

ACT Budget Bulletin 2020-21

Introduction

This bulletin provides a summary of ACT Council of Social Service (ACTCOSS) responses to the 2020-21 ACT Budget announced on 9 February 2021.

The bulletin summarises key announcements for community service organisations and Canberrans on low incomes and facing disadvantage. It also includes a list of measures about which ACTCOSS will be requesting more information. Lastly, it highlights gaps that are not addressed in this Budget.

In summary, ACTCOSS believes that the delayed 2020-21 ACT Budget fell short on the investments and vision required to ensure Canberrans facing disadvantage were protected as the ACT emerges from the COVID-19 crisis.

The Budget includes pre-announced measures of \$15.8 million to extend funding introduced during COVID-19 for mental health services, \$2.6 million for housing and homelessness services, and new commitments for Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander communities.

ACTCOSS welcomed budget measures including \$37.6 million to improve building efficiency and sustainability for social and public housing, low-income owner-occupiers and rental properties; \$900,000 for a Palliative Care ACT Respite Hub pilot; \$1.2 million to extend COVID-19 tenancy relief until 30 June 2021 for residential landlords who reduced rents by at least 25% for tenants who have been impacted by COVID-19; and \$4.9 million from 2020-21 to 2023-24 to continue to implement the recommendations of the Our Booris, Our Way review.

While we welcome these investments, the 2020-21 ACT Budget is most notable for what is missing.

This Budget includes major commitments on infrastructure, including light rail and climate change initiatives, but does not include any additional money to implement the commitments in the Parliamentary and Governing Agreement to increase social and affordable housing.

The ACT's housing crisis is worsening. Yet this ACT Budget will provide little comfort to Canberrans trying to keep a roof over their heads.

This is a missed opportunity. As the ACT recovers from the COVID-19 health and economic crisis, higher investment in housing delivers a high benefit. For every \$1 million invested in social housing, GDP is boosted by \$1.3 million.¹

We are deeply concerned that this ACT Budget funds some services for only one or two years. This means organisations, their staff and their clients have no future certainty. This contributes to high rates of anxiety and staff turnover and makes the work of the community sector very challenging.

The Health Justice Partnership, a successful service that supports new parents experiencing domestic and family violence, is only funded until the end of June 2021.

More broadly, we are disappointed to see that investment in community services does not appear to be part of the ACT Government's strategy to emerge from the COVID-19 health and economic crisis.

For example, we would like to have seen more investment in community-based early intervention services that prevent people from entering the justice system.

There is a social inclusion statement, yet it is little more than a shell. There is little new spending in this Budget directly targeting vulnerable and disadvantaged groups, including people with disability, older people and carers, despite these people being among the most impacted by COVID-19.

The health care and social assistance sector is one of the largest and fastest growing industries in the ACT as we try to meet the needs of a rapidly expanding and diverse population and an increasing population of older Canberrans.

We are struggling to meet demand, particularly following COVID-19. In the most recent National Survey of Community Sector Workers, 58% reported that poverty and disadvantage had increased among the people accessing their services; 84% reported demand in the community either 'increased' or 'increased significantly'; and less than 4% reported that they were completely able to meet demand.²

The community sector also makes an important economic contribution. For every \$1 a year invested in childcare, we can achieve an annual GDP increase

1 KPMG, *Social Housing Initiative Review*, Housing Ministers' Advisory Committee, September 2012, p. 2, http://www.nwhn.net.au/admin/file/content101/c6/social_housing_initiative_review.pdf

2 Disaggregated ACT data provided to ACTCOSS by ACOSS from national survey. National data available in *The profile & pulse of the sector: Findings from the 2019 Australian Community Sector Survey*: <https://www.acoss.org.au/community-sector-policy-publications/>

of around \$5,³ and community service organisations in the ACT make a contribution of \$2.2 billion to the ACT economy.⁴

One ray of hope is the Knowledge Capital – Future Jobs Fund announced in the ACT Budget. As a growing sector, and a major creator of jobs and economic growth, we urge the ACT Government to ensure that the needs of the health and community sector are included in the Future Jobs Fund program.

Key announcements

Note: all page numbers refer to the Word version of [ACT Budget 2020-21 documents](#).

Supporting the community services sector

- \$1.40m from 2020-21 to 2023-24 for a **Technology Upgrade Fund** for the Community Sector (Budget Outlook 2021, p.81).
- \$100,000 in 2020-21 to fund an **extension of the Refugee, Asylum Seeker and Humanitarian (RASH) program** to support ACT Services Access Card holders (asylum seekers) through the RASH Coordination Committee (Budget Outlook, p. 81). This is for one year only.

Cost of living, financial hardship and poverty

- \$1.2m from 2020-21 to 2021-22 to **extend COVID-19 residential tenancy relief** until 30 June 2021 for residential landlords who reduce rents by at least 25% for tenants who have been impacted by COVID-19 (Budget Outlook, p. 77).
- \$52,000 in 2020-21 for the **Canberra Relief Network to continue** to operate until the end of 2020-21 at Exhibition Park in Canberra (Budget Outlook, p. 80).

Affordable housing and homelessness

- \$2.6m for the **ACT's housing and homelessness services** to: expand the Early Morning Centre to a seven day per week service (\$300,000 from 2020-21 to 2021-22); increase emergency support and accommodation to OneLink to provide tenancy and client support services for people

3 J Dixon, *A comparison of the economic impacts of income tax cuts and childcare spending*, Centre of Policy Studies, Victoria University, October 2020, <https://australiainstitute.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/A-comparison-of-the-economic-impacts-of-income-tax-cuts-and-childcare-spending-WEB.pdf>

4 Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), *Australian National Accounts: State Accounts, 2014-15*, ABS, 2015.

experiencing homelessness or at risk of homelessness (\$450,000 from 2020-21 to 2021-22); provide additional funding to ACT Shelter to provide systemic advocacy in the housing sector following cuts by the Australian Government (\$700,000 from 2020-21 to 2023-24); and provide funding to Mackillop House and Winter Lodge services and expand the Axial Housing service (\$1.2m from 2020-21 to 2021-22) (Budget Outlook, pp. 93-94).

- \$1.56m from 2020-21 to 2023-24 for **identified staff positions for Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people** in the ACT to work towards the establishment of an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Community Controlled housing organisation (Budget Outlook, p. 93).

A just Canberra

- \$529,000 from 2020-21 to 2021-22 to provide **additional staff to administer the Victims of Crime Financial Assistance Scheme**. These additional resources will help ensure the scheme continues to provide critical support to the victims of crime in a timely manner while a review of the administration of the scheme is finalised (Budget Outlook, p. 96).

Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander self-determination

- \$4.857m from 2020-21 to 2023-24 to **continue to implement the recommendations of the Our Booris, Our Way review**. This initiative will support the operation of an independent Implementation Oversight Committee, which will monitor progress against the recommendations. The ACT Government will continue foundational work to grow the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled sector focusing on children, young people and families. The initiative also provides ongoing funding for improved frontline services, including Family Group Conferencing, Family Finding, embedding the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Placement Principle and cultural expertise within Child and Youth Protection Services (Budget Outlook, p.80). While this funding is welcome, it is long overdue. Some recommendations from the Our Booris, Our Way review are almost three years old. We also await to see a breakdown of how this funding will be spent.
- \$425,000 from 2020-21 to 2021-22 to support **detailed design work for the new accommodation for Gugan Gulwan Youth Aboriginal Corporation**, as part of its commitment to ensuring that Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander families have access to quality services and support to meet their cultural needs (Budget Outlook, p. 80).
- \$317,000 from 2020-21 to 2021-22 to provide funding to the Office for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs to develop a governance structure for a **Healing and Reconciliation Fund**. This initiative will also support facilitation of community conversations about the opportunity for and implications of a Treaty process for the ACT, an early project to be supported by the Healing and Reconciliation Fund (Budget Outlook, p. 80).

- \$2.448m from 2020-21 to 2023-24 to provide **ongoing employment for six Ngunnawal Ranger positions** to focus on natural resource management, land, fire, water, wildlife and ecological management. The Rangers will undertake field programs, research, policy development and visitor interpretation in a range of disciplines, providing the opportunity for Ngunnawal engagement and self-determination (Budget Outlook, p. 86).
- \$1.56m from 2020-21 to 2023-24 for **Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander housing**. The ACT Government will establish two identified positions for Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander staff within Housing ACT. These staff will be dedicated to the establishment, in close partnership with the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Elected Body, of an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Community Controlled housing organisation to support housing access for Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander peoples (Budget Outlook, p. 93).

Climate and energy

- \$104m has been allocated from 2020-21 to 2023-24 as part of a \$150m fund for the **Sustainable Household Scheme** to offer zero interest loans of up to \$15,000 for households and not-for-profit community organisations to assist with the upfront costs of investing in: rooftop solar panels; household battery storage; zero emission vehicles; and efficient electric appliances (Budget Outlook, p. 78). ACTCOSS will be advocating for these loans to be targeted at Canberrans who face disadvantage and who are on low incomes. We also await further details of the loan support scheme for not-for-profit community organisations.
- \$37.605m from 2020-21 to 2023-24 for **Vulnerable Household Energy Support** to improve building efficiency and sustainability for social and public housing, low-income owner-occupiers and rental properties. A provision has also been established for the balance of the \$50m fund (including \$12.462m in 2024-25) (Budget Outlook, p. 87).
- \$3.75m from 2021-22 to 2023-24 towards the [previously announced](#) \$5m **Building Energy Efficiency Upgrade Fund** to deliver grants and no-interest loans for energy and water efficiency upgrades, rooftop solar and batteries for community clubs (Budget Outlook, p. 85).
- \$855,000 from 2020-21 to 2023-24 to support the development of a **long-term plan for the phase out of gas use in the ACT**. This includes funding to develop legislative amendments to prevent future gas connections in residential greenfield and urban infill developments. It also covers projects that will advance all-electric infill developments (Budget Outlook, p. 86).
- \$250,000 in 2020-21 to **implement the recommendations of the Independent Competition and Regulatory Commission** to make it easier for ACT consumers to get better electricity deals by improving the transparency and comparability of retail electricity offers (Budget Outlook, p. 95).

- \$5.154m from 2020-21 to 2023-24 towards **waiving registration fees on newly purchased new or second-hand zero emission vehicles** registered during May 2021 to June 2024 for the first two years of their registration. This measure includes \$4.454m in revenue forgone. The ACT Government will also establish a fleet advisory service to support Canberra businesses and community organisations transitioning their fleets to zero emission vehicles (Budget Outlook, p. 88).

Community infrastructure

- \$8.856m from 2020-21 to 2023-24 for **road and community infrastructure** which provide improvements to road and cycling infrastructure, and playground and recreational infrastructure, as well as waste, public toilet and library facilities (Budget Outlook, p. 102). This initiative is funded by a Commonwealth *Local Roads and Community Infrastructure* grant. It is unclear what proportion of this funding will go to recreational infrastructure, toilets, and libraries.
- \$2.52m in 2020-21 for **feasibility and design studies for infrastructure and upgrades** in the next four months to develop a pipeline of shovel-ready proposals for future consideration (Budget Outlook, p. 100). It is not clear if this will be informed by, or includes funding for, a community facilities needs analysis.

A human rights jurisdiction

- \$2.4m from 2020-21 to 2023-24 to **support the ACT Reportable Conduct Scheme to better meet existing demand**. The scheme is a child protection measure designed to ensure allegations of abuse and misconduct by employees of institutions are identified, reported and acted on appropriately by their organisation. Ongoing support of the scheme will be substantially offset against funding already provisioned. Due to an offset of \$2.34m, the net cost of services is \$45,000 (Budget Outlook, p. 77).

Children, young people and families

- \$105,000 in 2020-21 to **extend the funding to the Canberra Rape Crisis Centre and Domestic Violence Crisis Service** to provide critical supports in responding to cases of domestic and family violence (Budget Outlook, p.81). This is for one year only.
- \$159,000 in 2020-21 to **continue the Health Justice Partnerships program**, which places legal help in maternity and early childhood services across the ACT to offer early intervention and support in domestic and family violence cases, primarily to pregnant women and new families (Budget Outlook, p.81). This is for one year only.
- \$2.928m from 2020-21 to 2023-24 to **increase the number of weeks offered to priority families accessing early childhood learning** for three-

year-olds, from 40 to 48 weeks per year. This increase will align with the annual operating period of most ACT early childhood education and care providers. Due to an offset of \$2.928m, this measure has zero net cost (Budget Outlook, p. 83).

- \$3.156m from 2020-21 to 2023-24 to provide **funding to continue to deliver the successful Adolescent Mobile Outreach Service (AMOS)**. AMOS is a community-based mental health outreach service that provides assessment treatment seven days a week for adolescents aged 12 to 18 years. Due to an offset of \$3.156m, this measure has zero net cost (Budget Outlook, p.89).

Better health

- \$20.46m from 2020-21 to 2023-24 to ensure a **safe and efficient rollout of the ACT of the COVID-19 vaccine** (Budget Outlook, p. 90).
- \$6.53m in 2020-21 to fund **acute medical, birthing, and non-elective surgery services at Calvary Public Hospital Bruce** (Budget Outlook, p. 89).
- \$908,000 from 2020-21 to 2021-22 to **fund four beds in Palliative Care ACT's 'Leo's Place' respite hub** to support Canberrans with a life-limiting illness and their carers. The facility will also provide a place for families and carers to access resources and support, including coordinating access to relevant services. Due to an offset from the Health Funding Envelope, the net cost of services will be \$300,000 (Budget Outlook, p. 92).
- \$16.63m from 2020-21 to 2023-24 provisioned in the August 2020 Economic and Fiscal Update will be released to **undertake critical electrical building services infrastructure upgrades to Building 10 at Canberra Hospital** that will support critical pathology and clinical research services. Due to an offset, the net capital cost will be zero, leaving \$441,000 in depreciation costs (Budget Outlook, p. 92).
- \$10.9m from 2021-22 to 2023-24 to include **outpatient imaging services at the Weston Creek Walk-In Centre** including ultrasound, X-ray, and computed tomography (CT). (Budget Outlook, p. 91).
- \$2m from 2020-21 to 2021-22 to undertake feasibility and site selection work for **four new Walk-In Centres** in South Tuggeranong, West Belconnen, Inner South, and North Gungahlin offering a combination of walk-in and appointment-based services. Feasibility will include site assessment, consideration of new models of care, and community consultation (Budget Outlook, p. 92).
- \$832,000 from 2021-22 to 2023-24 to establish a **new Walk-In Centre in Coombs**, co-located with the National Health Co-op GP clinic focusing on maternal, child and family health. It is on track to be opened on 1 July 2021 (Budget Outlook, p.92).

- \$2.390 (\$441,000 offset – Health Funding Envelope) from 2020-21 to 2023-24 to **extend mental health programs and services funded by the COVID-19 Mental Health Support Package** in May 2020 (Budget Outlook, p. 91).
- \$14.129m (\$12.195m offset – Health Funding Envelope) from 2020-21 to 2023-24 to continue the seven-day-a-week operation of **the Police, Ambulance and Clinician Early Response (PACER)** program until 2024 (Budget Outlook, p. 91).
- \$3.156m from 2021-22 to 2023-24 for **Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS)** to continue to operate the Adolescent Mobile Outreach Service to improve care for vulnerable young people and increase the availability of existing services supporting young people under the age of 18 who have moderate to severe mental illness. Due to an offset of \$3.156m through the Health Funding Envelope, the net cost of services is zero (Budget Outlook, p. 89).
- \$655,000 [previously announced](#) to **increase mental health support for young Canberrans with highly complex needs** who are at risk of mental illness. This investment supports the work underway to deliver an Adolescent Mental Health Unit by September 2022. Commitment of money not explicit in the Budget papers and this will be followed up with the ACT Government. However, this is a welcome first step towards addressing a significant service gap. This funding includes: scoping for a multidisciplinary service to support young people with complex needs who experience mental health challenges alongside trauma, disability, and/or drug and alcohol abuse; and scoping for an intensive trauma service for adolescents built on the Melaleuca Place model to support recovery and positive behaviour for 13 to 17-year-olds who have experienced childhood trauma, including abuse or neglect (Budget Statement C, p. 4).

Measures requiring further consideration

ACTCOSS will be requesting more information on the following initiatives to determine their impact upon and value to the community sector and Canberrans on low incomes and facing disadvantage.

These include:

- \$2.103m in 2021-22 on early works design to raise London Circuit; an enabling project for light rail Stage 2A (Budget Outlook, p. 98). Construction of Light Rail to Woden is part of a \$14b ACT Infrastructure Plan.
- \$2.3m from 2020-21 to 2023-24 to establish a Better Regulation Taskforce to review the current business environment in the ACT and begin pursuing reforms to support Canberra's recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic and long-term economic growth. The taskforce will also lead the ACT's contribution to nation-wide regulatory reforms. Due to an offset of \$1.984m, the net cost of services is \$329,000 (Budget Outlook, p. 68). A priority area in the Community Services Industry Strategy 2016-26 is reduction of red

tape. ACTCOSS will inquire into the inclusion of the community sector in the Better Regulation agenda.

- \$145,000 in 2020-21 to establish a taskforce in the health portfolio to conduct a feasibility study into insourcing work currently sub-contracted to external parties (Budget Outlook, p. 91). ACTCOSS seeks more information and assurance that this is not to an agenda to insource services delivered by community service organisations.
- Funding has been allocated to develop policy and legislation to support the introduction of \$5 bet limits and \$100 load-up limits on electronic gaming machines (Budget Outlook, p. 96). ACTCOSS welcomes limiting load-up to \$100 but supports the [Canberra Gambling Reform Alliance](#)'s call to introduce \$1 bet limits.
- Eligibility for Building Energy Efficiency Upgrade Fund grants (Budget Outlook, p. 81) for energy and water efficiency upgrades, rooftop solar and batteries for community clubs should be tied to the surrender of gaming machine authorisations and other gambling harm minimisation activities (as under previous ACT Government measures).
- \$9.027m from 2020-21 to 2023-24 for equal remuneration order (ERO) funding increase for Community Organisations and Development of Evidence Base for Future Funding Decisions (Budget Statement G, p. 25). ACTCOSS will clarify activities under the 'Development of an Evidence Base for Future Funding Decisions' and ongoing sector sustainability.
- \$2.434m in 2020-21 to support more Canberrans to Park and Ride (Budget Outlook, p. 251). ACTCOSS seeks clarity regarding alignment to broader planning and transport agendas, including the need for a needs analysis in community infrastructure and transport.
- \$15.80m from 2020-21 to 2023-24 to extend mental health programs and services funded by the COVID-19 Mental Health Support Package in May 2020 (Budget Outlook, p. 91). ACTCOSS seeks clarity as to what in this package is re-announced funding from the May 2020 [announcement](#).
- Canberra Health Services has recognised that an ACT-wide palliative care service, commencing with the design of a new palliative care ward at Canberra Hospital, is a 2020-21 priority. It has committed to partnering with service providers to commence design (Budget Statement C, p. 33). ACTCOSS supports calls for an enhanced palliative care service that provides dedicated medical, nursing, and allied health staff with consumers and carers included in the design process.
- ACT Health Directorate has reduced its targets for Strategic Indicator 1.1 – Improving the Mental Wellbeing of Canberrans (from >90% in 2019-20 to >60% in 2020-21) and Strategic Indicator 1.2 – Improving the Health Status of Canberrans (from >90% in 2019-20 to >55% in 2020-21) noting '[t]his target has proven to be unrealistic given the prevalence of mental health and other conditions (for example cancer and diabetes) in the community' (Budget Statement C, pp. 5-6). ACTCOSS seeks clarity as to why these

targets have been changed rather than addressing the causes of poor outcomes for Canberrans.

- Community Services Directorate has identified a 2020-21 strategic and operational priority is to increase the permanency and stability for children and young people on long-term orders in out of home care through increased Enduring Parental Responsibility and Adoption orders (Budget Statement G, p. 5). ACTCOSS seeks more information on this policy and how it will impact families engaged with the child protection system, and the goal of keeping families connected.

What's missing

- Commitment to **land transfers to Community Housing Providers for the provision of affordable housing** and new funding injections for **public housing** to support full implementation of the ACT Housing Strategy and commitments under the Parliamentary and Governing Agreement.
- A commitment to long-term financial sustainability for the community services sector including funding to support **Community Services Industry Strategy** 2016-26 implementation.
- Major investment in **tertiary health services to meet demand**. While there are a number of investments towards Walk-In Centre services, we would be keen to see more investment in improving access to tertiary health care.
- Funding for a **disability and health strategy** to address barriers to access, diagnostic overshadowing and critical health service gaps for people with disability.
- Funding for **early intervention approaches** to prevent people coming into contact with the justice system.
- Ongoing funding for the **Justice Health Strategy**.
- Continued funding of the **Utilities Hardship Fund** and no commitment to continue to provide the Utilities Concession to eligible Asylum Seekers after 2020-21.
- Funding for the **ACT Planning Strategy**; for a transport needs analysis; and a community infrastructure needs analysis; and improvements to decaying community infrastructure. While there is some funding for roads and physical infrastructure, there is a lack of investment in community development resources.
- Measures which support **social inclusion for people with disability**. While there are some ongoing measures such as the \$3.2m for the Disability Justice Strategy, continuation of the office of Senior Practitioner, the NDIS integrated response and \$2.25m in 2020-21 for disability access compliance in schools, there is no funding for a Disability Health Strategy, Universal Housing Design and the National Disability Strategy.

- Funding targeting **older Canberrans**. Measures absent include specific funding for transport for older Canberrans, increased investment in Age-Friendly Suburbs (paths and pathway infrastructure) and funding for IT training and equipment for seniors, especially given the need to engage online with health providers, service providers and government services during the pandemic.
- Funding for the **ACT Carers Strategy**.
- Funding for the implementation of the *Crimes (Offences Against Vulnerable People) Legislation Amendment Act 2020*.
- Funding for investment in mental health supports for children – particularly in their middle years.
- Funding for evidence-based work with separated families including early intervention counselling, as the numbers of separating families increases. There is only a mention of services specifically related to domestic violence.
- Funding to support families of people with disabilities.

ACT Council of Social Service Inc. | Weston Community Hub, 1/6 Gritten St, Weston ACT 2611
Ph: 02 6202 7200 | actcoss@actcoss.org.au | www.actcoss.org.au

ACTCOSS is committed to reconciliation, acknowledges the traditional custodians of the land and pays respect to elders past and present.

ACTCOSS advocates for social justice in the ACT and represents not-for-profit community organisations.

Initiative of

