

REPORT ON PROCEEDINGS BEFORE

**JOINT SELECT COMMITTEE ON THE GREATER SYDNEY
PARKLANDS TRUST**

REVIEW OF THE *GREATER SYDNEY PARKLANDS TRUST ACT 2022*

At Macquarie Room, Parliament House, Sydney on Friday 14 March 2025

The Committee met at 10:15.

PRESENT

The Hon. Peter Primrose (Chair)

Legislative Council

Ms Cate Faehrmann

Legislative Assembly

Ms Donna Davis

Mr Alex Greenwich (Deputy Chair)

Mr Mark Hodges

PRESENT VIA VIDEOCONFERENCE

Legislative Council

The Hon. Cameron Murphy

Legislative Assembly

Mrs Sally Quinnell

Dr David Saliba

The CHAIR: Before we start, I'd like to acknowledge the Gadigal people, who are the traditional custodians of the lands we're meeting on here at Parliament. I also pay my respects to Elders past and present of the Eora nation, and extend that respect to other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who are present here or watching proceedings online. Welcome to the second hearing of the Joint Select Committee on the Greater Sydney Parklands Trust review of the Greater Sydney Parklands Trust Act.

I'm Peter Primrose, Committee Chair. I'm joined by my colleagues, Mr Alex Greenwich, member for Sydney and Deputy Chair; Ms Donna Davis, member for Parramatta; and Mr Mark Hodges, member for Castle Hill. Dr David Saliba, member for Fairfield, and Mrs Sally Quinell, member for Camden, are joining us via videoconference. We thank the witnesses who are appearing before us today and the stakeholders who have made written submissions. We appreciate your input into this inquiry.

Mr GLENN MATTHEWS, Chief Executive Officer, Australian Racing Drivers' Club, affirmed and examined

The CHAIR: I welcome our first witness. Thank you for appearing before the Committee today to give evidence. Please note the Committee staff will be taking photos and videos during the hearing. The photos and videos may be used for social media and public engagement purposes on the Legislative Assembly's social media pages and websites. Please inform the Committee staff if you object to having photos and videos taken. Before we start, do you have any questions about the hearing process today?

GLENN MATTHEWS: No, I don't.

The CHAIR: Would you like to make a short opening statement before we begin with questions?

GLENN MATTHEWS: Yes, I would. Good morning, ladies and gentlemen. I'm Glenn Matthews, the CEO of the Australian Racing Drivers' Club or the ARDC, in short. On behalf of my board, thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today and to further elaborate on the rationales behind our two recommendations: transformational tenure extensions and not-for-profit tenant preference. The story of the ARDC's tenure and custodianship of Sydney Motorsport Park since 1996, so almost 30 years, is an illustration of what "good" looks like. It is good because we have demonstrated that we are an exemplary tenant with strong governance credentials and that, together with government, we've achieved some amazing outcomes—outcomes which are aligned with the principles of the Western Sydney Parklands plan of management and which have elevated the motorsport precinct within the Western Sydney Parklands into a recognised world-class precinct. Some examples include we were the first permanent circuit in Australia to achieve an FIA—they're the world governing body—grade 2 licence, meaning that we can hold all levels of racing up to, but not including, Formula One.

These are the highest safety standards and has enabled us to host many international events. Last year we attracted 361,401 visitors, hosting over 1,000 events with an occupancy of over 90 per cent. We are one of the busiest tracks in the world. Since 2012 we have delivered \$55.4 million in capital improvements, improvements of social infrastructure of which the ARDC has financed \$24.2 million or 44 per cent itself. Recent projects include the installation of permanent lights, and that's been a game changer. It's increased our capacity by 30 per cent and it's had a positive effect in growing the night economy. The second project has been the establishment of the Australian Motorsport Innovation Precinct, a current and future driver for race and team development, precision engineering, mobility studies, education and skills development, sustainability within motorsport and allied business development.

Sydney Motorsport Park is ranked in the top 30 worldwide under the global Sustainable Motorsports Index and has been the number one in Australia since 2021. Last year we achieved an FIA two-star environmental accreditation, one of only 19 circuits globally. Two important enablers for those achievements have been, firstly, our long-term lease tenure and, secondly, our corporate structure. Let me explain. Regarding our tenure, our current lease expires in 2041, so our past investments have had sufficient time to achieve the required returns to satisfy the business case. Regarding our corporate structure as a not-for-profit public entity limited by guarantee, profits have been reinvested into our purpose. So they have been reinvested into motorsport, especially grassroots motorsport, as well as significant capital improvements into the government-owned venue as opposed to distributions of profits to shareholders if our structure was public shareholder-based or a private corporation.

The challenge from this point is that, with only 16 years remaining on the current lease, there is not enough time to satisfy the financial return requirements for major projects for either the ARDC or third-party investment. This impediment can be immediately rectified with a lease extension, which, I should highlight, was possible with ministerial consent in previous years within the Western Sydney Parklands Trust. Our preference is to allow for those leases and assets formerly dealt with by the Western Sydney Parklands Trust to revert to the decision-making framework that existed under that entity. This would allow the Trust greater authority and discretion in granting

lease extensions where transformational investment opportunities exist. It is noteworthy that our original lease was extended by 10 years because we promised and then delivered \$5.7 million in capital improvements and then facilitated an owner-builder of the adjacent Alpha Hotel. Under the current GSPT Act, however, that is now not possible without going to public tender.

This is the rationale behind our recommendation for the transformational tenure extensions. Our submission mentions two major project opportunities, one in particular of state significance. I would be pleased to provide the committee further commercially sensitive details in closed session surrounding the Eastern Creek big battery proposal, which has demonstrable benefit for the local community, for the Government's energy transition objectives and for improving both the financial and environmental sustainability of the parklands.

As explained a moment ago, our corporate structure has enabled a higher investment into a government asset as opposed to a shareholder-based organisation. As such, this is the rationale behind our second recommendation—the not-for-profit tenant preference submission. Ladies and gentlemen, in closing, we make this submission based not on a promise, not on some theory, but a track record that illustrates what "good" looks like and has delivered benefits to New South Wales and particular the Greater Sydney Parklands, in alignment with the respective plan of management of the Western Sydney Parklands. Thank you again for this opportunity to be here. I'm very happy to answer questions and have further discussion.

The CHAIR: Thank you. That's very interesting.

Mr ALEX GREENWICH: I might just follow on from your opening remarks. In relation to your negotiation of commercial leases with the Greater Sydney Parklands as a leaseholder, what is that experience like currently and how may it have changed before and after the Act? You did touch on it in some detail in your opening remarks, but I just wonder if you could talk a bit more about that negotiation experience and particularly what's changed as a result of the Act?

GLENN MATTHEWS: Mr Greenwich, the lease that we're in currently now was entered into originally in 1996, so that's a long time ago. That was prior to even the establishment of the Western Sydney Parklands, so in terms of negotiations we haven't really had to negotiate a lease or a lease extension. Before the GSPT Act came into play, we did speak about what were the rules around getting lease extensions and what would be the quantum, if you like, of capital investment that could facilitate that to occur. It was always something that would be, as we put in our submission now, something that would be transformational for the site.

Mr ALEX GREENWICH: In terms of your ongoing dialogue beyond the actual contract or lease negotiations with Greater Sydney Parklands, take us through your interactions with them as a leaseholder. Do you have much to do with them or do you just get on with your routine business?

GLENN MATTHEWS: We have a great relationship with the Trust. We have interactions with them quite regularly and on different levels within the organisation. A couple of examples of that: first of all, if we even go back to stakeholder engagement, when we talk about the master plan that was built for the motor sports precinct, we had a lot to do with that. We were involved in all the stakeholder meetings. Even subsequent to that, I would meet with the chair and the CEO of the Trust at least a couple of times a year, probably more than that. That's really just, for me, making the invisible visible. I'm interested to let the Trust know what we're achieving against our own strategic plan and against our own master plan. For example, when we got our two-star environmental accreditation—which is one of 19 circuits in the world and something we've worked really hard on and we're really proud of—that's something that I would immediately communicate to the Trust.

Other examples are at an operational level. Recently the Trust formed a major events coordination committee. It's taken less than a year to put the framework of that around it. The Trust facilitated this and that's the Trust wanting the entire motor—there's three operators of the motor sports precinct, so it's looking at how can we best leverage and get the best out of that for the community. So we have this major events committee and, as a result of that, we also have an emergency management plan. Only a month ago we got together to go through—and, again, this was facilitated by the Trust—five incidents that we deskopped to ask, "What would we do? What would the precinct do." That was attended by not only the operators but various members of the Trust, by Office of Sport, by Blacktown City Council and by all the respective emergency response groups.

It was a fantastic exercise. We did it two weeks out from the first big event we held this year, which was the supercars. That's a another example of how we interact, and that's quite formal. The major events committee meets quarterly, and we're in open dialogue all the time, making sure that our calendars don't conflict and cause problems. We do have challenges on the site in terms of ingress and egress so we've got to be careful with what we all do and don't conflict with big events.

Mr ALEX GREENWICH: My apologies for not knowing the necessary detail in relation to the legislation but when it came to Centennial Park and Moore Park land, I was involved in making sure there was

open, transparent tender processes and lease processes there. In terms of your lease, which I think you said comes up for renewal in 2041—

GLENN MATTHEWS: It does, yes.

Mr ALEX GREENWICH: —what are the existing processes within the Act to facilitate that? How do you see reform in this space? I think we're talking about a very different setting to, say, the Entertainment Quarter. There is a plan to essentially reimagine the Entertainment Quarter with new types of venues et cetera and, indeed, a number of for-profit offerings by for-profit organisations, whereas here in Western Sydney there is a racecourse and it's probably not going to be reimaged as another purpose. I'm interested to know what that process is like.

GLENN MATTHEWS: As we put in the submission, as the legislation stands now, and this is only because of the enactment of the GSPT Act—as I've stated before, prior to that, we would have been able to negotiate directly with the Trust to get a new lease or extend our lease. With this new one, and I guess this is the problem and what we point out here, is that once you get into that last—we're at 16 years now. To get a new lease we have to wait to 2041, or, I imagine, a year out from that. There'd be an open tender process run by government, I imagine. The problem with that is it's a specialised asset. Not only that, with only 16 years remaining, if we wanted to do something transformational—we've got a couple here that I've mentioned and one of them is only \$30 million, but with 16 years to go, we just can't make it stack up.

So who loses out? The community loses out and the parklands loses out, whereas if we had the ability or the Trust had the ability, like it used to and reverted back to that decision-making framework, then we'll continue to reinvest in the site. We've got a huge advantage, as I point out in the second part of our submission. Because we're a non-for-profit, we get to put our excess funds back into making the place as great as it can be, which again builds onto the asset, which again then improves the financial sustainability not only of the operator but of course of the landlord.

Mr ALEX GREENWICH: In terms of that 2041 process, is there any clarity in the legislation when you can start negotiating with government? Is there a go-live date, which is, from this point we open it up to discussions with the current leaseholder and potential other bidders?

GLENN MATTHEWS: No, there's not.

Mr MARK HODGES: Does your lease provide for any types of extensions or times which you must then approach the Government—the landlord—for further leases?

GLENN MATTHEWS: There's no extensions within the current lease now; it ends in 2041. I mentioned in my opening—certainly in the submission—that originally it was 2031. We made a couple of promises of capital expenditure and facilitating getting a hotel built. We got two five-year extensions because we delivered on those promises, but there's nothing specifically in there now—no process—that I'm aware of.

Mr MARK HODGES: When did you get the two five-year extensions?

GLENN MATTHEWS: From memory—it's in my submission. That was under ministerial consent and it was in the early 2000s.

Mr MARK HODGES: Well prior to the current Act.

GLENN MATTHEWS: Yes. In fact, I think, from memory, it was 2002 or 2003, so you're correct.

Mr MARK HODGES: If you had to leave the site—for instance, for some reason you weren't given a further lease—what would happen to all the assets on the site? You'd have to remove them all, is that right?

GLENN MATTHEWS: No. Under the current lease they're leasehold improvements so the Trust gets to keep all of those assets. We're so connected there because we're the ones who have been advocating, either putting in funds ourselves from those profits or working with government and advocating to get other funds to be able to build on government assets.

Mr MARK HODGES: How long would you see as a reasonable period for the new lease to be granted to you?

GLENN MATTHEWS: In the submission—for an extension like that, I think it's determined by the size of the investment—the example we use in there is a big battery. We understand that the time frame around that might be a life of 30 or 40 years and so we think it would be appropriate to be 30 or 40 years. Elsewhere within the Western Sydney Parklands, there are large parcels of land that are business hubs. My understanding is that it was appropriate that they got 99-year leases. That's because of, I guess, the required return on investment for that size of investment.

Mr MARK HODGES: I think you mentioned earlier there were three operators. Is that what you said?

GLENN MATTHEWS: Yes.

Mr MARK HODGES: Do you sublease to those operators?

GLENN MATTHEWS: No. Next to the circuit race—if you like, the Australian Racing Drivers' Club—is the drag strip. Then we've got the new speedway that's been there only about a year. My understanding is that the drag strip has the lease over the speedway and subleases that out to people who specialise in operating speedways.

Mr MARK HODGES: But not only that; you enter into contracts with various entities. Is that correct?

GLENN MATTHEWS: Sorry?

Mr MARK HODGES: You enter into contracts with various entities for running your events?

GLENN MATTHEWS: Yes, we do.

Mr MARK HODGES: Are they long-term contracts?

GLENN MATTHEWS: Some of them are, yes. For example, with supercars before we've often had, say, three-year contracts with supercar promoters to come, or something like that. We have a number of ways that events are delivered. Some we deliver ourselves and we'll have contracts, say, with caterers et cetera.

Mr MARK HODGES: It would be necessary for your lease to be a longer-term lease to enable you to better negotiate those further contracts. Is that right?

GLENN MATTHEWS: It certainly wouldn't hurt, that's for sure.

Mr MARK HODGES: Just following on from a question Mr Greenwich asked you, when do you think would be the optimal time for you to be able to commence your negotiations for a new lease?

GLENN MATTHEWS: I think when we present a transformational capital expenditure work and continue the great work that we're doing now. I think that we've got a project, as I've mentioned, or two projects here, and I'm happy to speak about one in a closed session. I think it's appropriate then. I think one of the problems is that if we don't have that ability to get a lease extension bringing great stuff to the table, then reinvestment into government assets will stop as we get towards the end of tenure because who's going to risk that? Then, as we've said it in the submission, the state of the asset would deteriorate in the final years of leases if the only method of going forward is to go to public tender, given that we financed more than 44 per cent in the last dozen years of our own funds into the asset as well.

Ms DONNA DAVIS: How much is your lease? How much do you pay? My apologies if it's in the submission and I've missed it.

GLENN MATTHEWS: No, it's not in the submission. Just off the top of my head, it's about \$800,000 a year.

Ms DONNA DAVIS: As part of your lease, are there any requirements for you to do that capital works?

GLENN MATTHEWS: No. Many years ago we sat down with the Trust and looked at it. We got all of the assets valued. We both co-funded an independent consultant to come in and look at all the assets. Then what we did was agree on who's responsible for what, and so who should finance what. For example, anything we call the field of play—that's the track, the garages et cetera—that's clearly our responsibility. You will see in there we spent over \$3 million bringing that track up to the highest standard that we possibly could to get that FIA Grade 2, for example. In the lease itself, the only thing really specific is that we keep it in good order and, at the end of the lease, that the asset is in the same condition as when we got it. Well, we'd have to take a few things out and run it down a little bit compared to when we got it because it's a great place now.

Ms DONNA DAVIS: You say in your submission that over the past 12 years, in collaboration with Western Sydney Parklands Trust, you've delivered \$55.4 million in capital improvements, and you've independently financed \$24.2 million of that total. Where has the other funding come from?

GLENN MATTHEWS: It's come from government. It's come from grants, mainly through the Office of Sport. I think I split it up in the submission. For example, the lights project cost \$16 million and that was a five-year process in terms of establishing the business case and showing government that it had great return. In fact, to prove that, we held a supercar event in about 2017 and we hired lights in from all around the country—from mines et cetera—just to show that it would make a difference. The other funds have basically come from government and a couple of others from third parties as well.

Ms DONNA DAVIS: If government gets to keep the assets, they have invested significantly as well.

GLENN MATTHEWS: They certainly have. That's true.

Ms DONNA DAVIS: How do you balance commercialisation of the parks with conservation uses and other objects, and ensuring that the estate remains accessible to the broader public—probably more in the light of your surroundings rather than the area you leased, but the area that is your neighbour, particularly given the reservoir et cetera.

GLENN MATTHEWS: Sure. I mean, it's difficult for the general public to have access to the reservoir anyway. I mean, it's all fenced off. I guess what we do in terms of some events that we have is that they are ticketed, so people have to pay to get in, if we've got a high-profile event. But there's plenty of other events that we do that are free and there are also plenty of other things that we do for community. I mentioned in there, I think, we host five school cross-countries every year, for example, including the State All Schools Championship. We do learner drivers once a month in conjunction with the NSW Police. That's free of charge.

We have cycle racing—pretty much master cycle racing—most Sunday mornings and there are two other clubs, Marconi and Penrith, that will race under lights midweek as well. I guess what we do in terms of the community is try to open it up for other activities as well. It's not your traditional park. I live in the Blue Mountains, so it's not your traditional park or place where people want to come and look at the gum trees or the flora or fauna. They're there very much because it's the motorsport precinct within the Western Sydney Parklands.

Ms DONNA DAVIS: Is interest in the motorsport increasing? It's obviously not my thing, but I know that it is for many. We've got the Grand Prix in Melbourne this weekend with plenty of people.

GLENN MATTHEWS: I heard something this morning that they're expecting 400,000 visitors to that event. There are lots of things. There's a Netflix *Drive to Survive*, which has really boosted the interest back into motorsport.

Mr ALEX GREENWICH: My husband and I binge-watched that. It was really good.

GLENN MATTHEWS: There you go.

Ms DONNA DAVIS: I know lots of people who have binge-watched that. Yes, it is popular.

Mr ALEX GREENWICH: There's a new series on Senna at the moment.

GLENN MATTHEWS: Right. I think the interest is like any sport: It evolves over time. I think we're seeing a change in the demographics. Because we host so many different types of motorsports, it's horses for courses. The person that will watch a motorbike race is different to a person who'll want to watch supercars. A person who watches historical cars is different to a person who wants to watch supercars. There are different demographics. It's a very broad church, motorsport.

Ms DONNA DAVIS: It would be interesting to find out a bit more about the proposal at some stage.

The CHAIR: The name "parklands" to most people, I suspect, means older buildings, grass, trees, parrots—hopefully not Americans stealing baby wombats, but all sorts of other things. I would expect that people would not expect there to be car racing on those sites. How would you argue, in terms of the objects of the Act itself, that what you do meets those objects?

GLENN MATTHEWS: I guess what we tried to do in our submission is show where we do fit in with the objects of the Act. Just going back just one minute before that, it's interesting because over the years—and I've been with the organisation 15 years—very early in my tenure I'd been approached by Ministers from both sides who were sort of scratching their heads and saying, "Why is there a motorsport precinct within—should it reside with the Office of Sport? Should it be part of Parklands?" I think there were those debates early on and I guess—and I don't know if I'm speaking out of school—I think one of the reasons it was left in the parklands Trust was because it was a very good source of finance to help fund other parts of the parklands. Whether that's the rationale behind that, it is sometimes—you think of parklands, and I'm with you. As I said, living in the Blue Mountains, that's like a parklands. However, it has been defined as part of the parklands, and we're not here to question that. That's what we have. What we do is everything in our power to make sure we make that the best it can be within the parklands. In that, we take very seriously our place in terms of sustainability. That's one of the things that we're really proud of.

The CHAIR: In line with that—and one of the issues we discussed at length yesterday was the issue of commercialisation versus opposing it—would you have any suggestions about how the Act could be amended to facilitate improved opportunities for revenue?

GLENN MATTHEWS: I've skimmed most of the submissions, and I do support the idea of where the Trust should be able to shift some moneys around and perhaps make loans from one trust to another if you've got emergency maintenance and stuff like that. In terms of commerciality, I think it depends on, first of all, within the Act itself, what percentage of the land is allowed to do that. That gets back to my point in terms of it already having been defined that we're a motorsport precinct and so commercialisation can virtually happen unfettered on that part of the precinct.

What we do is concentrate on our part of the precinct and say, "Given what the rules are there, what are the best commercial returns we can do?", because we know it improves our financial sustainability. If it improves our financial sustainability, it improves the parklands' as well because, the way our lease is at the moment, there are incentives such that, once we get past revenue thresholds, there's a percentage of the additional revenue that the parklands gets in rent. That's what I talked earlier about—the more investments we can do, there's the direct increase in rent and financial return for the Trust, but then there's also those increased profits and surpluses we make which, because we're a not-for-profit, we put back into the assets and back into the park anyway.

The CHAIR: We heard—and this is not countervailing; they're just different narratives—very strong arguments yesterday that were critical of leases, even 10-year leases. From everything you've said, you wouldn't exist if it was just a 10-year lease.

GLENN MATTHEWS: Mr Chair, I did a bit of recon and I admit that I sat in the back here yesterday, because I hadn't been before one of these committees before, so I thought I'd better come and have a bit of a squiz. So I was here when that lady was actually talking about that and, if I remember, she was from landscape and talking about heritage listing. She built a compelling argument about that. But back to your point about commercialisation, if we want to commercialise, I understand, for heritage—and that's a great argument—that things might change in 10 years and you've got to have some checks and balances and make sure that things are appropriate. That's a great argument. How could you deny that? But, again, our precinct doesn't have those required checks and balances to make sure that heritage listing is still appropriate, because we don't have any. With our mandate, if you talk about what the commercial opportunities are, in 10 years we could do nothing—nothing substantial, anyway.

The CHAIR: In part, it really is—to use the old expression—horses for courses.

GLENN MATTHEWS: Yes, it is.

The CHAIR: It would also involve the conditions of the lease for various types of activities.

GLENN MATTHEWS: I agree.

Mr ALEX GREENWICH: The tension which we're dealing with, when it comes to looking at the Act, is what recommendations we may make as a Committee to processes within the Act or for changes to the legislation. On one end, we've got a history, sometimes, of ministerial sign-off behind closed doors, which seems inappropriate to the general public and to many people here. On the other extreme, we've got the need for open, transparent tender processes. Stuck in the middle are the existing leaseholders who are trying to run an asset. As you get closer to the end of the lease, there is the uncertainty around that, the funding for the parklands and the investment in it. We've got quite a challenging process here for everyone involved. What are your recommendations in terms of potential changes to the Act that could keep transparency and ensure continual investment and a fair playing field for everyone involved?

GLENN MATTHEWS: I think it's outlined in our submission. First of all, I can't agree more that it's horses for courses. There's no doubt that, because the parklands are so diverse, it's hard to have the one rule. I sat there and thought, "Why don't you just carve out rules that are specific for the Western Sydney Parklands Trust?", because it worked great. We take the probity issues. Everything has to be transparent; there's no doubt about that. That's what really led us to our submission. We think we're unique because it's specialised, and everyone might say that. But the fact is that it is what good looks like. Just look at our record and what has been able to be achieved working in collaboration with government. The asset is financially sustainable. It improves every year.

How everyone can be satisfied, I think, is by the draft legislation that we've actually put in here. In order to qualify for transformational tenure extensions or for getting not-for-profits—we're saying that, all things being equal, not-for-profits should have a preference but, also, the not-for-profit's purpose should be congruent with what the specialised asset is. There's no way we should get special conditions if we're tendering for a cafe in Centennial Park because there's no connection between our organisation and Centennial Park. At the motorsport park, we're connected to both the purpose of the motorsport park but also the community of the motorsport park.

The CHAIR: Thank you for appearing before us today. You'll be provided with a copy of the transcript of your evidence for corrections. Committee staff will also email any questions taken on notice from today, and

any supplementary questions from the Committee.

(The witness withdrew.)

(Short adjournment)

Mr HALL GREENLAND, President, Friends of Callan Park, before the Committee via videoconference, affirmed and examined

Mrs PATRICIA BARKLEY, PSM, AM, Secretary, Friends of Fernhill and Mulgoa Valley Inc, affirmed and examined

Mr PHILLIP RUSSO, OAM, President, North Parramatta Residents Action Group, affirmed and examined

Mr LAURENCE BENNETT, Secretary, North Parramatta Residents Action Group, affirmed and examined

Mr ROSS NICHOLAS, Member, Centennial Park Residents Association, affirmed and examined

The CHAIR: I begin by welcoming our next witnesses. Thank you for appearing before the Committee today to give evidence. Please note that committee staff will be taking photos and videos during the hearing. The photos and videos may be used for social media and public engagement purposes on the Legislative Assembly's social media pages and websites. Please inform the committee staff if you object to having photos and videos taken. Before we start, can I ask all of you if you have any questions about the hearing process?

ROSS NICHOLAS: No.

LAURENCE BENNETT: No.

PHILLIP RUSSO: No.

PATRICIA BARKLEY: No.

HALL GREENLAND: No.

The CHAIR: Would any of you like to make a short opening statement before we begin with questions?

HALL GREENLAND: I understood that I'd be able to make a statement for two or three minutes. Is that possible?

The CHAIR: Please proceed.

HALL GREENLAND: I'll go straight into it, Chair. I thank the Committee for inviting me to appear. I come here basically to defend the Callan Park (Special Provisions) Act, which is seemingly under attack from a number of the submissions, including the one from the New South Wales Government. The Callan Park Act, as some of you will recall, was passed after the great victory in 2002 against the last attempt to dismember Callan Park and have apartment developments on parts of Callan Park. This Parliament decided, quite rightly and to its credit, that in future to protect Callan Park there would be an Act that mandated transparency, public participation and a role for the local council and even for the Parliament itself in protecting this priceless site of parklands and heritage assets.

Unfortunately, from time to time and in an episodic way, these safeguards have come under attack. There have been attempts to whittle them down and even to abolish them. Unfortunately we see another example of this, particularly in the New South Wales Government submission to the Committee—number 37. I just want to single out a couple of those, if I can, just to alert the Committee members to the Friends' position as far as these are concerned. The first one is on the 50-year leases. You will have heard other people critique this proposal. It is virtual privatisation of public assets, and on a heritage site it is not appropriate. It is also unnecessary, as far as Callan Park is concerned, because while the maximum leases in the legislation are 10 years, you can have leases beyond 10 years but they must lay on the table of both Houses of the New South Wales Parliament for 15 sitting days. Either House, as a safeguard and as a protection for Callan Park, can refuse or amend those leases.

This parliamentary oversight, in our view, is particularly important, and we would urge the Committee to maintain it. I note that the Greater Sydney Parklands and New South Wales Government say that the 10-year mandate is a hindrance to investment, and yet the biggest lessee at Callan Park is We Help Ourselves. It's a drug and alcohol detox facility for 140 clients at any stage. It has spent millions of dollars in lease fees, renovations, maintenance and upgrades, and it's done so under the 10-year-maximum lease rule. It is misleading to say that 10-year leases don't work.

The second prong of the New South Wales Government's attempt to undermine the Act is to do with limiting the transparency and public consultation for leases. At present, for any lease at Callan Park, the main provisions of that lease must go on public exhibition for 30 days for the public to make submissions before the Minister makes a decision. That's the situation, and it seems to me an ideal situation as far as protecting the transparency of Callan Park's administration is concerned. The Government submission calls for this to be suspended or abolished for leases of up to five years. Five years is a considerable period. They argue that it can be inconvenient for film shoots and for music concerts. I don't think that really holds water. There are long gestation periods for those kinds of projects, and a 30-day public exhibition period seems to me to be something that can be accommodated. But even if it's not, the whole principle of transparency and public consultation seems to me to trump the convenience of film shoots or music events if it comes to a conflict. The three other things that I'd just like to briefly mention—

The CHAIR: Very briefly, please, Mr Greenland.

HALL GREENLAND: Thank you. Activation—I know there's plenty of emphasis on that. There is plenty of activation in Callan Park, like that We Help Ourselves facility. There are five playing fields, scores of people walk their dogs, there's a childcare centre and there's film shoots. There's plenty of it. I'd just like to emphasise that inactivation is also part of the great value of parks. Places where there's quietness, tranquillity and peace in the hustle and bustle of urban life are very important attributes and advantages of parks. The second thing I want to mention just before I conclude is that Callan Park is a not-for-profit place, basically. You can have for-profit music and artistic events there, that's true, but the not-for-profit echoes the reason why Callan Park was first acquired by the public. That was for a social welfare purpose. Jamie Parker used to call it the "moral heart" of Callan Park. There is a social purpose.

I know it says that means a coffee shop is not possible. That's not true. Some of you will recall in the Australia Day Australian of the Year Awards, the local heroes award went to two Canberra women who had set up a social enterprise cafe in Canberra to train refugee women in hospitality. It is possible to have coffee shops and to have social purposes in the one place. Finally, I know there's a lot of argument for consistency and uniformity—although I noticed in the last session the whole point about horses for courses was mentioned, which I think is valid enough—but if there has to be consistency and uniformity, can I suggest to the Committee that the ideal protections that exist in Callan Park be spread to the other iconic parks in the GSP portfolio? For the time being I'll leave it at that, but I do appeal to the Committee to celebrate and protect what is a model piece of legislation.

PATRICIA BARKLEY: Some of you may not be aware that Fernhill comprises 423 hectares, has seven vegetation communities, two of which are endangered, and the vegetation is mostly biobanked. The vegetation that's biobanked is probably about 300 hectares. Fernhill is an important component of the semi-rural green corridor that is the Mulgoa Valley. Fernhill's 1845 Greek Revival house survives in its original setting, and its designed landscape is arguably unique in the history of landscape design in New South Wales. Fernhill was bought in 2018 for \$27.25 million. In 2023, \$65 million was promised to develop it. That money did not eventuate, so Fernhill has yet to be developed as a park. The objects of the Act and their interpretation are particularly important for Fernhill to conserving and enhancing its colonial designed rural landscape, architectural heritage and unique Cumberland Plain vegetation.

By the way, Fernhill can only be visited on a Sunday between 10.00 a.m. and 4.00 p.m. in the afternoon along a 2.4 kilometre walking trail up to the house. As it's uphill, you need to be reasonably fit. Fernhill could become a world-class sustainable park, but future landscape planning will need to adopt sustainable elements—for example, resource self-sufficiency, abide by the Burra Charter and the Fernhill conservation order, and adopt the recommendations of the 2019 Fernhill conservation management plan. By the way, that conservation management plan, although it was done in 2019, still has not been approved by GSP. Community consultation should be informed by sound, factual background information, enabling visitors to understand what they are visiting—its natural and cultural, colonial and Aboriginal significances.

Fernhill is not a blank canvas, yet that is how it was presented to the public by GSP in 2021—a large area of land, suitable for the accommodation of all manner of activities, without respect to the prior natural and cultural heritage claims on the site. It should be noted that the current LMP, which has been approved, does not recognise all the conservation management plan restrictions, nor does it consider Fernhill in its entirety—how the rural character of Fernhill will be maintained, or how the disabled and elderly will circumnavigate Fernhill. In other words, the Act does not recognise the uniqueness of each park. For example, the characteristic which defines Fernhill Estate from the other parks is its rural nature, which is important for both its heritage significance and its future recreation and educational utility as rural farmland in an increasingly urbanised landscape.

More housing developments require more parks and green belts or corridors. Mulgoa Valley, with its nature reserve, national park, biobank and rural areas, and now with Fernhill as a park, needs protection from development to maintain its green corridor and public access to open space. The importance of quality public open space is more important than ever in Western Sydney, with its increasing population and hotter temperatures. As GSP has stated in its plan of management:

Fernhill Estate is an idyllic rural parkland ... A place of natural beauty on the edge of the Cumberland Plain ... A place of quiet contemplation, to feel part of nature. A place to share the legacy and stories of our past and for the future. A place to be active and feel healthy.

Fernhill must be developed accordingly.

LAURENCE BENNETT: Thank you and the Parliament for conducting this investigation into the Greater Sydney Parklands Trust Act. In our submission, which I think you've all read, we have great concerns about the Act itself and the way it has been implemented or not implemented. Hopefully we've shown in our submission that it needs to be thoroughly reviewed and considered as to whether it's appropriate for the task for which it was envisaged. We don't think it is. We even think that it was probably put in the wrong department, because it is a very minor part within the planning department. The parklands section, in our opinion, needs to have a different place to operate because it is not regarded well.

The North Parramatta Residents Action Group has been conducting Save Parramatta Park for well over 40 years. In fact, when I was a member of Parramatta council in the 1980s, I was in court defending the park. We were in a case where Mr Ken Hale took Parramatta council and the Parramatta Leagues Club to the Land and Environment Court, under Justice Jim McClelland, to try to save the park from a further intrusion into the limited space we had at the time. Now there's even less. That was a battle that hasn't changed in all that time, and we think now is the time to change all these ongoing problems. The land is such a valuable asset not only to Parramatta and New South Wales but also to the Australian public and, in parts, to the world. As you know, part of that is Old Government House, and right now we are trying to get a second site very nearby to be included also as World Heritage listed.

In our submission, we've pointed out the problems. We've also tried to be more positive and provide possible solutions to the difficulties we see. The management of Parramatta Park have got one big issue—funding. It's no different to back in the days when I was on council and we controlled Parramatta council. The council underfunded the park. That's why they handed it back to the State. But the State has done no better. We have to overcome that problem. We have put possible solutions in our submission. We hope you'd consider those because, unless you can overcome the problems with Parramatta Park, they will continue. The classic example of the problem is the CommBank site. It's a major activity within the old Parramatta Park precinct, but it's my understanding—I'm not 100 per cent sure of this—that it has been excised out and they don't pay any rent to the park. It's just lost land. Yet they are the major attraction in the area.

Management of the park—their major source of revenue is parking fees and then revenue from leases. The parking fees, for example—they get most of their revenue on a Monday to Friday basis. But guess what? CommBank runs mainly on Thursday, Friday, Saturday and Sunday, when most people attend. Our suggestion is that if that was included in Parramatta Park and there was a fee per head for persons attending CommBank Stadium, that would overcome the sourcing of funding for it. It would be a small increase on the fees of people attending but could make a huge difference to funding. That's the sort of positive attitude we've tried to provide. We've got other solutions in there that may be of assistance. In your questioning, we can further elaborate if it's of assistance. We thank you for what you're doing. We are greatly concerned because the park has not progressed. It has just struggled to maintain—and maintain is basically mow. They haven't really addressed the key issues that are in the Act. I think we've pointed that out in our submission. I can understand the problems with management, but it's a combination of legislation, parliamentary neglect and the management not being active and proactive.

The other key thing is, right now, there is an opportunity to expand the park, and it's critical. The health department land in the health precinct immediately adjoining Parramatta Park is being offered up by the very same department that's supposed to manage it as possible residential. Let me tell you, if that is sold off to developers or whatever, Parramatta Park will be landlocked forever in the little precinct it has, but massive development has occurred in all areas surrounding the park and in Western Sydney generally. It will fail to achieve the objectives that are stated in the Act. We've set some objectives, but how do you achieve them? This is one way of doing it, if we could include things like the Fleet Street precinct, Parramatta Gaol and the area north. We've provided a solution how we could overcome that, but it requires innovative thinking. We hope that we've provided some leadership for you. I'll leave it at that, and you can ask us questions.

PHILLIP RUSSO: Thank you to you and the Committee for the opportunity to make some comments. As a 65-year resident of Parramatta, and being a former councillor and on the Parramatta Park Trust in the '90s, I feel I have a great affection for Parramatta Park, as most of the residents do. We are very fortunate to have a

park that actually adjoins the CBD. It is a most-used park for recreational activities and everything else. But over that 65 years I've seen a diminishing of the park itself with the excise of the land that puts the stadium there to extract the memorial swimming pool and then place a new swimming pool on the park site on the southern side. Parramatta High School has also taken that space, and the State Government is looking to put more housing and university student accommodation on the psychiatric centre in Parramatta Park, which would make a great difference to the park itself.

Also, culturally speaking, the Aboriginals have occupied that site for over 50,000 years. I think that there should be a national recognition that the park has not just been occupied since European settlement, but those people lived in and maintained that park in all that time. That park also could be of more recreational use. I did a tour of the park with my colleague yesterday. There's surplus land adjoining the Great Western Highway that is being landlocked, and units are being placed there. That could be traded off and made sure that we could increase the parkland itself going further north because, in the old days when we had Westmead and Northmead, they were part of the Parramatta Park as the west meadow and the north meadow. In all that time, and even the 65 years that I've lived in Parramatta, it has been diminished and diminished. I think that nationally it should be recognised as the very start of Australia—the very start of colonial history starts in Australia. It starts in the first House of Parliament that was in Parramatta. There's so much colonial history there, but the Aboriginal history should also be echoed or re-echoed first.

The CHAIR: I don't mean to be rude, but we're really keen to ask questions.

PHILLIP RUSSO: My apologies.

The CHAIR: No, but if you have a statement—

PHILLIP RUSSO: My statement is, Mr Chairman, that Parramatta Park could not be diminished further, and that we should resolve here and now to increase the funding for Parramatta Park to make it a more sustainable and beautiful area.

ROSS NICHOLAS: Chair and members of the Committee, thank you very much for giving us the opportunity. I'm a member of the Centennial Park Residents Association. I'm also a member of the community trustee board of the Greater Sydney parks for Centennial Park. The Centennial Park Residents Association is the umbrella organisation street committees of Centennial Park precinct. Our charter includes protection and preservation of the Centennial Parklands and the residential amenity of this historical garden suburb for future generations. The Centennial Park Residents Association is a member of the Alliance for Public Parklands. We are very concerned about the failure of government to fund parklands properly. That has been a concern for many years and I think is one of the issues for all of us.

We consider the Act currently is well drafted; however, we have some concerns as to its implementation. In particular, we refer to section 21 of the Act, which provides that the granting of leases, licenses or easements over Trust lands is to be consistent with the objects of the Act. The Government has recently announced they will hold an open tender process for the long-term lease of the Entertainment Quarter at Moore Park, with the Premier stating:

We want to turn the EQ into a thriving world-class precinct, full of dining and entertainment options, complete with a brand new venue that can host between 15,000 – 20,000 for live music and public events.

It's unclear to us whether the current tender process lease for the Entertainment Quarter will be consistent with the objects of the Trust, which are set out at section 3. These include maintenance and improvement to the parklands estate, ensuring the conservation of the natural and cultural heritage, and to advocate for a long-term vision to achieve the outcome of quality parklands. The Centennial Park Residents Association would like to understand how the intent of these objectives of the GSPT Act will be met through the tender process. The Act vests the power to grant a lease, license or easement for more than 25 years in the Minister, subject to an open tender process. Such a grant must accord with the objectives of the Act. Such use of power should be subject to both parliamentary scrutiny and community feedback.

I note that Carsingha, who are the current lessees of the Entertainment Quarter site, would like a change to the objects in the Act to support sustainable funding streams, and also to include leasing of land for financial benefit. We're concerned about this and see conflict between the current objects and the objects proposed by Carsingha. We also refer to parkland plans of management principles to be applied in deciding which leases are consistent with the objects of the Act. The current Centennial Park plan of management 2040 doesn't appear to include principles to be applied in deciding whether the current tender process for the Entertainment Quarter is consistent with the objects of the Act. The necessity for transparency in such an open tender process cannot be overstated to ensure appropriate probity and equity when dealing with an important asset such as parkland.

Turning now to the role of community trustee boards, the Act states that community trustee boards should

be a consultative body in relation to matters of local relevance, including the protection and use of the relevant parkland, and leasing carried out on, or to be carried out on, the relevant parkland. This is very important given the ownership of parklands by the people of New South Wales, and the need to ensure diverse perspectives are considered in decision-making in relation to such assets. Additionally, local communities bear the brunt of decision-making that has inadequately considered community impacts such as noise, traffic, anti-social behaviours and the like. In this regard, it's unclear what role the Centennial Park community trustee board will play in relation to the protection and use of Centennial Parklands, and the business leasing and other activities under the tender process for the Entertainment Quarter.

Also, there's evidence that it's obvious that the Centennial Park community trustee board is not being afforded the opportunity to comment or, on occasion, made aware of issues impacting the local community. For example, in my recollection, no mention was made during meetings or in correspondence of proposed changes to the cultural State environmental planning policy. These changes have direct impacts on the community and residents in the Centennial Parklands precinct. Legislation can provide correct and well-meaning provisions, but if this is not operationalised, they are of no use and undermine the intent and objectives of a well-drafted framework. Thank you for this opportunity.

The CHAIR: That was very comprehensive. Thank you all for your statements. They're all very important, and Hansard would have taken them down diligently.

Mr ALEX GREENWICH: My question is to Mr Nicholas. Your submission also talks about the special deposit fund and allocation by the Trust. Could you talk about your concerns in relation to the transparency of that? Also, just more broadly, I would be interested in how the community trustee boards are working compared to the previous consultative committee process that was in place.

ROSS NICHOLAS: In our submission, we were concerned about the funding, basically, or the transparency of the funding within the parklands, and this probably arises mainly because of the joining of the Callan Park and the Centennial Parklands together. It was a piece of legislation that came through, I understand, fairly late at night without any community consultation. We found out a few days later that this had happened, and we're concerned, particularly because of EQ, that that will become the funding method or the way of funding other parklands. It will be given away, effectively, to commercial interests in order to fund lots of other parklands.

I mean, I go back to the view, which I expressed at the start of my verbal submission, that funding is fundamentally problematic because government has not funded. We are concerned that we have no idea of what actually happens. Much of the income is commercial in confidence. There's no transparency to the funding and where it is spent. We're concerned that if there are to be some commercial activities, they should probably be spent within that parkland—such as with Callan Park, which obviously does need a lot of money spent. Government should actually be allocating that directly.

Just moving on, I wasn't a member of the community consultation committee at Centennial Park, but I do know various people who were on it. The problems that I see with the community consultative committee is that the GSP say that they've only been doing this for a couple of years; they're developing the methodology of consulting. I was just talking outside to somebody. The CCC committee of the Centennial Parklands had been established for at least 20 years, and so I feel that they have gone through that process, but I think there has probably been a disconnect between GSP, which is somewhat remote, I think, and Centennial Park administration, which was actually at Centennial Park and was open to the public or had a much more public-facing aspect.

The main problem that we have with the CTB, as I see it, is that we have four meetings a year—a total of six hours. We are fed information. We're very often given a briefing on something specific. There's very little opportunity for members of the committee or the community trustee board to discuss within themselves, to get to know each other and to actually ask questions of the GSP, because most of the people who are actually at the board meetings are communications people from GSP. They're actually not people who are operations or who actually have any responsibility, and I think that is really problematic. We don't meet often enough. We don't meet long enough, and there's not a lot of information.

The one aspect that I did raise was the fact that we—as far as I know, we were not informed of the very important SEPP, the cultural State environmental planning policy, which could potentially have great effects on Centennial Park, in that it may allow much increased concerts and activities. It will remove certain planning processes, all these things. I would have thought that it would have been entirely appropriate if we had discussed it and we had also been given the opportunity to make submissions about it.

Ms CATE FAEHRMANN: In terms of time, I'm just going to ask one question, so I just want to reassure the community groups that have taken on board your submissions, particularly in relation to what you're saying around environmental protections. This question is about First Nations people and consultation and what you're

seeing in terms of whether the objects of the Act are being realised. I'm sure you're aware that the objects of the Act include:

- (b) to enable the Greater Sydney Parklands Trust to facilitate a connection to Country for First Nations peoples that—
 - (i) recognises and conserves First Nations peoples' cultural heritage and values through the use of the parklands estate, and
 - (ii) establishes long-term and mutually beneficial partnerships that give effect to the ongoing relationships of First Nations peoples with Country ...

Recognising that we need to consult with First Nations people about this, I'm interested to know what is happening in that regard in any of the parklands that you're associated with, in terms of your community groups. Fernhill?

PATRICIA BARKLEY: In terms of Fernhill, one of the reasons that the conservation management plan has not been approved, according to GSP, is because there isn't an Aboriginal component in it, and that's fair enough. The Mulgoa Valley has a lot of heritage in relation to the Aborigines. They moved along the Mulgoa Creek from the Hawkesbury, down to the south along the creek. Although Fernhill itself, because it only has one creek, a major creek doesn't appear to have that much Aboriginal artefacts et cetera on the site. One of the things disappointing is that the area where the artefacts are on Fernhill, the landscape master plan has proposed to put in a bus turning circle. This is also a biodiversity site, as the regent honeyeater had fledglings there a couple of years ago; swift parrot has also been there. In terms of the Aboriginal things, a lot needs to be done by GSP in terms of Fernhill.

Ms CATE FAEHRMANN: Mrs Barkley, just to be a bit clear for others, maybe not so much the cultural values of the site, because we could get that elsewhere, but whether there actually is anything happening around establishing relationships—in an effective way to meet the objects of the Act—with First Nations peoples on the parklands that you're managing. Mr Russo, I think you mentioned something in your opening statement.

PHILLIP RUSSO: Yes. I believe that there hasn't been a great connection from the parklands people in Parramatta with the Parramatta council. Even though we have a discovery room in Parramatta council, we see very few artefacts or that coming forward—in fact, very little publicity or advertising about the cultural aspect of Parramatta Park and the inhabitants that have been there for, as I said, over 50,000 years. I'm disappointed in that regard that there's not a great mention of the Indigenous people. There's no great advancement as far as the heritage value that should be established. There's a women's place, a birthing place opposite Mill Creek; it's announced, but there's no security, no advertisement. There are scarred trees within Parramatta Park. They shan't be advertised because vandals will probably make their engravings on them also. But it's so much the lack of communication or propagating the cultural benefits of Parramatta Park with an Indigenous relation.

LAURENCE BENNETT: Can I just add two words on that?

Ms CATE FAEHRMANN: Maybe. I'm just conscious that we've heard from Parramatta.

The CHAIR: Yes, I'll come back to you, Mr Greenland. We'll just work our way along the table if we can. Mr Bennett, please proceed.

LAURENCE BENNETT: Parramatta Park is, in our opinion, the most important park in Australia because it carries a documented history up to 32,000 years, which is proved by the archaeological excavations in the areas surrounding and including the park. The story needs to be told from that date. The Aboriginal contribution is significant and important. We can't tell the story of now and then forget about the past, because the past is real. It's part of the contribution we carry forward. This has not occurred. They don't regard the two as continuous and associated. That's another concern which I think we've outlined in our submission. Thank you.

ROSS NICHOLAS: I don't know, really, the extent of the Centennial Park liaison with Indigenous groups. But part of our CTB, or community trustee board, was that there was to be an Indigenous member. We didn't have an Indigenous member during the last period. Apparently there were some issues about transport for the person who was going to be perhaps wanted, so they had trouble getting there. Secondly, the confirmation at the moment—there's a sort of confirmation process going through. It is incredibly complex to be confirmed. There's some offshore organisation that confirms your suitability. I must say, if we want diversity on these boards, I think there are some real issues. But we do not have an Indigenous member and they are looking for one at the moment—have written out to us. I think that's problematic, and we all think that.

HALL GREENLAND: Yes, we do have a First Nations representative on the CTB who is conscientious and attends the meetings. There is evidence—very, very strong evidence, which John Clegg, the anthropologist from the University of Sydney, uncovered 50, 60 years ago—that Callan Point at Callan Park was particularly important to the Gadigal and Wangal people as an area of celebration and so on, as well as food gathering. There were some fatal clashes between First Nations people and the early settlers in Iron Cove, so there is a real history

there. One of the things that was part of the landscape structure plan was to celebrate and to commemorate that connection on Callan Point by clearing the site and protecting the traces of First Nations use of the site. Unfortunately, that's been stalled by the inadequate funding. Yes, we do have a CTB member, and we do have plans to celebrate and commemorate, but they've been held up by the fact that the Government has not been forthcoming with the plans for that stage. It's the next, impending, imminent stage of the reclamation of Callan Point. So, yes, we're waiting. Hopefully the Committee can make strong recommendations about funding, particularly for First Nations memory of the site.

Ms DONNA DAVIS: Thank you to everyone for attending today, but I'm going to focus my questions on NPRAG's submission. Thank you to Phil and Laurie for coming in today. I note that in your submission you talk about an examination of the finances of the park and possibilities for increasing funding. You mention a surcharge on all patrons at commercial activities within the park, but you also mention including CommBank Stadium. Noting that the previous Government, and the Act as it stands at the moment, actually excised CommBank and, obviously, the leagues club out of the park, is that still suggesting that even though it's not in the park, you think that that could be a funding solution?

LAURENCE BENNETT: Without funding, all of us groups will struggle and continue where we are—not improving, not achieving the objectives in the Act. It will just struggle and struggle and struggle. We have to be positive about how we fund these organisations. The Government made legislation to exclude CommBank from the park and exclude the leagues club out of the park. If they can exclude it, they can re-include it so that they now become, basically, leases within the footprint of Parramatta Park. Part of that renewed lease would be a condition to ensure that they get some funding. As soon as a commercial operation is thought of and implemented in the park, land is quickly excluded, which reduces the park's size but, more importantly, reduces any potential to support the balance of the park—the remnant that's left. If you can take it out, you can change the legislation and put it back in because they would be tenants of the park. The park would be more financially viable. Right now, the only reasonable source is parking but even that is not done well, as I mentioned earlier on.

Ms DONNA DAVIS: Yes, you did.

LAURENCE BENNETT: CommBank mainly operates Thursday, Friday, Saturday and possibly on Sundays. Guess which days Parramatta Park doesn't man the car park which adjoins CommBank Stadium? At five o'clock on a Friday afternoon they all knock off and go home. The game is at 7.30 p.m. Everybody that parked in there gets the parking for free, whereas if it was a normal day, they'd be paying the park some money. But no, somehow the management says we can't afford—I don't know what the reasons are, but one would anticipate extra overtime costs for the staff. It's not very efficient, but at least if you had someone standing at the gate there saying, "Where's your money?"—

Ms DONNA DAVIS: Sorry to cut you off; I know there are other questions. Have you had a conversation and proposed this idea to the Parramatta Leagues Club about them coming back into the park?

PHILLIP RUSSO: Can I just come in here?

Ms DONNA DAVIS: I just wondered whether or not that would be something—

PHILLIP RUSSO: This is a bit new to me about Laurie's suggestion about raising finance. But my idea—and I think it would benefit the community, the council and the park—would be a heritage step. Parramatta is rich in heritage. We could pull up at Elizabeth Farm and there's James Ruse cottage, back to Old Parliament House, Parramatta Gaol included, and the old psych hospital. There's so much heritage that would generate money as a commercial value. That's where I see—this is rather new to me about exploiting the stadium and that. I'm totally opposed to user pays—charging kids to swing on swings et cetera. The commercial value would be a joint partnership between the park and the council to exploit the heritage of Parramatta.

Ms DONNA DAVIS: I've got others, but I know we don't have much time.

The CHAIR: We are slowly running out of time. I have seven questions that I'm going to put to you on notice because I think they're important. I won't have time to ask them, but I think they're important. We're still keen to get your information. Mr Greenland, do you have some comment on this matter?

HALL GREENLAND: At the risk of alienating Committee members, Chair, it is rather remarkable that five important parks and their associated community groups have been crowded into an hour. I appreciate the supplementary questions, but it is, from my point of view, rather inappropriate that our time is constricted, whereas time for other bodies has been rather generous. It is what it is. We will respond as promptly as possible to your questions.

The CHAIR: As you say, it is what it is, but please be assured that we, and certainly the secretariat, have read all of your submissions. All of your views will be taken into account. Mr Hodges?

Mr MARK HODGES: We have four minutes left. Whatever I'd ask would take a lot longer to answer, so I'll put mine as supplementary questions.

The CHAIR: One of the questions I have is for Mrs Barkley, but I'd be interested in everyone's views. In your submission, you note that the Trust's financial reporting is incomplete and lacking in transparency. That's on page 9. Should the Act require consolidated annual financial reports to be prepared by the trust?

PATRICIA BARKLEY: Definitely. I think others will be speaking later today about this issue. The reports are very confusing and very obfuscating, for want of a better word. We think they should be improved.

The CHAIR: Does anyone else wish to comment on that?

PHILLIP RUSSO: We share the view at NPRAG that there's not a full disclosure about the finances of Parramatta Park. I agree with what my colleague said.

LAURENCE BENNETT: Just to finish that point off, particularly on the leases, they aggregate them up, but you don't know who's doing what or contributing what. You don't understand what terms and conditions the park has traded off in granting that lease and the duration of the lease. I know it gets tricky with confidential stuff but, equally, it's our land. It's the public's land. We should have some insight into what's been negotiated on the Crown and the public's land—not just hidden in some reports, which are extremely hard to find. As we pointed out, you don't fully understand how complex it is. I'll leave it at that. We're not happy as well.

ROSS NICHOLAS: I would concur with that. I have a problem with commercial-in-confidence provisions, particularly with government. I find it bizarre. We're told that we need to do this, but you ask, "What's the cost?" or "What's the benefit?" and one has no idea. I think there are some issues there.

HALL GREENLAND: I concur with those statements. We're continually concerned about what happens to lease income at Callan Park, as people have noted, because of inadequate government funding. There are real needs there. Money is being generated, but we'd like to be assured that that money is being spent at Callan Park.

The CHAIR: Can I ask if any of my colleagues have any final questions?

Ms CATE FAEHRMANN: Maybe just a quick one in relation to the community trustee boards. I've got the information about the fact that they can't elect their own chair and that the current legislation allows a member to be appointed or removed at the Minister's discretion. I might go straight to Mr Greenland for a response on that. I assume that Friends of Callan Park and others are advocating for the legislation to be strengthened in that regard, in terms of the trustee boards and the make-up of them.

HALL GREENLAND: Absolutely. Other speakers have made this point too. It's essential that there's some sense of autonomy, or that they are the mistresses or the masters of their own business—that they elect their own chair, that they have some say about the agenda and that the, as you say, arbitrary removal of members by the Minister is ruled out. The Minister, after all, gets to nominate who goes on it. There are real concerns about the independence, autonomy and freedom of CBTs. In our submission we've made recommendations about how that situation may be improved. It does need to be improved.

The CHAIR: Are there any further questions? I'm very happy to extend it for another five minutes.

Ms CATE FAEHRMANN: I have one more question about the board meetings. Mr Nicholas, you said there are six hours over the year—so four meetings, capped at one hour and a half each, I assume.

ROSS NICHOLAS: Yes.

Ms CATE FAEHRMANN: It seems as though you're just getting a presentation. It's almost like they're just managing the trustee board. Again, going on from what Mr Greenland said, it certainly sounds like that. Are you able to increase the time that you meet? I'm assuming you can do that.

ROSS NICHOLAS: No.

Ms CATE FAEHRMANN: Really?

ROSS NICHOLAS: Sorry, there is the chair, who is a reasonably senior public servant. Was she independent? She probably was. As I said, they didn't encourage us to communicate amongst ourselves. We sort of turned up. There was a chair and the agenda was set. It was quite a controlled environment. We were given a presentation on different things each time. There was usually one-quarter of an hour to discuss something that had been previously raised. For instance—and this may sound ridiculous—we didn't have each other's contact details, which I thought was unfortunate. It was a managed process with comms. It was a communication. The GSP say they're learning and getting better, and they probably are, but it's not entirely satisfactory.

The CHAIR: Can I follow on from that, because I think it's a very important issue. I'll ask you to each take this on notice. This was one of my questions to ask you: What changes, if any, to the Act—and possibly any subordinate legislation that arises out of it—are required to improve the operation of the community trustee boards? What specifically should we recommend be written in to require them to operate more effectively? I'll ask each of you to take that on notice. We'll come back and give you that question specifically. We're looking now to get into the entrails of this. What specific things can we do and should be written down?

PHILLIP RUSSO: Very briefly, Chair, we have no local representation on Parramatta Park. Parramatta Park is the heart and soul of Parramatta. We've got people who—I don't know where they come from. If they come from the North Shore or eastern suburbs, what affiliation have they got with Parramatta Park?

PATRICIA BARKLEY: I've got two brief points. If I'm a community member, how do I contact a member of the community trustee board? I can't. Secondly, what's the expertise that's on that community trustee board? For example, with Fernhill, we've got so much biodiversity. There's no-one on that trustee board who's got that expertise. There's supposed to be one with Heritage, although that's a bit doubtful. After the board had met the first time, there was only, I think, one of the board members who had ever been to Fernhill.

The CHAIR: Obviously this is an important question. That's why I'd like you to take, if you would, the opportunity of considering it and then giving us back some specific—it doesn't have to be a 300-page submission. What are the specific things—as specific as you can make them—that we need to be looking at to possibly recommend, as changes to the Act or some form of subordinate legislation?

Mr ALEX GREENWICH: Chair, if I could flesh that out. Please also consider, in terms of the consultative abilities or powers of the consultative committee, the access to commercial-in-confidence information, the running of meetings—things that we could actually make recommendations to prescribe in regulation to strengthen the abilities and powers of the community consultative boards. Think in terms of that and please come back to us in as much detail as you require to help us strengthen those provisions.

Ms DONNA DAVIS: We have had pressure on time but if there are any opportunities in further submissions, I also welcome you, if you wish, to expand on your visions of an expansion of Parramatta Park—I know many of us are very passionate about the opportunity to be able to do that—and how that fits with the Act. Are there aspects of the Act that limit that ability? Are there aspects of the Act that we would need to address to be able to achieve that?

LAURENCE BENNETT: First of all, I'd like to thank Donna Davis for her activity with regarding the Parramatta Park and the North Parramatta precinct. When she was on council, and mayor, we had great hopes for the precinct, and we hope that continues and does not stall. We will be more than glad to add extra flesh to our submission, because there's a myriad of failures at different levels or lack of imagination by the people concerned so far. I don't know how you change that by putting people who don't live in the area and are not part of the community and still get a good result. Our concern is this not clear. Is this Committee coming to these parklands to do an on-site inspection? If you are, is it possible for us to be there and point out some of the arguments that we'll be talking about?

Mr MARK HODGES: The Chair and I have attended Parramatta Park. Not all Committee members were able to attend due to commitments but we attended and I certainly had a look.

LAURENCE BENNETT: We note some of you have been to Parramatta Park individually, but as a group, when you're considering this, is that something that's being contemplated?

The CHAIR: We have met with the trust committee on site out there, but if that's a request, we'll consider it in our deliberative later today, if that's okay—

LAURENCE BENNETT: It's a request, then.

The CHAIR: —rather than make a decision now. If we can put it to the Committee later on—

LAURENCE BENNETT: We're offering a complex vision of what is probably the most significant park in, certainly, New South Wales, and we need to do something to enhance it so we can contribute to the local and surrounding communities. Hopefully, when your change is envisioned, we'll achieve that in whatever you propose.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Leave that with us and we'll come back, because it's important. As a Committee, we have tried to get around to it already. Thank you for appearing before us today. Procedurally, you'll all be provided with a copy of the transcript of your evidence so you can make any corrections that you wish. Committee staff will also email any questions taken on notice from today, and any supplementary questions that members of the Committee, including myself, will make. We'd appreciate that input. I appreciate that this has been complex, but we're constrained in terms of our reporting date that's been set by the Parliament. We think this is really

important. It's an important inquiry, and that's why we're keen to meet with as many people as we can within the time that we've been given. We really appreciate all of you being here today. Thank you very much for your contribution.

LAURENCE BENNETT: Just one final thing, if you don't mind. We've made not only submissions to you; we have made submissions to many Ministers, who we believe have import and significance, like the Premier, the environment Minister and the Minister for Planning and Public Spaces, to get their contribution. It'd be interesting for you to see what their contribution is to our questions, because we are very concerned that they had an opportunity particularly to expand the park, but apparently, for one reason or other, have not either protected the park or proceeded to enhance the park. You need to know about it.

The CHAIR: Thank you, that's now on record. We'll take it into account. Thank you very much, everyone.

Mr MARK HODGES: Please feel free to send those submissions to us—those documents—and Ministers' responses.

LAURENCE BENNETT: We've sent out about 18—State, Federal and local.

Mr MARK HODGES: Please feel free to send them to us, and the responses.

The CHAIR: The Committee is adjourned until 1.15 p.m.

(The witnesses withdrew.)

(Luncheon adjournment)

LINDA BERGIN, OAM, Individual, affirmed and examined

PETER WATTS, AM, Individual, affirmed and examined

DOUGLAS BELTON II, Individual, affirmed and examined

The CHAIR: I welcome our next witnesses, Dr Peter Watts, Mr Douglas Belton, and Ms Linda Bergin, and thank them very much for appearing before the Committee today to give evidence. Please note that Committee staff will be taking photos and videos during the hearing. The photos and videos may be used for social media and public engagement purposes on the Legislative Assembly's social media pages and websites. Please inform the Committee staff if you object to having photos and videos taken. Before we start, do you have any questions about the hearing process?

LINDA BERGIN: No.

DOUGLAS BELTON II: No.

The CHAIR: Thank you. I should stress to people that we have a number of other Committees operating this afternoon. We also have members online via Webex who will be asking questions and listening to evidence as well, so there are not simply the two of us. There are other members participating online. Would any of you like to make a short opening statement before we begin with questions? Maybe I could begin with Ms Bergin.

LINDA BERGIN: Thank you for inviting me today. I migrated to Australia 30 years ago, became a citizen, and started an internet consultancy in the '90s. In the mid-1990s I founded the Headland Preservation Group, which advocated for the return of former Defence lands to the people of Australia. The aspirations of a Sydney-wide parklands authority and an interconnected green grid are a noble one. However, I am concerned about GSP's governance and funding model. Governing GSP's parklands estate is a gigantic task, with assets of \$3.5 billion and revenues of approximately \$100 million, especially since all five parks have immense heritage value.

The governance framework—GSP board, then GSP chief executive, then GSP staff, and then GSP community trustee boards, which are consultative committees with no real powers—is cumbersome. I am not sure how much the CTBs talk to the public. There are no contact details for CTBs. CTB agendas are set by the GSP, not by the CTB, and apparently not provided in advance of meetings, except to CTB chairs. No GSP board members attend CTB meetings, except for Michael Rose and CEO Joshua French just a few times. GSP board meetings—I am talking about the main board—are intransparent. They do not publish minutes, only a list of matters discussed.

Contrast this to the Harbour Trust, which publishes minutes twice a year, opens its meetings to the public

and takes questions.¹ I note that Michael Rose was formerly a Harbour Trust board member. The new Centre for Excellence in Nature Discovery in Centennial Park is missing from the GSP board notes, even though a \$550,000 project manager was appointed last December. As Jeff Angel mentioned, there is little GSP reporting. GSP as a whole does not publish an annual report. The only place board members are named is on the GSP website but no terms. The only consolidated dollar amounts I found were in the latest two-minute annual highlights video. The GSP website is poorly designed, and the search bar sometimes does not work. The Centennial Park heritage listing page is still missing its national heritage listing. Is no-one checking?

All three of GSP's previous Years In Review reports incorrectly state 40 million visitors; but they're not visitors—they're visits. There's a big difference. For example, Centennial had 40 million visits, but only two million visitors. The Committee for Sydney's submission makes this same blunder, confusing visits with visitors. GSP missed a statutory deadline for tabling in Parliament its assessment review report. It was 10 months late. I am not aware that any parliamentary extension is allowed. This is a report which assesses four parks which might be added to the GSP.

In conclusion, I do not support the GSP funding model using off-park business hubs. This is a complicated land development process to secure developers for vacant land to generate a revenue stream. Why design a new Sydney parkland authority and then lumber it with this complex funding arrangement that is not related to the care of parklands? Government should properly fund Sydney's significant parklands by way of appropriations, and this should be enacted in the GSP Act. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Dr Watts?

PETER WATTS: Thank you for the opportunity to speak today. I do so as someone who has been professionally involved with the conservation of the cultural and natural environment for over 50 years. I have no difficulty at all with the objects of the Greater Sydney Parklands Trust. However, I do have considerable difficulty with the way in which some of these objects are implemented or, more particularly, are not implemented. Indeed, some seem to be totally ignored. My remarks are confined to Callan Park, which I know well as it's my local parkland and has been my local parkland for over 40 years. However, my remarks are also informed by membership of the Broughton Hall community consultative committee, which advises on one of the major tenants of Callan Park, WHOS, on the conservation, management and maintenance of its extensive gardens. This committee—which is not a committee that has anything to do with the GSP, I might say, even though they are the owner of the land—comprises experts in mental health, heritage, horticulture and garden history as well as local community representatives.

With a modest guiding document of about three pages, one handyman, almost no funding, an enthusiastic tenant, minimal bureaucracy but abundant common sense, the extensive buildings and grounds have been largely brought from a semi-ruinous state to a wonderful place for both the rehabilitation of the resident clients, together with public use. There is a really important lesson here, which I'll get to in a moment. The major issue I wish to raise is the appalling deterioration of significant historical buildings within Callan Park, managed by the GSP. This is on a site that is on the State Heritage Register, yet for many years the approach to most buildings which have become empty—in fact, to all buildings that become empty—is to allow their deterioration to advance to such a stage that a fence is built round them, presumably for public protection. No maintenance is carried out at all. Windows are smashed. Roofs fall in. Verandahs collapse. Roof tiles, cappings and gutters collapse or are dislodged. Fig trees grow from chimneys and the state of the interiors can only be imagined after years of water penetration. I hope some of my photographs are being circulated.

The CHAIR: Yes. We're looking at them.

PETER WATTS: Thank you. Some buildings have reached a stage where they've had to be demolished. At the present time, there must be a dozen or more major buildings boarded up or surrounded by security fences and all in an appalling state. This is not fulfilling in any way at all the object in section 3 (c) of the Act. In the meantime, millions are spent on public consultation, probity checks, development of planning documents, the building of expensive new landscapes and very flash public toilets. I'm not against any of these, but I do question where the priorities are. It defies simple common sense not to undertake the most basic maintenance of important historical buildings, especially when it is clearly one of the objects of the Act. As I have said in my submission, and I repeat here, it does not need complex and expensive CMPs and other studies and documentation and consultation. It needs experienced tradespeople, good professional supervision, common sense and a traditional

¹ The Committee received [correspondence](#) from Ms Bergin clarifying this statement.

approach to maintenance. I have no suggestions as to how to encourage a commonsense approach through an Act of Parliament. I hope someone cleverer than me may be able to suggest a way to do so.

DOUGLAS BELTON II: I speak today as a community representative to the Western Sydney Parklands community trustee board and a PhD candidate at Western Sydney University, where I work with community-based organisations on community-led, climate-resilient land use projects, with an emphasis on integrated food, housing and public health system innovation. The *Greater Sydney Parklands Trust Act 2022* commits to delivering world-class, ecologically sustainable parklands for the public, as in the object in section 3 (a). However, the terms of the Act constrain its ability to meet this objective by limiting community co-governance in land use planning and decision-making, subordinating public benefit considerations to extractive and locally disempowering market logics. A world-class parklands system should not merely preserve landscapes; it should regenerate ecosystems as a site for convivial social and environmental participation and innovation. Yet, under the current legislative framework, these possibilities remain largely under-considered.

The GSPT Act must enable public co-governance of parklands. The object in section 3 (a) commits to maintaining and improving the parklands estate, yet the Act does not mandate things like participatory governance mechanisms that would allow communities to co-design land use strategies. Instead, the Western Sydney Parklands Plan of Management 2030, for example, exemplifies how this legislative gap leads to top-down decision-making that limits uptake of community-led, multifunctional urban farmland uses that are not predicated on highest and best commercial use logics. I did submit a number of recommended amendments to consider. In conclusion, to fully deliver on the object in section 3 (a), the Act must embed community-led governance and land use decision-making; reform land allocation models to prioritise public benefit over market-based leasing; and position the Trust as an active advocate for regenerative, socially inclusive parklands.

The CHAIR: Thank you for being so concise in your opening statements. It is much appreciated.

Ms CATE FAEHRMANN: Thanks for your submissions and for being here today. I want to ask if you've got comments around the role of the community trustee boards. We've heard from the previous witnesses about one example—the Centennial Park community trustee board—that seems to be, in some ways, a tick-a-box exercise and that meets six hours a year in total. How could the role of community trustee boards be improved, considering this is a review of the Act? Anyone can respond.

PETER WATTS: To me, the balance between the main Trust and the community trustee boards is back-to-front. The main board, in my view, would be far better—if it existed at all—to be a simple coordinating body, and the real authority and power would exist at a lower level, whether you call it a community trustee board or whatever you call it. These are people who know the place. Can we bear in mind that each of these places is entirely different? They have completely different sets of circumstances, opportunities and problems et cetera. They require focused attention. A community trustee board, as it's currently established, can't provide that, nor can the one at the upper level provide it. It doesn't have the local knowledge and expertise, and it doesn't seem to wish to have it.

To me, somehow in the governance of the organisation, the role of those separate bodies needs to be almost entirely reversed. I think that would see a huge difference. You would have the real expertise and the real local knowledge that you want actually making the fundamental, basic decisions, which may have to get rubberstamped further up, if there's any value at all in having an overarching body. And there is value in having an overarching body that can lobby government at a very senior level to get more funding and so on and so forth. There are some commonalities, but the commonalities are not as great as we would all think they are.

Ms CATE FAEHRMANN: There's the public consultation and public participation aspect as well. Ms Bergin, in your submission about the development of the centre for excellence in nature discovery, you're saying there was no public consultation about that, but the trustees apparently signed off on it.

LINDA BERGIN: No. Could I explain that? First of all, I agree with exactly what Dr Watts said. You've got to turn this thing upside down and give the powers to the community boards. There's no point in refining the community trustee boards as per how they're set up now. I totally agree. As far as the Centennial Park Centre for Excellence in Nature Discovery goes, nobody knows about that—full stop. I'll call it a secret. I don't mean to infer that anyone is deliberately keeping it a secret, but there's absolutely nothing about that. It was brought to the Centennial community trustee board twice, but they were never really told what it was, and it does not appear at all in the board notes of the GSP board.

Ms CATE FAEHRMANN: We can come back to that; we've got the Trust appearing. On the importance of public participation—and I want to go to Mr Belton about this as well—it doesn't really allow that. The Act doesn't really contain that. There are two questions. You said, Ms Bergin, that you don't want to see the community

trustee boards reformed as they are in the Act now, as though you want a completely new model. Is that right? I'm sorry I missed your opening statement, if you did mention it.

LINDA BERGIN: There are just too many problems with the governance, in my opinion. The way that you see that is that there is an up to \$20 million—I suspect it's going to be \$20 million by the time it's all said and done—big, new development in the heart of Centennial Park. How is that possible? That is not even allowed under the Act, even though that wording about no increase in the net natural environment is very strange wording.² Clearly, to build something that big in secret that nobody knows about, which, in my opinion, is not even lawful under the Act—they've been talking about it since 2019. How is this whole thing working? Without getting into details, it's not working.

DOUGLAS BELTON II: From my understanding, as I've done some research in the context and history of what we have today and this amalgamation of parklands, as was mentioned earlier, there has been that loss of local autonomy in terms of the governance and stewardship of those lands. With that, we've come to a place where these community trustee boards are meant to be a proxy for that loss of local governance and decision-making. I do concur with the other statements here about the lack of decision-making authority. It does feel very much, just from a lived experience perspective, like a one-way communication flow. I do have to credit the organisers and facilitators of the community trustee board activities. They are phenomenal in terms of marshalling information but, as an example, there is no encouragement for us to talk to each other as community trustee boards directly.

The communication is mediated through this body and there is very little opportunity to bring forward proposals, for example, that can be proactively considered by the actual directors of the Trust. In order to get—for example, I've asked for specific reports on the allocation of urban farmlands in the Western Sydney Parklands to be presented. That was presented. But then the follow-through, in terms of we've taken the information—I've talked to other folks that I work with and organise within Western Sydney about what this means for food security in the community, and there just seems there's not really an apparatus to support community-led development projects that feature these types of public benefits.

Ms CATE FAEHRMANN: The last object in the Act says:

... to provide increased opportunity for community engagement to shape regionally significant parklands in response to diverse community needs.

It doesn't sound from the witnesses' evidence that it's meeting that object.

LINDA BERGIN: That's a very strange wording, "to provide increased opportunity for community engagement". Engagement is a very broad word. Engagement can mean a lot of stuff. I don't think that says a whole lot, frankly, in my opinion.

DOUGLAS BELTON II: I would add, to get really specific about the language, it's about delivering "for" public benefit, and I think therein is an opportunity for reflection and potential change. Going from "for" to considering how to manage and deliver the parklands with and by the public, which really—I think explicitly—shows the difference. Delivering for allows you to make some overtures or some kind of allowances for things to happen that don't necessarily materialise unless you're more explicit about what you're intending to do.

Mr MARK HODGES: Ms Bergin, you referred to Centennial Park and the development in Centennial Park. Can you expand further on that?

LINDA BERGIN: In December of this year the Greater Sydney Parklands awarded a \$550 million contract to a project manager. In fact, it was just a day apart from the golf course contract.

PETER WATTS: I think you mean \$550,000. You said "million".

LINDA BERGIN: Excuse me, I'm just nervous. Yes, a \$550,000 project manager to do the whole thing and then they intend to consult the community in February or March. There's no transparency around this. I used my computer background to dig it out, basically, and do a case study, which I put in my submission so that the Committee would be aware that this thing is on foot. It's pretty shocking. In fact, at least two former Centennial board members have told me that they didn't even like, at the time, the development of the present education centre, which is much more modest. It's small, and even that was controversial at the time. This is far bigger.

Mr MARK HODGES: So you're saying there was insufficient consultation?

² The Committee received [correspondence](#) from Ms Bergin clarifying this statement.

LINDA BERGIN: There was none. Well, there was consultation with the community trustee board, according to the minutes that I've read, on two occasions, but there's no specifics in there. I don't believe that some of those members were aware of the details of it. In fact, there was a mistake. The minutes said that they were going to contract with the designer for this thing. They didn't contract with the designer; they contracted with a project manager. That's much more. That's someone who takes the whole thing from start to finish. That is actually a misrepresentation—I don't know—in the CTB minutes.

Mr MARK HODGES: With respect to the community boards, you've indicated that the roles between the Trust and the community boards should be reversed. Is that what you said earlier?

PETER WATTS: What I'm saying is it seems to me that there is more expertise; there is certainly more local knowledge. There's more expertise, and potentially much greater expertise, on the community trustee boards, who are really interested in that local park, know that park extremely well and would have more opportunity to focus on a park than exists at the higher level board, where they're dealing with five different sites in different geographic locations, in different local government areas, with very different circumstances—different financial equations that apply, different circumstances in terms of what they're looking after from Fernhill, which is a rural environment, to something like Centennial Parklands, which is a very urban park. They're totally different. And then to Callan Park, which has got these massive historical buildings all through it. Those are very different circumstances, and they need a lot of focus.

I ran an organisation for government that ran lots of different sites, and I know the difficulties of running places where there are very different requirements. I did that by localising there, and I would say it was very effective. I'm talking about the then Historic Houses Trust of NSW, now called the Museums of History NSW. That was very localised, because the staff in the properties were empowered to act on behalf of the interests of that property, so you got responses to a whole lot of different circumstances which were local. It was very successful and very effective. You weren't applying a one-size-fits-all approach to the management of all these very different places, which happens in Greater Sydney Parklands. I'm not quite sure how the model would work—and I'd be very happy to give it further consideration—but I think some authority, if not considerable authority, and decision-making power should sit at a local level.

Mr MARK HODGES: Are you suggesting that what you've called the local level should be funded to perform that role? Presently the community trustee boards do it on a voluntary basis. Are you suggesting they should be funded?

PETER WATTS: I'm suggesting they should have considerable authority. It follows from that that funding would flow. I'm not suggesting for a moment that those people on the community trustee boards should be paid, just as I don't think there's any need for the overall board to be paid either. If you're talking about payment for people who are involved in decision-making, that's not something I would even contemplate. I'm talking about decision-making, to actually make the decisions about what should be happening on the ground. The issue I'm talking about—gutters or trees growing out of chimneys—no-one ever seems to make a decision. Well, send a fellow up there and cut the bloody tree down. It never happens. No-one ever seems to say, "Let's put a new gutter on," or, "Let's fix a hole in a roof." We all know that.

I'm not on a community trustee board, but I try to convey this to people who are: Can we not try to encourage the Greater Sydney Parklands Trust to do something about these things? It seems to be like pissing in the wind, to be perfectly frank. It's not heard. No-one seems to listen. Yet, on a community level, when I walk around that site every day, as I do, I just see these things collapsing and you think, "Why isn't someone doing something about it?" It's inconceivable to me. Yet we see \$1 million being spent on a new toilet block, which will probably win an architecture award. It's the most beautiful looking thing, but that's not what I think would be the priority. A local person would understand that.

LINDA BERGIN: I've got two emails to the official email of the GSP, both with significant—number one is about the centre for excellence in Centennial Park, and another one.³ I've gotten no reply. One is one month old and one is two months old. Not even an acknowledgement—I got no reply whatsoever. I know that's just a small thing, but—

The CHAIR: Please send us a copy of that. Please table them and we'll ask for a reply.

LINDA BERGIN: Yes, I've got them.

The CHAIR: Mr Belton, do you have any comments on this issue?

³ The Committee received [correspondence](#) from Ms Bergin clarifying this statement.

DOUGLAS BELTON II: What's the issue?

The CHAIR: The issue we're talking about is the relationship, I think, between the Trust and what we're calling the community trusts.

DOUGLAS BELTON II: Again, many of the comments that were made are consistent with my experience. I am of the belief that in a democratic society we should be striving for innovation and demonstrating ways to deliver on the spirit of that legislation, which seemed to call for greater local participation in parklands planning. Certainly, there are some deficiencies that we've talked about today in terms of delivering on that. I would encourage the Committee to really consider alternative models of parklands management.

There is some scholarship that talks about a mode of conservationism called fortress conservationism, which seems to be entirely focused or mostly focused on excluding humans from the space in order to maintain that pristine nature or an idea of a pristine landscape. I'm not at all discounting the importance of making sure that systems are managed in a way that preserves those parklands, but there is also an alternative mode of landscape management that might be called, in scholarship, convivial conservationism, which really focuses on the way that people and landscapes live together and the symbiotic benefit that can come from that approach. But that's a fundamental and probably philosophical underpinning to the legislative act that would be potentially quite different than what we see with the current Act.

The CHAIR: In terms of the discussion we're having, if I waved a magic wand and the community trustee boards were all abolished tomorrow, how would things be different?

LINDA BERGIN: Abolished?

The CHAIR: Abolished.

LINDA BERGIN: Probably wouldn't be any different.

DOUGLAS BELTON II: I wouldn't disagree with that.

The CHAIR: Dr Watts?

PETER WATTS: It's pretty clear that they are ineffective, not because they want to be ineffective but because they're not allowed to be effective.

The CHAIR: The point was, what do they actually do at the moment? Even though they're established for some purpose under the legislation, everything I'm hearing is that they don't actually have any functional role at the moment.

PETER WATTS: And yet they potentially have a huge role.

The CHAIR: If you abolish them in terms of what they're doing now, your evidence is that you don't think that—and I'm not advocating this. I'm simply saying from a functional point of view, even though they're established under the Act, their function is such that they're not actually achieving what maybe they could achieve.

PETER WATTS: They perhaps provide a glimmer of opportunity, but it's not much more than a glimmer because, at the end of the day, they have no authority. But they make, I suspect, GSP feel comfortable that they're communicating with their community, and it's just a one-way information exchange.

DOUGLAS BELTON II: I would temper that to say that I think the exchange of information is two ways, but the impact going back to the GSP is where it seems like there's a deficiency. I know that some of the conversations, proposals, things that I've tried to organise with other CTB members have actually, in a sanitised kind of way, made it back to the GSP in various forms. But, again, as was mentioned earlier, there hasn't been, other than Michael Rose attending one or two of the meetings that I can remember—

LINDA BERGIN: One.

DOUGLAS BELTON II: One, okay. So, from the Western Sydney Parklands, there hasn't been a whole lot of engagement beyond that. I've organised some conversations with some individual planners, but they've been unofficial, and they haven't really had any, as you said, functional kind of impact on decision-making at that board level.

LINDA BERGIN: Even the CEO does not—I think he's attended, across the three CTBs, one, maybe two. It's just the staff below the CEO, and one of those is the engagement person, and one is, I don't know, maybe a marketing person. All of this has to make its way back to the board in some form. What is that form? How does it make its way? Do these staff go back to the chief executive and give him a report? And then he goes to the board meeting, and he gives them a report? By the time it gets up to the board, I don't know what the board is getting.

DOUGLAS BELTON II: Much less the deliberation process—what's being deliberated and how it's being deliberated.

LINDA BERGIN: There are no board minutes.

Ms DONNA DAVIS: Thank you very much for coming in today to Parliament. My first question is to you, Ms Bergin. Thank you for your submission. I note your long-time involvement with the Harbour Trust and your comments about the review of the Sydney Harbour Federation Trust Act in 2001.

LINDA BERGIN: In 2019-20.

Ms DONNA DAVIS: The review of the 2001 Act by the Morrison Government in 2019. You may want to take this on notice, but I would be interested to know what are the elements of that Act that work well, that we should be looking to in this Act in New South Wales, given I know how hard you fought to keep New South Wales' mitts off the Federation.

LINDA BERGIN: Right. It's turned out pretty well, I think. Since 25 years the Harbour Trust has been going, and it's turned out really well except for one instance in 2014. They were going to build an aged care home on Middle Head, and that is a result of having not enough money and doing things in secret. That's what's going to inevitably happen to the GSP Trust, in my opinion. Now, as far as the Harbour Trust Act, the first thing is it has a vision statement, which the GSP Act doesn't have, right? There's no vision statement at all. It's much simpler. There are only five objects, not—how many?—20 objects and functions, so it's much simpler and it's just cleaner. I think it's a tight Act. This Act—they've made an Act on top of three other Acts, and then they had to amend the underlying Acts to match this Act. I find it very confusing and complicated, and I don't find the GSP Act legally tightly worded. I'm happy to take that on notice.

Ms DONNA DAVIS: That would be good. I'd also like to know about the funding model that is used by the Feds that we could potentially be looking at. What are the differences?

LINDA BERGIN: That was my idea 25 years ago. My idea was that they should—we were worried because Defence was going to sell it all off. That was a big, big threat. My idea was to adopt the model of the Presidio Trust in San Francisco. The way that worked, it's very similar. The government would give it all the money to rehabilitate everything, and then after that it would be self-funding. That was supposed to be the thing. The Harbour Trust never really got—they've gotten hundreds of millions of dollars. They're still short, but they still get a lot of money and, considering, they're doing pretty well. My suggestion way back then was as long as they had enough money to get all the assets up to scratch, including enough money to keep the assets up to scratch—the Harbour Trust has a lot of heritage buildings that you're never going to get rid of, so they do have the ability to generate income. I think it's working pretty well so far—with one or two hiccups, but it's working well.

Ms DONNA DAVIS: My next question is really to all of you. One of the things that has come out of today and yesterday is this relationship between—that we need to generate money. We need to be finding money to be able to keep our parks operating and opening and to restore our buildings and keep them functioning. Do you have any ideas, thoughts or considerations about what should be changed in the Act to actually allow this?

LINDA BERGIN: Yes. It should be put in the Act, basically, that Parliament should fund the GSP. Can it be in the Act? I don't know. I'm not an expert, but it would seem to me that parks are as important these days as schools and hospitals. They're critical, and they're getting more important. I live next to Headland Park in Barangaroo. I've watched it being built. I've gone there a lot, and it's already filling up. Parks are critical. They should be regarded as like schools, hospitals and other social infrastructure. I'm wondering why it can't be in the Act that the Government would fund these parks.

Ms DONNA DAVIS: Dr Watts, do you have any thoughts?

PETER WATTS: I completely, absolutely agree. I don't think I can add any more to that. It's already enacted in the Callan Park Act, which is the one I'm most interested in. It's just like any other government infrastructure. We can find tens of billions of dollars for freeways, motorways and so on, but we don't seem to be able to find tuppence ha'penny for our parks. I don't know how you legislate that. I have no idea how it can be. The Callan Park Act has prevented commercial activity from happening in Callan Park. That doesn't mean there aren't buildings within it that are capable of being leased, because there are lots of buildings and they need to find good uses. They need to be leased, and that might be able to be done on an income-earning basis. I don't see that as being particularly commercial. I think, fundamentally, these things should be funded by government. If there are parks within the portfolio of the five parks that are generating income, the one good thing about an overarching body is it has the opportunity to shift funding. If one is generating a lot of money, like Centennial Park, then it can shift money to one that is desperately in need of a buck. That's a very useful thing to happen.

Ms DONNA DAVIS: That doesn't currently happen?

PETER WATTS: No.

Ms DONNA DAVIS: But that is something you would propose?

PETER WATTS: That's right.

LINDA BERGIN: I agree.

Ms DONNA DAVIS: Mr Belton, one of the advantages of Western Sydney Parklands is it does have that ability to generate income because of operations that happen adjacent to and on land that is part of the parklands but is being used to generate income from other uses. Do you think that that is an effective model? Is it a good model? Is it something that we should consider in other parks? What has your experience been?

DOUGLAS BELTON II: I think the question of funding and finances should be tied to strategies of community wealth building. For example, Western Sydney Parklands is the biggest of the parklands. It's something like 5,200 hectares of land, or more. Within there, there's at least one business park. There are certain provisions made for the kind of commercial revenue-generating interest within the parklands that don't seem to be considered in the same discourse and conversation with some of the community benefit or public benefit aspects. They seem to be separated as a revenue-generating enterprise that then feeds into the general revenues of the parklands. Particularly around the Plan of Management 2030 within the Western Sydney Parklands, for example, there's quite a lot of focus on things like agritourism, which hasn't really materialised even though it's been on the books for a while.

It seems to me that the approach is to try to incentivise outside investors who might be looking at 30 per cent of the equity being extracted out of the value of a project back to investors. That could be retained for public benefit or local community benefit. For me, it's not a binary of do we have business happening on the parklands or not; it's about what kind of businesses. Is there a strategy in place to focus on how we enable local businesses and local social enterprises, for example, to be a fundamental component, if not a driving factor, in the type of development projects that are to happen? I see those as being related. By no means do I say that as a replacement for the idea of actually getting proper funding. I just think that the conversation, in terms of government funding allocations and budget allocations, should be inextricably linked to the project of community wealth building as well.

LINDA BERGIN: Could I enter a document into evidence? This is from the Western Sydney Parklands annual report. It describes how they do business hubs, which is exactly what the New South Wales Government is proposing to do. I could read it to you, but it's quite complicated in the way that they have to do these things. I don't understand why a parklands authority overall would have to do this. I could read it if you want.

The CHAIR: If you could table it for us and then we will incorporate it with the evidence that we receive.

Ms DONNA DAVIS: Sorry, Chair, could I have just one more question? It's for everyone, but probably to you first, Mr Belton. This morning we had the Australian Racing Drivers' Club come in here, and I asked how much they pay to lease the land that they have access to. One of the considerations that has been put forward by the GSP is to look at leasing arrangements and to increase the period that organisations can lease land from the Trust for. Do you have any views on that? Can you add to that in your experience, particularly in Western Sydney Parklands?

DOUGLAS BELTON II: Going back to the basis of public benefit, I think that the question of how long lease terms are negotiated for should be filtered through that question of what is the public benefit. Unfortunately it seems that there's a built-in assumption that if it's generating X amount of revenue then it automatically qualifies as a public benefit. I think that really needs to be critically assessed and rethought. For example, a lease term for, and I'm just throwing this out there, a community land trust that wants to do a community-led farming project—which is not very well provisioned for in the current Act and policies, as opposed to privateer farming models—might be longer than what's allocated for in the parkland. I think it really depends on a case-by-case, in my view, but the public benefit should be first and foremost in those considerations.

Ms DONNA DAVIS: I think that the proposal is that they would only need to meet two criteria for the Minister to secure an extension.

LINDA BERGIN: I think long leases are very dangerous. They go on too long. I would concur with AILA, the Australian Institute of Landscape Architects that testified yesterday, that you don't need more than 10 years. I know that the Harbour Trust—we've just amended that legislation—which is longer, leases are capped at 35. It can't ever go over 35. Anything over 25 has to lay before Parliament for disallowance. I thought that was a pretty good compromise.

The CHAIR: Could I just ask two questions and then I'll come back to you? You mentioned previously the Presidio of San Francisco. It's my understanding that that was a former military site which was created as a trust, and one of the requirements was to become financially self-sufficient. I was wondering, is that a model that we should be looking at?

LINDA BERGIN: That was the model for the Harbour Trust 25 years ago, but only after the Government gives it enough money to rehabilitate and enough money for ongoing asset maintenance. The buildings themselves, which are not going to be torn down, can throw off income. That worked for the Presidio and it would work for the Harbour Trust. But so far they haven't got enough money to finish everything they need to do. The GSP is different because Centennial is a mature park. Callan has a lot to do yet to rehabilitate its buildings.

PETER WATTS: A huge amount.

LINDA BERGIN: Fernhill is just getting started, and Western Sydney is a completely different can of worms altogether. I'm not sure really how to answer that, because they're not homogeneous. The Harbour Trust was kind of the same. They're all ex-Defence sites, all on the harbour and came online all at the same time, so they're similar.

The CHAIR: The other location that has been suggested to me in terms of its operation is the Royal Parks of London. It seemed to me that there are heritage archaeological constraints, and how they manage their funding for commercial uses alongside heritage uses would be worth exploring. I wonder if you have any information or comments on that.

LINDA BERGIN: I can take that on notice, if you like.

The CHAIR: That would be valuable, if you would.

PETER WATTS: I don't have any knowledge at all, but I would caution some warning. Having done a similar thing with historical buildings, you're looking at a completely different environment in the UK, with a very large population—both native population and visitor population. It's totally different from the experience we have here. I have no opinion about it; I just sound that word of caution.

The CHAIR: We're just looking at models; that's all, at the moment. But wise caution. If you would take on notice any information—

LINDA BERGIN: I will do my best. But as Dr Watts said, it may not be able to be something.

The CHAIR: It has just been suggested as a possibility.

Mr MARK HODGES: Can I just go back to the funding? I'd be interested to hear each of your views on this. When parks and gardens in local government areas are maintained, it's the council that pays for it, and they raise funds through their rates. Whilst each of the parks under the Greater Sydney Parklands Trust have different cultural heritage values to the whole of the state, they are used, to a large degree, by people in proximity—whether it be the various councils who adjoin the parks. Do you have any views as to whether or not the funding should be paid for by those people who live in an approximate geographical area to the various parks?

LINDA BERGIN: I'm not sure that that would be worth looking at. I'm not exactly sure, but Centennial Parklands is a national asset. It's important to everyone in Australia and also Sydney. I'm not sure that local funding of such an important asset would be the way to go, but it's a possibility, I suppose.

PETER WATTS: I have a broad philosophical view. The shared funding arrangement is a sensible one. It's about how it's apportioned between the state Government, local government and possibly the Commonwealth Government, but it's the state and local government in this circumstance. I think the Sydney Harbour Federation Trust is a good example of where the idea was there that it would become self-sustaining. I had the same issue when I was chairman of the National Art School. The Government said it would have independence but, within three years, it had to be self-sustaining. Every building was in a parlous state. There was absolutely no way that you could do it. The same applies at Callan Park. If all those buildings were brought up to a certain standard so that they were lettable and in good condition, I don't see anything wrong, in principle, with local government making a contribution.

However, I would also say that those parklands—I'll take Callan Park, which I know best. It is used by a very wide variety of people. It's not just local people. I see them there every day. They arrive in cars and so on. They come from all over Sydney. It's amazing. I think one has to be very careful and cautious to think these are just there for the local community. They are used very widely. I don't know about all of the others, but Centennial Park is clearly used widely, as is Callan Park. But, in principle, I don't see anything wrong with it; it's just, if you're suggesting it's 100 per cent, that's probably very difficult.

Mr MARK HODGES: I'm certainly not suggesting 100 per cent. I'm more interested in a shared contribution model.

DOUGLAS BELTON II: Thinking about it in the context of Western Sydney Parklands, for example, creative performance space can be difficult to access affordably. The reason I raise that is because when I think about a shared local government contribution, in my view, if it were to work, it would work best if it was tied to not just the contribution but to how some provisions or allocations are made within the parklands to accommodate affordable access for these various park uses that could be carved out or allocated for the benefit of local community members in specific ways. I personally wouldn't be averse to suggesting a contribution, but I would imagine that, for it to be effective and the right thing to do, it would be tied to some shared benefit, as I mentioned earlier.

The CHAIR: Ms Bergin, in your submission you stated—along with other stakeholders—that the Trust's financial reporting is incomplete and lacking in transparency. What should happen about that? For example, should the Act be amended to require consolidated financial reports to be prepared?

LINDA BERGIN: Michael Rose told me—because I didn't understand it at first—that the GSP doesn't own anything, doesn't pay for anything and doesn't get revenues on its own behalf. It doesn't have an annual report of its own. It's got these three. I've read every one of them and added everything up as well to try to consolidate it myself. I don't know. If it was consolidated, would that mean that—what I'm worried about is that they will get rid of the three underlying trusts and shift everything to the GSP. Then you could have an annual report, but what I worry about is that you then won't have any reporting about the expenditure and revenue for each. You won't be able to break the parks out anymore; it'll be in this one thing.

In terms of what they do now, they did this year in review for three years. Now they don't even do that anymore. They've turned that into what's called a "highlights video". They don't even publish this.⁴ The highlights video only has two numbers in it that flash by, so you can't really see it. They have one number in there for capital expenditure and then they have another number in there for capex improvements, programs and operational. That's it. They're the only two numbers. I added up all the annual reports and it sort of matched, but there really isn't that much.

The CHAIR: Do either of you have any comments?

PETER WATTS: I'm not familiar with the accounts, but it seems to me extraordinary that, for an authority, you can't pick it up and see quickly and easily what the expenditure is for the totality, let alone a breakdown. You'd expect a breakdown, in this case, between the five properties.

LINDA BERGIN: You can't.

PETER WATTS: It seems extraordinary to me that you can't do that.

LINDA BERGIN: They could still have a report. It wouldn't be an annual report, but they could take the three annual reports and make a report of some sort.

The CHAIR: Are you satisfied or happy with the current annual reports that are being done?

LINDA BERGIN: They're standard annual reports. I just have one question. There's a provision in the Act under "Functions" that states:

- (2) To avoid doubt, the Trust's annual reporting information prepared under the *Government Sector Finance Act 2018* must include a report about the Trust's performance of its functions, including its functions under subsection (1)(j) and (k).

First of all, the Trust doesn't have an annual report. It says "the Trust's annual reporting information", so you could read that to take the three. I looked in there and I couldn't quite work out where they complied with that. I'm not sure that I'm right, but I just wanted to flag that function number two is a bit strange. It would be good to have a report about the Trust's performance of its functions, including its functions under the Act.

DOUGLAS BELTON II: Just to add to that, in terms of not necessarily the financial component but in terms of some of the qualitative inputs—for example, feedback that was provided from the CTBs. I know certainly the feedback that I provided—and I recognise the need for it to be amalgamated with other feedback. But it didn't seem to really get to the crux of what the feedback was. I felt that there were, in terms of improvements to the reporting, some opportunities to improve the qualitative transparency of people's experience as functional elements of the Act.

⁴ The Committee received [correspondence](#) from Ms Bergin clarifying this statement.

The CHAIR: Thank you very much for bringing your expertise here today. It's very much appreciated. You will be provided with a copy of the transcript of your evidence for corrections. Committee staff will also email any questions taken on notice from today and any supplementary questions from the Committee. We really appreciate your time today. Thank you very much for contributing.

(The witnesses withdrew.)

(Short adjournment)

Mr JOSHUA FRENCH, Chief Executive Officer, Greater Sydney Parklands Trust, affirmed and examined

Mr JACOB MESSER, Director Operations, Visitors and Sport, Greater Sydney Parklands Trust, affirmed and examined

The CHAIR: Thank you for appearing before the Committee today to give evidence. Please note the Committee staff will be taking photos and videos during the hearing. The photos and videos may be used for social media and public engagement purposes on the Legislative Assembly social media pages and websites. Please inform Committee staff if you object to having photos and videos taken. Before we start, do you have any questions about the hearing process?

JACOB MESSER: No.

JOSHUA FRENCH: No.

The CHAIR: Would either or both of you like to make a short opening statement?

JOSHUA FRENCH: I'd like to thank the Committee for the opportunity to have Mr Messer and I here today, and for the process that you are conducting. Parks are the stage on which we live the life of the everyday, to play and connect with people and nature. As a city-wide parks agency, we are passionate about improving and growing Greater Sydney's parks and open space. We play an important role in managing and improving some of Sydney's most iconic parklands. We're a team of dedicated park experts driving to create a city of connected parklands, taking a metropolitan viewpoint while embracing local perspectives and empowering communities to help shape our parks and meet their needs now and into the future. We continue to partner with local communities and councils to understand and protect natural heritage that makes each park unique.

We balance this with the needs of our diverse and growing park communities, who increasingly live in higher density housing and rely on parks as their backyards to walk, exercise and meet with family and friends. The opportunity to review the submissions that have been presented has been very insightful and instructive for us in terms of how we're tracking and, since the commencement of our Act on 1 July 2022, it's clear where we need to focus our improvements and our efforts in environmental stewardship and advocacy for Sydney's blue-green grid moving forward. I would like to also acknowledge the support for funding parklands into the future in many of the submissions. We look forward to the final report and to continue to work with the Select Committee to ensure Greater Sydney Parklands are meeting its obligations.

The CHAIR: Mr Messer, do you have any additional comments?

JACOB MESSER: I do not, Chair.

The CHAIR: We move on to questions from our Committee members.

Ms CATE FAEHRMANN: Thanks for appearing today. Mr French, there has been a fair bit of feedback from witnesses that they think that the Trust Act is a reasonably okay piece of legislation in terms of what it was established to do and the objects, but the operationalising of it and the way in which the Trust is exercising its duties potentially don't appear to meet all the objects of the Act. What's your response to that?

JOSHUA FRENCH: I would say we're a young agency and we continue to implement the objects of the Act in stages. We started off with our consultation engagement framework and a number of strategic pieces that underpinned the corporate setting of our agency: our corporate plan, establishing the community trustee boards, and working across Greater Sydney as we work in the parklands estate. I think there is always room for improvement and we will continue to do so. Some of the limiting factors around funding, as that becomes more available, will also help us deliver on those.

Ms CATE FAEHRMANN: Is it a matter of resources, then? I'll ask questions about the functions under the Act as well. Have you submitted to Government that the GSP Trust's resources aren't sufficient for it to meet its objects?

JOSHUA FRENCH: It's not so much the resources aren't sufficient; it's just implementing in a staged process really thoughtfully and over time. For instance, I'd refer back to the consultation engagement framework. We needed to undertake that and then establish the community trustee boards to continue to grow in that space. While all government agencies will say they could have more resources, this is more around a planned approach to implementing in a really considered way over time, as well as some resourcing would assist in the future as we move to more areas. There were many actions in the Act that were mandatory and with time frames. We focused on those—for instance, commencing the preparation of the Callan Park Plan of Management and other requirements assessing the potential of four parklands estates to come into the agency. We've been addressing those with time frames in the Act, and then working on the others as well.

Ms CATE FAEHRMANN: In terms of legislative requirements, which was raised in the previous session, section 15 (1) lists a lot of functions. Then subsection (2) says:

To avoid doubt, the Trust's annual reporting information prepared under the *Government Sector Finance Act 2018* must include a report about the Trust's performance of its functions, including its functions under subsection (1)(j) and (k).

Firstly, the previous witness said that your annual reporting seems to have reduced in detail in terms of what that looks like from the Trust perspective. Secondly, where is the report about the Trust's performance of its functions?

JOSHUA FRENCH: The annual report frameworks are prepared under the guidelines provided by government. We prepare three annual reports, currently: one for Western Sydney Parklands Trust, one for Parramatta Park Trust and one for Centennial Park and Moore Park Trust. We're exempt at the moment from preparing one for Greater Sydney Parklands Trust from the framework because, at the moment, Greater Sydney Parklands Trust has no land nor meets the criteria to require a separate annual report preparation. The reporting standard has been consistent. We've followed government templates for those three annual reports that I mentioned, which we've been doing, and they're all publicly available on our website.

Ms CATE FAEHRMANN: To be clear, when you're saying the guidelines and being exempt, specifically which guidelines and where does that exemption sit?

JOSHUA FRENCH: They list which agencies are required to prepare an annual report. I can take on notice the guideline. I have a note here. I'll check it. But that list specifically lists that we are required to provide the reports for the three trusts that I mentioned at this stage. Then in the future I imagine we will be required to prepare one for Greater Sydney Parklands Trust.

Ms CATE FAEHRMANN: Despite what it says in the Act that created the Trust that you're the CEO of?

JOSHUA FRENCH: Yes.

Ms CATE FAEHRMANN: The Act that established the Trust that you're the CEO of specifically says "the Trust's annual reporting information", which pretty clearly pertains to the Greater Sydney Parklands Trust. Are you concerned that the Greater Sydney Parklands Trust isn't meeting its obligations under the Act?

JOSHUA FRENCH: The Greater Sydney Parklands Trust essentially acts as an umbrella Trust to the other three trusts that I mentioned. We have a Greater Sydney Parklands Trust Board, and those board members are members of all the underlying trusts. We understand this is complex to understand, particularly for some community members, because we do get asked this question. The four trusts that are operating do have separate requirements for reporting depending on what they pertain to. Essentially, because Greater Sydney Parklands Trust has no land and a very small budget and expenditure, it's currently not meeting those guidelines. So, for me, no, I'm not worried because everything is covered in the other three annual reports that I've mentioned.

Ms CATE FAEHRMANN: All right. Maybe that's, obviously, something we need to look at with the legislation.

The CHAIR: Are those other annual reports, which I've looked at, prepared on a consistent basis?

JOSHUA FRENCH: Yes, they are.

The CHAIR: So they're comparable?

JOSHUA FRENCH: Yes.

The CHAIR: If I put them all in front of me, I could see item 15 (c), item 15 (c) and item 15 (c)?

JOSHUA FRENCH: They are prepared from a similar template and comparable, yes. And we do include introductory text about Greater Sydney Parklands as an agency to guide and aid readers to make that more clear as well, the role of the agency.

Ms CATE FAEHRMANN: Just to come back to that original thing, even though there are three annual reports, do those annual reports—for example, does the Centennial Park annual report include any reporting against the performance of the functions of the Act?

JOSHUA FRENCH: It does, yes. It talks through and then highlights—and I should also just add one point. Because some of the parks are vested into trusts, the Centennial Park and Moore Park Trust annual report reports on Callan Park as well; Callan Park was vested into Centennial Park and Moore Park Trust as part of the creation of Greater Sydney Parklands. Wistaria Gardens is vested into Parramatta Park Trust, and Fernhill Estate is vested into Western Sydney Parklands Trust. Those reports cover off the parklands estate in those three areas, and then do talk to our performance as an agency in what we've delivered for the community in various areas of our expertise and expectations from the community.

Ms CATE FAEHRMANN: I might come back to that. I'll ask you a slightly unrelated question at this point. Are you aware of potential concerns, in terms of Callan Park, about the potential use of synthetic turf? Firstly, are you aware of the potential for that, and do you have any concerns of the installation of synthetic turf in a heritage landscape like Callan Park?

JOSHUA FRENCH: I am aware of the proposal, as it's being publicly discussed at Inner West Council meetings. We have yet to receive anything formal from council, and once we do, we will talk to them in more detail. I think we take an approach of looking at landscape and heritage values in all of our parks in the works that we do, and we will consider that once we are provided the information on that particular project.

Ms CATE FAEHRMANN: I have more questions, but I assume there'll be a second round.

Mr MARK HODGES: How many board members are there?

JOSHUA FRENCH: There's me and five others, but there are up to seven board members for the Greater Sydney Parklands Trust.

Mr MARK HODGES: Have you ever had seven board members?

JOSHUA FRENCH: We have, yes. Up until late last year, we had the full contingent of board members.

Mr MARK HODGES: When did you advertise for two more board members?

JOSHUA FRENCH: We are currently going through the process, working with government, on the recruitment of the additional board members, the two board members.

Mr MARK HODGES: All right. The question was when did you advertise for the additional two board members?

JOSHUA FRENCH: We have not yet advertised for the additional two board members.

Mr MARK HODGES: You haven't put it on a newsletter that you send out to people?

JOSHUA FRENCH: I will take that on notice. Sorry, I'm thinking from a recruitment perspective versus engagement for board member interest, so I'll take that one on notice.

Mr MARK HODGES: If your newsletter says that the applications are now closed for those two board members, what would you say about that?

JOSHUA FRENCH: Can I clarify? Are you talking about community trustee board members or Greater Sydney Parklands Trust board members?

Mr MARK HODGES: Greater Sydney Parklands Trust board members.

JOSHUA FRENCH: Just as a point of clarification, we have been advertising for community trustee board members publicly in our newsletters for each of the parklands. That has now closed, and we are now assessing those. I will confirm—take that on notice, but I suggest that this could be about community trustee board appointments.

Mr MARK HODGES: It may well be. We've heard a lot of evidence from people about the financing. Do you have any further comment that you wish to make about models to finance the Greater Sydney Parklands Trust?

JOSHUA FRENCH: I will say parks need funding. In the Act, it's already there as a sustainable funding model that Greater Sydney Parklands trusts can own supplementary land, of which we don't own at this stage. This is bought off the model from the Western Sydney Parklands Trust, where we have on-park business hubs. So that is in business hub land in Western Sydney Parklands, on 2 per cent of the parklands. The Act contemplates that we can own land not part of a parklands estate. So it could be totally separate in an industrial estate

somewhere, and we can do the same model that we have successfully implemented for Western Sydney Parklands, where we can lease it to private industry, and then the return for that then funds the parklands estate. This model, which is clearly outlined in the Act, would then support parklands estates that are unable to generate revenue to support their capital investment and the ongoing operational, which is actually the most critical funding, to keep the regular mowing, cleaning of toilets, delivering community programs, education and community events, and bush regeneration. For parklands, the supplementary land model in the Act—that's what we're working to achieve, and we're working with government on this model.

The CHAIR: Just before we move on from that, could you possibly provide us with some more detail on any legislative changes that you'd be proposing are required for that?

JOSHUA FRENCH: We have, in the New South Wales Government's submission, just identified some differentiation points around linking to the objects—particularly around environmental, as these are off-park, not part of the parklands estate—that the Committee may wish to consider as part of their deliberations to better support the implementation of that model.

The CHAIR: I note that on pages 17 and 18, you talk about the development of supplementary land. I'm just wondering if you have any more specific detail on actual proposals and restrictions on how that works.

JOSHUA FRENCH: Yes. I think working to achieve that model—so working within government, identifying surplus lands that might be available and working to transfer them to Greater Sydney Parklands—is something that we're working closely with government on. I do think, then, delivering and realising those, they will be part of Greater Sydney Parklands Trust. That's who will own them. Likely, when we have supplementary lands is when we will then commence the annual reporting process. But the Act then allows the distribution of those funds to the other three trusts. If Greater Sydney Parklands Trust has an ongoing income stream through the development and implementation of the supplementary land, the money can then be transferred to those other trusts, such as Parramatta Park Trust, to support the maintenance and capital improvements of that parkland.

The CHAIR: Is there a definition that you may have in your head about what supplementary land means?

JOSHUA FRENCH: It's defined in the Act, but, as I touched on, it is land separate; it's not for parkland purposes. It's not attached to a parklands estate. It's land within Greater Sydney but no direct relationship to the values or the work that we would do in a parkland, essentially. That's why we're suggesting the objects could consider that more further.

The CHAIR: Under that definition, it could be the koala colony at Wedderburn. I'm just wondering, is there something that says "this supplementary land, other than not being directly part of parklands"? What would it be?

JOSHUA FRENCH: We're looking for highest and best use for income. We're looking at, for instance, industrial land—similar to the model we've already got at Western Sydney Parklands—to bring in the revenue that's needed to support the parklands estate.

The CHAIR: Is there another legislative model that you're drawing on in terms of defining what "supplementary" is?

JOSHUA FRENCH: Not that I'm aware of. We have looked at global precedents, particularly when the Act was formed, in how we do. But we could look further to define that to assist the Committee, if required.

The CHAIR: It's just that it's almost circular, in terms of a definition, if it's not currently part of the parklands estate—and even if it is, it could be supplementary to the prime purposes. You cite the example of the Western Sydney Parklands industrial site development. Please take on notice—I won't labour the point, but I know that it's going to be a point of contention and I think we just need to clarify what it actually means.

JOSHUA FRENCH: Chair, I will just add one point. At Western Sydney Parklands it's defined as "on-park business hub", so we do use the word "on-park" and that's defined in the Act. In the Greater Sydney Parklands Trust Act it's defined as "off-park business hub" to support the definition of supplementary land. But I take your point on notice too.

Ms DONNA DAVIS: Thank you very much for being here this afternoon. Just touching on the board again, when are the terms for the current board members due to expire for the Greater Sydney Parklands board?

JOSHUA FRENCH: In September this year.

Ms DONNA DAVIS: This morning we had some questions around ongoing funding for Parramatta Park. There was a question raised about the car park on O'Connell Street and that it doesn't appear to require anyone to pay to use that car park seven days a week, only Monday to Friday. Is that correct?

JACOB MESSER: That is correct. We have a setting where we're getting utility income from Monday to Friday business users. We have a certain number of car park spaces available in the park that we try and meet the community need. We turn off the paid parking in the afternoon so that there is extra capacity post-work for people to enjoy the park without having the burden of a parking fee. Likewise on the weekend, which is our peak period, we don't charge for parking to come to the park. We see it as part of our offer that people can come to the park without paying.

Ms DONNA DAVIS: Do you have any idea how many people that access Venues NSW might be using that car park on the weekend and Friday nights?

JACOB MESSER: We do actually hire the car park for some of the games that Venues NSW hosts at CommBank Stadium, so there is a business relationship there that they hire it from us and pay us fees as well for that utility.

Ms DONNA DAVIS: This morning there was a question about the CMP for the Fernhill Estate, and that that hasn't been finalised yet. There was a mention of the First Nations component not being completed. Would you be able to expand a little bit on that for us, please?

JOSHUA FRENCH: We do have a draft conservation management plan for Fernhill Estate and we have undertaken additional Connecting with Country and First Nations studies to inform an update that we would do in the future. These draft documents were used to inform the foundation plan of management to 2026 for Fernhill Estate. Although in draft, they were pivotal in informing the plan of management, which was then consulted on in detail with the community and then adopted by the Minister, and we're working to that. What the plan would be, or consider to do, is that when funding becomes available for Fernhill Estate, we would then pick up the refresh and finalisation of the conservation management plan ahead of any significant investment. We do have a Fernhill Estate landscape master plan as well, in which we have identified key recreation, environmental and heritage projects. Again, as funding becomes available to implement that over time, we would look to finalise those documents.

Ms DONNA DAVIS: You mentioned in your submission, on pages 19 and 20, recommendations to increase the terms for leases and licences for Callan Park and Parramatta Park. Can you elaborate on that? What particular parts of Parramatta Park would that refer to?

JOSHUA FRENCH: We are looking for more consistency, or considered consistency that allows for that. At Parramatta Park we have heritage buildings which we had restored. We have gone to market and we have a mix of not-for-profit and commercial operators running businesses out of those heritage buildings. What we're looking for is that for some of the buildings that need some investment, there may be a requirement or worth considering longer terms that then allow a broader group of interested parties to come in and activate, restore and then ongoing manage those buildings for the community in line with the aspirations of what the community are after, and they can invest in those buildings. The adjustment to length of time of tenure may give a broader scope of people who are interested and able to invest.

Ms DONNA DAVIS: After a terrible incident several years ago where a lady lost her life, lighting was improved in one section of Parramatta Park. I know you've done a tremendous job to implement the most recent lighting in the park. But there is still a really big need to improve that lighting, particularly with the increased population around Parramatta Park and people that are wanting somewhere safe to be able to get home, particularly after visiting the city or coming from work at Westmead. Are there provisions? What are the hurdles that you are facing in actually implementing that next round of lighting?

JACOB MESSER: We partnered with funding through other arms of government—to Transport for NSW through the safer women and girls program. We had deep engagement with girls and women in the development of that program to really hear what they needed and wanted and to design a response to that. We would certainly, with further support from government, implement the complete loop and then the outreach to our connecting—such as the sports precinct, health precinct, the light rail and the swim centre that opened recently. Yes, it's certainly our intent, and we're looking for those funding opportunities.

JOSHUA FRENCH: It's a key project identified in *Your Parramatta Park 2030*, which is the conservation management plan and plan of management for Parramatta Park. Lighting is critical not just for safety, which is extremely important, but in a changing climate and a warm Western Sydney, people want to be recreating at night and walking around the park at night. We're really delighted that we have this first significant stage connecting Parramatta CBD to Westmead lit, and we've got more stages to come as the funding becomes available.

Ms DONNA DAVIS: I think a lot of people know my passion about expanding the park. I note that you do talk in your submission about the potential to be able to do that. Can you just talk us through what may be some of the changes that would be required in the Act to be able to achieve that? What are the benefits to

Parramatta and Western Sydney of being able to expand Parramatta Park to incorporate the area known as Parramatta North or some of that area?

JOSHUA FRENCH: The Act does contemplate estate expansion. We have prepared an estate expansion framework, which sets out the criteria for what would make a new park for Greater Sydney Parklands. It has criteria such as minimum size, multifunctionality and the ability to reach new catchments. That framework has been developed, and that's what we've used to assess the four parks that are listed in the Act. The report has recently been tabled in Parliament. Another consideration is adjacency. This would consider how you might look at parks, parklands or open space that are adjacent to the existing open space in the parklands of Greater Sydney Parklands that would support that.

The Act requires a minor change to mirror what's in the Western Sydney Parklands Act to allow for those parklands to be put into the Greater Sydney Parklands Trust, if that was the decision of government. As an example, for North Parramatta, if government made a decision on that, that could be vested into the Parramatta Park Trust, like Wistaria Gardens was vested into the Parramatta Park Trust, if that was the direction the Government looked to implement. However, I echo a previous comment: Funding is the most critical. We received 38 hectares of Callan Park, which is a great asset for the community of Sydney, without additional funding. We would like to advocate for funding with new parks or a model that is in the Act—the off-park business hub model—that would then support the estate expansion.

Ms DONNA DAVIS: Ms Bergin was here earlier today. She was talking about the experience of the Harbour Trust and that when the Act was established by the Federal government, they looked to the model in San Francisco and its—I have forgotten the name.

JOSHUA FRENCH: The Presidio.

Ms DONNA DAVIS: It was quite an interesting concept where, in San Francisco, government was responsible for bringing all of those structures—I'm not sure if it was just the structures or the landscape as well—to a particular standard before they were then handed over to the Trust. Is that a model that the GSP has looked at or would consider for this Act? Given the number of buildings in Parramatta North, I wondered whether or not that would be beneficial.

JOSHUA FRENCH: I have looked at the Presidio model. I know the former chief executive also looked at that when developing the Act. I have worked with the former chief park officer of Presidio to understand their model in detail. That is a very successful model. They also looked to our model at Western Sydney Parklands, in the discussions that I've had with them, as a model to achieve. This is a matter for government to pick up as to the opportunities that might look to the future.

Ms DONNA DAVIS: You have examined it. Are there any other models around the world that you've looked at?

JOSHUA FRENCH: London's Royal Parks have some innovative ways in which they work—not just funding. We look to our sister parks across the world for how they do everything—how they do operational excellence and community engagement—and that informed a lot of the work that went into the Trust. I'm on the large urban parks committee for World Urban Parks, where we often connect and talk about similar strategies and opportunities in this space.

The CHAIR: Could I ask three financial questions and then I'll come back to my colleagues, given that you mention that finance is one of the key issues. The first one is: You propose to add financial stability to the functions of the Trust under the Act. Could you outline why this change is needed? What impact could it have on the level of commercial development in the parklands estate?

JOSHUA FRENCH: We suggest this because it's critical to the business—financial sustainability. It's also aligning with many government policies around reporting and how you report financially on green infrastructure. There is the recent health and wellbeing framework and a lot of environmental reporting requirements that mean this could be a sensible option to consider. The other thing is that the ability for income generation that's appropriate can then support the parklands operations. I use Parramatta Park as an example again. The rents that we get from those leases from the cafes and not-for-profits do go in to support the ongoing maintenance. We think it's important to recognise that.

The CHAIR: The concern that has been raised is that this may increase the level of overall commercial development in the parklands estate. Is that a concern that people should have, in your view?

JOSHUA FRENCH: Look to what we're doing across the parklands estate as an opportunity to review that. As I've mentioned, the strategic planning documents that underpin the work that we do—the plans of management—set out what we can and can't do in the parklands estate. There are a number of planning

frameworks that support or address that concern. Moving forward, of course we could look further as to how that might be improved if that change was made.

The CHAIR: I might come back to that one. Stakeholders have expressed concern about further commercialisation and privatisation of the parks. What is the Trust's approach to determining the appropriate balance between encouraging opportunities for economic development while still ensuring that environmental values are protected?

JOSHUA FRENCH: I point back to the strategic documents—the plans of management—that support everything that occurs in the park. Many of the opportunities that you're referring to actually do support the activation and deliver on community need. For instance, people do want to access a restaurant and cafe at Parramatta Park, and the private industry is delivering that very successfully. That is underpinned by Your Parramatta Park 2030, which I mentioned earlier, which sets out the principles and management priorities that are possible in that park setting. Again, we would look to continue the model that we have, which is an individual model for each part of the parklands estate that we work through through that planning phase.

The CHAIR: As I said, I'm quickly running through a couple of questions that have been raised by other submissions. You propose enabling funds to be loaned between park trusts to assist with financial sustainability, support holistic parkland management and ensure that funding is available for essential and critical repairs and maintenance across the parks. That's on pages 8 and 17 of your submission. How would loans between trusts work in practice—for example, repayment of loans by parks that currently operate at a deficit?

JOSHUA FRENCH: Our understanding is that would be an interim arrangement. The submission does talk to critical asset repair. We're talking about the parks that need money spent on cracked footpaths and assets that are closed or pose a safety risk to the community. I imagine that we would develop or we would consider a policy that would then set up the arrangement for that in the future, when the off-park business hub model is realised. This would be the opportunity for paying back loans. We would also continue to advocate—Jacob mentioned the Safer Cities lighting in Parramatta Park—where we work through grant programs or our partners in state government for funding. This may also be an opportunity to look to that in the future.

The CHAIR: Who would underwrite the loans?

JOSHUA FRENCH: We're saying in the submission that they'd be considered by the GSPT board.

The CHAIR: So you'd underwrite them?

JOSHUA FRENCH: They would be coming from existing funds that are in the Greater Sydney Parklands.

The CHAIR: But it would be moved from one trust to another.

JOSHUA FRENCH: That's correct.

The CHAIR: What if they defaulted?

JOSHUA FRENCH: For example, if the Western Sydney Parklands Trust loaned the Parramatta Park Trust a modest amount to repair critical asset repairs, and you're asking if the Parramatta Park Trust defaulted on that payback—I'll take that one on notice. We're just contemplating the policy setting.

The CHAIR: I'm exploring; I'm not being critical.

JOSHUA FRENCH: The policy setting would need to outline that process—how it works and how they are paid back.

The CHAIR: I'm just wondering whether there would need to be a provision for it to become a grant as opposed to a loan.

Mr MARK HODGES: It's probably similar to councils loaning between contribution plans.

The CHAIR: Yes.

JOSHUA FRENCH: Which is possible.

Ms CATE FAEHRMANN: Looking at the Greater Sydney Parklands corporate plan document, the strategic priorities 2023-24 says, "The critical success factors we need to get right over the next two years are"—and the third critical success factor is:

Prepare to expand the parklands estate through efficient, effective and scalable operations, and to support the NSW Government's housing agenda

What does that mean?

JOSHUA FRENCH: That is the estate expansion framework that I mentioned. Under the Act, the four parks that are identified for assessment as potential Greater Sydney Parklands parks are Millennium Parklands at Sydney Olympic Park, Chipping Norton Lake, Lake Gillawarna and Mount Annan Botanic Gardens. That specific priority was around preparing the framework for that assessment, undertaking those assessments and then finalising a report, which has recently been completed. That framework will then also be used for any future assessments that we may be asked to look at from government.

Ms CATE FAEHRMANN: Where it says, "and to support the Government's housing agenda"—for that to be a strategic priority of the Greater Sydney Parklands this year, what does that mean? I'm just really trying to pick that apart.

JOSHUA FRENCH: For instance, if the Government decided that a new park around south-west Sydney to support its housing delivery targets—the one that's listed in the Act is Chipping Norton Lake and Lake Gillawarna. If the Government decided that that was one to expand into the portfolio of Greater Sydney Parklands, that would directly be related to the housing agenda, particularly in the South West Growth Area.

Ms CATE FAEHRMANN: Where did that come from? Did the Trust board work out these strategic priorities for the corporate plan? Who wrote the document?

JOSHUA FRENCH: The Trust wrote the document with consultation from the Trust board. Those strategic priorities have been updated for 2025 onwards, so there are five; they've been slightly refined to the ones that you're talking to. The Trust board provides strategic input into that corporate plan.

Ms CATE FAEHRMANN: What's the annual funding provided from government for the GSP?

JOSHUA FRENCH: Can I just clarify—for Greater Sydney Parklands Trust or for the four trusts?

Ms CATE FAEHRMANN: Yes, sorry. The Trust. The government agency, as established under the Act, that we're reviewing, which is the agency that you are head of—the Trust. What government funding does it get?

JOSHUA FRENCH: We look at the government funding across the four trusts because they all have a direct relationship. Currently Greater Sydney Parklands Trust does not get direct government funding but the other three trusts that sit under the umbrella Trust do.

Ms CATE FAEHRMANN: To get a clear handle—I feel like if I was the Minister that had the Greater Sydney Parklands Trust reporting to me, I'd be reasonably frustrated at this point. How do you report to the Minister the operations of the Trust? You've got a corporate plan as well, you're a government agency and you've been established. If you're saying that there's no financial reporting—I can see that that's exempt when I look at the Auditor-General's audits; that's fine. But even, for example, reporting against this corporate plan, where does it—

JOSHUA FRENCH: There's internal reporting within the department. The agency—the four trusts—

Ms CATE FAEHRMANN: So you report to—

JOSHUA FRENCH: We do report. Sorry, I thought you were referring—so just to clarify, we don't produce an annual report for Greater Sydney Parklands Trust but we do report within government regularly, like all government agencies, on budget performance based on the budget that is allocated to each of the trusts.

Ms CATE FAEHRMANN: So you're still your own organisation with your own staff doing things like a corporate plan with a board. That reporting, are we able to see that, please, as this Committee? Are you able to table the reports, say, for the last couple of years that you have provided to the department in terms of your activities and reporting against various—it's frustrating for us because we can't see anything.

JOSHUA FRENCH: Greater Sydney Parklands is the agency and the people, and we administer and work for the four trusts—Greater Sydney Parklands Trust and then the three trusts under that.

Ms CATE FAEHRMANN: I know, but we're assessing the Act that's established you as an organisation.

JOSHUA FRENCH: Exactly, as the umbrella.

Ms CATE FAEHRMANN: Regarding the blue-green committee, there's obviously been a lot of feedback from community groups, particularly environmental groups and heritage groups, that the blue-green committee has not been established despite the Act obviously saying that the Trust may establish one. Why not?

JOSHUA FRENCH: Our actions in the blue-green grid area have been on projects adjacent to or within our parklands—connecting people to our existing parklands estate and working with local councils on key projects such as the Queens Park Cycleway at Centennial Parklands. At the moment, we're delivering an active transport link through Western Sydney Parklands that connects the M12 and the M7 cycleways. We've been working at that

level. We've also been thinking about the strategic level and, as I mentioned before, prioritising those requirements in the Act and focusing on the essential ones with timeframes and working to deliver the others over time.

Ms CATE FAEHRMANN: Is there anywhere that the reporting against, for example, to advocate—the blue-green committee, if it was established, was to advocate for a long-term vision for an outcome of quality parklands across Greater Sydney, particularly connectivity of green corridors. Are there any reports that you are reporting against those goals, for example? Does the Trust have a strategy or a plan for connectivity across the—

JOSHUA FRENCH: Across the full parklands estate at this—

Ms CATE FAEHRMANN: There's the full parklands estate but I think the Act is quite clear in that it was more than that. The Act is quite clear if you read the second reading. This is, again, what this Committee is here to do. It's to advocate for a long-term vision and that connectivity. I suppose the community wants to know, if work is being done within the Trust itself, what that work is exactly.

JOSHUA FRENCH: We are not reporting on that—in a formal sense, I think is what you're asking—but we would look to in the future.

Ms CATE FAEHRMANN: It sounds like you don't think that a blue-green grid committee is necessary?

JOSHUA FRENCH: That's not what I'm saying. The blue-green grid committee is something we will look into, and the potential to establish, under the direction of the Government.

Ms CATE FAEHRMANN: Regarding the community trustee boards, there's been a lot of feedback as well about those. Take the example of the Centennial Park community trustee board, which we had the pleasure of meeting late last year, I think. They meet four times a year, for a total of six hours—because it's 1½ hours—and feedback is that essentially they get presented with something and they have maybe 15 minutes at the end to comment. It seems as though it's very tick a box rather than genuinely being able to feed into anything. What's your feedback or response to that? I'm sure you've heard it before.

JACOB MESSER: I think there was also a reference to the previous structure that was at Centennial Park—the community consultative committee.

Ms CATE FAEHRMANN: That's right.

JACOB MESSER: It's a similar structure. I would observe that the current CTB, as described by the Act and then enabled by the engagement framework, is a more powerful community opportunity in that the chairs of the CTBs can and should, in fact, drive the agenda of what they hear from Greater Sydney Parklands. That agenda is then co-developed over the year ahead. There was also a mechanism that GSP facilitated last year of doing an internal survey about the performance of the CTBs that the members themselves commented on, and we have co-developed an improvement plan for 2024-25 for both the CTBs and GSP on how we can improve the functions of the CTB and how we can improve GSP's relationship with the CTBs.

We acknowledge the opportunities for improvement and we're certainly looking to implement those, but I think it's a step up from the previous structure that was described in the Centennial Park and Moore Park Trust Act, and certainly empowers the CTB to drive the program and how we engage as GSP with them. Certainly, also each CTB operates differently under the guidance of the chair. Some do meet in between those meetings to enable cross-fertilisation of ideas and agendas, and others don't. But, again, that's up to each individual CTB to put into place. We're a facilitator of those business relationships and development of agendas.

Ms CATE FAEHRMANN: I'm not sure, looking at the Act, where I can see that the activities of the community trust boards are driven by the chair, who's appointed by the Minister. I'm not sure where that's come from.

JACOB MESSER: I'll take that on notice, if I could. At this point, that's understood.

Ms CATE FAEHRMANN: Yes. It's an interesting take. We had Ms Bergin raise with us the expenditure of \$10 million to \$15 million on a potential new discovery centre, which would appear to not have had any community consultation and seems to have come out of nowhere. What is that? Where's the process up to? Why isn't that more public after a start?

JOSHUA FRENCH: We call it CEND, the Centre for Excellence in Nature Discovery. It's identified in the Centennial Parklands Master Plan 2013, for which a significant amount of community consultation was undertaken. We have a world-class education program run out of Centennial Parklands and we now run that across the parklands estate, of which there's already an education facility that needs upgrading. At the same time, we have a very active community-led Centennial Parklands Foundation, who have been looking for other ways to fund community projects. They made a significant contribution and led the Wild Play discovery garden at

Centennial Parklands, the delivery of that. This project, which is in our strategic planning documents, has been identified as one that they would like to champion. We're in the early stages. We've only just started the project planning, so there is a long way to go with this project. It is unfunded and we've just started the process, or we're at the very start of it. We will be talking to the community and stakeholders in great detail, as we do with all of other projects, when we have progressed some work on this, which at the moment is realising something from just a master plan document at this stage.

Mr MARK HODGES: Can I go back to the blue-green grid committee? It's not clear. You have not established the blue-green grid committee as yet. Is that correct?

JOSHUA FRENCH: That's correct.

Mr MARK HODGES: As the Act makes a discretionary decision for the Trust as to whether the Trust will establish it, what considerations has the Trust taken into account when deciding whether to establish that committee?

JOSHUA FRENCH: We haven't made a decision to establish it or not. We have done a lot of pre-planning work and investigation of what the blue-green grid committee could look like. We have spoken previously, including discussions with the board, about governance arrangements, so we have actively started the investigations of that and in detail looked at what it could be and the benefits that a committee like this could bring. That work has been underway. We just haven't moved to the establishment phase yet.

Mr MARK HODGES: When did that work commence?

JOSHUA FRENCH: It's been happening over the last—more than a year.

Mr MARK HODGES: What was the last type of work done to further the progress of section 12, which is establishment of the committee? When was the last thing you did on it?

JOSHUA FRENCH: We have heard from the community in submissions, and we've started to revisit that planning work that we did, just to inform our thinking of which we will then take direction from the Government if, out of this Committee, is something that should be progressed.

Mr MARK HODGES: One of the considerations this Committee has is whether to amend the Act to make it mandatory that it be established. Are you able to provide us with more information regarding what stage this is at, and what you have actually done?

JOSHUA FRENCH: We have just prepared a background report that has a number of options of what essentially are the potential outcomes for what a committee could do. We haven't prepared any work around the establishment of a committee, so we would need to do some work on that, like we did when we established the community trustee boards where we have terms of reference, structures and all publicly facing documents. We have not looked—we are not in that stage. We're just in the pre-investigation.

Mr MARK HODGES: In respect to the community trustee boards, we've heard a lot of evidence about those board meetings and we've been told, I think, some of the meetings take 60 minutes and they're not given copies of the agenda prior to the meeting. Can you expand on the process of those meetings and whether the community trustee board members are provided with the agenda before the meeting?

JACOB MESSER: I would have to take that on notice, specifically about the agenda. Papers are prepared, distributed, but timing I wouldn't be confident about advising the Committee on. As I said previously, the agenda is co-designed and we have a calendar for the year ahead of what would be on the agenda, so the CTB members can see that and influence that.⁵ That can also evolve over the year, depending on strategic priorities and issues arising within government or within GSP itself, so that's a fluid thing. But, yes, they're presented with papers and, depending on what the agenda item is, that might be seeking strategic advice, or it might be informing.

The CHAIR: Can I just confirm, is there a requirement anywhere that says that the agenda items need to be provided X number of days before a meeting?

JOSHUA FRENCH: The terms of reference for the committee covers off the requirements. The agendas are modified depending on the committee's requirements in terms of what might like to be brought through. One committee, for instance, is interested in development applications in the surrounding parklands or adjacency. One is particularly interested in correspondence matters or key issues and themes, so the agendas have been modified

⁵ The Committee received [correspondence](#) from Mr Messer clarifying this statement.

on advice of the community trustee board by the chair in many instances. To carry on from Mr Messer's point, they are worked through with the chair and provided, too. We'll confirm that time frame to you on notice.

The CHAIR: Taking the point being made by my colleague made, it is a matter of procedural fairness. If you're asking people to make decisions, it needs to be provided.

JOSHUA FRENCH: Yes.

The CHAIR: I'm not being critical. I'm simply asking, is there a provision? Then we can talk with you about whether there needs to be a provision, that's all.

Mr MARK HODGES: Apart from giving the community trustee board members an agenda, are they given papers or emailed reports or business papers prior to meetings?

JOSHUA FRENCH: Each one is different. Each committee has a different requirement, so we work to the needs of those. It really depends on the agenda items and what's on them and what each committee is looking to talk to. Each of them is then provided with any presentation packs and the outcomes of those meetings as well.

The CHAIR: They are legal trusts. I use the term "legal trusts", but in terms of the general understanding, so there would be obligations in the common law as to what is required as well as legislation.

JOSHUA FRENCH: And each community trustee board has its own terms of reference, which is on the Greater Sydney Parklands website.

The CHAIR: Yes, and the members are responsible for their actions.

JOSHUA FRENCH: Correct—the code of conduct and all the standard requirements for a government board.

JACOB MESSER: If the Committee was interested in seeing the improvement plan to see that interplay between the community trustee board and their own reflection on their performance and our performance, then we could table that.

The CHAIR: Yes, please. I think that would be useful.

JOSHUA FRENCH: Now that they've been active for two years, that has really informed this improvement plan so that we can address matters that are arising.

Mr MARK HODGES: Are the community trustee board meetings open to the public?

JOSHUA FRENCH: Yes.⁶

Mr MARK HODGES: Is the public given notice in advance of the time, date and place of the meetings?

JOSHUA FRENCH: The dates are published on the parklands website. Some that I've been to come as observers to the meetings.

Mr MARK HODGES: Where are the meetings held?

JOSHUA FRENCH: It's a mixture. Some of them are locational, for instance, the Fernhill Estate one. We tried it at Penrith City Council, and we now have it in a function room close to Penrith train station. The Parramatta Park one is held at our office in Parramatta. The Centennial Park and Moore Park one is held at the Moore Park Golf club function room. Looking at the requirements of the committee and working with the board, we have located those venues. There are also some meetings that are held online. That's at the discretion of the board if they want all face to face or online. They have a mixed model.

Mr MARK HODGES: And they're held—is it four times each year?

JOSHUA FRENCH: It's four times a year, but as we touched on before, there are often other out-of-session meetings if there's a particular project or interest. At the request of the committee, we do hold additional meetings.

The CHAIR: I might continue with some of my financial questions. These are matters that have been raised with the Committee in evidence, and that's why I'm asking them—to get your comments on them. You proposed changes to the current requirement for leases or licences with a term of 10 years or more to go through

⁶ The Committee received [correspondence](#) from Mr French clarifying this statement.

an open tender process. Can you please talk more about why the current provisions can be overly restrictive and on your proposal to enable direct dealings?

JOSHUA FRENCH: They do provide some restrictions, but not totally. We have successful examples of leasing across the whole parklands estate under our current framework. What we're talking about is minor improvements and modifications. The first one—I've touched on some of this earlier in the Committee discussions today—is where we have a significant amount of heritage buildings, for instance at Callan Park, that do need investment for heritage restoration and adaptive re-use. Our understanding from some of our experiences is that this limits the applicants that will submit, because they may not have the funding to support that as well as do their own fit-out and as well as operate their own business.

The other matter, Chair, that you mentioned is more around where we have not-for-profits in the parklands estate. For instance, we have some at Western Sydney Parklands. We also have agreements with other government agencies, like the Office of Sport, who occupy the equestrian centre in Western Sydney Parklands. The opportunity for concession for those where, at the moment, the requirement is to go back out to market. They are asking us about that and what that means for their businesses.

The CHAIR: There's a difference between a licence or a lease for a hot-dog stand and for a racing car speedway. What is the difference in terms of the obligations on implementing this proposal for 10-year leases or more?

JOSHUA FRENCH: There's a framework setting. We have a policy setting from the property services team directorate in the agency which sets out the requirements. Each Act, as well, has specific requirements for the parklands estate and then the New South Wales Government procurement requirements. There's a whole heap of statutory requirements we're required to follow through a process and an assessment process. We're not proposing to change that. We're just looking for opportunities to help with some of those matters that I mentioned. For the others, we have an existing very transparent framework.

The CHAIR: One of the concerns—and I'll leave it to my colleagues to clarify this if I've got it wrong—is that extending leases beyond 10 years has been raised as a concern. Counter to that, obviously, is that for significant expenditure by a community organisation, you actually need a lease of longer than 10 years. This is why I go back to my differentiation between a coffee cart as opposed to a speedway. Do you envisage there being a differentiation between those in terms of the 10-year rule that you're proposing?

JOSHUA FRENCH: We would look to investigate that further, if the opportunity arose, as to how you would ensure the values of the parklands estate are met. There are already some requirements, particularly on the years that are identified in the various Acts. We would look to revisit those if needed. If there was a change made to that, we would go to an expression of interest. Each expression of interest for a particular property that we were to take to market would respond to the strategic planning setting. For instance, at Callan Park, the current leasing arrangement documents that will go out for an asset in that parkland would address all those requirements in that public process.

The CHAIR: I might come back to that one later on. Could you talk about what work the Trust has done to create additional interconnections between green spaces to expand the total footprint of the parkland estate? I know that you've mentioned this already, but I'm just wondering if there is a document or something that you could provide us with?

JACOB MESSER: We do have biodiversity strategies in place. Each park is obviously a very different scale. Parramatta Park would have 10 hectares of ecological endangered community. There isn't an opportunity within the plan of management and the balancing of values and uses to grow that within the park itself, but we work within the catchment—working with Parramatta council, the catchment authority and like agencies—to make sure that connectivity works at a catchment level. Whereas a park such as Western Sydney Parklands, which is 25 kilometres long—a central theme of its plan of management is that over 36 per cent of it will be a continuous, contiguous green corridor.

It's all about connectivity and all about reaching out to connect to the surrounding lands, creek lines and waterways et cetera. Each year we create about 30 hectares of bushland revegetation restoration work within Western Sydney Parklands. So far in the active management of the Western Sydney Parklands Trust, the estate has grown from about 1,000 hectares to about 1,500 hectares. That's really, under the plan of management, looking to grow to 2,000 hectares. It's a central pillar of our work within the parklands to grow that and connect it to the other biodiversity areas. The biodiversity strategies themselves, of course, describe where the priorities are, how to connect significant remnants and less significant remnants and create this future continuous corridor.

The CHAIR: In terms of that—and I won't hold you to the percentages—how much of that would involve easements and the transfer of land that are currently easements held by the Government? I'm thinking of water—

JACOB MESSER: Sorry, can I clarify, easements such as—because the parkland is also significant from infrastructure and providing easements to Transgrid, water and gas et cetera. Are you asking to clarify, Chair, does that 36 per cent—is it contained within the easements itself?

The CHAIR: Yes, I'm talking about the potential transfer of easements, particularly as part of this interconnectivity. We had a discussion about this yesterday. For instance, in 2025, needing to have an endless, huge area required for the transfer of water from one area to another which—if it was undergrounded—was raised. That whole easement could then become part of a land transfer, which would be part of that whole blue-green connection that we were talking about. How far have you gone with that so far?

JACOB MESSER: We're certainly working with those peak infrastructure agencies. In the example of the M12 and then the development of significant water infrastructure to service the South West Growth Area being driven by Sydney Water, the three agencies worked together to combine our works, reprogram and end up with a single program that undergrounded the Sydney Water works and then allowed the Western Sydney Parklands Trust to build the Wylde BMX and mountain bike hub in that same area so that infrastructures lying in corridors next to each other—we're getting the outcomes under the plan of management we need while facilitating this greater community good that other agencies are driving for the Government agenda. The infrastructure itself sits outside of that land. The infrastructure, save for Transgrid, which is a main—there can't be bush under the high-intensity powerlines. That's a different portion. But we have thought, and over time, opened up discussions, around how we could get greater biodiversity outcomes at a ground-plane level, at a grasslands level, even though we can't grow mature trees under the powerlines. That's definitely a long-term aspiration.

The CHAIR: Ms Cate Faehrmann, you may wish to ask questions about First Nations?

Ms CATE FAEHRMANN: I will as well. Going back to your corporate plan where you have something about staffing on page 21. It says 30 per cent permanent staff focused on core business and 70 per cent contractors, lessees and outsourcing. Are those figures and stats in relation to the Greater Sydney Parklands Trust, or is that in relation to the Trust and all of its assets in terms of all the different parklands?

JOSHUA FRENCH: The corporate plan is the Greater Sydney Parklands' corporate plan as an agency. That outlines that the agency is responsible for the Greater Sydney Parklands Trust, the Western Sydney Parklands Trust, the Parramatta Park Trust and the Centennial Park and Moore Park Trust, and also the associated relevant Acts.

Ms CATE FAEHRMANN: So that staffing breakdown of 30 per cent permanent staff and 70 per cent contractors is across the—

JOSHUA FRENCH: Across the agency.

Ms CATE FAEHRMANN: Thank you, I just wanted to clarify that. One of the objects of the Act is on First Nations involvement. It's very clear it's to facilitate a connection to Country for First Nations peoples. Part of that also reads:

... establishes long-term and mutually beneficial partnerships that give effect to the ongoing relationships of First Nations peoples with Country.

From your perspective, is the Trust meeting those objects? If so, how is it doing so?

JOSHUA FRENCH: The agency has an established heritage and culture team that works with First Nations custodians and communities for the work that we do. The agency also has a reconciliation action plan that was developed after it was formed. Then we have specific projects, which we work across the agency in delivering and working through community on our projects. One example at the moment is a saltwater community conversations program where we've spoken to 30 First Nations community members on informing planning and design initiatives that the agency is working on.

Ms CATE FAEHRMANN: That sounds good. I've just found the Reflect Reconciliation Action Plan 2023. It's good to know that's there. Some of the feedback is it's been difficult to get First Nations people's active involvement in the community trustee boards. What can be done to help facilitate and improve that?

JACOB MESSER: I suppose that's one of the learnings that, while there is representation on each of the CTBs, the cultural draw on Aboriginal people who are investing in these kinds of processes is significant. While we outreach to try to facilitate that with those members, it's difficult for them because they're servicing a whole lot of programs, including things much bigger, say, national programs like the Voice et cetera. We are definitely alive to the difficulty and thinking about how we might continue to build those connections and also broaden the catchment of those people who are involved, to spread that load somewhat.

Ms CATE FAEHRMANN: Do you have the existing board make-up? Is there any First Nations representation on there?

JACOB MESSER: On each board there is a First Nations—

Ms CATE FAEHRMANN: Sorry, on the Greater Sydney Parklands Trust board?

JOSHUA FRENCH: Yes, there is. On the Greater Sydney Parklands Trust board there is a First Nations landscape architect as a board member.

Ms CATE FAEHRMANN: That's good to hear. We've also had discussions about the potential change or amendment to the Act to mandate that as a requirement in the make-up of the board. It's good that's the case anyway.

Ms DONNA DAVIS: One of your recommendations is to amend the terms of the Parramatta Park Trust Act and the Act for Callan Park to extend the maximum term of all leases to 50 years, and also to amend the leasing and licensing provisions within the Callan Park Act to require consistency with the objects of the Act, section 6 (5). We heard earlier today about the model adopted by the Harbour Trust, which is 25 years with an additional 10-year maximum, but that needs to be taken to the Parliament to be confirmed, for want of a better word. Is that something that you had explored in putting forward this proposal, or did you just do 50 years because that's already what was in the other parks?

JOSHUA FRENCH: It's a New South Wales Government submission, not just the agency submission, where there was a cross view taken across agencies, particularly with the recent discussions around the botanic gardens legislative amendment, which changed that. It was looking across what's happening in other government legislation as well as recent discussions. But in terms of what is the ideal number, we would be open to talking further about how you come to that and what that means.

Ms CATE FAEHRMANN: We had a submission from somebody who was particularly concerned about the caring for wildlife in the parks. Given that so many, particularly Western Sydney Parklands and Centennial, of course, are such a refuge and haven for so much biodiversity, the suggestion that she had was for a dedicated ecologist perspective, potentially, on the board. I think there were concerns that when there is an injured animal—for example, a swan or a duck in Centennial Park with something that needs attention—that WIRES usually has to be called for that. Has the board considered improving their services in that regard? We could potentially look at legislative changes for this as well.

JOSHUA FRENCH: I'll answer the board question and then pass to Jacob for the operational response. The Minister must consider under the Act a skill set for the appointment of board members, so that is already covered in terms of environmental and conservation management, along with heritage, along with park management skills, along with governance and property.

Ms CATE FAEHRMANN: I think she was being a bit more specific in terms of wildlife biodiversity and ecology.

JOSHUA FRENCH: The board, with the agency, leads the preparation of the biodiversity strategy that Mr Messer talked about, so they have a direct influence in informing the strategy. Each of the plans of management for the parks also talk in more detail at a local level about what that requirement is. That's the policy setting, of which the community inputs into them as well as the board. There is a direct connection from the board into the plans that support the park. Mr Messer can give an operational perspective.

JACOB MESSER: The reference you made, Ms Faehrmann, is to the 30-70. Part of that 70 would be WIRES. We can't do everything ourselves, so we partner with expert wildlife carers et cetera. They are the peak body. We're about the biodiversity and creating the safe refuge. Looking at the absence of hollows, we've got a program to go and drill holes in trees, which is quite innovative—to develop hollows where there aren't any. Obviously our work on flora supports biodiversity for the fauna area. The expansion of quality diversity and the expansion of the Western Sydney Parklands revegetation program, of course, creates additional habitat and connectivity within the parklands and without. We would see that we're focusing on our core business, which is creating the right environment for wildlife to live, and then we bring in for care, if there is an adverse event, the experts in that, with that skill set.

Ms CATE FAEHRMANN: To be clear, do you pay WIRES? When you're saying the contractors, with the 70 per cent—

JACOB MESSER: No, sorry, WIRES are not a contractor. The 70 per cent represents skills, not contractors.

Ms CATE FAEHRMANN: You're relying on WIRES to come in.

JACOB MESSER: Yes.

Ms CATE FAEHRMANN: That's a very informal relationship. The people in the park finding the poor swan with the broken wing phone WIRES. I've got it here that they're told just to phone WIRES.

JACOB MESSER: We do have a ranger overlay at Centennial Park, and it's 24 hours a day. They are reporting incidents et cetera.

Ms CATE FAEHRMANN: But they phone WIRES as well.

JACOB MESSER: Yes, that's right. It's not about passing it off just to the community; our team are constantly monitoring the park and, if something happens, reporting on that.

Ms CATE FAEHRMANN: The other point that this submission makes is in terms of having somebody with more—it says environmental management, but somebody that is an ecologist or has an understanding that the need to protect and conserve biodiversity isn't just the existing parklands, it's that 50-year vision, which is the connectivity for the species. Centennial Park is a haven, but where's the connectivity to other green parts of Sydney and beyond? That's what that's about. I think that's what a lot of witnesses have said is missing in what seems to be the current operation of the Greater Sydney Parklands Trust, with the greatest respect.

JOSHUA FRENCH: Yes.

The CHAIR: Thank you both for appearing before us today. You'll be provided with a copy of the transcript of your evidence for corrections. Committee staff will also email any questions taken on notice from today, and any supplementary questions from the Committee. I thank you for your offer of a further discussion, should the Committee request it, after considering the evidence that we've received. We'd be grateful for that. Thank you very much. That's the end of our hearing.

(The witnesses withdrew.)

The Committee adjourned at 16:00.