginal. Of the 73 staff members who work in that team across a range of areas, because not all of them are out on the ground interacting with youths, 34 of the team members are Aboriginal.

**Mr GUYULA:** The Coroner's report on Baby G showed that child protection workers made an assumption about the Aboriginal family of Baby G and did not do enough to put in place supports for the family as they struggled with a sick baby. Has the department recognised these issues and made changes to ensure families get better support in the future?

**Ms CAHILL:** I agree with you. There was much to learn from the way that case was managed. When I read the findings of the Coroner, I was incredibly distressed to learn of the challenges faced by that young family. On reading the coronial inquiry, I immediately had a meeting with the department and said that we need to make sure this never happens again. We must make sure—where we have a young family who are displaced, not in their home environment and struggling with language and dealing with what is often for anybody an incredibly confusing environment, when you are in hospital with a sick little one and you are not sure what is going on.

Some clear steps have been taken to make sure that in future—god forbid it should ever happen where we have a similar situation with a family who needs that level of support—the priority must be making sure the family are well supported and everything is thoroughly investigated. I have also instructed that we need an

independent review, someone who is not directly connected to the situation, to check and make sure everything is being done to help, whatever the situation requires.

**Mr GUYULA:** How many children are currently in out-of-home care, and how many of those are in kinship care?

**Ms CAHILL:** With your indulgence, I will give you the full breakdown, if you like. Of the 876 children I mentioned earlier in out-of-home care, in purchased home-based care there are 407 children, and 355 of those are Aboriginal children; in kinship care, there are 87 children, 81 of whom are Aboriginal; in foster care, there are 305 children, 274 of whom are Aboriginal; and in residential care, there are 57 children, 53 of whom are Aboriginal.

In other care—which might be boarding school or, sadly, detention for some—there are 20 children, and all of those children are Aboriginal.

**Mr GUYULA:** In this 2025–26 budget how much funding is going to purchased home-based care, foster care services and kinship care services?

**Ms CAHILL:** In the 2025–26 budget there is a total of \$35.977m allocated for home-based care. There is a total of \$12.574m allocated for kinship and foster care. There is \$22.417m allocated for intensive therapeutic residential care.

**Mr GUYULA:** Written question 593 from the last Assembly showed there were 219 kids in kinship care on 31 May 2023, and information from written question 51 states there were only 82 kids in kinship care on 31 January this year. Given there were approximately 900 in out-of-home care, why are so few in kinship care? What funding is in this budget to help increase the number of kinship carers?

**Ms CAHILL:** I am sure you will appreciate that one of the challenges of placing children in foster care or kinship care is actually having the people we are able to place them with. We work really hard to make sure we can maximise that access. We are working in partnership with the Foster and Kinship Carers Association of the Northern Territory. We have been proactively engaging with them, particularly in the last six months.

I met with them early in my appointment to this ministry to understand why we were struggling to get people into this space. I think over time there had been a lack of solid communication around expectations, demands and needs that were placed on to those carers. We realised we could do better in that space. To that end we have invested money to ensure that group is able to deliver their services and advocacy services in supporting kinship and foster care and that they look at carer recruitment, offer education and training and support to assist carers in an ongoing fashion. We have provided recently an additional grant.

The challenge we recognised was that if we are wanting more people to enter into and put their hand up to offer to take placements in kinship care and foster care, we actually need to support them better. The department recently undertook a very big process to consult across the Territory to find out what was happening in that space and how we could better support this.

We have also looked to dedicate funding to this in the amount of just on a million dollars. The total budget for 2025–26 is \$1.6m so that we can support Aboriginal carer services specifically and look to encourage more people to put their hand up for kinship care. I think one of the challenges is you find them and then sometimes you forget that they need ongoing support, through no ill will other than people get very busy and you have taken care of that particular situation. Therefore, we are focusing hard on keeping connected with these people directly and through organisations such as the Foster and Kinship Carers Association.

As of March 2025 we have 89% of children in care who are Aboriginal and 29% are placed with Aboriginal carers, but we are working really hard to increase that.

**Mr GUYULA:** What are the barriers to becoming kinship carers? If you have an overcrowded house, is this a barrier?

**Ms CAHILL:** I think, Member for Mulka, you would agree that what we have to do is make sure that we give the best possible environment to children. The ideal situation is that we keep them placed with family, and that will always be the first priority. If that is not possible, looking to place them in a kinship care arrangement would be the next obvious way to go, but we also have to be mindful that we are not overburdening those people. If you have people who are already taking care of a number of children, we have to be mindful of that.

One of things we have done is look to develop the workforce and get more people working in that space. We are holding community practice forums every year. We are making sure that we meet regularly with the service providers and the people who are helping in that space. We are looking to make sure that we have organisations across the sector that are similarly working along with us to grow and develop the capacity in those spaces.

If we find an environment where there is a potential for kinship care and perhaps there is an overcrowded situation, we would look for whether there is alternative accommodation we can find and a way we can alleviate the pressure in that household. What we will do then is advocate for the families who are willing to put their hands up. If we need to get them into a bigger house, we will advocate with them for housing and get them on a priority list so that we can make sure that they are in the best possible position to support those children.

**Mr GUYULA:** Six years ago the department identified that they wanted to reduce the number of kids in purchased home-based care and support more people to become kinship carers and foster carers, but this has never happened. What is the department's current position, and why has there been no progress made?

**Ms CAHILL:** I cannot speak for why things have not progressed in the past. I was not part of the government at the time and cannot identify why that may have happened.

I can tell you that I have made a clear direction for the department that we have to make every possible effort to give each child who comes to our attention who needs that extra support—that we put them in the best possible environment to give them the best possible outcome.

The most important thing we have done recently has been to take the time to go out and speak to people on the ground who are telling us why they may not have put their hand up or who may have done it in the past and decided they do not want to do it again, and we are finding out what the obstacles are. Some of them are in relation to things that you have already raised such as housing is no longer adequate. We then look to see how we can improve that situation. Some people said they did not feel supported or understood how they could best support those children.

We have a strong program now where we are working to ensure that everybody who says they would like to become involved in kinship or foster care is provided with the tools to be able to do that. Most importantly, we keep connected with them, so it is not a matter that we have now found you and you have this child, and everything is okay. We are keeping that connection going. Supporting these people to know they are not taking this journey on their own is probably the most critical thing we can do.

We are also in a battle across the nation, where the number of people willing to put their hands up to take on children in foster or kinship care is reducing, so we need to look at why that is happening as well and take on board the messages they are getting from other jurisdictions. The work being done by the Foster and Kinship Carers Association NT is invaluable to us in helping to understand that. We have re-engaged with them in a strong and positive manner, and they have been willing to work with us to grow that pool of carers. I am hoping that by this time next year we will find ourselves in a very different position.

**Mr PAECH:** Along the line of the Member for Mulka's questioning, you spoke about doing advocacy with housing. Does the department work with Housing to identify those on the waitlist who are experiencing DV or who can be identified as a kinship carer for priority to get into a house?

**Ms CAHILL:** When it comes to our attention we advocate very strongly in that space. One of the challenges, I am sure you will appreciate, is that people are often are reluctant to say they need help. When we have someone who has indicated they are willing and wanting to be involved in kinship care, if that is a situation, we would absolutely work and advocate with the department of Housing for them. Without question when we encounter a situation where domestic violence is involved we do everything in our power to ensure that person is relocated if necessary to a safer environment.

**Mr PAECH:** When determining the placement of a child, is there a different criterion for a foster care placement from a kinship care placement?

**Ms CAHILL:** I actually asked that question recently and the answer is no. The requirements are the same, as are the support frameworks that go in place.

**Mr PAECH:** What about the payment per child in a foster care arrangement versus a kinship care arrangement?

**Ms CAHILL:** Again, that is the same.

**Mr PAECH:** What is that?

**Ms CAHILL:** It varies depending on the age and complexity of the child. For a child aged zero to five at the lowest level of complexity there is a payment of \$265.65 a week. That then escalates to the highest level in a remote setting, which is \$774.36 per week. For children aged six to nine, the lowest level is \$284.29 per week which escalates to \$828.71 for the highest level in the remote setting. For children aged 10 to 13 level 1 is \$334.75, which escalates to \$975.80 at the highest level. For 14 to 17-year-olds, the level 1 is \$414.46 per week, escalating to \$1,208.16 at the highest level in a remote setting.

**J DAVIS:** I want to confirm that you said it is the same rate of payment to foster carers and kinship carers.

**Ms CAHILL:** That is correct.

**Mr PAECH:** How many child notifications were made in the past 12 months? Of those notifications, how many of those resulted in investigations and substantiated findings?

**Ms CAHILL:** As at 31 March 2025, there were a total of 9,557 notifications, of which 4,524 proceeded to a new child protection investigation, with another 3,948 notifications having been assessed as being part of an existing open case. As of 31 March 2025, 6,639 investigations have been completed. As of that same date, 1,086 of the investigations found that a child had suffered harm or neglect.

**Mr PAECH:** Could you also confirm the average time between notification and response?

**Ms CAHILL:** If it is all right with you, we will take it on notice because there is quite a variation. For example, there might be a police investigation that delays the completion of the child protection investigation.

**Mr PAECH:** I am happy to ask it on notice. I might add a section, and you can say whether you accept part 2.

---

#### Question on Notice No 8.4

**Mr DEPUTY CHAIR:** Member for Gwoja, please restate the question for the record.

**Mr PAECH:** What is the average time between notification and response, and what is the average time a child spends in out-of-home care?

**Mr DEPUTY CHAIR:** Minister, do you accept the question?

**Ms CAHILL:** Yes.

**Mr DEPUTY CHAIR:** The question has been allocated the number 8.4.

---

**Mr PAECH:** How many of the child protection notifications are you aware of that are related to DV, and how many referrals were made to DV specialist services?

**Ms CAHILL:** As of 31 March, children exposed to domestic and family violence comprised 7,429 of the notifications, which was an increase of 39% from 2023–24.

**Mr PAECH:** How many referrals were made to DV specialist services?

**Ms CAHILL:** We would not have that data.

**Mr PAECH:** Does the department have that data at all, or it does not collect that data?

**Ms CAHILL:** It is not data that is usually collected.

**Mr PAECH:** Can you confirm, over the last reporting period, how many reunifications of children there have been?

**Ms CAHILL:** This is probably the best breakdown I can give you. As of 31 March 2025, 142 children exited out of home care, either by reunification to family or transitioning to independence at 18 years of age.

**Mr PAECH:** You spoke in your opening statement about safe houses. This budget allocates \$500,000 for remote safe houses. Can you explain what that funding will cover across the Territory's remote safe houses, and could you walk us through how much of the budget is currently invested in safe house and crisis accommodation for victim-survivors of domestic and family violence?

**Ms CAHILL:** The \$500,000 that was referred to specifically in the opening statement related to the \$36m generally. We put that additional money into that program. The safe house program has a much bigger budget than that; that comes from other sources. The total allocation which comes out of the NTRAI—the Commonwealth-supported programs—is remote families support at \$5.3m, women's safe houses at \$12.7m and children and family centres at \$4.6m, giving a total of \$22.7m.

**Mr PAECH:** With the safe houses, I understand that there is an agreement between the Northern Territory Government and a number of those Aboriginal community-controlled organisations to hand over the safe houses to community control. Will those houses be upgraded and refurbished before they are handed over?

**Ms CAHILL:** That would be something that I would have to refer to the minister for Housing for the infrastructure works. There is a small amount of money that is provided under the NTRAI that may be able to assist with that, an amount of \$3m for capital funding, which could accommodate that along with a discussion with the minister for Housing to see how that might pan out.

**Mr PAECH:** Is that \$3m per annum or \$3m over the seven-year agreement?

**Ms CAHILL:** That \$3m is for 2025–26.

**K McNAMARA:** Has any funding been cut to infrastructure upgrades to existing DV women's shelters?

**Ms CAHILL:** I am pretty confident I know where this question is coming from.

There was an allocation made to Dawn House for capital works. Unfortunately, back in 2021–22 that money was never paid across. I have had a meeting with Dawn House as to how we can look to work with them to actually obtain the funding that they need for the upgrade of their facilities. In the current 2025–26 budget it has not been revoted through because it was not actually money that was cash allocated. I have had the opportunity to have a very good discussion with the CE of Dawn House. She is very happy to be working alongside us to look at how we can make that happen. We are absolutely committed to helping them improve their infrastructure, and we will do everything we can to work alongside her to make that happen.

**K McNAMARA:** The money that was promised in 2021—they have been doing an enormous amount of planning, impacting all of their strategic planning, around what that infrastructure is going to be and it is really desperately needed—has that money just been moved somewhere else now?

**Ms CAHILL:** My understanding is the money was a program announced but not funded. That was the challenge. The CE of Dawn House and I have been trying to unravel that, because she was not involved at the time either, and she is similarly having some challenges in trying to identify where it was supposed to have come from.

**K McNAMARA:** What is the plan from here? This is the oldest refuge that we have and the infrastructure is desperately needed. They are turning away hundreds of women a month. What is the plan from here to do those upgrades?

**Ms CAHILL:** From my point of view it is to continue to work with Dawn House to identify where we might be able to access funding to assist them with that project.

**J DAVIS:** Following up on infrastructure, I think there was also money allocated to Katherine Women's Crisis Centre, \$3m, and DAIWS, \$1.5m. Can you say what has happened to that money?

**Ms CAHILL:** Unfortunately, the infrastructure program is not something that I am totally familiar with, so it really is a question that should have been addressed to the relevant minister. I can tell you that where I am identifying challenges in this space, I am committed to working with those services to look at how we can assist them in improving their infrastructure.

**J DAVIS:** Are you aware, with either of those services, what has happened with the infrastructure plans?

**Ms CAHILL:** As I said, you would need to have addressed that question to the Infrastructure minister.

**J DAVIS:** I am interested in your role as the minister in relation to those two services.

**Ms CAHILL:** As the Minister for Children and Families; Child Protection; and Prevention of Domestic Violence, I do not have a role in the infrastructure space, except to get as creative as I can when I can.

**K McNAMARA:** I understand that as of March they were still expecting this money to come through and making plans for it. What has changed? At what point was it realised that this money was not there?

**Ms CAHILL:** I am sorry; again, that question goes to the portfolio of Infrastructure. They are the ones who manage that. I have spoken to the CE of Dawn House to try to identify where that conversation went, and between us we will continue to have the discussion to look at how we can make it happen, but at this point in time we have not unravelled that.

**K McNAMARA:** Budgets are all about government priorities, right? You have \$6.5m here for an issue that is probably the largest social issue that we face, and that we all feel passionately about. I can see \$6m for the Territory Coordinator, but I cannot understand—yes, if the money was not previously allocated, but why can the government not prioritise something as essential as the funding for the infrastructure of Dawn House?

**Ms CAHILL:** I believe the relevant minister went into a lot of detail about how those decisions were made, and the fact that if you have a program that exceeds any cash allocation, there will be a challenge. I do not think keeping something on the books year after year without—the question should be asked: why was it kept on the books year after year without funds being allocated to it? I cannot answer that question, because that predates my coming to government.

**K McNAMARA:** I heard you answer before that you are working with Dawn House to look at options available. Does that mean they are basically starting from scratch now?

**Ms CAHILL:** In my conversations with Dawn House they have a number of areas they are looking at, so I cannot answer on their behalf.

**J DAVIS:** Thank you for explaining how you are working with the CEO of Dawn House. Have you talked to the CEO of the Katherine Women's Crisis Centre?

**Ms CAHILL:** When I was in Katherine most recently, I was not able to get a time together. I am heading back down there in the next couple of weeks, and I will definitely be catching up with her then.

**J DAVIS:** I know it is not your portfolio, but do you know whether or not they know that \$3m they would have been expecting, as Dawn House was, is no longer in the budget?

**Ms CAHILL:** Without having that discussion with them, I could not say.

**Mr PAECH:** I want to ask about accommodation. I suspect, given the question I am asking, you might need to take it on notice. How many crisis accommodation beds are currently available for domestic, family and sexual violence survivors across the Northern Territory? How many people were turned away from domestic and family violence shelters in the past reporting period due to a lack of accommodation or bed space? I am happy to ask as of 31 March to enable a snapshot.

**Ms CAHILL:** It is not data that is reported through to us necessarily, but the Commonwealth captures bed nights data. The data we have that is available—there is a delay in getting that data—is to 31 December 2024 there were 14,665 bed night clients stayed in women's crisis centres. The full-year data for 2023–24 was 39,031 bed nights. There is clearly a lag time in capturing that data.

I have spoken to a number of the women's crisis shelters and they have all reported that they are turning women away. It is something that, if they are willing to actively collect and share that data, may help us in our arguments about increasing funding in this space. At a Commonwealth level we argue that the demand here is significantly greater than in other states and territories.

**Mr PAECH:** Can you confirm if the Northern Territory Government is still committed to establishing an Aboriginal childcare and family peak and a domestic and family violence peak?

**Ms CAHILL:** I will deal with the DV peak body first. We have an agreement in place with NTCOSS where they are funded to take on that role. I recently had some discussions with the person in that nominated role and have identified that perhaps we have not been as robust we might have otherwise have been to ensure that the requirements in that agreement are being progressed in a way that would assist to facilitate that discussion. I will be working with NTCOSS on that in the short term.

**Mr PAECH:** In relation to the DV peak, it was obviously a coronial inquest recommendation. Is there funding allocated to establish that? Is the Northern Territory Government providing NTCOSS with the money to establish the peak?

**Ms CAHILL:** Like a number of the recommendations made by the Coroner, that peak voice was already in place, and has been for some time. I do not think ...

**Mr PAECH:** There is no peak at the moment for DEVELOPMENT.

**Ms CAHILL:** There are multiple agencies which put themselves forward. There was an agreement entered into with NTCOSS to support those services, which is what a peak advocate and advisory body does. That is currently in play. We will continue to work with them to determine what that would look like. At this point in time, that is the extent of the intent in that space.

**Mr PAECH:** The coronial inquest said that there should be one peak for the DV sector. I understand that you are currently providing funding to NTCOSS to act as an interim peak.

**Ms CAHILL:** They have been funded since 2021 or 2022 to take that advocacy role. We need to allow them to demonstrate whether or not they are able to deliver on that. Then we will reassess it at the end. I appreciate that the Coroner is entitled to make as many recommendations as she chooses ...

**Mr PAECH:** Absolutely; sorry, minister. That funding was to NTCOSS to do the foundation work to establish a peak. Is the Northern Territory Government committed to establishing a standalone peak for domestic and family violence?

**Ms CAHILL:** I have read the agreement, and it is not quite how it reads in terms of how you have just articulated it. We need to allow them to deliver on the obligations under the agreement and then take it from there.

In relation to the peaks in the Children and Families space, the first priority is sector strengthening. A market strategy was commissioned in looking at industry strengthening plan with the Secretariat of the National Aboriginal Islander Child Care (SNAICC) to build Aboriginal community-controlled organisation capability and grow a culturally safe child and family services workforce.

I understand the program you are talking about is still under consideration. They have commenced the implementation of the Northern Territory Remote Aboriginal Investment Partnership Agreement and are focusing on place-based development, community control, local workforce growth and capital investment, joint site level investment and readiness assessments with the Department of the Chief Minister and Cabinet. They have commenced work on the strategic commissioning framework to align funding services and outcomes with place-based need, cultural security and long-term impact.

All this work was required first to lay the foundations to grow the sector and increase accountability to make sure the investments are long term, evidence based and fund what works. I understand the body you are talking about is being considered as part of the work that has been done.

**Mr PAECH:** Is there funding in this budget to work to enable the establishment of that child peak?

**Ms CAHILL:** Essentially SNAICC is federally funded, but the decision was made that this work must be done first. Once completed it will lay that foundation, and consideration will be given as to what funding partnerships might be required.

**Mr PAECH:** Can you confirm what the Northern Territory Government is funding either AMSANT or NTCOSS to have that policy officer, which you are referring to as the work of the peak?

**Ms CAHILL:** The funding is not just about needing another peak organisation advocating in this space; it is a broad range looking at governance and a whole approach in the sector. Policy development is the NTCOSS

side of things. In addition to that AMSANT has been funded \$440,000 over two years to do their component of the work, and NTCOSS is funded \$343,000 per annum over the five-year contract.

**Mr PAECH:** Talking about the funding provided to NTCOSS in relation to the DV work, I understand it funds a policy officer position for DV, but there is no additional funding for establishing or growing a peak.

**Ms CAHILL:** I am confident I have answered that.

**Mr PAECH:** If that is your response, that is absolutely okay.

**K McNAMARA:** From how it has been explained to me, NTCOSS kind of acts as a peak in the absence of a real one and that the sector, with the recommendations from the coronial—it is a big call for the sector to get a peak. We have a peak for recreational fishing—the point has been made to me—why can we not have a peak for DV? I am serious with that question. Is it a goal of the government to set up a peak for DV, like they are asking?

**Ms CAHILL:** Fishing aside, NTCOSS is the peak body for social service providers and DV is a group they represent. We have given them specific funding to focus on looking at that sector and at the policy framework. I do not have the agreement in front of me, which has quite a scope of work in it. I am currently reviewing that scope with the department, to ensure that work has been delivered, because much of what you would want to have achieved by a peak in this sector would be achieved by that work.

Where we have funding in place to do a particular task, before we move into another sector where there is already an existing relationship, it is important to make sure we have that right first, and then look at what needs to be done.

**K McNAMARA:** Does that agreement have an end date?

**Ms CAHILL:** It was a five-year agreement.

**K McNAMARA:** What happens at the end of that if the sector says, 'Thank you for this trial for this agreement, but we actually need a peak?' Would you then be open to funding a peak?

**Ms CAHILL:** I spoke earlier about the fact that we are looking at the last three years of the strategic framework for domestic, family and sexual violence. We are building a road map and making sure that what we are doing is being done in the right places and getting the right results. That will help form where we take it going forward. I will not pre-empt that work, because there is a lot to be done.

---

### **Answer to Question on Notice No 8.3**

**Ms CAHILL:** The recruitment to the Circuit Breaker positions has attracted talented staff with a diverse range of skills, knowledge and experience. Circuit Breaker staff have demonstrable skills and experience working with vulnerable young people with highly complex behaviours and understanding of child and adolescent development, trauma-informed practice, alcohol and drug use, poverty, cultural identity, mental health and disability. Staff may also have qualifications in social work; psychology; child, youth and family intervention; or safe communities in the area of child protection.

Circuit Breaker currently has 34 staff who identify as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander. These staff are recognised for their expert knowledge, lived experience in community and solid networks with families and communities.

All staff appointed to Circuit Breaker roles receive additional training, which includes child protection induction, family responsibility agreements, trauma-informed practice, Maybo training and domestic and family violence-informed practice.

The department continuously reviews the education and training suite delivered to these staff.

---

**Mr DEPUTY CHAIR:** I remind all members that under Standing Order 109, questions should not ask ministers for an expression of opinion; to announce government policy, but may seek an explanation regarding the policy of the government and its application; or for a legal opinion. Please bear that in mind.

**J DAVIS:** You said it was a five-year funding agreement with NTCOSS. Is that the same grant agreement period for AMSANT?

**Ms CAHILL:** There are two years remaining on that agreement.

**J DAVIS:** We heard yesterday from the Attorney-General that your department coordinated a whole-of-government response to the coronial recommendations, and this was provided to the Attorney-General in mid-May. Are you able to share those responses? It was suggested we ask you that.

**Ms CAHILL:** As you would be aware, the report is yet to be tabled in parliament, so I cannot pre-empt that, but I can tell you there was extensive consultation across all departments. There was some external consultation, and the work undertaken was incredibly comprehensive.

**J DAVIS:** I understand that you cannot pre-empt the report, which is a report of the Attorney-General. My question was whether you could share the DCF response to the recommendations.

**Ms CAHILL:** The report provided to form the Attorney-General's report response was a Cabinet document, so I cannot discuss the details of that. The fulsomeness of the report—you will see the level of work that was undertaken.

**J DAVIS:** I look forward to it.

Recommendation 34 recommended that the government increase the baseline funding for frontline services by 10%. Is this part of the money that has been allocated in this budget?

**Ms CAHILL:** Yes. We take very seriously making sure our frontline services have the resources they require. That was the \$5.2m per annum that I spoke about in the opening statement.

**J DAVIS:** Is that additional?

**Ms CAHILL:** That is specifically funding for frontline services, noting that all services previous to that were on time-limited funding.

**J DAVIS:** I think that has been warmly welcomed by everyone in the sector. It makes a big difference.

Moving away from the coronial recommendations, I will ask about the death review. Under action plan 2, \$300,000 over two years was committed to establishing a systemic domestic and family violence death review process for the NT, as there is in other places, to ensure that we learn from these deaths and address what has happened to make sure it does not happen again. Can you advise whether this will be going ahead?

**Ms CAHILL:** Yes, I can confirm the work is going ahead. There is a dedicated position to do that work, and the work is being undertaken.

**J DAVIS:** Is that budget, the \$300,000 over two years, committed to that ongoing work?

**Ms CAHILL:** The advice is that work is undertaken in the allocation to the department, so it is not time-limited. If the work needs to continue, the department has the resources to continue that.

**J DAVIS:** Do you mean within existing money?

**Ms CAHILL:** We have a whole-of-government DFSV policy and governance commitment, which is \$2.5m for 2025–26, so it sits within that framework.

**J DAVIS:** Does the work towards the death review sit within that?

**Ms CAHILL:** Yes, it sits in that. The person who is tasked with doing that sits within that governance and coordination division.

**J DAVIS:** Can you give any indication on timeframes for that?

**Ms CAHILL:** It will depend on the model that is developed to deliver that.

**J DAVIS:** Do you have an expectation of when you might have a model to respond to?

**Ms CAHILL:** Not at this stage.

**Mr PAECH:** Has the recruitment been finalised for that position?

**Ms CAHILL:** Our initial recruitment was unsuccessful to identify someone with the specific skills, but the work is being done to ensure that is being progressed. We will continue to ensure that commitment is given to complete that work.

**Mr PAECH:** Has the position been readvertised yet?

**Ms CAHILL:** The settling down of everything after the machinery-of-government changes and making sure we had everything in place has delayed some recruitment. The advice I have received is that work is done to make sure we have that right. The recruitment has not commenced, but I have no doubt it will commence in the near future.

**Mr PAECH:** Has your department raised concerns with the Attorney-General that the child death review committee has not met since the change of government and there have been 10 child deaths that have not been reviewed?

**Ms CAHILL:** No, that matter has not been specifically raised with the Attorney-General.

**J DAVIS:** If I understand correctly, you advertised the position and it has not been filled. You will be in the process of readvertising it at the moment or the commitment is to that role. Is there any money committed to actually establishing a death review?

**Ms CAHILL:** As I indicated previously, we have a coordination and governance unit. That forms part of that \$2.5m, so there is money there to do it, yes.

**Mr PAECH:** I would like to understand what the financial contribution is to Circuit Breaker around domestic and family violence. What is that addressing as part of Circuit Breaker?

**Ms CAHILL:** I am delighted that you have asked that question.

**Mr PAECH:** Good; you look excited.

**Ms CAHILL:** Because I am excited.

One of the things that baffles me when we talk about the recommendations by the Coroner is the selective nature with which support is given to some of those recommendations. Many of the recommendations related to programs that were already in existence—24 to be exact. Some of them had been in existence for a long time and clearly were not getting the results we would hope for.

There were a couple of recommendations that were new. One of them was the recommendation that we needed to find a way to get to young people to break the cycle of violence before it became their normal response or pattern of behaviour and assist them so that they did not become either the next perpetrator or the next victim.

Sadly, I have seen a number of cases in the past few months where it is obvious that the approach in the past has created the next perpetrator and the next victim in our young people. Some of them stay with me way too long and some of them cause me distress on a regular basis, not the least of which was one young person who, in a decade, was placed in 37 placements. That is the system we were working with. Those people come to our attention at a point in life where often the damage is already done.

Circuit Breaker was the result of discussions with the department about what we could do to get to these kids sooner. If we are going to break the cycle of violence, how can we possibly do that? That is where Circuit Breaker was born. We were a little pressed for money, so we needed to look within to see what we had in place in resources and skill sets and talk to the staff on the ground working on the front line to get their ideas about how we could break this vicious cycle.

One of the things that was obvious, particularly in the youth team, was that they felt all they had become was a glorified taxi service for young people out on the streets at all hours of the night and day and not being able

to actively do something about what was happening. From that discussion with frontline workers Circuit Breaker was born.

We have a program that provides intensive support, targeting young people aged 10 to 17 and their families across the Territory. We have active teams in Alice Springs, Katherine, Tennant Creek and Darwin. Tennant Creek is the newest of the programs. We are hoping to also include a remote program in the Nhulunbuy area as well.

We engage with young people who are demonstrating antisocial behaviour and work with their families to increase the accountability and help them to understand. As a parent I can understand the temptation to go, 'Joe is running away and I cannot deal with it. It is not my problem; he will have to deal with it himself', but that is not okay. The Circuit Breaker staff are trained in domestic, family and sexual violence risk assessment and the RAMF—management framework—and they are progressing through Safe and Together training to ensure that they safely engage with these families when these young kids come to their attention.

Broadly, the program includes safe places accommodation where young people can stay if they do not have appropriate adult supervision. Then the families meet with the department to review the behaviour and try to figure out why that young person was out at two o'clock in the morning or nine o'clock at night—or whatever the time happens to be. They look at the other factors that are impacting them, including school attendance, unsafe home life and any medical and mental health concerns that might be present.

Then they work with local police, the Department of Education and Training, the Department of Health and other non-government organisations to increase the supervision, safety and wellbeing of these young people. That sends a clear message to them that there are people who care about them, who care about their families and want to make their lives better so that they do not continue on a path that sees them land before the justice system.

I have been out on the street with these teams in Alice Springs on two occasions now, and the rapport between the teams and these young people is just incredible to see—the trust that they have built, the relationship that they have built with the families. I have been with them when a call has come in from a family member saying that their child has taken off and they do not know where they are, and could they please keep an eye out for them and get them back home safely.

From 9 December 2024 to 31 March, we had 112 Circuit Breaker cases. Year to date we are actually up to 184. That is 184 kids and families that we can directly intervene in before those kids find themselves in trouble with the justice system and before those kids find themselves continually exposed to unhealthy environments. Of those 112, 68 family responsibility agreements were voluntarily entered into where families agreed that they wanted to work with the Circuit Breaker team to make their lives better for their children, and 25 young people were referred to safe places.

Where it fits in the space around domestic, family and sexual violence safety and breaking the cycle of violence is that, as of June 2025, 94 referrals—of the children who had been intercepted and have interacted with the Circuit Breaker team—have been made to providers, including domestic and family violence, health, education, intensive family support, youth engagement and employment support services. They have worked to identify flexible and innovative approaches to meet the needs of the children and their families, to ensure that the foundations that are being laid with these kids are positive and healthy.

It was asked earlier whether or not we work actively to assist in getting into better housing situations. That is part of what the Circuit Breaker team will do where they encounter families who are struggling in that space.

**Mr PAECH:** What elements of the Circuit Breaker are specific to domestic and family violence responses?

**Ms CAHILL:** I believe I am answering that.

**Mr PAECH:** The only reason I am asking is you have made a funding allocation and everything you have spoken about sounds like the Deputy Chief Minister should be paying for out of juvenile justice.

**Ms CAHILL:** The good news, Member for Gwojja, is these kids are not part of the justice system and that is the whole point. The point is that these kids are in trouble ...

**Mr PAECH:** This is DV money. All I am trying to ascertain is: are there particular aspects to this that are around dealing with the immediate responses to domestic and family violence?

**Ms CAHILL:** The Coroner recommended that we needed to find a way to break the cycle, that we needed to get to kids to show them that domestic violence was not the answer. We are fighting this war on two fronts. We are fighting the immediate crisis, and everybody likes to focus on the immediate crisis because we absolutely have to keep women and children and victims of domestic violence safe and get them out of that immediate crisis. However, if that is all that we focus on that is all we will ever have. The Coroner said fix the kids; Circuit Breaker is working on fixing the kids. That is the connection.

If you continue to expose children to domestic violence situations and you do not get them out of there and you do not work with the families and the community to show them that there are other options available, we will end up with young people who after a decade will only know a violent response. If you do not find a way to intercede in that child's life, get them to school, get them healthy and make sure their family environment is not one full of violence and alcohol-fuelled violence with disruption and overcrowding, you cannot fix the problem by simply focusing on the crisis, because that is all you will have.

Circuit Breaker, without question, is creating an environment—the only thing in the landscape at the moment where we can point to working with kids before they hit the youth justice system. These kids are not before the youth justice system. These kids are on the brink of being with the youth justice system because they are out on the street escaping a family situation that most often is fuelled by domestic violence.

**Mr PAECH:** What then is the data for young people who are witnessing domestic and family violence? What is the data for young people perpetrating DV? Where the young people are being referred to?

**Ms CAHILL:** To date, of the children we have interceded with, 94 children and their families have had referrals made that include work to deal with domestic and family violence, to deal with health and education, to provide them with intensive family support and youth engagement and to help the families navigate whatever is breaking down in their family relationship. We have children whose families now have an external group that they can reach out to in times of crisis before the crisis gets too big.

We can keep doing things the same way, and we will continue to get the same outcome.

**Mr PAECH:** No-one is saying that. I am just asking a question. I am trying to understand if there is a mandatory component of kids who come into contact with your department who have had a history. Are they automatically referred to Circuit Breaker?

**Ms CAHILL:** Automatically had a history of what?

**Mr PAECH:** Of being caught up on the streets, displaying behaviour that your agency would deem caution or areas to be concerned about.

**Ms CAHILL:** In the early stages of the program—we are rechecking that data to see that it is still consistent—about 30% of the kids have never been encountered by the department before, and that is a good thing because it means we are getting to kids before they get into trouble. A percentage of them are children who have been known to the department, primarily through the glorified taxi service.

**Mr PAECH:** How is this Circuit Breaker Program different from Right Track or the YORET program? There have been different machinations of the work you are talking about. It was previously Right Track and the YORET program. What is different about this program from those former programs, which have been under multiple different governments?

**Ms CAHILL:** The primary difference is that we have a group of people working in the Circuit Breaker Program who are actively engaged in an ongoing capacity with these kids. YORETs told me firsthand that they went out, picked up kids and took them home; that was it. The kids would be back on the street, so they would pick them up and take them home; that was it. That is not what happens any longer.

We now have a system where families and the department work together to see what is going wrong in that space. If you want to break the cycle of violence and make sure these kids and their families have the best possible chance of not ending up as a victim or in front of the justice system, you must bring everybody together and provide direct support before it gets to a crisis point.

They are working with the families on a regular basis. Some of the kids involved in the Circuit Breaker Program from December are still connected to the program. This is not 'pick them up, drop them off, walk away'. This is not 'pick them up, drop them off; it's not our problem, someone else can deal with it'. This is a team who are actively engaging with families and children who are at risk, and de-risking that situation.

**Mr PAECH:** If there is concern that the previous YORET workers were dropping children off and then those children were leaving home, should it not have been the department's role at the time—because you are supposed to be delivering the care and protection of that kid—to realise that it might not be safe and then make your own referral or notification?

**Ms CAHILL:** Kids running away from home and getting involved in that family situation—if there was an immediate crisis, they took kids to a safe place. There were two children in a six-month period where that happened. The reality is that this is a complete program. It is not just a report to child protection where it will occur when children are at significant risk. They will not take those children home if they are not considered safe. It is about giving them permission, and it was not part of their role to go to the families and work with them as a youth worker.

There are children who are at risk because they are wandering the streets at 2 am. That does not necessarily mean they are a case that meets the threshold for child protection. It means they could be a child in an environment that is on the cusp of being a damaged environment. That is the point; you want to get to that environment before it becomes so severe that there is a domestic violence incident. This is prevention.

If you want to use a parallel, you can either wait for the outbreak of measles to kill all the kids or you can vaccinate them. Some would argue that vaccinating them is a program that does not really do anything because they will not catch measles anyway, but you vaccinate them to prevent the crisis. We are working with these kids and families to show them there is a different way. I am sorry if the view is that we should not be trying things differently. I am sorry that ...

**Mr PAECH:** A point of order, Mr Deputy Chair! That needs to be corrected. Not one person on this committee has made that assumption or insinuated that we should not be trying things differently. We are simply asking questions to understand where the funding is and what stream of funding is being allocated where.

**Mr DEPUTY CHAIR:** We will take a break. The time is 8.34 pm. We will come back at 8.40 pm.

---

The committee suspended.

---

**Mr DEPUTY CHAIR:** I thank everyone so far during consideration of this portfolio. All questions have been asked and been answered respectfully. I thank everyone for that.

I remind people that we need to focus on the budget and financial matters as part of these questions. While we have had a little leeway on wide but important issues, I want to bring everyone back to the financial Estimates.

**K McNAMARA:** You were talking about the referrals from Circuit Breaker. I think you said 94 referrals were made to DV, health, education. Do you have a breakdown of those referrals? What were referred to DV orgs, which ones for health and which ones for education et cetera?

**Ms CAHILL:** Unfortunately, at the moment we do not have that breakdown. It is part of what we are looking at in terms of how we evaluate the program. Sadly, the ability to capture data is reasonably limited at the moment in the system. A lot of it is manual.

As we have progressed and developed the program, the things that I have ascertained we need to be capturing—it is like, 'Okay, can we capture this information'—how many of these kids are now going to school or have increased their school attendance? How many of them have got themselves into trouble, for example, and have progressed beyond—they were not in the justice system and now they are. What does that look like?

The ability to break down to that level of data will be part of the evaluation process. Some of the interactions between the team, the children and their families—it is hundreds of interactions.

**K McNAMARA:** To continue on from what we were talking about before the break, everything that has been described so far of Circuit Breaker to me, as a non-frontline expert, sounds fantastic and what we need to be doing. There is no argument from me.

The question that keeps coming up about Circuit Breaker is everything I am hearing in the sector is they are saying, 'Circuit Breaker is great, but it is not DV; it does not come from the sector; it is not informed by the sector. Why is it coming out of DV funding when it is actually not a DV-specific program?' That to me seems to be the line of questioning that I am hearing a lot.

**Ms CAHILL:** I believe I have answered this already, but I will reiterate.

The clear message is that if we cannot get to break the cycle of violence—you will not get that through traditional DV funding. Traditional DV funding is crisis related and focuses appropriately on helping victims, changing men's behaviour and so on. It is at a point in time where we are at the crisis point.

We have some other innovative programs coming that people equally might not think belong in a DV-funded space, which are changing behaviours of young people in education in schools, but it is important. The commitment to this program is it has to be able to demonstrate that it is having the desired results. That will take some time. It is a DV program because it is designed to stop the next generation of perpetrator and victim. It is about breaking the cycle and showing another way.

I am talking to the teams on the ground who are doing this. They are committed and see the benefit that it is having. They are seeing it with the families and the children. What is unheard of is that we have people who are asking to be part of that team. We have turned an environment that felt like an endless cycle of going nowhere into an environment where relationships and trust is built with the ability to work with families and stop the situation from escalating to a crisis.

I appreciate that it is different. I get that. It is not the usual approach, but it is critical.

**J DAVIS:** Thank you for that comprehensive outline of Circuit Breaker. I echo the Member for Gwoja; I do not think anyone here is saying it is a bad program at all. It is about the domestic and family violence logic within the program, about the expertise of people within the program to deal with, for example, young men who are being violent to young women, what kind of expertise they have, how the design of the program is being informed by that, how many DV services the program is referring to et cetera. We have spent a lot of time talking about it, though.

I heard you say earlier in relation to family responsibility agreements that you are looking forward to enabling firmer interventions. Can you say what that means?

**Ms CAHILL:** There are several stages to the Circuit Breaker Program, and we are in the first stage. The second stage is where we get into a space where perhaps some of the children we are interacting with take the next step down a path that is not the best path. We may need a firmer relationship in the family responsibility agreement space that gives us a bit more capacity to say this is where we are at and we need to drive this a bit harder. That is still in development, and what it might look like is something we are considering.

It also goes hand in hand with community service orders and mandatory diversionary programs which are currently not possible because there is no capacity to direct somebody to be involved in a diversion program. A diversion program could be working at the local cafe and learning a skill and getting a job. We cannot mandate that currently; it is all voluntary.

With families where we feel that they might need a stronger framework in place and we need to engage with them in a more direct way, that may be the way it develops, but that is a work in progress.

**J DAVIS:** Towards mandated diversion or other community service orders potentially.

**Ms CAHILL:** Potentially. The last thing we want is these kids to end up in the court system or detention. If we can find a way to distract them off that path—it could be engaging in a process where you participate in a training program that talks about what good relationships are and so on. We cannot require people to do that currently. We cannot get families involved in that or mandate it, but we are looking to see if we do have to reach that next step. We have not gotten to that point previously. Families are engaging really well. I think everybody wants a good outcome for their kids and families. We need to be able to put that consequence in place in the event we get to that stage.

**J DAVIS:** For families as well as young people?

**Ms CAHILL:** At the end of the day, the families are accountable for their children.

**J DAVIS:** We talked about this in parliament, but just to clarify, in terms of evaluation, there has been no evaluation yet. It is a very new program, but based on what has happened so far, you have made a decision as the minister to expand this program. I think you said there would be an evaluation available by the end of the year; is that correct?

**Ms CAHILL:** Planning is underway as to the scope of the evaluation, how it will assess how the program is being implemented, and the short-term outcomes versus the long-term outcomes. We want that to happen as an ongoing process, and a good 12 months of data will provide that for us.

**J DAVIS:** Is that an internally run evaluation?

**Ms CAHILL:** At this point in time, yes.

**J DAVIS:** On 22 January you announced an additional \$8.4m funding, which included a contribution from the Australian Government. I think 22 services were listed as part of that. That was six months ago. How many of those 22 services received that funding?

**Ms CAHILL:** They have all received that funding.

**J DAVIS:** That is great news, thank you.

**Mr PAECH:** I just wanted to get some information. There is a misconception in the community that children in the out-of-home care system are also all in the youth justice system. Do you have any data to tell us how many children in the out-of-home care system are in the youth justice system?

**Ms CAHILL:** It will probably not surprise you that it is not very many, which is the beauty of being able to get involved at an appropriate point in time. As of 31 March, there are 55 children out of 879 in care, who are in youth detention. As of 16 June that number has decreased to 33.

**Mr PAECH:** That is 33 of the 879?

**Ms CAHILL:** That is correct. Sorry; I read that wrong. It is even better than that.

**Mr PAECH:** Good, I like that.

**Ms CAHILL:** Children in care, out of 55 in detention, as of 31 March it is only nine. Out of 33 at June 2025, it has dropped down to eight.

**Mr PAECH:** Even better, thank you.

What is the government's plan in the budget to work with the sector to increase the domestic, family and sexual violence workforce?

**Ms CAHILL:** I am glad you asked that question too. As you know, attracting people into the child protection space has always been a challenge. After a lot of discussion with the department about why that is, what influences it and why it is so difficult, we have realised that we recruit to the pointy end all the time, particularly in the DV space, but we do not need pointy end-skilled people all the time. Therefore, we are looking to broaden our approach in recruiting to encompass a broader range of skills that will achieve earlier interventions and, hopefully, result in far less requirement for young people ending up in child protection. At the same time it will help us to address situations where those young people are exposed to domestic violence, because it will be a different skill set.

A body of work is about to start around what that will look like and how we can attract a greater breadth of skill sets into the space. I am hopeful that will see a greater uptake. The flip side of it is if you are not always focusing on the pointy end and you have a range of people who are working with these families and their kids, that angst is significantly reduced as well. We might get greater engagement, much earlier, which will help alleviate the potential crisis point.

**Mr PAECH:** Is there any work being done at a departmental level to help grow and attract staff in the domestic and family violence space as a whole sector?

**Ms CAHILL:** There is a new training and resource centre being established. It has dedicated funding and will look at how we bring people into the sector with the right breadth of skills. We are also working with Charles Darwin University on a new qualification in DV. The idea is that we can start to grow our own skilled workforce. We can bring people in at potentially a lower end to do some of the less pointy end work, then give them the opportunity to train and have a career path that sees them stay with this for a long period of time.

I am also advised that under the NTRAI there is a tripartite agreement to fund sector strengthening work. We will look to push that through the workforce development piece so that we can get the benefit in the portfolio as well.

**Mr PAECH:** What is the current child protection caseload per region and per child protection worker? Can you give us a breakdown by region—that is, Central, Barkly, Big Rivers, greater Darwin, and I have not forgotten the Palmerston region?

**Ms CAHILL:** It does fluctuate, but I can give you the average and I can break it down by region.

**Mr PAECH:** Yes, please.

**Ms CAHILL:** For the Arnhem region, carrying officers—the caseload officer—the average cases are 17; the team leaders have an average oversight of 24; managers, 32; and directors, 17. In the Barkly region, the carrying officers have an average of 17 cases; team leaders, five; managers, seven; and directors, six. In Big Rivers, the carrying officers have an average of 15; team leaders, 10; managers, two; and directors, one. In Central Australia, carrying officers have an average of 14; team leaders, 16; managers, six; and directors, 12. In greater Darwin, carrying officers have an average of 24; team leaders, six; managers, six; and directors, 25. In the Top End, carrying officers, 15; team leaders, 15; and managers, 16. There are no directors in that role. It is important to identify that the team leaders, managers and directors also pick up as help and work in that space as well.

**Mr PAECH:** How many established child protection positions are there in each location, and what is the current vacancy?

**Ms CAHILL:** Would you like a breakdown by region as well as overall or just overall?

**Mr PAECH:** By region would be wonderful, please.

**Ms CAHILL:** Did you want by level?

**Mr PAECH:** No.

**Ms CAHILL:** Overall, on average there is about a 40% vacancy rate. Overall, there is a vacancy rate of 136 positions out of 334. In the Arnhem region there are 11 vacancies with 14 positions filled. In Barkly there are six vacancies with 12 positions filled. In Big Rivers there are 24 vacancies with 31 positions filled. In Central Australia there are 36 vacancies with 52 positions filled. In greater Darwin there are 38 vacancies with 63 positions filled. In the Top End there are 20 vacancies with 26 positions filled.

That is one of the reasons we are looking at whether we can approach this space differently and provide a broader range of skill sets so that we can encourage more people into the sector and give them a career pathway with us.

**Mr PAECH:** How many unallocated cases are there per region?

**Ms CAHILL:** The previous numbers given were the average or the median number of cases that fell per region per position in the team. As of 31 March, the unassigned cases for the Arnhem region were 42; in Barkly, 41; in Big Rivers, 97; in Central Australia, 209; in greater Darwin, 514; and in Top End, 75. There is a small group that we cannot identify which region they belong to. There are 66 in that group.

**Mr PAECH:** How many mandatory reports were made this reporting period?

**Ms CAHILL:** As of 31 March, there were 17,955 child protection notifications.

**Mr PAECH:** How many of those were substantiated?

**Ms CAHILL:** Of that number of notifications, 1,086 investigations found the child had suffered harm or neglect.

**J DAVIS:** In regard to the dissolution of the domestic, family and sexual violence advisory forum what consultation with services was undertaken prior to dissolving it?

**Ms CAHILL:** To clarify, the advisory forum was not a forum that I had any direct input or reporting capacity for. It was a forum that was transformed from the original working group. It was mainly made up of bureaucrats and a number of peak bodies. It reported through to the CE of the Department of the Chief Minister and Cabinet through the coordination committee where all the CEs meet. The report available to the minister was the report available to the public, which was essentially a one-page document that talked about a half-day meeting and a half-day workshop.

For me, that would not tell me what I needed to know or give me the resource access to the people that I need to consult with. I have actively gone out and met with many groups. I would like to tell you who they are, if that is all right.

**J DAVIS:** I think you also shared that in parliament as well. In the interests of time, I would be happy to ...

**Ms CAHILL:** There were 62 organisations which were made up of a range of individuals. I am currently working with the Aboriginal Advisory Board on Domestic, Family and Sexual Violence. I am seeking their input as to, if we are going to work with communities in particular, what is the best approach. These are the people who are on the ground in those communities identifying and working with them.

Of the 62 organisations I have met with—some are individuals, some are local groups and some are national groups—we will contact all of them to see their willingness to be part of a broader consultation forum so that we can then draw on them as we need to, because they all have different levels of expertise. I have not quite decided yet what the form of that will be. We will take that as part of the road map development. I need a group that I can call on, appoint to and have do more than meet four times a year for half a day. That is the critical element for me.

**J DAVIS:** As you probably know, I am a great fan of consultation, and grassroots consultation. My understanding of that forum was not to advise you, but to develop policy. It had representatives of frontline services and NGOs on it as well. That is quite a different role from what you are describing as a broad consultation group that can advise you directly.

**Ms CAHILL:** To be honest, I am not sure that they were formed to develop policy. They were originally established as the Domestic, Family and Sexual Violence Cross Agency Working Group. They were set up to develop the framework and the action plans that came under that. They did not do the work; that was driven by the department and done by a range of people—government agencies, non-government agencies, sector peaks et cetera. They provided advice on the implementation of policy; that is true.

As the Minister for Prevention of Domestic Violence, I need a group, and that forum—the government department people still meet, they can still draw on the sector for information and advice. There is nothing to prevent that from happening. For me, in terms of a body that is an advisory group that can help drive the change we need and can consult far more broadly and draw together that grassroots element, I need a group that can do that. That group did not work from that point of view.

**J DAVIS:** You have touched on this, but I am interested in what kind of mechanism you will use to determine who will be part of that group and how it will work together. What will be the mechanism for sharing what the department is doing—how the road map is being implemented and evaluated—with the public, if that forum is not there? I am not sure if that was the role of the forum, but if there is nothing formal as a way of sharing that information more broadly with the sector and the public, what will be in place?

**Ms CAHILL:** The road map is being developed, and I believe we will answer those questions. It is something that is happening in the future and not specifically directed to the budget development and the outputs currently. It is being progressed, and everyone who wishes to have an opportunity to input will have that opportunity.

**J DAVIS:** You said it was being progressed, the mechanism for that, do you mean in terms of the sharing of information more broadly and with the sector?

**Ms CAHILL:** The road map will develop the processes as to how we will progress the work in this space.

**Ms UIBO:** My question is around the Aboriginal advisory group. I met with some people in the sector who were concerned. They were appreciative and understanding of the importance of the group you are focusing on, but concerned that it would automatically knock out any of the input they could have for non-Aboriginal people in this space? Is this something you are considering or is it still the work of the road map?

**Ms CAHILL:** It is part of the road map process, but also what will that alternative group—as I said, 62 different organisations and services, and that is not counting the individuals I have spoken to, have had the opportunity to discuss how they see the world moving forward. How we harness that will be incorporated into the road map.

**K McNAMARA:** What are you and the department doing to support a proposed joint project to build interim accommodation for people experiencing homelessness? It is a joint project with Vinnies (St Vincent de Paul) and Larrakia Nation on a culturally appropriate accommodation facility, I believe, between Leanyer water park and Shoal Bay.

**Ms CAHILL:** Our role was to support the funding for their move from their previous premises in Stuart Park to their current facility. The work being done with Vinnies and the other groups you mentioned is being driven by the Department of Logistics and Infrastructure and the Department of Lands, Planning and Environment.

**K McNAMARA:** Do you, with homelessness services, not have anything to do with that project?

**Ms CAHILL:** It is a fine line between service delivery and infrastructure requirements. Currently our relationship with Vinnies, through Ozanam House, is restricted to the current situation.

**K McNAMARA:** Coming over for homelessness services, would you do some work—because it seems as though we do not have anything like this, and homelessness is a massive issue—in terms of advocating for this project? Are there any other supports? It is not an existing project yet, but it would fill a glaring gap that we need, so is there any work you would do around advocacy?

**Ms CAHILL:** Aside from the fact we have talked to St Vincent de Paul about the importance of the project, and they are very happy with the way things are progressing, that has been the extent of the interaction.

**Mr PAECH:** Could you confirm if there will be a review or evaluation into the No More campaign which receives NTG funding?

**Ms CAHILL:** I have been advised that there is no formal evaluation process aside from that which would have been articulated in their agreement. As anyone would know, if you are engaged in a grant agreement with government there is usually a number of reporting requirements and KPIs that have to be met. It is a five-year agreement, so the normal course of reporting and evaluation is the process that is followed.

**Mr PAECH:** Have you and will you be visiting remote safe houses?

**Ms CAHILL:** Yes I have, and I will continue to do so. I had the pleasure of visiting services at Wurrumiyanga and recently, Galiwinku. This is not as remote, but I also engaged with the Banatjarl strong women group in Katherine. I have a long list of invitations which I am trying to negotiate. As you know, travelling to remote areas can be challenging, but the interactions with the safe houses has been incredibly rewarding and positive, and the work that they do is amazing.

**Mr PAECH:** You would be across this, as the Alice Springs members and I are, is there an outcome or way forward for the Salvation Army accommodation proposal in Alice Springs?

**Ms CAHILL:** I have visited the site and had some lengthy discussions with the team who are looking to progress that. My understanding is that they are still in negotiations regarding rezoning, and I am keeping in touch with them.

**J DAVIS:** Can you advise how many children in care had a care plan during the reporting period?

**Ms CAHILL:** I wish the answer was yes, because we have a very expensive system that the information is going to be recorded in, but at this stage it is not there, so we do not have the availability of that information.

**J DAVIS:** You do not know how many children have care plan.

**Ms CAHILL:** That is correct.

**J DAVIS:** We cannot take it on notice because the data is not there; is that correct?

**Ms CAHILL:** You have touched on something that I am struggling with as well. Unfortunately, the system within which that information is recorded does not currently have the capacity to run reports. We are working hard to rectify that. Although the information is captured, it would be a manual long process and quite challenging. I have similarly asked questions in the past about different things. We must fix the problem that is not allowing the reports to be generated.

**J DAVIS:** Is that for the whole of the department?

**Ms BROADFOOT:** At the moment the care system runs some reports at very high levels. Our ability to go in and run care reports against children is not possible. To try to assist, that does not mean that nobody has any oversight at all, just to clarify that. At the officer level, the team leader level and the manager level they can go into children they know are on the case load and can see where they are at in relation to care plans, but there is no ability to run any report against it from a management reporting level that we would, for example, bring to Estimates.

**J DAVIS:** How do you know that every child has a care plan?

**Ms BROADFOOT:** At the officer level they are doing the work, and they know which children have care plans, which children require a review and which children need to be followed up. Our ability to run that at an agency level is not there yet, but we are working towards it with the Department of Corporate and Digital Development.

**J DAVIS:** Sure, I understand that. At the moment, the way that you know it is happening is that the people on the ground say that it is; is that correct?

**Ms BROADFOOT:** Yes. There is a management structure with team leaders and managers who oversee the day-to-day activity. They have visibility on a child-by-child basis, but my ability to provide the minister, much to her obvious frustration ...

**J DAVIS:** I can understand why.

**Ms BROADFOOT:** ... is at an agency level. To then break it down, for example, by region—which we were asked about before—is just not possible at this point.

**J DAVIS:** In terms of making decisions about the direction of the portfolio, about things that are happening in this space, what data can you get to rely on in doing that?

**Ms CAHILL:** That is an excellent question, Member for Johnston.

**J DAVIS:** Thank you, minister.

**Ms CAHILL:** To have a system where all the information is deposited and then to not be able to generate that larger reporting capacity is very frustrating, but we have a system in parallel. The reports that are done at a team meeting level to the information that is carried up through each region as to what is happening in the region is labour intensive, and I have to be quite specific about what we are looking at. The department to some degree are relying on old methods of being able to do that, but the obvious answer is we have to fix the system and we need to fix it asap.

**J DAVIS:** What is happening towards that?

**Ms CAHILL:** We are working with DCDD to make that happen.

**Mr PAECH:** They are on tomorrow.

**Ms CAHILL:** Ask them the question on my behalf.

**J DAVIS:** I had a series of questions in relation to this which you will not be able to answer. Broadly, what accountability measures are there to make sure that there are care plans, beyond what you described? That may be all that there is; I do not know.

**Ms CAHILL:** You can be reassured that team leaders, directors and managers of each of these areas are diligent in making sure that the children who are in the care of the department have all the prerequisite processes supporting them, and they are able to do that in a regional manner. They know who the children are that they are responsible for and they can individually go into the programs and see exactly what is happening, so they have that coverage. It is just the broader capacity for an overarching view to be able to identify what is happening across the board that makes it a little challenging. I am hopeful that it will be resolved relatively quickly.

**J DAVIS:** Remind me how many children we are talking about who are currently in care.

**Ms CAHILL:** There are 876.

**J DAVIS:** In the annual report of the Children's Commissioner concerns were raised about limited and delayed provision of data from DCF and the impact that it has on the commission's ability to undertake oversight. I wondered whether they had made any formal recommendations to the department that you are able to act on or whether you are aware of it and are taking it into account.

**Ms CAHILL:** There have not been formal recommendations made, and I think the Children's Commissioner is aware that we are working hard to rectify that.

**J DAVIS:** I did not quite get the figure—when you were going through the budget in answer to the Member for Mulka—of how much of the budget was on purchased home-based care. Can you repeat that figure?

**Ms CAHILL:** Just while we are digging that out again, I have a response to question on notice 8.4.

---

#### **Answer to Question on Notice No 8.4**

**Ms CAHILL:** Of the notifications received in 2024–25 to 31 March 2025, the average time between notification date and commencement of an investigation is four days, and notification date and completion of an investigation is 90 days.

Of the current 876 children in care, as at 31 March 2025, the average time spent in care is six years and seven months.

---

**Ms CAHILL:** The total amount to 31 March 2025 was \$30.803m for purchased home-based care.

**J DAVIS:** Is that all going to private providers?

**Ms CAHILL:** Yes, that is correct.

**J DAVIS:** What is the process for oversight of their work from your department?

**Ms CAHILL:** For home-based care, there are agreement contracts in place which have obligations in place. The terms of conditions articulate the expectations in the delivery of that care.

**Mr PAECH:** Is cross-cultural training mandatory for all child protection workers? Is there an agreement in place for all out-of-home care providers to have cultural awareness training?

**Ms CAHILL:** All staff undertake cultural awareness training and, in some instances, will do additional training particular to the communities they may be working with. For the NGO sector, which is under agreement, there is a clause in the agreements that requires them to undertake training, and they would engage with an appropriate provider in that space.

**Mr PAECH:** What culturally safe, trauma-informed early intervention programs, other than the Circuit Breaker Program, are funded for at-risk families and young people?

**Ms CAHILL:** We have the providers in the family support services space and, similar to the arrangements for any NGO contractors, if they are dealing with Aboriginal children, families and communities they have to have that appropriate cultural focus. We also have 13 Aboriginal-controlled organisations which work in collaboration with established non-government organisations to deliver vital family support services across

39 communities in the Territory. Our Aboriginal carer services also provide support to our kin carers, and we fund seven ACCOs to do this culturally informed practice.

**Mr PAECH:** Is that with the kinship carers?

**Ms CAHILL:** Yes. The kinship carers are provided support by our Aboriginal carer services. On top of that, we have seven ACCOs which do the culturally informed practice.

**Mr PAECH:** Is that training for the out-of-home carers and kinship carers about making sure they are helping the young Indigenous person maintain their cultural connection and identity?

**Ms CAHILL:** Yes.

**Mr DEPUTY CHAIR:** That concludes the consideration of outputs relating to the Department of Children and Families.

On behalf of the committee, I thank the minister for appearing before the committee today and the officers who provided assistance to the minister. I think I speak on behalf of the whole committee when I say that you and your agency, minister, the Department of Children and Families and your portfolios of Children and Families, Child Protection and Prevention of Domestic Violence are important to the Territory.

Is there anything you would like to say in closing?

**Ms CAHILL:** I reiterate my thanks to the team, especially those with us today and those who have been working feverishly in the background for a number of weeks now to ensure that we can inform Territorians as to the work that is being done in this space. As you have noted, it is critical and vital. This is the future, particularly of many of our children, that rests in our hands. We take that very seriously. Protecting our community and keeping our families and children safe is very important to all of us. I thank the team again.

**Mr DEPUTY CHAIR:** I thank all the committee members and the Legislative Assembly staff.

That concludes the Estimates hearings for today. Hearings will recommence at 9 am tomorrow, Wednesday 18 June 2025, with questions of the Minister for Lands, Planning and Environment.

---

The committee concluded.

---