



ACTCOSS ACT Budget Priorities 2024-25

April 2024

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About ACTCOSS

ACTCOSS acknowledges Canberra has been built on the unceded land of the Ngunnawal people. We also acknowledge and respect other people and families that have a traditional connection to the lands of the ACT and region. We pay respects to their Elders and recognise the strength and resilience of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and their ongoing contributions to the ACT community.

The ACT Council of Social Service Inc. (ACTCOSS) advocates for social justice in the ACT and is the peak body representing not-for-profit community organisations.

ACTCOSS is a member of the nationwide COSS Network, made up of each of the state and territory Councils and the national body, the Australian Council of Social Service (ACOSS).

ACTCOSS's vision is for Canberra to be a just, safe and sustainable community in which everyone has the opportunity for self-determination and a fair share of resources and services.

ACTCOSS's strength comes from its members and the people they serve. Our members include frontline community services, peak bodies, advocacy organisations, community associations, consumer groups and individuals passionate about a fair, sustainable and inclusive ACT.

ACTCOSS advises that this document may be publicly distributed, including by placing a copy on our website.

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Acronyms

ABS	Australian Bureau of Statistics
ACAT	ACT Civil and Administrative Tribunal
ACCO	Aboriginal Community-Controlled Organisation
ACTCOSS	ACT Council of Social Service Inc.
AHURI	Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute
AIHW	Australian Institute of Health and Welfare
AMC	Alexander Maconochie Centre
ATOD	Alcohol, tobacco and other drug
ATODA	Alcohol, Tobacco and Other Drug Association ACT
ATSIEB	Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Elected Body
CHN	Capital Health Network
CHP	Community housing provider
CPI	Consumer Price Index
CRA	Commonwealth Rent Assistance
CSD	Community Services Directorate
CYPS	Child and Youth Protection Services
DFV	Domestic and family violence
EPSDD	Environment, Planning and Sustainable Development Directorate
GP	General Practitioner
LFiT	Large-scale Feed-in Tariff
LGBTIQA+	Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, gender diverse, intersex, queer, asexual and questioning
NAPLAN	National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy
NDIS	National Disability Insurance Scheme
NPM	National Preventative Mechanism
OICS	Office of the Inspector of Correctional Services
OOHC	Out-of-home care
OPCAT	Optional Protocol to the Convention Against Torture
PISA	Program for International Student Assessment
SNAICC	Secretariat of National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care



Introduction

This submission to the 2024-25 ACT Budget process comes at a time when the ACT faces a number of critical challenges. While the ACT has the highest average weekly earnings in Australia, when we look beyond the average we see that the cost of living in Canberra means many households cannot afford the fundamentals of a healthy life.

Many Canberrans are struggling with rising costs of living, and those on the lowest incomes are hurting most. Housing affordability is the most pressing challenge facing low-income households. As the waiting list for public housing continues to grow, many Canberrans struggle in a housing market that has never been less affordable or more volatile. They are increasingly being priced out of food, education, utilities and healthcare. For many, debt repayments are surging, but wages are not.

At the same time, services on the ground consistently report that they cannot keep up with growing demand. The ACT's community services play a crucial role in supporting Canberrans, helping people when they are struggling and acting as a safety net that keeps our community functioning through difficult times. In addition to supporting those on the lowest incomes, many services are helping people who have never appeared at their doors before – waged individuals and working families who are draining their savings to keep a roof over their heads but cannot afford to put food on the table. The complexity of need is also intensifying, particularly among people grappling with multiple and intersecting forms of disadvantage and exclusion.

Vital community services are facing an uphill battle responding to this rising demand, all too often struggling with their own scarcity of resources and depleted finances. While the ACT's population has grown rapidly over the past decade, our social infrastructure has not kept pace and is buckling under the strain of heightened demand, increased complexity, and funding that has fallen behind the costs of service delivery. Rising service delivery costs during a period of capped funding and population growth threatens the sustainability of the vital community services Canberrans rely on in times of need.

The 2024-25 ACT Budget can and must put in place measures that strengthen our community services and begin to address the significant social and economic challenges the ACT faces. Key to this will be targeting resources toward reducing inequity and exclusion, and ensuring people on the margins are given every opportunity to lead healthy and fulfilling lives.

This document identifies four key Budget priorities that ACTCOSS believes are essential to putting the ACT on a more just, equitable and sustainable path:

1. Strengthening direct government investment in **social housing and homelessness services**
2. Alleviating **cost of living** for low-income individuals and families
3. Valuing the **community sector**
4. Supporting **self-determination for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.**



In addition to these core priorities, we recommend a range of targeted investments designed to improve outcomes for children, young people and families; ensure an inclusive and effective energy transition and response to climate change; improve justice outcomes; support Canberrans with disability; reduce inequities in health and mental health; and improve planning and transport.

The proposals set out in this submission reflect the collective wisdom of our members. The ACT community sector has the determination, skills and insights throughout our sector to drive meaningful change; and with required reforms, new and expanded initiatives, and funding funnelled into the priority areas we have highlighted in this document, the ACT Government can make a major difference in ensuring a more equitable, just, sustainable and thriving Canberra community.



Summary of recommendations

Priority Recommendations

Housing and Homelessness

Social and affordable housing

- Substantially increase direct government investment to grow the net stock of public housing.
- Invest \$100 million to support public housing repairs and maintenance.
- Ensure the growth and viability of community housing by:
 - providing discounts/subsidies on government-released sites for community housing, or grants which enable increased community housing by a multiplicity of providers
 - providing rates exemption/discount for properties managed by community housing rentals for social/affordable rentals.
- Increase share of social housing allocated under land release program target (with the 15% to only apply to social and affordable housing for rent in perpetuity).
- Enhance housing options and access for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples through investment in local Aboriginal Community-Controlled Housing.

ACT Housing Strategy

- Fund independent evaluation of the ACT Housing Strategy, to commence immediately and ensure baseline figures, targets, outcomes and housing stock levels by category are regularly reported.

Private rental market

- Strengthen supports and protections for renters, including establishing a rental ombudsman to monitor and enforce the *Residential Tenancy Act*.

Homelessness services and support

- Invest in targeted tenancy support programs for people with mental health issues.
- Invest in permanent supportive housing for people with complex needs and experiencing chronic homelessness.

Cost of living

- Increase investment in food and emergency relief.
- Adopt an income-based approach to ACT Government fines, fees, levies and other charges, and target any new taxes toward those who can pay.
- Ensure concessions are adequate, accessible, appropriately indexed and targeted to need, based on review of the Targeted Assistance Strategy.
- Review and reform utilities concessions, including consideration of percentage-based concessions, and investigate system for automatically applying concessions to eligible people.



- Trial free public transport for students and concession card holders and analyse the costs, benefits and distributional impact.
- Invest in a fair, fast and inclusive energy transition:
 - Expand and better target financial support for low-income households to electrify and improve their home energy efficiency (including ancillary support like home energy audits & financial counselling).
 - Ensure social housing tenants are supported on the pathway to electrification.
 - Incentivise landlords to ensure rental properties are energy efficient and electric.
- Increase investment in community health centres and public dental services.
- Implement and fully fund all 27 of the 52 recommendations in the [Inquiry into Cost of Living Pressures in the ACT report](#) that are not already existing government policy.

Valuing the community sector

- Increase sector funding to cover all costs including workforce and service delivery costs and monitoring and evaluation, particularly outcomes reporting.
- Fund all community sector organisations to develop a climate adaptation plan and prepare for climate change, including:
 - funding to community sector organisations to support them to develop a climate adaptation plan
 - staffing and infrastructure for a coordination initiative between the community sector and government to better understand the requirements for whole-of-sector adaptation and plan responses
 - a \$4 million annual fund for community sector climate adaptation grants open to individual community sector organisations.
- Urgently inject funding to address ageing community sector accommodation to ensure services are delivered in safe and inclusive environments for low-income, disadvantaged and/or vulnerable Canberrans.
- Provide funding to enable the community sector to genuinely co-design and participate in commissioning cycles across all directorates.
- Supplement the community sector indexation formula with a Population Level Adjustment in this and all future budgets, and consider ways to address the lack of historic funding of the community sector to meet population growth.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander self-determination

- Increase investment in Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCOs), including resourcing an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peak Body in the ACT and housing provider.
- Set aside funds to act on the findings of the independent review into the overrepresentation of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people in the justice system.
- Implement and resource all recommendations from the *Our Booris, Our Way* report.



- Ensure adequate resourcing for the implementation of the ACT Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Agreement, considering input from the Auditor General.
- Ensure ACCOs and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have sufficient support to participate in and benefit from commissioning processes.
- Invest in enhanced support for holistic, wraparound Aboriginal-specific ante-natal and post-natal support programs

Further Recommendations

Children, young people, and families

- Ensure adequate resourcing to support raising the minimum age of criminal responsibility, including increased funding for holistic child mental health services and programs.
- Provide additional funding to resource child, youth and family sector reforms, including increased investment to grow early intervention and family preservation services, support workforce development, improve data collection, and ensure robust and transparent monitoring and evaluation; and with dedicated funding for services supporting families with disability and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families.
- Increase investment in wrap-around services and holistic supports to ensure better and more equitable child development outcomes and engagement in early childhood educational and care for families experiencing disadvantage or with complex needs.
- Invest in measures to reduce educational inequities among school-aged children, with a focus on resourcing partnerships and linkages between schools and community sector services to improve the range and accessibility of extended services to students, schools and families.
- Increase resourcing for ACCOs to develop and deliver culturally appropriate early childhood and school-age student programs to support learning and development and family involvement in education.
- Ensure funding for domestic and family violence prevention and response is commensurate with need and sustainable, with additional resourcing for case management, early intervention and longer-term supports for victim-survivors.
- Increase investment in integrated specialist services for sexual assault responses.
- Increase investment in perinatal wellbeing services, including funding for in-patient parent and baby care, in addition to dedicated funding for community-controlled, wraparound perinatal programs for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander parents and children.
- Provide additional funding to community-based specialist women's services, including health services, community legal services and housing and homelessness services.
- Provide additional funding for youth crime diversion programs and evidence-based early interventions, including holistic assessments, appropriate case management and improved staffing for services supporting young people.



Climate and Energy

- Review and reform utilities concessions to improve equity across households and be more responsive to changes in prices and circumstances, including implementing percentage-based concessions, and investigating a system for automatically applying concessions to eligible people.
- Expand and better target financial support (including ancillary support like home energy audits and financial counselling) for electrification and energy efficiency retrofits to low-income households, renters, a wider range of concession card holders and people on low incomes who do not have concession cards.
- Ensure public and community housing is electric and energy efficient and tenants are supported on the pathway to electrification, including investigating the installation of solar panels on public and community housing properties.
- Expand and fully fund the Home Energy Efficiency Program to ensure all low-income renters can access a home energy audit and education, draught sealing, and adequate curtains.
- Incentivise landlords to ensure private rental properties are electric and energy efficient.
- Strengthen and enforce minimum energy efficiency standards for rentals and incentivise landlords to ensure these standards are met.
- Commit to adding draught proofing, double glazing and curtaining in the next stage of rolling out minimum energy standards for rental homes to ensure the benefits of electrification are fully realised, and with an effective system for enforcing this regulation.
- Equitably distribute costs when phasing out the gas network, including providing targeted support for transition, disconnection, and abolishment costs.
- Invest in building community capacity to face more frequent and severe disasters, including increasing the capacity for community sector services to be scaled up when needed.

Disability

- Provide additional funding to fully implement to the Disability Health Strategy, including investment in training practitioners, funding for wraparound diagnostic services and community health access grants, and the establishment of Disability Liaison Officers within ACT Health.
- Ensure adequate and ongoing funding for the implementation of the ACT Disability Strategy, ACT Disability Justice Strategy, and the Inclusive Education Strategy.
- Fund systemic and individual disability advocacy to meet the needs of people with disabilities who require support to access NDIS funding or are not able to access the NDIS.
- Fund and resource a specialty Disability Legal Service within the community legal sector.
- Provide targeted funding to improve the accessibility of mental health, reproductive health, crisis and domestic and family violence services to people with disability.
- Commit to investing in foundational supports to support people who are ineligible for the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS).



- Direct additional funding towards services delivering support to groups with specific needs and vulnerabilities which are currently underserved by both mainstream and disability services such as parents with disability and LGBTIQ+ people with disability.
- Address the lack of accessible and affordable housing for people with disabilities, including through refining the criteria for accessing the Disability Duty Concession Scheme.

Health

- Improve access to primary healthcare by increasing investment in, and the scope of operations of, community health centres, walk-in clinics and public dental services.
- Fully fund the ACT Drug Strategy Action Plan, ensuring the Alcohol, Tobacco and Other Drug (ATOD) sector receives continual funding based on projected community need for ATOD specialist treatment services, and working in partnership with the ATOD sector to ensure robust and transparent monitoring and evaluation of drug decriminalisation.
- Invest in community-based responses for people with co-occurring mental health and alcohol and drug use.
- Develop and fund a sexual and reproductive health strategy based on lived experience, including communications about how people can access free abortions.
- Further invest in the ACT Women's Health Service and provide subsidised health services for women and people who have experienced sexual violence.
- Fund dementia-specific support services, including diagnosis, education, counselling, housing, support groups and respite programs.
- Fund an Individual Advocacy Service so that individuals managing complex and co-occurring conditions can access support navigating the health system.
- Fund a multicultural health service to provide culturally-sensitive care.
- Provide ongoing and increased funding to support trans, gender diverse and intersex people access healthcare and gender-affirming care.
- Improve the delivery and accessibility of palliative care services in the ACT.
- Continue investment in the Long-COVID-19 Clinic as a dedicated service providing integrated care for those with post-viral sequelae.

Human Rights

- Increase funding to the bodies comprising the ACT National Preventative Mechanism (NPM) – the Inspector of Correctional Services, the Human Rights Commission and the ACT Ombudsman – to adequately carry out monitoring and oversight relating to OPCAT.
- Dedicate funding to establishing an independent advocacy voice for culturally and linguistically diverse Canberrans in the ACT.
- Provide increased funding to community legal services to ensure equitable access to legal supports for all ACT residents, including women and children, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, people with disabilities and other Canberrans facing legal disadvantage.



- Increase funding for grant opportunities to cover bonds and rent for refugee and low-income migrant groups settling in the ACT.
- Fund an independent review of police complaints handling mechanisms to ensure greater practical independence, accountability and transparency of investigations.
- Fund human rights improvement mechanisms arising from the Royal Commission into Violence, Abuse, Neglect and Exploitation of People with Disability.
- Invest in human-rights promoting solutions to address racism experienced by children and young people as outlined in the ACT Human Rights Commission 'It really stabs me' Report, including funding to support anti-racism strategies within ACT schools and the community.

Justice

- Establish a 'Breaking the Cycle' Fund to build the capacity of the community sector to provide diversion and support programs, with a particular emphasis on building the capacity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations, and with an initial funding commitment of at least \$20 million per annum for new community-led initiatives.
- Fund the establishment of a Justice Reinvestment Coordinator-General to oversee the 'Breaking the Cycle' Fund and ensure a cross-directorate, whole-of-government approach.
- Fund the implementation of all recommendations from the 2022 Healthy Prison Review of the Alexander Maconochie Centre and remaining recommendations from the 2019 Healthy Prison Review.
- Fully fund community services to meet the needs of children, young people and their families who are diverted from the criminal justice system as the minimum age of criminal responsibility is raised to 14, including mental health and early intervention services.
- Increase funding to the Restorative Justice Unit to embed restorative processes through the justice system and increase referrals to the Unit.
- Fully resource the Disability Justice and Justice Reinvestment Strategies.
- Fund health promotion, financial literacy and education programs in the AMC, including specific programs for women.
- Ensure the community sector is adequately funded and supported to provide services and programs within the AMC and to support throughcare.
- Invest in bail support programs with intensive case management and supports to reduce high rates of remand.
- Increase investment in justice housing options, including expanded transitional housing programs to prevent homelessness and recidivism for detainees post-release; supported accommodation for young people, women and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples on bail; a housing program to support domestic and family violence defendants and people convicted of domestic and family violence offences; and avenues for continued support and contact with case managers once people exit justice housing.
- Increase funding for detainees to access individual advocacy services.
- Implement a needle and syringe program for the AMC.



Mental Health

- Increase funding to the community-managed mental health service sector that is commensurate with community need and the cost of delivering services, with the proportion of mental health funding going to these services increasing from 13% to 20%.
- Invest in providing mental health focused services at community health centres.
- Develop a fully-funded plan to implement the ACT mental health workforce strategy and expand and sustain the community-managed mental health workforce, including:
 - provision of funding that covers adequate wages, professional development and indirect staff costs in the community-managed mental health sector
 - funding to develop the ACT's lived experience workforce
 - investment in training pathways and paid work placements to support the growth of the lived experience workforce, including funding for the Certificate IV in Mental Health Peer Work and related skill sets.
- Invest in resources and a centralised support service to assist people to navigate the mental health system and find appropriate and timely mental health services and supports.
- Provide funding to reinstate the ACT Recovery College.
- Train all frontline public sector staff in trauma-informed approaches.

Planning and Transport

- Invest in adequate and affordable transport for students, including free public transport for school students and sufficient transport options for university and CIT students.
- Trial free public transport for all students and concession card holders and analyse the costs, benefits and distributional impact.
- Invest in community transport including for vulnerable children unable to attend early learning centres due to transport barriers.
- Invest in measures to support transport equity, including better targeting the Sustainable Household Scheme to those in need and expanding the products available to include bicycles, electric bicycles, and second-hand electric cars.
- Remove barriers to access for second-hand cars from non-authorised retailers or expand the list of authorised retailers.
- Support active travel including maintenance of and investment in walking and cycle paths and separated cycleways.
- Provide affordable land and reduced land taxes and rates for community housing providers to facilitate the delivery of much needed community housing.
- Review ageing community facilities and community organisation facilities and develop an investment plan.
- Ensure the implementation of the new ACT planning system is inclusive and supports the needs of people with disability.
- Assist community organisations that require freight transport (e.g., food pantries) to cover fuel levy expenses.



Budget priorities

Housing and homelessness

Wellbeing domain 7: Housing and Home

For ACTCOSS and our members, tackling the housing crisis is a core priority and a social and economic imperative for the 2025-25 ACT Budget.

A home provides the foundation on which people can build their wellbeing and manage life's opportunities and challenges. A decent, secure home supports good health, keeps people safe from extreme weather, protects women and children fleeing violence, allows ageing in place, and provides the basis for people to engage productively in work and their community.

Unfortunately, this most basic of human rights – having a decent home – is out of reach for a growing number of Canberrans. Canberra's housing market has never been less affordable or more volatile. Many households are spending record amounts on housing, and people in every age group are living in rental stress. Many of our members are services working on the frontline of this crisis. They see pensioners competing for rooms in sharehouses, people in full-time work on the brink of homelessness, families couch-surfing or living in their cars, and in some cases, their own workers are struggling to find affordable homes in their communities.

ACTCOSS's annual *Cost of Living Report* consistently identifies housing as the greatest cost-of-living pressure for low-income households in the ACT.¹ Anglicare's most recent Rental Affordability Snapshot showed no rental properties in the ACT were affordable for single income households on Jobseeker, Youth Allowance, or other payments.² A growing number of essential workers are also struggling to find affordable housing in the ACT's private rental market. The 2023 Everybody's Home report *Priced Out* found that, on average, aged care workers, early childhood educators and nurses in single occupancy homes in the ACT will need to spend between 70-78% of their income on rent.³

While we welcomed the Government's efforts to make a start on tackling the affordability crisis in last year's Budget, the actions and level of investment to date do not match the scale of this crisis. We know this is a challenge that cannot be turned around within one budget cycle, but we can and must start now, beginning with a commitment to substantial investment in new social housing stock.

¹ ACTCOSS, [Cost of Living Report: The gendered nature of cost of living for low-income households in Canberra](#), ACTCOSS, 2023.

² Anglicare Australia, [Rental affordability snapshot](#), Regional reports, 14th edition, 2023.

³ Everybody's Home, [Priced Out](#), Everybody's Home, April 2023.



Social and affordable housing

Recommendations

- Substantially increase direct government investment to grow the net stock of public housing.
- Invest \$100 million to support public housing repairs and maintenance.
- Ensure the growth and viability of community housing by:
 - providing discounts/subsidies on government-released sites for community housing, or grants which enable increased community housing by a multiplicity of providers
 - providing rates exemption/discount for properties managed by community housing rentals for social/affordable rentals.
- Increase share of social housing allocated under land release program target (with the 15% to only apply to social and affordable housing for rent in perpetuity).
- Enhance housing options and access for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples through investment in local Aboriginal Community-Controlled Housing.

With costs in the private rental market soaring, social housing is the only feasible option for a growing proportion of low-income households. Despite this, the proportion of social housing stock has continued to fall in the ACT relative to population and household growth. It has gone from being the government's default answer to housing affordability for most of the 20th century, to languishing in decline.⁴

As at 1 January 2024, there were 3,145 applicants on the social housing waiting list, with an average wait time of 1,946 days (more than 5 years) for standard housing.⁵ According to the Productivity Commission's 2024 *Report on Government Services*, the ACT has the lowest number of households in public housing in 10 years.⁶

ACTCOSS believes the ACT Government should set a specific target for social housing that reflects current and projected demand for public and community housing, and establish a long-term pipeline of funding that enables that growth.

In addition, there is an urgent need for further investment to reduce the maintenance backlog in public housing. While ACTCOSS welcomed funding allocated toward this purpose in last year's Budget, it is simply not enough. Chronic underinvestment in public housing stock means too many properties remain in a state of disrepair or are not appropriate to meet the needs of those housed. There is an urgent need for a comprehensive and transparent audit of public housing, and the undertaking of repairs and adaptations as soon as is practicable.

⁴ Wright, B & ACT Housing, [Cornerstone of the Capital: history of public housing in Canberra](#), ACT Housing, 2000; E Fanning, [Thinking big helped Australia solve a housing crisis in the 1940s. We can do it again](#), *The Guardian*, 24 April 2022.

⁵ ACT Government, [Waiting lists for public housing \(website\)](#), accessed 29 March 2024,

⁶ Productivity Commission, [Report on Government Services 2023: G Housing and homelessness](#), Australian Government, 24 January 2023, sector overview data tables, accessed 5 March 2023.



In addition to substantial upfront investment in new public housing and expedited repairs and maintenance, additional investments and reformed policy and tax settings setting are needed to ensure the growth and viability of community housing.

To date, the land release program target for social and affordable housing has been reached through affordable home purchase by lower-income Canberrans, at the expense of growing the supply of social or affordable rentals. It is imperative a higher proportion is allocated to social housing (and genuinely affordable rental).

ACT Housing Strategy

Recommendation

- Fund independent evaluation of the ACT Housing Strategy, to commence immediately and ensure baseline figures, targets, outcomes and housing stock levels by category are regularly reported.

The ACT Housing Strategy, first announced in 2018, promised to create an equitable, diverse and sustainable supply of housing for the ACT community, reduce homelessness, strengthen social housing assistance, increase affordable rental housing and increase affordable home ownership. These are laudable objectives, however the extent to which they have been achieved remains unclear. There is a need to strengthen oversight of the Strategy's implementation and outcomes, with improvements in the transparency, quality and accessibility of housing data.

Private rental market

Recommendation

- Strengthen supports and protections for renters, including establishing a rental ombudsman to monitor and enforce the *Residential Tenancy Act*.

Better enforcement, oversight and accountability are needed to ensure compliance with the ACT's residential tenancy laws. Current arrangements place the onus on renters to exercise their rights and enforce laws, yet many are reluctant to do so due to the tenant-landlord power imbalance, the stress and cost burden of navigating tribunal processes, or a lack of knowledge of existing rights. A rental ombudsman with investigative, compliance and education functions would be invaluable in ensuring better compliance with and understanding of existing laws, and relieving the backlog of cases at ACAT.



Homelessness services and supports

Recommendations

- Invest in targeted tenancy support programs for people with mental health issues.
- Invest in permanent supportive housing for people with complex needs and experiencing chronic homelessness.

There is a direct relationship between mental ill health and homelessness or insecure housing. Housing insecurity and homelessness can both cause and contribute to mental ill health and impede recovery. In the ACT, the lack of affordable and secure housing disproportionately affects people with mental health challenges. According to the latest data from the AIHW, 44% of people accessing homelessness services in the ACT were identified as having a mental health issue, and the proportion has been trending upwards since 2011.⁷

To address this, we are calling for investment in integrated housing and mental health support, with an expansion of programs that link psychosocial, clinical and tenancy support services for those experiencing mental ill health and experiencing or at risk of homelessness. This includes tailored tenancy support programs that recognise the variable capacity and care needs of people experiencing both episodic and enduring mental ill health, and with eligibility criteria that are designed around people's identified support needs, rather than the type of housing they live in.

The evidence base for such an investment is clear and compelling. The Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute (AHURI) commissioned a four-year study examining the integration of homelessness and mental health services systems in Australia.⁸ It found clear evidence from other jurisdictions showing that existing programs that integrate tenancy support programs with mental health supports are effective in generating government cost savings, bringing about tenancy stability and improving consumer mental health and wellbeing. It found that models that focus on care coordination integrated with housing, clinical, psychosocial and financial support are most likely to be successful, and that these programs should be accessible to tenants in the social and private housing sectors alike.

Model programs such as the Housing and Accommodation Support Initiative (HASI) in NSW, Doorway in Victoria, and the Housing and Support Program (HASP) in Queensland have been extensively evaluated and demonstrated considerable benefits to participants, as well also significant costs savings to government such as reductions in downstream service system costs and improvements in involvement in education and work.

⁷ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW), [Specialist homelessness services annual report 2019-20](#), AIHW, Australian Government, 2024.

⁸ Brackertz, N, [Trajectories: the interplay between mental health and housing pathways. Policy priorities for better access to housing and mental health support for people with lived experience of mental ill health and housing insecurity](#), AHURI for Mental Health Australia & Mind Australia, 2021; Brackertz, N, Borrowman, L, Roggenbuck, C, Pollock, S, Davis, E, [Trajectories: the interplay between mental health and housing pathways. Final research report](#), AHURI & Mind Australia, Melbourne; Brackertz, N, Wilkinson, A, Davison, J, [Housing, homelessness and mental health: towards systems change](#), AHURI, Melbourne, 2018.



Cost of living

Recommendations

- Increase investment in food and emergency relief.
- Adopt an income-based approach to ACT Government fines, fees, levies and other charges, and target any new taxes toward those who can pay.
- Ensure concessions are adequate, accessible, appropriately indexed and targeted to need, based on review of the Targeted Assistance Strategy.
- Review and reform utilities concessions, including consideration of percentage-based concessions, and investigate system for automatically applying concessions to eligible people.
- Trial free public transport for students and concession card holders and analyse the costs, benefits and distributional impact.
- Invest in a fair, fast and inclusive energy transition:
 - Expand and better target financial support for low-income households to electrify and improve their home energy efficiency (including ancillary support like home energy audits & financial counselling).
 - Ensure social housing tenants are supported on the pathway to electrification.
 - Incentivise landlords to ensure rental properties are energy efficient and electric.
- Increase investment in community health centres and public dental services.
- Implement and fully fund all 27 of the 52 recommendations in the [Inquiry into Cost of Living Pressures in the ACT report](#) that are not already existing government policy.
- Increase funding to financial counselling services to respond to increasing demand and complexity resulting from the cost-of-living crisis.

Wellbeing domain 9: Living standards

Wellbeing domain 2: Economy

Our members report that more and more people in the community are struggling with daily costs such as housing, energy, food and transport, with a growing number of working people and families impacted.

Our 2024 ACT Cost of Living report is still under development, but preliminary research suggests that CPI increases and cost of living unaffordability have worsened again throughout the past year, especially for people on low incomes.

Canberra is the second most expensive city to rent in overall, with median house rent at \$680 per week and median unit rent at \$560 per week.⁹ While median rents marginally decreased during 2023, Canberra is still the least affordable jurisdiction in the country for people on low incomes. According to the [Rental Affordability Index](#), low-income households continue to face particularly unaffordable rents, which are

⁹ Domain, [December 2023 Rental Report](#), Domain website, 2023.

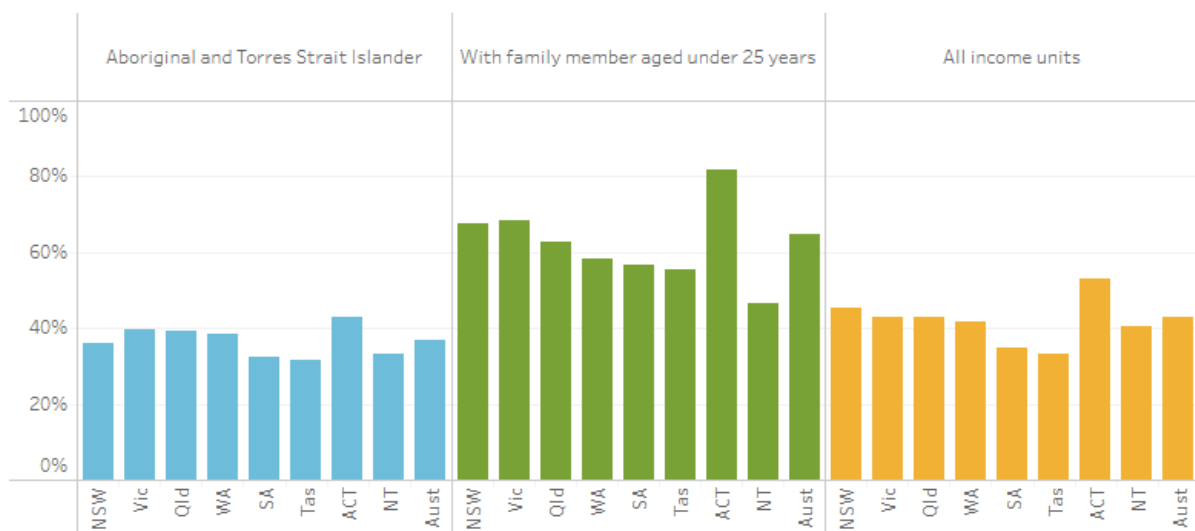


pushed up by the ACT’s overall high-income earning workforce. Every suburb in the ACT is unaffordable to severely unaffordable for students in sharehouses, and for pensioners the entire Territory is severely to extremely unaffordable.¹⁰

According to the [Productivity Commission’s 2024 Report on Government Services \(ROGS\)](#), ACT renters have the highest levels of rental stress of any state or territory in the country. In the ACT in 2023, over half (53.2%) of all Commonwealth Rent Assistance (CRA) recipients experienced rental stress (spent more than 30% of their income on rent). Of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander CRA recipients, 43% experienced rental stress (also the highest rate in the country).

Concerningly, young people are disproportionately experiencing the burden of Canberra’s high rental prices – for CRA recipients with a family member aged under 25 years, the vast majority (82%) experienced rental stress in 2023 (spent more than 30% of their income on rent). This is the highest rate of any jurisdiction in the country by 14 percentage points.

Figure G.2 Income units receiving CRA Paying more than 30% of income on rent
By selected equity group, by jurisdiction, at end June 2023



Source: table GA.13

Source: Productivity Commission, [2024 Report on Government Services: G Housing and homelessness](#), Australian Government, 2024.

Previous research by the Productivity Commission also indicates that over 60% (66%) of low-income households in the private rental market spend more than 30% of their disposable income on rent.¹¹

According to Anglicare’s [2023 Rental Affordability Snapshot](#), of the 1,273 ACT rental listings surveyed, only one rental property (0.1%) was affordable for a couple with two children on minimum wage; only two rental properties (0.2%) were affordable for a single person on minimum wage; and for those on the Disability Support Pension, JobSeeker, Youth Allowance or other payment, no rental properties were affordable.

¹⁰ SGS Economics and Planning, *Rental Affordability Index* [accessed 14 April 2024].

¹¹ Productivity Commission, [Submission to Inquiry into the worsening rental crisis in Australia](#), , 2023.



Alongside rental stress, the National Australia Bank [Consumer Insights Survey Q3 2023](#) found ACT households are experiencing high levels of financial hardship:

- 43% of ACT respondents indicated money is a source of stress in their life
- 32% indicated they are struggling to make ends meet
- most (55%) indicated they were not confident they could manage a major unexpected expense
- 60% were not confident they were on track to have enough money to provide for their future financial needs.

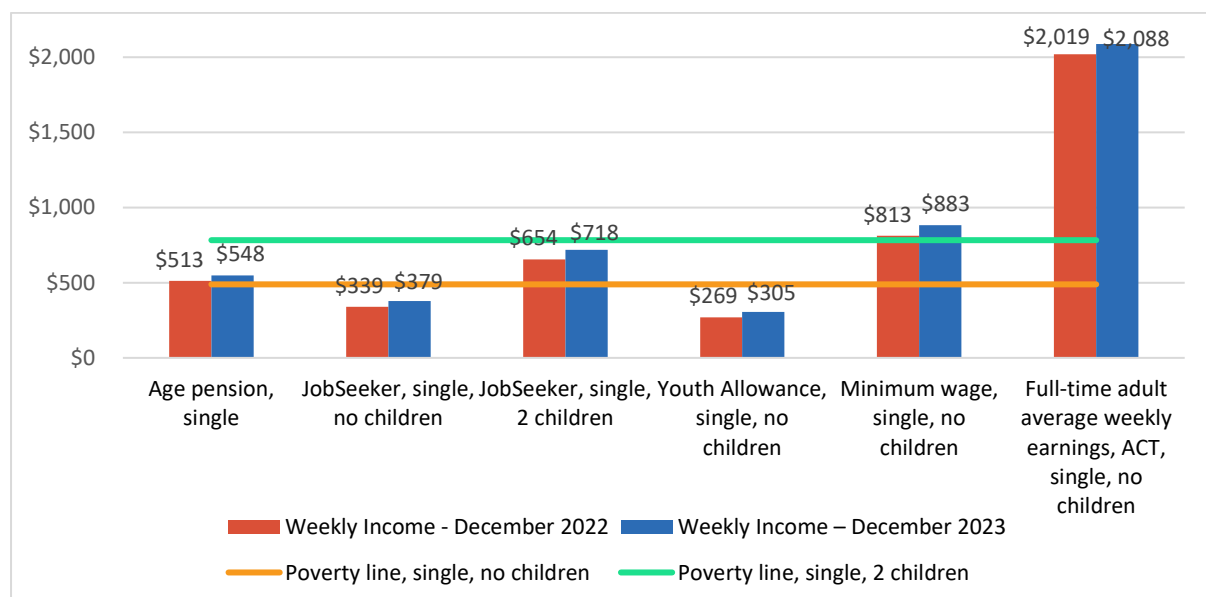
Increases in interest rates since May 2022 mean many homeowners are also struggling. Different research indicates that approximately 7% of ACT mortgage holders are experiencing financial hardship due to being unable to afford mortgage repayments and to meet minimum credit card repayment requirements.¹²

While there has been a small improvement from 2022 to 2023, Commonwealth income support payments remain below the poverty line. Canberrans on income support payments are unable to afford the fundamentals of a healthy life. Our members frequently report that their clients are going without food, healthcare or adequate heating and cooling in order to pay for their housing. As of December 2023:

- A single person without children on JobSeeker has an income \$110 below the poverty line of \$489 per week
- A single person on Youth Allowance (other) has an income \$184 below the poverty line of \$489 per week
- A single parent with two children, on JobSeeker has an income \$65 below the poverty line of \$783 per week.

Poverty Gap for 2024

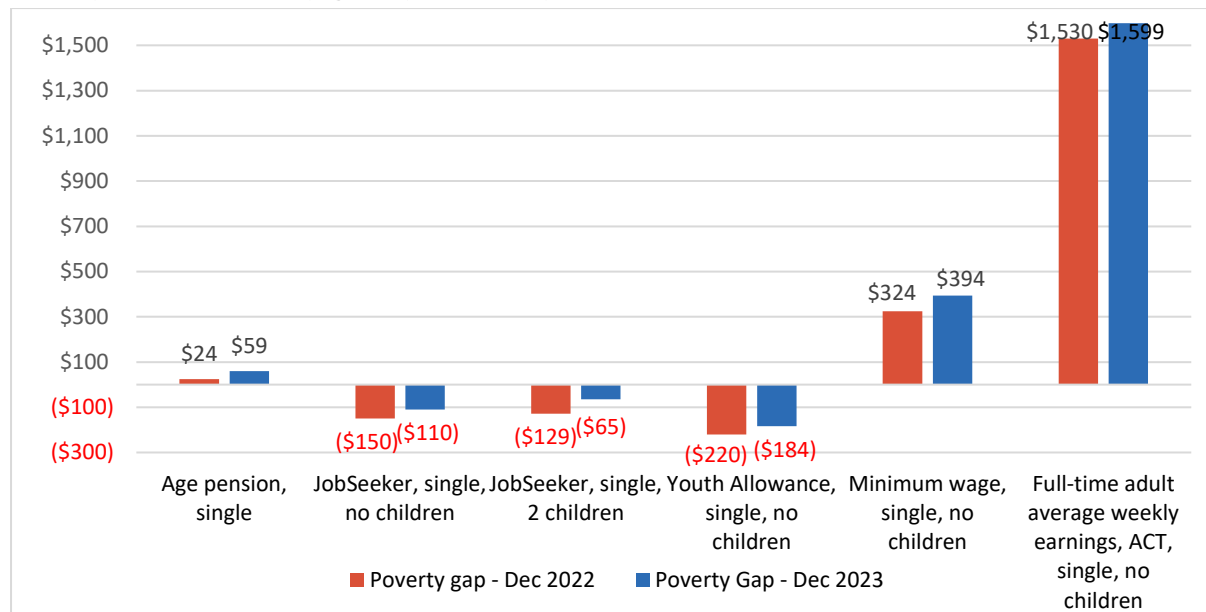
Income change compared to poverty line by income type, Dec 2022 - Dec 2023



¹²National Australia Bank (NAB), [NAB Consumer Insights Q3 2023 Financial Hardship - Who is struggling & what are the key drivers?](#), NAB, 2023, p.8.



Weekly income poverty gap by income type, Dec 2023

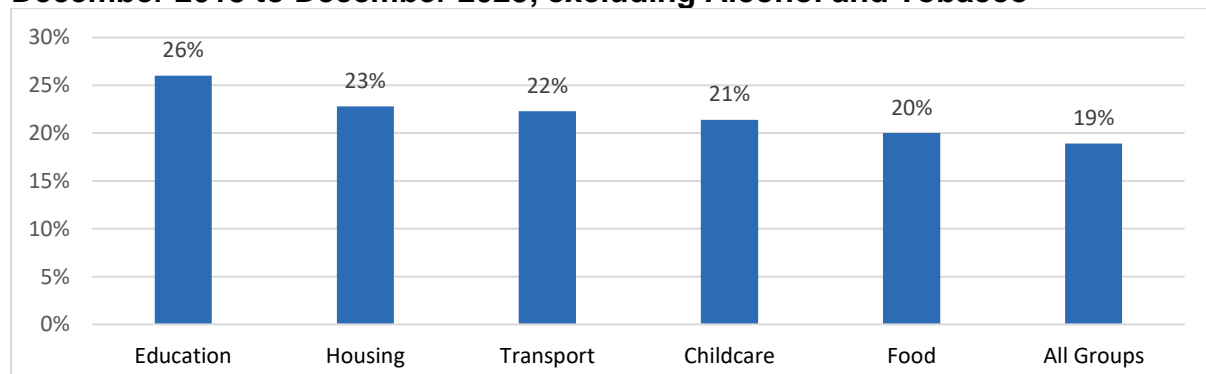


Source: P Davidson, B Bradbury and M Wong (2023), [Poverty in Australia 2023: Who is affected](#), *Poverty and Inequality Partnership Report* no. 20. Australian Council of Social Service and UNSW Sydney, 2023, accessed 25 March 2024 [Poverty Line]; Services Australia, [A guide to Australian Government payments](#), Historical versions 1 December 2022 to 31 December 2022 and 20 September 2023 to 31 December 2023, Services Australia, Canberra, 2023.

Consultation with our members indicates that demand for their services continued to increase throughout 2023, along with a broadening in the range of people seeking support, including fulltime wage earners.

Over the past five years, Canberra has experienced significant price increases for a range of essential goods. Excluding alcohol and tobacco, the five highest increases in the Canberra CPI Groups from December 2018 to December 2023 were education (26%); housing (23%, with property rates and charges increasing by 26%); transport (22%); childcare (21%), and food and non-alcoholic beverages (20%). These were all above the increase in Canberra's overall CPI for all groups of 19%.

Highest increases in the Canberra CPI Groups over the five years from December 2018 to December 2023, excluding Alcohol and Tobacco



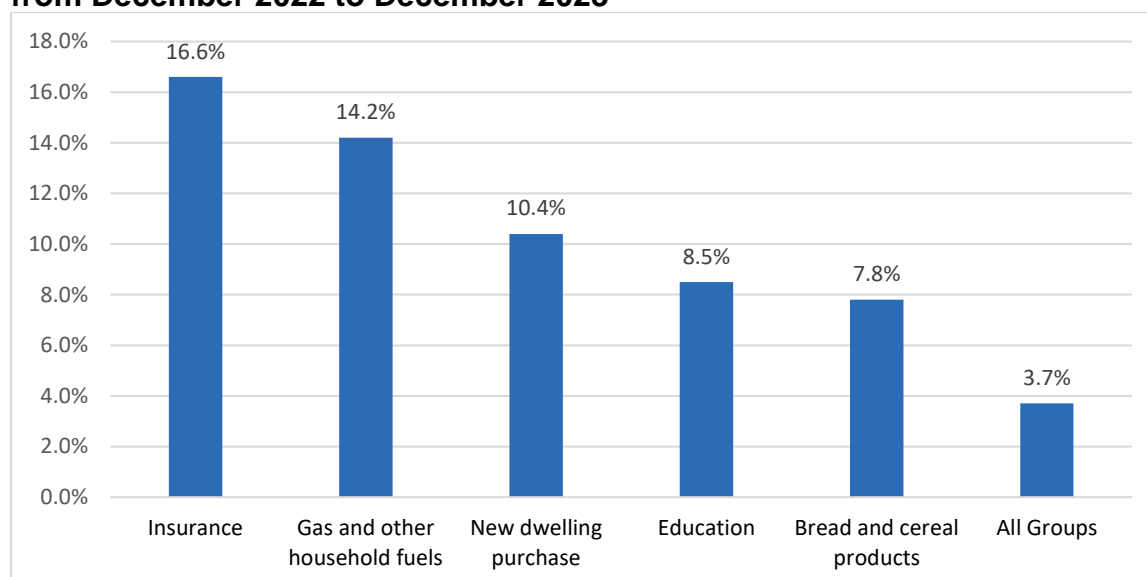
Source: ABS, 'Table 10. CPI: Group, Sub-group and Expenditure Class, Percentage change from corresponding quarter of previous year by Capital City' and 'Table 11. CPI: Group, Sub-group and Expenditure Class, Percentage change from previous quarter by Capital City' [time series spreadsheets], [Consumer Price Index, Australia, Reference period December 2023](#), ABS, 2024.



While the increase in CPI for health (17%) was below the overall increase in CPI, the CPI for the medical and hospital services sub-group increased at a higher rate (22%). Also, while the increase in the CPI for insurance and financial services (5%) was well below the overall CPI increase, the CPI for insurance (24%) increased at a much higher rate.

Excluding alcohol and tobacco, the five highest increases in Canberra CPI Groups and sub-groups over the 12 months from December 2022 to December 2023 were insurance (17%), gas and other household fuels (14%), new dwelling purchase (10%), education (9%), and bread and cereal products (8%).

Highest increases in Canberra CPI Groups and sub-groups over the 12 months from December 2022 to December 2023



Source: ABS, 'Table 10. CPI: Group, Sub-group and Expenditure Class, Percentage change from corresponding quarter of previous year by Capital City' and 'Table 11. CPI: Group, Sub-group and Expenditure Class, Percentage change from previous quarter by Capital City' [time series spreadsheets], [Consumer Price Index, Australia, Reference period December 2023](#), ABS, 2024.

As noted in our recent [submission](#) to the Inquiry into Cost of Living pressures in the ACT, to address cost of living pressures the ACT Government can either increase the amount of money people have and/or lower the cost of essential services in the ACT, such as housing, transport, energy, healthcare and childcare.



Valuing the community sector

Wellbeing domain 1: Access & Connectivity (service accessibility, liveable city)

Wellbeing domain 2: Economy (employment, income inequality)

Wellbeing domain 8: Identity and belonging (valuing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures and recognising our Traditional Custodians)

Wellbeing domain 12: Time (unpaid work, including caring)

Community services are integral to the social and economic fabric of the ACT. They support community and individual wellbeing and provide a vital safety net for those experiencing adversity or hardship, such as poverty, domestic and family violence, housing insecurity or homelessness, mental ill health, or issues with drug and alcohol use. These vital services can support and enable greater social connection and workforce participation, boosting our economy and improving community cohesion in the process.

Despite the vital role of the community sector, frontline services are under strain. Community sector staff report increasing levels of disadvantage, growing complexity of need among service users, and an increasing inability to meet demand.¹³ At the same time, costs for staffing and business overheads are rising and many community services report that funding is not sufficient to cover the full cost of service delivery. In addition to inflationary pressures and increased wages, operational cost pressures have increased due to increased compliance costs, monitoring and evaluation, and oncosts for staff including workforce development and training, supervision, and volunteer management.

We know from the 2023 ACT Community Sector Snapshot¹⁴ that:

- around two-thirds of survey participants reported levels of demand for their main service increased (67%) during 2022
- over two-thirds (69%) reported growing complexity of need among service users
- only 4% of organisations were always able to meet demand, and almost half (47%) noted an increase in the number of clients that they could not support
- almost half of organisations (43%) experienced increased wait times over the past year
- 84% of organisations indicated their current funding is not sufficient to adequately respond to increasing demand for their services
- around two thirds (67%) of organisations found it more difficult to attract and retain staff in the in 2022
- more than 80% of CEOs and senior managers said funding was insufficient to employ enough staff and no organisations were funded for backfilling staff absences
- increasing demand for services has led to a need for additional staff.

¹³ ACTCOSS, [Factsheet: ACT Community Sector Snapshot](#) (1 April 2023), ACTCOSS, 2023.

¹⁴ ACTCOSS, [Factsheet: ACT Community Sector Snapshot](#), ACTCOSS, 2023.



In addition to increasing demand and the complexity of needs, inadequate indexation (particularly in the context of inflationary pressures) has placed enormous strain on services and frontline staff. Exhaustion, burnout, and low morale are having a devastating effect on the workforce, and services are universally reporting difficulties attracting and retaining staff. ACT Community Sector Worker, 2022

Provide funding to cover all costs

Recommendation

- Increase sector funding to cover the full costs of running services and programs including monitoring and evaluation, and oncosts for staff including workforce development and training, supervision, and volunteer management.

The ACT Government spends approximately \$200 million each year in funding to the community sector through both ongoing and one-off annual grants¹⁵. The overall amount of funding for the ACT's community services system has simply not kept pace with rising operational costs, increasing need and complexity among service users, and population growth. The lack of population and needs-based funding, combined with indexation that has not kept pace with rising operational costs, is pushing many vital services to breaking point.

To ensure the community sector can deliver services to meet the needs of the ACT community, significant investment is also needed to build and maintain a skilled, well-paid workforce. This would enable staff to develop skills and capacity through training, backfill staffing gaps and avoid burnout.

The community sector delivers crucial support to Canberrans across many areas of the ACT's Wellbeing Framework. For the community sector to operate effectively, and contribute to government policies and programs, it needs a significant injection of funding to cover all costs and meet community need.

Inject funding for community sector accommodation

Recommendation

- Urgently inject funding to address ageing community sector accommodation to ensure services are delivered in safe and inclusive environments for low-income, disadvantaged and/or vulnerable Canberrans.

Many community sector organisations work in ACT Property Group buildings which are ageing and no longer fit for purpose. Significant funding is required to provide

¹⁵ <https://www.communityservices.act.gov.au/about-us/strategic-policy/community-sector-reform> Executive Summary p.3



enough space for services to run programs and accommodate staff. These facilities need to be accessible, multi-purpose, adaptable to changing demand and resilient to climate change. The government must also ensure all regions in Canberra have access to these community sector accommodation.

Community sector climate adaptation

Recommendations

- Fund all community sector organisations to develop a climate adaptation plan and prepare for climate change, including:
 - funding to community sector organisations to support them to develop a climate adaptation plan
 - staffing and infrastructure for a coordination initiative between the community sector and government to better understand the requirements for whole-of-sector adaptation and plan responses
 - a \$4 million annual fund for community sector climate adaptation grants open to individual community sector organisations.

Climate change will continue to increase pressure on the ACT community through gradual changes and an increase in the frequency and severity of natural disasters. Gradual changes are already occurring and fall within the remit of the community sector. Examples include increased mental ill health, food insecurity, and migration away from less viable agricultural communities to Canberra. The ACT community and Government rely on the community sector to assist the community during and after natural disasters. This reliance is formalised, for instance, in the Social Recovery Network managed by Community Services Directorate (CSD). Most community sector organisation funding is from the government and for specific purposes which do not include climate adaptation, while community sector organisations' discretionary funding has recently been focused on responding to the pandemic and cost-of-living crisis.

Few community sector organisations have climate adaptation plans and they have not been resourced to implement them. Community sector organisations are not funded for most of their emergency response functions and will soon be overwhelmed by their scale and frequency. Other community sector organisations provide essential services which cannot be interrupted during a disaster, for instance rape crisis and domestic violence services, but most do not have adequate resources to plan and prepare to continue them through natural disasters. There has not been any sector-level examination of client flows between community sector organisations, or from community sector organisations to government, during or after natural disasters. Nor is the community sector prepared for increased client numbers or need resulting from the gradual effects of climate change, with virtually no sector-level planning or cooperation with government.



The Environment, Planning and Sustainable Development Directorate (EPSDD) is currently working with partners, including ACTCOSS, to develop and trial a toolkit to enable community sector organisations to create climate adaptation plans. Currently there is no funding to enable the vast majority of community sector organisations to use the toolkit or allow them to invest in specific adaptation measures.

Once developed, these climate adaptation plans will require additional funding. An annual fund of \$4 million dollars should be created to support the implementation of climate adaptation plans. It should be open only to community sector organisations that have completed a climate adaptation plan using the government's toolkit. Adaptations specified under the plans would be eligible for this competitive fund.

To facilitate coordination, a coordination initiative between the community sector and government should be established and funded. This should include funding to enable a better understanding and response to whole of sector adaptation needs.

Genuine co-design and participation in commissioning

Recommendation

- Provide funding to **enable the community sector to genuinely co-design** and **participate in commissioning** cycles across all directorates.

At the same time the sector has experienced increased demand, rising operational costs and capped funding, it has also been expected to participate in the largest government reform of the sector in a generation through commissioning.¹⁶ The commissioning process has been resource intensive and created significant stress and uncertainty for the sector. Most non-government partners are not funded to participate in these processes. Additional funding to resource community sector engagement in the commissioning process is needed to ensure commissioning is successful, inclusive and effective. This would enable smaller organisations and sub-sectors without a peak body to participate in the early stages of commissioning cycles, including *Strategise and Design*.

Develop a standard Population Level Adjustment for all community sector funding

Recommendation

- Supplement the community sector indexation formula with a Population Level Adjustment in this and all future budgets, and consider ways to address the lack of historic funding of the community sector to meet population growth.

¹⁶ ACT Government Commissioning (website), <https://www.communityservices.act.gov.au/commissioning>.



Strong population growth has underpinned the ACT Government's financial and social strategies. Since 2010, the ACT's population has increased from 364,806 to 474,099, or 30%.¹⁷ Over the next decade, the ABS projects that the ACT population will increase from 471,244 to 536,543,¹⁸ a further increase of 14%. According to the ABS, this increase could be as much as 21%.¹⁹

The ACT Government spends approximately \$200 million each year in funding to the community sector through both ongoing and one-off annual grants. However, for well over a decade, the ACT Government's funding for the community sector has systemically ignored the impact of population growth on the volume of demand for community services and the associated level of funding to the sector. To ensure community services are able to meet the needs of the ACT community, it is imperative funding models are needs-based and systematically incorporate in population growth.

¹⁷ Based on [ABS population clock for the ACT](https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/people/population/population-clock-pyramid) [accessed 19 April 2024].

<https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/people/population/population-clock-pyramid>

¹⁸ Based on [ABS medium series population projection](#) for the ACT from 2022 [accessed 19 April 2024].

¹⁹ Based on [ABS high series population projection](#) for the ACT from 2022. [accessed 19 April 2024].



Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander self-determination

For Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people, these issues cut across all wellbeing domains, but especially Domain 8: Identity and Belonging.

Recommendations

- Increase investment in Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations, including resourcing an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peak Body in the ACT and housing provider.
- Set aside funds to act on the findings of the independent review into the overrepresentation of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people in the justice system.
- Implement and resource all recommendations from the *Our Booris, Our Way* report.
- Ensure adequate resourcing for the implementation of the ACT Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Agreement, considering input the Auditor General.
- Ensure Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have sufficient support to participate in and benefit from commissioning processes.
- Invest in enhanced support for holistic, wraparound Aboriginal-specific ante-natal and post-natal support programs.

The overall wellbeing and life outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in the ACT will not change unless there is a fundamental shift in how government services, programs and policies are delivered. In the ACT we continue to see deep inequities and some of the worst outcomes in the country in terms of out-of-home care, chronic homelessness and incarceration rates.

The continuing impacts of colonisation, intergenerational trauma and systemic racism means that Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people face profound disadvantage across most areas of life in the ACT. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are overrepresented in the justice system²⁰ and the child and youth protection system²¹, experience worse health and education outcomes²², and are more likely to experience homelessness, housing stress and overcrowding.²³

Despite comprising 2% of the ACT population, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people make up over a quarter (27%) of the population in the Alexander Maconochie Centre (AMC), up from 17% in 2013.²⁴ Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander adults

²⁰ ABS, [Prisoners in Australia](#), Prisoner characteristics, States and territories, ABS, 2024.

²¹ Australian Government Productivity Commission, [Report on Government Services 2024: Community Services](#), Australian Government Productivity Commission, 2024.

²² Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), [Data by region: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples](#), ABS, 17 March 2024.

²³ Australian Government, Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, [Specialist homelessness services annual report 2022–23](#), Australian Government, 2024.

²⁴ ABS, [Prisoners in Australia](#), ABS, 2024.



are also 23 times more likely to be in prison than the non-Indigenous adult population – the highest rate of overrepresentation in the country.²⁵

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples comprise 19% of specialist homelessness service clients and, alarmingly, over half (51%) are chronically homeless.²⁶ Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are 14 times more likely than non-Indigenous children to be in out-of-home care, and the ACT has the second lowest rate of Aboriginal children on track in all five domains of the Australian Early Development Census.²⁷ Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people are also more than 14 times more likely to be in youth detention.²⁸

Rather than an indictment of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander peoples, these figures demonstrate the entrenched and systemic racism at the heart of government systems and social life and the lack of resourcing for self-determination and community-led solutions. [The National Agreement on Closing the Gap](#) recognises that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled organisations are better for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, achieve better results, employ more Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and are often preferred over mainstream services.

ACTCOSS encourages the ACT Government to adopt a whole-of-government approach to funding and resourcing Aboriginal Community-Controlled Organisations (ACCOs) and to scope the necessary investment and need for an Aboriginal Peak Body in the ACT, in consultation with existing ACCOs and with the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community in the ACT.

We are also prepared to work in partnership with the ACT Government to ensure that all work to strengthen the community sector in Canberra prioritises the needs of ACCOs through investment in services and capacity building for the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community sector workforce. This should include full resourcing of ACCOs to participate in commissioning processes.

We recognise the important work that is currently underway to improve the lives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families in the child and youth protection system. The appointment of an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children's Commissioner was a vital step forward and, along with the establishment of a new Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander care and protection legal advocacy service, we are hopeful this will make a significant difference for child and youth protection services and youth justice outcomes.

Despite some important steps forward, much more needs to be done to reduce the overrepresentation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, young people and families in the child protection system. The *Our Booris, Our Way Review* report detailed a series of recommendations and called for an expansion of early family supports and services delivered by ACCOs. These recommendations are yet to be

²⁵ ABS, [Prisoners in Australia](#), ABS, 2024

²⁶ Australian Government, Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, [Specialist homelessness services annual report 2022–23](#), Australian Government, 2024.

²⁷ SNAICC – National Voice for our Children, [Family Matters Report 2023](#), SNAICC, 2023.

²⁸ Productivity Commission, [Report on Government Services 2024: Community Services](#), 2024.



fully implemented and resourced and, despite some modest investments, rates of overrepresentation remain unacceptably high. As highlighted in the most recent *Family Matters* report from SNAICC, there remains a lack of sufficient resources for ACCOs to support families to participate in child protection processes in the ACT; the proportion of expenditure on family support and intensive family support is below the national average; and there remains a significant level of distrust between the Aboriginal sector and the ACT Government.²⁹ In this year's Budget, we urge the Government to provide meaningful and proportional funding for Aboriginal-led and self-determined approaches to keeping Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children safe, well and connected to culture.

We acknowledge the ACT Government has dedicated resources toward reducing the overrepresentation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in prison and youth detention. However, it is critical that the scale of investment is sufficient and sustained, including funding to support capacity building and workforce development. The ACT Government must also ensure this work does not happen in silos, and that there is adequate resourcing to enable cross-directorate collaboration, genuine and ongoing engagement of and accountability to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, and strong partnerships with the community sector.

Children, young people and families

Recommendations

- Ensure adequate resourcing to support raising the minimum age of criminal responsibility, including increased funding for holistic child mental health services and programs.
- Provide additional funding to resource child, youth and family sector reforms, including increased investment to grow early intervention and family preservation services, support workforce development, improve data collection infrastructure, and ensure robust and transparent monitoring and evaluation of reform implementation and impact; and with dedicated funding for services supporting families with disability and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families.
- Increase investment in wrap-around services and holistic supports to ensure better and more equitable child development outcomes and engagement in early childhood educational and care for families experiencing disadvantage or with complex needs.
- Invest in measures to reduce educational inequities among school-aged children, with a focus on resourcing partnerships and linkages between schools and community sector services to improve the range and accessibility of extended services to students, schools and families.
- Increase resourcing for ACCOs to develop and deliver culturally appropriate early childhood and school-age student programs to support learning and development and family involvement in education.

²⁹ SNAICC – National Voice for our Children, [Family Matters Report 2023](#), SNAICC, 2023.



- Ensure funding for domestic and family violence prevention and response is commensurate with need and sustainable, with additional resourcing for case management, early intervention and longer-term supports for victim-survivors.
- Increase investment in integrated specialist services for sexual assault responses.
- Increase investment in perinatal wellbeing services, including funding for in-patient parent and baby care, in addition to dedicated funding for community-controlled, wraparound perinatal programs for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander parents and children.
- Develop and implement a system-wide strategy to support partnerships and linkages between schools and community sector services to improve the range and accessibility of extended services to students, schools and families.
- Provide additional funding to community-based specialist women's services, including health services, community legal services and housing and homelessness services.
- Provide additional funding for youth crime diversion programs and evidence-based early interventions, including holistic assessments, appropriate case management and improved staffing for services supporting young people.
- Implement and fund all recommendations from the Inspector of Correctional Services Healthy Centre Review of Bimberri Youth Justice Centre.
- Improve access to community mental health support services for children and young people, particularly for vulnerable children under the age of 12.

Wellbeing Domain 2: Education & Lifelong Learning

Wellbeing Domain 6: Health

Wellbeing Domain 10: Safety

The safety and wellbeing of Canberran families, young people and children is central to the quality of life of our community. Yet for some the youngest and most vulnerable Canberrans, work remains to level the playing field and give them a fair start in life. This Budget provides an opportunity to strengthen supports and invest in our children and young people and the families that support them.

Evidence shows that investing in the early years has lasting benefits throughout life and long-term economic benefits for society; and that prioritising investment in those living in the most disadvantaged circumstances yields the greatest benefit. Accordingly, ACTCOSS welcomes recent investments in early childhood education made through the provision of six hours per week of free preschool for every three-year-old child. Evidence shows that children who attend preschool are better prepared to excel in primary school, and that two consecutive years of preschool attendance is better than only one year before school.³⁰ We also commend efforts to build the ACT early childhood education workforce.

While commending recent investments in early childhood education, we believe further work is required to ensure these investments strengthen outcomes for

³⁰ Fox, S and Geddes, M, [Preschool - Two Years are Better Than One: Developing a Preschool Program for Australian 3 Year Olds – Evidence, Policy and Implementation](#), Mitchell Institute Policy Paper No. 03/2016, Mitchell Institute, Melbourne, 2016.



children from disadvantaged backgrounds or experiencing social exclusion, including greater investment in wrap-around and integrated approaches to supporting children and families experiencing hardship, marginalisation or other forms of disadvantage. The socio-economic gradient in child development outcomes has become more pronounced over the past decade in the ACT, and we know that equitable and universal access to early childhood education, coupled with holistic and integrated support for families, is key to reversing this inequity.³¹

Given the vital role of education in fostering social and economic inclusion and equity, ACTCOSS are deeply concerned about the stark and growing disparities that characterise the education system in the ACT. Our education system should be one that allows all students, regardless of their socioeconomic background, to reach their full potential. Yet the ACT education system is one of the most inequitable in Australia, with the ACT having the worst relationship between socioeconomic status and performance of all jurisdictions except the Northern Territory, in PISA assessments.³² Disadvantaged students in the ACT are also falling behind in NAPLAN. The gap between disadvantaged and advantaged students in the ACT is about 1.5 years in Year 3 and increases to four years by Year 9. Priority equity cohorts such as students whose parents did not complete high school and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students perform significantly worse than their peers.

To overcome these growing educational disparities, ACTCOSS recommends investment in a system-wide strategy to support partnerships and linkages between schools and community sector services to improve the range and accessibility of extended services to students, schools and families, particularly those facing disadvantage. This would entail investment in programs and coordinating mechanisms that support a school hub model, providing connections to family, community, and the broader social and health services children and families need to thrive. For disadvantaged and vulnerable children and young people, this contact with health and community services at the school site can help build confidence and relationships that create pathways to services outside the school gate.³³

We also know that keeping children and young people out of the justice system is essential to positive development outcomes. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are 14 times more likely than non-Indigenous children to be in detention in the ACT.³⁴ We commend the ACT Government for committing to raise the age of criminal responsibility. The previously announced supports to help children being diverted are welcome but insufficient to the task. Additional funding for appropriate supports and diversionary programs is required to ensure that vulnerable young people do not slip through the cracks or end up involved in the justice system once they have turned 14.

³¹ ACT Government, [Australian Early Development Census 2021: Results for the ACT](#), 2021; Collier LR, Gregory T, Harman-Smith Y, Gialamas A, Brinkman SA, [Inequalities in child development at school entry: A repeated cross-sectional analysis of the Australian Early Development Census 2009–2018](#), *The Lancet Regional Health–Western Pacific*, 2020 Nov 1;4.

³² J Del Rio, H Noura, K Jones, A Sukkarieh, [Raising the grade: How schools in the Australian Capital Territory can lift literacy outcomes for students and the economy](#), Equity Economics, 2023

³³ ACTCOSS, [Submission to Inquiry into literacy and numeracy in ACT public schools](#), ACTCOSS, 2024.

³⁴ Productivity Commission, [Report on Government Services 2024: Community Services](#), 2024.



While a range of welcome system reforms are underway to support raising the minimum age of criminal responsibility, it is imperative a wide spectrum of support services is adequately resourced and coordinated to successfully deliver on these reforms. This includes enhancing the capacity of child and youth mental health services and programs to provide holistic, wrap-around support to children and young people who are referred to the Therapeutic Support Panel. These services need to be adequately resourced to be flexible and tailored to the unique and complex needs of children, young people and their families, as well as working in a coordinated and complementary way with other support services.

Likewise, significant investment is required to support major reforms underway to the ACT's child protection system, including recent and forthcoming legislative changes to the *Children and Young Peoples Act 2008*. To ensure these reforms deliver positive outcomes for children, young people and families, considerable resources will need to be dedicated to growing early intervention and family support services, workforce development, improved data collection infrastructure, and robust and transparent monitoring and evaluation of reform implementation and impact.³⁵ We note that ACT Government annual spending per child on protective intervention services, care services, intensive family support services and family support services remains the lowest in the country at \$1,206, well below the national average of \$1,638, and particularly low in relation to family support services.³⁶ Significant investment will be needed to keep families together and enable the proposed rebalancing of the system to early intervention and the new family preservation model, while at the same time ensuring support reaches those children, young people and families already deeply engaged with the child protection system.

Investing in a safe and equitable community also requires the prevention of domestic and family violence (DFV) and gendered violence. In addition to increasing investment in primary prevention, frontline services must be appropriately funded to meet client demand and provide wraparound services, community legal services and housing and homelessness services for victim-survivors.

Specialist family violence services in the ACT are under severe pressure, with levels of demand reaching unsustainable levels. In a context of heightened demand and insufficient resourcing, the service system remains narrowly focused on crisis intervention, with limited capacity to support complex needs and longer-term recovery. This is ultimately resulting in some victim-survivors re-presenting to services again and again, alongside fatigue and burnout within the workforce. Additional investment is needed to not only provide sufficient crisis intervention, but to expand access to case management, early intervention and longer-term and holistic supports to victim-survivors.

³⁵ ACTCOSS, [Submission to the consultation on Child and Young People Act 2008 Reform Stage 2](#), ACTCOSS, 2024.

³⁶ Productivity Commission, Report on Government Services 2024, '[Child protection services](#)' (table 16A.8), *Australian Government Productivity Commission*.



Climate and energy

Recommendations

- Review and reform utilities concessions to improve equity across households and be more responsive to changes in prices and circumstances, including implementing percentage-based concessions, and investigating a system for automatically applying concessions to eligible people.
- Expand and better target financial support (including ancillary support like home energy audits and financial counselling) for electrification and energy efficiency retrofits to low-income households, renters, a wider range of concession card holders and people on low incomes who do not have concession cards.
- Ensure public and community housing is electric and energy efficient and tenants are supported on the pathway to electrification, including investigating the installation of solar panels on public and community housing properties.
- Expand and fully fund the Home Energy Efficiency Program to ensure all low-income renters can access a home energy audit and education, draught sealing, and adequate curtains.
- Incentivise landlords to ensure private rental properties are electric and energy efficient.
- Strengthen and enforce minimum energy efficiency standards for rentals and incentivise landlords to ensure these standards are met.
- Commit to adding draught proofing, double glazing and curtaining in the next stage of rolling out minimum energy standards for rental homes to ensure the benefits of electrification are fully realised, and with an effective system for enforcing this regulation.
- Equitably distribute costs when phasing out the gas network, including providing targeted support for transition, disconnection, and abolishment costs.
- Invest in building community capacity to face more frequent and severe disasters, including increasing the capacity for community sector services to be scaled up when needed.

Wellbeing Domain 4: Environment & Climate

Wellbeing Domain 9: Living Standards

Wellbeing Domain 6: Health

Climate change is a social justice issue deeply linked to all Wellbeing Domains. Globally and within our own community, disadvantaged groups, such as people on low incomes, people with disabilities, people with chronic health issues and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, are more likely to be negatively impacted by climate change.³⁷ Climate action is also a social justice issue. As climate change related extreme weather events become more frequent, more people will require a broad range of support. Climate action through mitigation and

³⁷ N Islam & J Winkel, [Climate change and social inequality](#), DESA Working Paper No.152, United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2017.



adaptation measures must not entrench or exacerbate disadvantage. Instead, climate action should aim to reduce poverty and inequality and improve wellbeing.

Fair, fast and inclusive climate action presents an opportunity to ensure that low-income households and other disadvantaged groups have access to clean, dependable and affordable energy, well-distributed energy resources and affordable housing that is energy efficient.

If the equity implications of the ACT's pathway to electrification are not properly planned for, people on low incomes and those who have limited ability to upgrade their homes will be made worse off by the expected rise in prices. Our members report that energy stress and the inability to afford more energy-efficient options are among some of the most frequent issues raised by their clients. While we acknowledge that there are initiatives in place to assist Canberrans to upgrade their appliances and homes, these have complex eligibility criteria that favour proactive homeowners over renters and should be better targeted to those in need.

To ensure an equitable pathway to net zero emissions, the ACT Government must invest in a fair, fast and inclusive transition to ensure no one gets left behind. The ACT government has a responsibility to ensure energy is reliable, accessible and affordable, and that the solutions to net zero emissions consider the wider community, especially people experiencing poverty and disadvantage. Initiatives that address the barriers that are faced by groups such as low-income households, renters and those in public housing, people with disabilities and illness, sole parents, lower income workers and small business owners who are not eligible for current concessions are needed to ensure that overall emissions targets are met.

We need policy addressing the impacts of climate change, but that policy must not perpetuate inequality. If resources to invest in climate action are scarce, then they must be targeted toward those on the lowest incomes. Public money used to support the transition to net zero must be targeted to those who need it most and those that are most impacted by being left behind.³⁸

Disability

Wellbeing Domain 1: Access & Connectivity

Wellbeing Domain 7: Housing & Home

Wellbeing Domain 11: Social Connection

Wellbeing Domain 3: Education & Lifelong Learning

The ACT Government must make significant investments to improve choice, control, accessibility and outcomes for people with disabilities. It is well understood that an inclusive society benefits everyone, so investment in inclusion for people with disability has a significant flow-on effect to the wellbeing of all community members.

³⁸ For further details on ACTCOSS policy proposals for a just energy transition, see: [ACTCOSS submission to Inquiry into climate change and a just transition](#); [ACTCOSS submission to ACT Integrated Energy Plan Position Paper](#); ACTCOSS Report: [Supporting a fair, fast and inclusive energy transition in the ACT](#), 2023; see also B Kolovos, '[Solar panels could be a lifesaver for public housing tenants grappling with Australia's soaring energy costs](#)', *The Guardian*, 3 April 2023, accessed 4 April 2023.



People with disability experience discrimination and segregation in all areas of life, which negatively impacts mental and physical health. Adults with disabilities are significantly less likely to report experiencing good or excellent health at 24%, compared to 65% of people without disabilities.³⁹ In addition, 32% of adults with disabilities experience high or very high psychological distress compared with only 8% of adults without disabilities.⁴⁰

Children and young people with disabilities are also at increased risk of harm, as 18% of recent accounts of violence, abuse, neglect or exploitation reported to the Disability Royal Commission occurred in Australian schools.⁴¹ A further 45% of reported accounts occurred in Australian state or territory government settings or health settings, including discriminatory practices in health settings and problems accessing correct diagnoses and appropriate disability support provision.⁴² Close to half of adults with disabilities have experienced violence.⁴³ Women with disabilities, in comparison to men with or without disabilities and women without disabilities, are the most likely cohort to have experienced sexual assault after age 15 at approximately 57%.⁴⁴ LGBTQ+ (the study referenced did not include intersex participants) people with disabilities are also more likely to experience assault or harassment based on their gender identity or sexuality; 71% of young LGBTQ+ people with disabilities reported experiencing verbal harassment, compared to 51% without disabilities.⁴⁵ People with disabilities are diverse, have diverse needs and services providing support require adequate funding to support individuals and advocate for systemic change which prioritises accessibility, inclusion and agency.

In this year's Budget, additional funding needs to be delivered to address the findings of the Royal Commission into Violence, Abuse and Neglect of People with Disability, the implications of the wide-ranging NDIS review changes, and to make good on the ACT Government's promised ACT Disability Strategy and other reforms.

The NDIS review recommendation regarding foundational supports lays out the variety of ways in which the territory government will be required to make investments in services, both mainstream and specialised, to ensure that people with disabilities are able to receive the varied supports they require to live good lives. Foundational supports that will require ongoing funding support from the ACT Government include general supports such as peer support and information services

³⁹ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW), [People with disability in Australia 2022](#), Australian Government.

⁴⁰ AIHW, [People with disability in Australia 2022](#).

⁴¹ Royal Commission into Violence, Abuse, Neglect, and Exploitation of People with Disability (Disability Royal Commission), [Seventh progress report](#), Royal Commission into Violence, Abuse, Neglect, and Exploitation of People with Disability, 14 March 2023, p. 33.

⁴² Disability Royal Commission, [Seventh progress report](#).

⁴³ AIHW, [People with disability in Australia 2022](#).

⁴⁴ AIHW, [People with disability in Australia 2022](#).

⁴⁵ AO Hill, N Amos, A Bourne, M Parsons, C Bigby, M Carman, & A Lyons, [Violence, abuse, neglect and exploitation of LGBTQA+ people with disability: a secondary analysis of data from two national surveys](#), Australian Research Centre in Sex, Health and Society, La Trobe University, November 2022, p. 78, accessed 22 March 2023.



as well as targeted supports such as equipment and assistance with accessing the community.⁴⁶

ACTCOSS supports the recommendations made by ACT disability organisations in their joint submission to the ACT Budget consultation process. This includes fully funding the implementation of the ACT's Disability Health Strategy. The \$4 million investment in the Strategy announced in the ACT Government's recent midyear update was a welcome downpayment toward this, however additional funding is needed to deliver measures that go beyond planning, scoping and communications work. We recommend additional funding to resource practical efforts to improve the health experience of people with disability including training practitioners, funding for wraparound diagnostic services, community health access grants, and disability liaison officers within the Canberra Hospital and the rehab hospital.

Additional funding is also required to implement the ACT Government's Inclusive Education Strategy, which aims to improve the capacity of teachers and schools to support inclusive education for children with disability. A number of segregated school settings continue to operate in the ACT, and too many students with disability experience barriers to education, poor attainment and harm within education settings.

Additional investment is required to implement and oversight the strategy. This includes reducing the workload of teachers by providing additional teaching and support staff; investing in universal design in infrastructure and access to curricula; and additional funding for occupational therapists, speech pathology and allied health professionals in schools.

Canberrans with disability also continue to face barriers to securing and retaining housing that is affordable and accessible, and additional investment is needed in services to improve the supply of affordable and disability-accessible housing, and to support people with disability to locate, gain and retain tenancies in the private rental and social housing markets. Support package for parents with a disability, together with funding for measures to prevent violence against women and children with disability and improve services service response, are also needed.

⁴⁶ Public Interest Advocacy Centre (PIAC), [Explainer: Understanding the NDIS Review](#), PIAC, 2023.



Health

Recommendations

- Improve access to primary healthcare by increasing investment in, and the scope of operations of, community health centres, walk-in clinics and public dental services.
- Fully fund the ACT Drug Strategy Action Plan, ensuring the Alcohol, Tobacco and Other Drug (ATOD) sector receives continual funding based on projected community need for ATOD specialist treatment services, and working in partnership with the ATOD sector to ensure robust and transparent monitoring and evaluation of drug decriminalisation.
- Invest in community-based responses for people with co-occurring mental health and alcohol and drug use.
- Develop and fund a sexual and reproductive health strategy based on lived experience, including communications about how people can access free abortions.
- Further invest in the ACT Women's Health Service and provide subsidised health services for women and people who have experienced sexual violence.
- Fund dementia-specific support services, including diagnosis, education, counselling, housing, support groups and respite programs.
- Fund an Individual Advocacy Service so that individuals managing complex and co-occurring conditions can access support navigating the health system.
- Fund a multicultural health service to provide culturally-sensitive care.
- Invest in funding to support trans, gender diverse and intersex (TGI) people for healthcare and gender affirming care, including ongoing support and expansion of these services.
- Improve the delivery and accessibility of palliative care services in the ACT.
- Continue investment in the Long-COVID-19 Clinic as a dedicated service providing integrated care for those with post-viral sequelae.

Wellbeing Domain 6: Health

Chronic disease makes up most of our spending on healthcare, and people in the lowest income quintile, as well as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, are much more likely to suffer from chronic disease.⁴⁷ To prevent and effectively manage chronic disease, people must be able to see a doctor before their illness becomes dire. An estimated 40% of Canberrans have a long-term health condition.⁴⁸ However, there is a distinct lack of affordable primary healthcare in the ACT.

The ACT has the lowest rates of bulk billing GPs in the country, with less than 40% of people likely to see a bulk-billing GP and 20% of people saying they are never

⁴⁷ P Breadon, L Fox, O Emslie, [The Australian Centre for Disease Control \(ACDC\): Highway to health](#), Grattan Institute, 2023.

⁴⁸ ABS, [Region summary: Australian Capital Territory](#), ABS website,.



bulk billed.⁴⁹ When they do see a doctor, people on low incomes are more likely to wait longer for an appointment.⁵⁰ The ACT also has the highest out-of-pocket costs in the country for GP, specialist and allied health appointments.⁵¹ CPI data indicates in the last 10 years, medical, dental and hospital services in the ACT increased by more than 50%. Forty percent of chronic illness is preventable, so the government needs to provide healthcare that prevents people from becoming chronically ill.⁵²

For people on low incomes to be able to access the healthcare they need, there is a pressing need to increase access to affordable and accessible primary healthcare, and to prioritise investment in early intervention and disease prevention for people on low incomes and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.⁵³

As recommended [above](#), improving access to primary healthcare is a vital measure to relieve cost of living pressures and improve health outcomes. We support existing investments in walk-in centres and community health centres, but we believe this investment needs to be increased to make more effective use of walk-in centres and expand the scope of operations of community health centres. This will be an important means of expanding access to primary care in the ACT for those on low incomes and/or with multiple and complex health and social needs.

Human rights

Recommendations

- Increase funding to the ACT National Preventative Mechanisms (NPMs) – the Inspector of Correctional Services, the Human Rights Commission and the ACT Ombudsman – to adequately carry out monitoring and oversight relating to OPCAT.
- Dedicate funding to establishing an independent advocacy voice for culturally and linguistically diverse Canberrans in the ACT.
- Provide increased funding to community legal services to ensure equitable access to legal supports for all ACT residents, including women and children, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, people with disabilities and other Canberrans facing legal disadvantage.
- Increase funding for grant opportunities to cover bonds and rent for refugee and low-income migrant groups settling in the ACT.

⁴⁹ N Chrysanthos and A Dow, '[Bulk-billing data reveals where you're most likely to find a free doctor](#)', *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 20 February 2023; M Davey, '["Almost impossible to get bulk billed": patients avoid seeing doctors due to out-of-pocket costs](#)', *The Guardian*, 12 May 2022.

⁵⁰ N Chrysanthos and A Dow, *Bulk-billing data reveals where you're most likely to find a free doctor*; M Davey, '["Almost impossible to get bulk billed": patients avoid seeing doctors due to out-of-pocket costs](#)'.

⁵¹ Productivity Commission, [Report on Government Services 2023: 10 Primary and community health](#) [data set], Productivity Commission, Australian Government, 2023, accessed 17 March 2023.

⁵² Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW), [One-third of disease burden caused by modifiable risk factors](#) [media release], AIHW, 18 August 2021, accessed 17 March 2023.

⁵³ P Breadon, L Fox, O Emslie, *The Australian Centre for Disease Control (ACDC): Highway to health*.



- Fund an independent review of police complaints handling mechanisms to ensure greater practical independence, accountability and transparency of investigations.
- Fund human rights improvement mechanisms arising from the Royal Commission into Violence, Abuse, Neglect and Exploitation of People with Disability.
- Invest in human-rights promoting solutions to address racism experienced by children and young people as outlined in the ACT Human Rights Commission 'It really stabs me' Report (2023), including funding to support anti-racism education and strategies within ACT schools and the community.

Wellbeing Domain 5: Governance & Institutions

The ACT's commitment to being a human rights jurisdiction requires complaints mechanisms and procedures that are truly accessible. The most vulnerable and disadvantaged members of our community are at the greatest risk of having their human rights breached, including those experiencing homelessness or housing precarity, on low incomes, from migrant and refugee backgrounds, as well as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people. The [ACT Human Rights Commission 'It really stabs me' Report 2023](#) found that 54% of culturally and linguistically diverse identifying children and young people reported experiencing racism, while 92% of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander children and young people reported experiencing racism.

ACTCOSS commends the ACT Government's commitment to strengthening human rights through the passage of the Human Rights (Healthy Environment) Amendment Bill 2023. As issues of implementing mechanisms to enable Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander self-determination emerge in concurrence with the snowballing impacts of climate change, it is more important than ever that the ACT Government invests in ensuring that the right to a healthy environment is a meaningful right that supports community members to live in safe and well-cared for environments. As detailed in ACTCOSS' [submission to the inquiry](#), we also remain committed to advocating for the ACT Government to add the full suite of Economic, Social and Cultural rights to the *ACT Human Rights Act*, including rights to housing, physical and mental health, and cultural participation.

Australia's ratification of the Optional Protocol to the Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (OPCAT) presented the ACT Government with the opportunity to strengthen the culture of human rights within places where people are deprived of their liberty, including in the ACT's prison and youth detention facilities, in forensic mental health facilities, healthcare settings, police custody, and in other places and contexts where people are deprived of their liberty. We welcomed the ACT Government's announcement in early 2022 that the Office of the Inspector of Correctional Services (OICS), the ACT Human Rights Commission and the ACT Ombudsman had been nominated as the oversight bodies comprising the ACT's multi-body National Preventive Mechanism (NPM).

Despite the establishment of an ACT NPM, resourcing for NPM bodies remains inadequate, preventing the NPM from collectively fulfilling its mandate. ACTCOSS has consistently advocated for adequate resourcing of the OICS and other NPM



bodies and believes the benefits are clear and compelling.⁵⁴ As the Victorian Ombudsman has stated: “it costs far more to deal with the consequences of ill-treatment – which could be a huge bill for damage or compensation, or a Royal Commission – than setting up regular monitoring to prevent it and drive improvements”.⁵⁵ Resourcing should be provided in a way that enables NPM bodies to fulfil OPCAT’s core functions; respects the functional, structural and personal independence of NPM bodies; and ensures multidisciplinary monitoring and effective liaison with, and involvement of, civil society representatives and people with lived experience of detention in the OPCAT inspection process.

To support a more coordinated approach and to ensure the visibility of the overall NPM in the ACT, we also recommend resourcing one of the ACT NPM entities to act as the ACT NPM central coordinating body, or alternatively reinstating the full-time NPM Coordination Director role that existed up until July 2023.

Justice

Recommendations

- Establish a ‘Breaking the Cycle’ Fund to build the capacity of the community sector to provide diversion and support programs, with a particular emphasis on building the capacity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations, and with an initial funding commitment of at least \$20 million per annum for new community-led initiatives.
- Fund the establishment of a Justice Reinvestment Coordinator-General to oversee the ‘Breaking the Cycle’ Fund and ensure a cross-directorate, whole-of-government approach.
- Fund the implementation of all recommendations from the 2022 Healthy Prison Review of the Alexander Maconochie Centre and remaining recommendations from the 2019 Healthy Prison Review.
- Fully fund community services to meet the needs of children, young people and their families who are diverted from the criminal justice system as the minimum age of criminal responsibility is raised to 14, including mental health and early intervention services.
- Increase funding to the Restorative Justice Unit to embed restorative processes through the justice system and increase referrals to the Unit.
- Fully resource the Disability Justice and Justice Reinvestment Strategies.
- Fund health promotion, financial literacy and education programs in the AMC, including specific programs for women.
- Ensure the community sector is adequately funded and supported to provide services and programs within the AMC.

⁵⁴ ACTCOSS, [Submission to the Review of the Inspector of Correctional Services Act 2017](#), 2024.

⁵⁵ Victorian Ombudsman, [Implementing OPCAT in Victoria: Report and Inspection of the Dame Phyllis Frost Centre](#), 30 November, 2017, p.5



- Invest in bail support programs with intensive case management and supports to reduce high rates of remand.
- Increase investment in justice housing options, including expanded transitional housing programs to prevent homelessness and recidivism for detainees post-release; supported accommodation for young people, women and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples on bail; a housing program to support domestic and family violence defendants and people convicted of domestic and family violence offences; and avenues for continued support and contact with case managers once people exit justice housing.
- Increase funding for detainees to access individual advocacy services.
- Implement a needle and syringe program for the AMC.

Wellbeing Domain 5: Governance & Institutions

Wellbeing Domain 7: Housing & Home

Wellbeing Domain 10: Safety

The ACT community deserves better from our justice system. Despite the ACT Government's stated commitment to justice reinvestment and the relatively low rates of incarceration in the ACT, we have the highest rate of recidivism (when including return to community corrections orders) and the highest ratio of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander incarceration rates compared with non-Indigenous incarceration rates.⁵⁶ In addition, the ACT has the highest rate of prior imprisonment in Australia, with 80% of all people in prison in the ACT having been to prison before.⁵⁷ This rate is even higher for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, with 84% having a history of prior imprisonment.⁵⁸

Incarceration is also extraordinarily expensive. In the ACT, the total net operating and capital cost of adult imprisonment and youth detention over the past year was more than \$120 million dollars.⁵⁹ By investing a greater proportion of this money in diversionary community services, community services will have a chance of truly meeting the present needs in the community, rather than having to operate through strict exclusion of those who are ineligible or relegated to long waiting lists.⁶⁰ This action would go a long way towards showing genuine action on meeting the ACT Governments' Reducing Recidivism 25% by 2025 goal and the *Building Communities not Prisons* initiative. Every dollar spent on evidence-based justice reinvestment is a dollar that does not need to be spent on depriving a person of their liberty, or on supporting victims of crime.

The prison population has been increasing since the Alexander Maconochie Centre (AMC) opened,⁶¹ and the facilities are no longer fit to provide for the needs of the detainees. The 2022 Healthy Prison Review found that 79% of detainees reported

⁵⁶ ABS, [Prisoners in Australia](#), Prisoner characteristics, States and territories, ABS, 2024.

⁵⁷ ABS, [Prisoners in Australia](#), Prisoner characteristics, States and territories, ABS, 2024.

⁵⁸ ABS, [Prisoners in Australia](#), Prisoner characteristics, States and territories, ABS, 2024.

⁵⁹ Productivity Commission, [Report on Government Services 2024: Community Services](#), 2024; Productivity Commission, [Report on Government Services 2024: Justice](#), 2024.

⁶⁰ Justice Reform Initiative, [Alternatives to incarceration in the Australian Capital Territory](#), 2024.

⁶¹ Productivity Commission, [Report on Government Services 2024: Justice](#), 2024.



experiencing boredom most of the time, and 80% disagree that the work they do in the AMC will help them gain employment after release.⁶² The percentage of eligible detainees receiving education and training remains unacceptably low at 24% (compared to 83% in 2013-14).⁶³ According to the Healthy Prison Review, detainees struggle to access healthcare services and 71% report they found it difficult to access psychological supports.⁶⁴ The Hume Health Centre and Winnunga Nimmityjah are attempting to service more than double the number of detainees for which they are resourced.⁶⁵ These statistics highlight the need to both improve the health, therapeutic and rehabilitative services in AMC and, critically, to increase investment in preventative and diversionary services to keep people out of prison.

The number of unsentenced detainees is also continuing to increase. At present, 46% of detainees are on remand in the ACT – the highest rate in Australia and double the remand rate in the ACT a decade ago.⁶⁶ Through funding effective community programs and services across the spectrum of basic life needs, engagement with the justice system can be prevented. Raising the age of criminal responsibility delivers an opportunity to provide holistic supports to young people and their families to prevent their first engagement with the criminal justice system. Prevention is the key to justice that will improve outcomes for those at risk and the entire ACT community.

Additional priority should be given to programs that include:

- expanded bail support (e.g., bail support for all people; bail accommodation, including for people alleged to have committed domestic and family violence offences);
- expansion of community-led specialist drug and alcohol treatment programs to better meet the needs of justice-involved populations;
- expansion of specialist post-release programs for adults and young people leaving custody; and
- expansion of specialist mental health and disability programs to better meet the needs of justice-involved populations and improved screening and assessment processes.

While housing is an issue for the rest of the community, it is a particularly acute issue for people leaving prison. Being released into homelessness or inappropriate housing situations drastically increases the risk that a former detainee will end up back in prison. The [justice housing evaluation report](#) shows that justice housing for people released from the AMC is vital and must be expanded and tailored to the needs of the population it supports. The report shows that scaling up this housing is crucial to prevent homelessness and recidivism.

⁶² ACT Inspector of Correctional Services, [Healthy prison review of the Alexander Maconochie Centre 2022: Summary report](#), ACT Inspector of Correctional Services, November 2022, p. 12.

⁶³ Productivity Commission, [Report on Government Services 2024: Justice](#), 2024, Table 8A.11.

⁶⁴ ACT Inspector of Correctional Services, [Healthy prison review of the Alexander Maconochie Centre 2022: Summary report](#).

⁶⁵ ACT Inspector of Correctional Services, [Healthy prison review of the Alexander Maconochie Centre 2022: Summary report](#).

⁶⁶ ABS, [Prisoners in Australia 2024](#), Tables 14 and 15.



ACTCOSS endorses the proposal for a 'Breaking the Cycle' Fund, as proposed by the Justice Reform Initiative.⁶⁷ This fund would build the capacity of the community sector to provide a suite of diversion and support programs, with a particular emphasis on building the capacity of ACCOs. To oversee the Fund, we also support the establishment of a Justice Reinvestment Coordinator-General, recognising that breaking the cycle of justice system involvement is a whole-of-government, cross-directorate responsibility.

Mental health

Recommendations

- Increase funding to the community-managed mental health service sector that is commensurate with community need and the cost of delivering services, with the proportion of mental health funding going to these services increasing from 13% to 20%.
- Invest in providing mental health focused services at community health centres.
- Develop a fully-funded plan to implement the ACT mental health workforce strategy and expand and sustain the community-managed mental health workforce, including:
 - provision of funding that covers adequate wages, professional development and indirect staff costs in the community-managed mental health sector
 - funding to develop the ACT's lived experience workforce
 - investment in training pathways and paid work placements to support the growth of the lived experience workforce, including funding for the Certificate IV in Mental Health Peer Work and related skill sets.
- Invest in resources and a centralised support service to assist people to navigate the mental health system and find appropriate and timely mental health services and supports.
- Provide funding to reinstate the ACT Recovery College.
- Train all frontline public sector staff in trauma-informed approaches.

Wellbeing Domain 6: Health

Canberra is in the middle of cost-of-living and housing affordability crises, and the resulting pressures affect our well-being and mental health.⁶⁸ Many people are putting off mental health treatment due to cost. During 2022-23, 35% of people with a mental health condition in the ACT delayed or avoided seeing a psychologist due to cost.⁶⁹ A combination of low bulk-billing rates in the ACT and high out-of-pocket

⁶⁷ Justice Reform Initiative, [Alternatives to incarceration in the Australian Capital Territory](#), 2024.

⁶⁸ Heartward Strategic, [Money and mental health: Social research report](#), Heartward Strategic, August 2022, pp 16, 37-38, accessed 27 March 2023; E Liu, B Judd, and M Santamouris, 'Challenges in transitioning to low carbon living for lower income households in Australia', *Advances in Building Energy Research*, 2019, 13(1):49-64, doi: 10.1080/17512549.2017.1354780, pp 54, 57.

⁶⁹ Productivity Commission, [Report on Government Services 2023: E Health](#), Productivity Commission, 2023, figure 13.5, accessed 23 March 2023.



costs for Medicare health services means the community sector provides a crucial role in providing mental health and psychosocial services in the ACT, but without the funding required to adequately service existing and growing demand. Private health providers have no incentive to take on complex mental health cases, which further adds to pressure on services provided by the community mental health sector and the ACT Government.

Major service gaps are also preventing people from accessing care.⁷⁰ At risk groups are particularly vulnerable to service gaps, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, the LGBTIQ+ community, culturally and linguistically diverse people, and people who are, or have been, in contact with the justice system.⁷¹ While funding for acute mental health services has nearly doubled since 2014, per capita funding for community-managed mental health services in the ACT has diminished significantly.⁷² Serious investment into community-managed mental health services would not only fill these serious service gaps, but also ease the burden on emergency departments and other acute services.⁷³

Funding for community-managed mental health services has not only failed to keep pace with demand and increases in complexity, but has also failed to keep pace with inflation and population growth. In real terms, we have fewer resources to stem the significant stress faced in our region. This has severe implications for the ACT's struggling public health system, significant downstream economic costs, and costs to human flourishing, with consequences for individuals, families, and our community more broadly.

⁷⁰ Capital Health Network (CHN), [Capital Health Network \(ACT PHN\) 2021–2024 Needs Assessment](#), CHN, n.d., accessed 27 March 2023; CHN, [Australian Capital Territory PHN Needs Assessment 2020-2021](#), CHN.

⁷¹ CHN, *Capital Health Network (ACT PHN) 2021–2024 Needs Assessment*, p 63.

⁷² Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW), [Mental health: Expenditure](#), AIHW, 2022.

⁷³ CHN, *Australian Capital Territory PHN Needs Assessment 2020-2021*, p 14; AHURI, [Mental health services provided in emergency departments](#), AHURI, May 2021, pp 4-5, accessed 27 March 2023.



Planning and transport

Recommendations

- Invest in adequate and affordable transport for students, including free public transport for school students and sufficient transport options for university and CIT students.
- Trial free public transport for all students and concession card holders and analyse the costs, benefits and distributional impact.
- Invest in community transport, including for vulnerable children unable to attend early learning centres due to transport barriers.
- Invest in measures to support transport equity, including better targeting the Sustainable Household Scheme to those in need and expanding the products available to include bicycles, electric bicycles, and second-hand electric cars.
- Remove barriers to access for second-hand cars from non-authorised retailers or expand the list of authorised retailers.
- Support active travel including maintenance of and investment in walking and cycle paths and separated cycleways.
- Provide affordable land and reduced land taxes and rates for community housing providers to facilitate the delivery of much needed community housing.
- Review ageing community facilities and community organisation facilities and develop an investment plan.
- Ensure the implementation of the new ACT planning system is inclusive and supports the needs of people with disability.
- Assist community organisations that require freight transport (e.g., food pantries) to cover fuel levy expenses.

Wellbeing Domain 1: Access & Connectivity

Wellbeing Domain 11: Social Connection

Wellbeing Domain 12: Time

By June 2060, the ACT planning and transport system will need to support 784,000 people.⁷⁴ Planning decisions we make now will affect our health, wellbeing and equity in the ACT for years to come.⁷⁵ Building a healthy, sustainable Canberra will require ongoing investment into transport systems, public and community housing, green spaces and community services and facilities. With the ongoing housing and rental affordability crisis in the ACT, addressing the lack of supply in both the private market and social housing sector is crucial. We must also put the needs of marginalised and disadvantaged groups at the forefront of decision-making and consultation processes, as they will be most adversely affected by poor planning decisions.

⁷⁴ ACT Government, [ACT Population Projections: 2022 to 2060](#), ACT Government, n.d.

⁷⁵ World Health Organization (WHO), [How to develop and sustain healthy cities in 20 steps](#), WHO, 2022, pp 2-4.

