



ACT 2024 Election

# A secure home for all

## Housing and Homelessness

### Election Platform



**ACT**  
**Shelter**



**COSS**  
Council of  
Social Service

Everyone needs a home. A home where they feel safe, a home that's secure, and a home they can afford.

Yet for a growing number of Canberrans, an affordable home is beyond reach. Our housing system is broken, and housing stress and homelessness is harming individuals, families and the wider community. Business-as-usual, with a reliance on the market to provide affordable housing, will not work.

The 2024 ACT Election presents a historic opportunity to change the path we are on, to deliver a decisive and generational shift in housing policy, with a transformational investment in social housing at the core.

## ***Our housing system is broken***

In recent years, surges in rental and house prices, coupled with a sustained cost-of-living crisis, have brought many individuals and families to breaking point.

Canberrans on low incomes are choosing between eating and keeping a roof over their heads in an unworkable private rental market, squeezed by high prices and record low vacancies.

For some women and children, the inability to afford housing means staying in – or returning to – violent relationships.

While the private rental market is becoming increasingly unaffordable for many, there is scant social housing to fill the gap. The overall proportion of social housing in the ACT has continued to shrink. At the same time, rental costs have surged, homelessness has increased, and wait times for social housing have ballooned.

At the time of self-government in 1989, public housing comprised 12.2% of all households in the ACT. By 2016, it had dropped to 6.7%, and by 2020 it was 6.2%. As Canberrans prepare to vote in 2024, only 5.7% of households in the ACT are in public housing.

If this pattern of underinvestment is not reversed, the number of Canberrans who are homeless or in severe housing stress will further rise.

The damage caused by the housing crisis will be enduring and generational unless remediated decisively and effectively.

## ***The time to act is now***

This election is an opportunity for the next government to set the ACT on a different pathway. This means committing to a plan for housing that is based on strategic, long-term thinking, has proper investment behind it, and measures success by the outcomes achieved for people in housing need. If we are going to reverse the current trajectory, the next ACT Government must get to grips with the scale of the housing challenge and provide the level of political priority and commitment required.

**ACTCOSS and ACT Shelter believe transformational investment in social housing must be at the core of this agenda.**

Growing social housing is the most effective means for the ACT Government to provide genuinely affordable, secure, quality homes on the scale needed to help those currently locked out of the housing market or facing a future of perpetual housing insecurity. An ambitious social housing policy offers the best chance to tackle the housing crisis and the harm it is causing individuals, families and the wider community.

Alongside investment in social housing, our policy platform promotes reforms and investments to provide greater stability and protections for people who rent; ensure homelessness services meet demand and provide the support people need; improve housing outcomes for people with disability, mental health issues and other complex needs; and help close the gap in housing outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

The ACT is at a critical juncture. We have a historic opportunity to change the path we are on, and we urge all political parties and candidates to adopt these policies and a commit to ensuring a safe and secure home for all Canberrans.

# ACT Election priorities

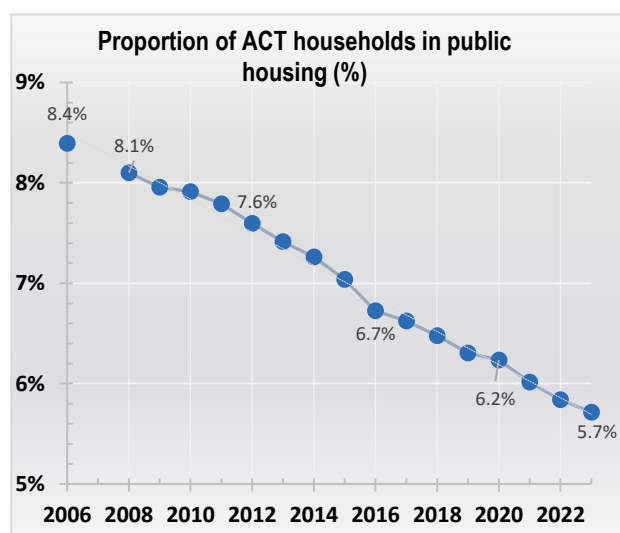
## Increase the supply of public and community housing to meet current and projected growth

Social housing is essential infrastructure and the bedrock of affordable housing availability. Yet this foundation has been steadily eroded in the ACT.

With costs in the private rental market soaring, social housing is the only feasible option for a growing number of low-income households. More than 3,000 people are on the waiting list for public housing in the ACT. The average wait time is nearly four years, increasing to 5.4 years for standard public housing. The shortage of social housing is resulting in pressure on other services systems, including homelessness, family violence, mental and physical health, alcohol and other drugs, policing and justice.

The ACT's social housing deficit is the result of a decades-long decline in the proportion of dwellings available for social housing.

Current policy settings are not enough to halt this decline. Instead, they are the cause. The ACT Government's eight-year *Growing and Renewing Public Housing Program* aims to deliver a net increase of 400 public housing homes by 2027. Even if this target is achieved, the supply of public housing homes relative to the ACT's population will continue to decrease. When the program commenced there were 28 public housing homes for every 1,000 people in the ACT; currently there are 26, and by 2027 it will drop to approximately 24 public housing homes per 1,000 people.



**A substantial expansion of social housing is the only sustainable solution to the housing crisis for low-income households. Maintaining current policy settings or tinkering around the edges is not an option: the scale of current housing crisis requires generational investment in social housing at a scale that reflects the challenges the system is facing.**

While the upfront investment needed to meet the scale of the current social housing crisis is significant, the cost of inaction is enormous. Expanding the provision of stable and affordable social housing will lead to better social, educational, employment and health outcomes, reducing the long-term financial burden on social services and healthcare systems. It will also improve the financial sustainability of social housing over time by allowing for a tenant profile with a more diverse income profile.

- Specify an annual commitment for **social housing** that reflects current and projected demand, with the goal of restoring social housing to at least 10% of all housing stock by 2036.
- Substantially increase direct government investment to grow the net stock of **public housing**, and develop a public strategy to expand public housing stock to meet demand and increase the social and financial sustainability of public housing into the future.
- Increase the share of **social housing** allocated under land release program target, with at least 15% to only apply to social and affordable housing for rent in perpetuity.

The appropriateness, quality and accessibility of housing is crucial to people's quality of life, yet chronic underinvestment in public housing stock means too many properties are in a state of disrepair or aren't appropriate to meet the needs of those housed.

There is limited public information available about the condition of the Territory's public housing assets, and this makes it difficult to ensure the level and targeting of investment in maintenance and repairs is appropriate. Many tenants also report that the current process for seeking repairs or maintenance is confusing, difficult, slow and unresponsive. Greater accountability is needed to ensure maintenance, upgrades and repairs are undertaken in a timely manner and to an appropriate standard.

- Undertake a transparent stocktake of the condition and accessibility of public housing stock, and provide a public plan and the corresponding investment needed to undertake repairs, maintenance and modifications.
- Strengthen accountability and the responsiveness of public housing repairs, maintenance and modification services and programs, including a transition to insourced housing maintenance services.

Community housing, owned and operated by non-for-profit organisations, is a vital part of the social housing mix in the ACT. A community housing growth strategy, with specific growth targets and underpinned by supportive funding and policy settings, is key to support the expansion of community housing in the ACT.

- Ensure the growth and viability of **community housing** by:
  - developing a community housing growth strategy
  - 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 or discount for properties managed by community housing providers for social/affordable rentals.



## Provide greater stability, security and protections for people who rent

Market rents in the ACT are among the highest in the nation, with many prospective renters struggling to secure and maintain accommodation in a fiercely competitive private rental market. While progress on rental rights has been made in the ACT, further reforms and measures are required to support safe, secure and sustainable rental accommodation.

Better enforcement, oversight and accountability is essential to promote 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 of navigating tribunal processes, or a lack of knowledge of existing rights. In addition to increasing funding to tenancy advocacy services, a rental commissioner with investigative, compliance and education functions could strengthen compliance with and understanding of existing laws, as well as relieving the backlog of cases at ACAT through alternative dispute resolution processes. Improved data collection and reporting would enable a better understanding of the effects of existing rental regulations and identification of areas of systemic non-compliance.

The chronic shortage of affordable rental housing has forced some Canberrans to rely on alternative, often informal arrangements, ranging from share accommodation, boarding arrangements, student accommodation, caravan parks, crisis accommodation and secondary dwellings such as "granny flats" leased on an informal basis. People in these occupancy arrangements have minimal legal protections and are not afforded the full rights that apply to tenants with formal agreements. More needs to be done to protect the rights of marginal renters or 'occupants' and to reduce their vulnerability to exploitative, substandard or inappropriate arrangements.

- Strengthen supports and protections for renters, including increased funding for community legal assistance, and establishment of a rental commissioner to promote awareness of rights and responsibilities for tenants and landlords, monitor compliance with rental laws, and provide a streamlined and accessible method of dispute resolution.
- Review and strengthen protections for other renters – occupants (including people in informal share house arrangements, boarding arrangements, student accommodation or crisis accommodation) who do not have the protections that apply to tenants.

## Improve housing outcomes for people with disability

People with disability face a double disadvantage in Canberra – a lack of affordable housing and a lack of appropriate built form. These issues are amplified by the low rates of Disability Support Pension and Jobseeker, and Canberra’s high-cost private rental market. Compared to people without disability, people with disability are at greater risk of experiencing homelessness and housing insecurity. Over one quarter of social housing tenants in the ACT are people with disability, with more than half of public housing properties including someone with disability.

To improve the accessibility and affordability of housing for people with disability, the ACT Government must take concerted action across all parts of the housing market. To date, the adaptation of existing housing stock to improve accessibility has lacked systematic and holistic strategies and solutions, resulting in people with disability living in homes that don’t accommodate their needs – an issue that is particularly acute for renters. Further measures are also needed to help people with disability navigate and access public, social and private housing.

- Increase access-ready public and community housing at the Universal Design Gold Level.
- Introduce an incentives package to increase the supply of accessible private rental for people with disability.
- Undertake urgent priority maintenance issues and upgrades, including installing air conditioning, in the home of every public housing tenant with a disability.
- Fund a disability housing advocate to help people navigate and access public, social and private housing.
- Ensure the new Disability Liaison Officer position in Housing ACT is designed and recruited with the involvement of key disability organisations.
- Implement measures to encourage more accessibility features within new medium density housing, including investment and training to incentivise the inclusion of access-ready dwellings within all new developments at two stories and above.
- Implement a devolution program to support people to move out of group housing in the ACT and cease funding additional congregate housing.

## Prevent homelessness for people with mental health issues and other complex needs

People with mental health and other complex needs are overrepresented in the ACT's homeless population, yet services and systems are ill-equipped to respond to and support people with complex and intersecting needs.

Barriers to effectively addressing the needs of people with mental health issues and other complex needs include siloed services and unachievable eligibility criteria, as well as lack of access to ongoing health care and support that can effectively address complex co-occurring health issues. Service providers in the ACT are often forced to turn away homeless people with the highest needs because they are unable to cope with their complex needs.

At the same time, such people are often excluded from the public housing waiting list because they cannot demonstrate the requirement that they are 'housing ready'. Currently, access to public housing is premised on an explicitly conditional logic, wherein people experiencing homelessness must prove their 'housing readiness' before being added to the public housing waiting list and receiving access to public housing.

There is an urgent need for increased 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.

In addition, there is a significant gap in the ACT in the availability of intensive, integrated service models that include the full range of services required by individuals who have demonstrably very high and complex needs, including people who have experienced chronic homelessness or have complex mental health or alcohol and drug issues.

'Housing First' is a best-practice model of homelessness support. It means giving people experiencing long-term homelessness a stable home first. Supports to sustain housing and manage complex needs or recover from the experiences of homelessness often follow, but housing is not contingent on the person first demonstrating they are 'housing ready' or engaging with support. Expanding this form of permanent supportive housing, which combines affordable housing with wrap-around health and social services, is vital to reduce the high rate of chronic homelessness in the ACT and improve housing outcomes for those with complex needs.

- Invest in targeted, wrap-around tenancy support programs for people with mental health issues.
- Increase investment in permanent supportive housing programs and embed Housing First as the system-wide response for people with intensive support needs, including people with experiences of chronic homelessness and/or multiple forms of disadvantage.
- Adopt a housing-led approach as the central response to homelessness, backed up by and increase in pathways to low-barrier social housing and flexible wrap-around supports to help people gain and sustain social housing.



## Fund specialist homelessness services to meet demand

The housing crisis is driving increases in demand that are overwhelming homelessness services and reducing the effectiveness of the service system.

Our current homelessness service system is oriented toward crisis response. Service systems should be designed to prevent homelessness and, where this is not possible, to ensure homelessness is brief and non-recurring. The needs of people experiencing homelessness become more acute and complex (and therefore more expensive) the longer they are homeless, and the best approach is to help somebody stay in a home, rather than help them find a home once they're homeless.

However, due to growing demand and no commensurate increase in funding, homelessness services are overstretched and often struggle to intervene early. Instead, they're forced to deliver crisis-oriented support.

To systematically reorient the support system from crisis to early intervention, there is need to ensure homelessness services are adequately resourced and enabled to intervene early and, where necessary, to provide ongoing support once people exit homelessness.

In addition, it is vital crisis accommodation is accessible, safe, and short term. Currently, however, access to crisis accommodation is highly rationed, while at the same time there are few pathways into permanent housing. The supply of crisis housing needs to be increased, alongside an increase in the availability of social and supported housing and wraparound support to provide permanent pathways out of homelessness.

- Increase funding for intensive case management to intervene early and prevent people from becoming homeless, and to help keep people housed when they exit homelessness, including specialised teams for key groups such as young people, survivors of domestic and family violence, people with disability, people exiting prison, and older people.
- Increase the supply of crisis housing with a pathway to appropriate permanent housing.



## **Support community-controlled housing for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island peoples**

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples face systemic disadvantages and discrimination in housing, and they are vastly overrepresented among people experiencing homelessness in the ACT.

The importance of appropriate housing to improving the health and wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples is well established and accepted by government and civil society, and acknowledged in the inclusion of a housing target in the National Agreement on Closing the Gap. However, this acknowledgement is not reflected in current ACT housing policy. There is no dedicated strategy or plan in the ACT that has been developed in partnership with local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Nor is sufficient community-controlled community housing currently provided in the ACT. It is vital that the next ACT Government prioritise investment in community-led approaches and community-controlled services to overcome the stark housing disparities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

- Enhance housing options and access for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples through investment in local Aboriginal Community-Controlled Housing.
- Fund a transparent consultation in relation to housing need in the ACT for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, to commence within the first six months of the new term of government, and to result in a public report with concrete recommendations and an action plan for implementation.
- Increase funding for holistic, culturally-informed and community-led tenancy support for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples who are renting, or experiencing or at risk of homelessness.

## Improve coordination of services and supports

Achieving and sustaining a housing outcome often relies on a broad range of support outside of the homelessness sector, including domestic and family violence services, health and mental health care, disability services, education or employment, and financial and legal assistance. The best outcomes are delivered when these services are effectively coordinated or joined up as part of a whole-of-government response.

Current policy settings and funding mechanisms, however, work against a coordinated approach. This is reflected in the high rates of exits from institutions such as prison and out-of-home care into homelessness, inadequate access to data and information, and a lack of coordination across levels of government for the delivery of housing and support services. In the absence of effective coordination of care, individuals risk cycling in and out of services because of issues with service design, coordination across sectors, and quality of care.

There is a clear need for a renewed effort to coordinate the work of all the relevant directorates and agencies in the ACT, and to overcome the fragmented approach that characterises the current service system. As part of this, the duty to assist someone at risk of homelessness must be woven through the fabric of all government services, so that nobody exits a government service into homelessness. This approach, which has been successfully adopted in overseas jurisdictions, creates an active responsibility for public officials to identify people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness and assist them to access available support.

- Develop a common waiting list for social housing that minimises complexity and duplication, caters to the diverse and complex needs of applicants, includes pathways to Housing First models of support for people with complex and intensive needs, and increases transparency and accountability in the allocation of housing across both public and community housing.
- Strengthen coordination and shared accountability across relevant government directorates and agencies and services systems, backed up by a 'duty to assist' obligation for public agencies and funding frameworks that support more joined up models of service delivery.

## Renew the ACT Housing Strategy

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. While these are laudable objectives, it is clear they have not been achieved under the existing strategy.

Existing policy settings have failed meet the scale and nature of the ACT's housing crisis, and there is pressing need to refresh and reinvigorate the strategy and to strengthen oversight of the strategy's implementation and outcomes. This includes improvements in the transparency, quality and accessibility of housing data, underpinned by timely analysis of housing market conditions, quantification of unmet housing needs and a clear-sighted overview of housing system performance challenges. A corresponding reporting framework should move away from the current emphasis on activities and toward a greater focus on impact and outcomes.

In addition to a renewed housing strategy, effective governance, coordination and institutional arrangements are needed to support a whole-of-government approach and deliver the transformational change needed. Housing ACT is not currently equipped to deliver social housing on the scale that is needed by the ACT community, nor to drive a coordinated, cross-directorate approach. Consideration should be also given to establishing a publicly-owned housing developer to support the expansion of social housing at scale, and with the benefit of being able to act counter-cyclically during housing market fluctuations.

- Regularly undertake and publicly report on an independent evaluation of ACT Housing Strategy, ensuring baseline figures and quantification of unmet housing needs, housing system performance, and housing stock levels by category are regularly reported.
- Review and reform existing governance, institutional and operational settings for housing policy in the ACT to ensure they are configured to meet ambitious social housing targets.
- Develop ministerial guidelines to ensure a clear definition and consistent criteria for affordable housing.

## Recognise housing as a human right

The right to housing is integrally linked to other human rights, yet it is not currently included in the ACT's Human Rights Act. Incorporating the right to housing into the Human Rights Act would strengthen accountability, provide legal recourse if the right to adequate housing is violated, and foster better policy and planning processes by ensuring the right to housing is systematically considered in ACT Government policy development and decision-making processes.

- Expand the ACT Human Rights Act to expressly include a right to adequate housing.

