

ACTCOSS Statement on Commissioning: August 2023



The community sector exists to serve the needs of Canberrans who experience poverty and disadvantage in our community. The community sector provides services and support, as well as input into Government policy making and program design. The sector works cooperatively to implement programs effectively and efficiently, informed by evidence, organisations and individuals with lived experience. The sector is open to opportunities for improvement to ensure better outcomes for all Canberrans. As the peak body for the community sector, ACTCOSS advocates for a just and equitable ACT, with a fair share of resources within the community and for the community sector that supports it.

In 2021, the ACT Government began a ten-year period of reform of the human services system known as [Commissioning](#). The aims of these reforms are “to ensure the [human services] system meets the needs of Canberrans, particularly those experiencing vulnerability or disadvantage”. ACTCOSS sees the goal of commissioning to be better outcomes for community members and a smooth and accessible process for community sector organisations.

As the process of commissioning unfolds, there will be opportunities for all parties to learn and improve future stages and iterations of commissioning. The Government’s annual Listening Reports are one way of doing this over the medium term, and they are welcomed. Additionally, it is important that lessons be learned quickly, from one sub-sector to the next for rapid, iterative improvement. Over the long term, the success of commissioning will depend on how well early mistakes are corrected and early lessons are learned.

ACTCOSS’ ROLE IN COMMISSIONING

Commissioning is a paramount priority for ACTCOSS. ACTCOSS occupies an influential position in the commissioning process and is uniquely equipped to help distil and communicate lessons that will improve commissioning. The ACT Government recognises the important role peak organisations should play in the commissioning process. The ACT Government prioritised the commissioning of peaks so that they could act as critical friends to Government and advocates for their members through subsequent commissioning processes. As a leading representative of the community sector in the ACT, ACTCOSS is well positioned to act as a trusted and robust adviser to the Government, advocating for systemic improvements to commissioning and related processes. ACTCOSS also has the opportunity to be a champion of reform within the community sector, enabling it to articulate and harness the opportunities and minimise the risks of commissioning.

ACTCOSS has [clearly stated public positions](#) on Commissioning that were developed in consultation with members. ACTCOSS’ role in commissioning is to:

- i. ensure, to the extent possible, that commissioning leads to outcomes which benefit people experiencing poverty and exclusion in the ACT
- ii. actively elicit the views of members about commissioning, listen closely to all participants, and distil themes and trends with a view to enhancing processes
- iii. represent sector views to Government

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- iv. work in partnership with Government to contribute constructively to commissioning processes, advocating for practice from all stakeholders that aligns with the shared [commissioning principles](#), and
- v. make sense of commissioning for all ACTCOSS members, especially for smaller organisations.

We are committed to the principles of collaborative, relationship-focused engagement built on trust, and open dialogue. We welcome feedback from all stakeholders, including organisations within the community sector and the ACT Government, about how we can progressively improve how we contribute to commissioning. We recognise that change is challenging for both the sector and Government – but also presents an opportunity to improve how we address the wellbeing of all Canberrans.

It is not possible for ACTCOSS to be engaged in all commissioning activities. ACTCOSS will be most effective when operating at a strategic, systems level. We work with members and other peaks, seeking their views, to stay across significant issues and challenges the community sector is experiencing through their engagement with the processes. We aim to pay specific attention to systemic biases in the commissioning process, which can dampen or miss the voices of smaller or niche organisations, end-users of services, and sub-sectors without specific peaks. In turn, this can limit areas of subject matter and lived experience expertise, biasing the information pool on which decisions are made. In many cases, we rely on member organisations letting us know where challenges exist so that we might communicate these with Government in a timely and effective manner.

The ACT Government has developed important channels for the community sector to provide feedback on the commissioning process. ACTCOSS plays a role in supporting the ACT Government to better understand the views of the sector. Some community sector organisations have concerns that they do not wish to make directly to the ACT Government during commissioning processes, concerned that frank advice could jeopardise their outcomes in procurement processes. Additionally, some community organisations are involved with commissioning across multiple directorates and attempting to maintain or enhance their relationships with the ACT Government but finding it difficult to navigate the different sub-sectors. With our breadth of membership, ACTCOSS is well-positioned to provide both strategic and specific concerns to Government.

ACTCOSS recognises that the sector will have differing and varied experiences with commissioning processes, and we do not aim to represent all these experiences. We do not advocate on behalf of any individual or community sector organisation. We are aware of the risk of perceptions of conflicts of interest, especially when cycles move to the *Invest* phase of the process. In summarising the views of the community sector for Government and other stakeholders, we are mindful of potential conflicts of interest.

As the commissioning process unfolds, different opportunities for improvement will emerge or diminish in importance. ACTCOSS will keep abreast and harness these opportunities as outlined by our members and Government. We welcome the opportunity to work with the ACT Government to address these challenges and ensure that commissioning is effective and leads to better outcomes for all in the ACT.