

Preamble

Canberra was recently ranked second best city in the world for quality of life. We are fortunate to live in a community that values wellbeing and strives for equity. Every year, almost all Canberrans interact with a community service, perhaps without even realising it. Whether it is connecting with playgroups or accessing childcare, participating in the local community garden, using the community hall for a party, gaining information on living with a chronic health condition, connecting with a youth worker or participating in a day out with other older people; the community sector supports all Canberrans across a range of life stages. Most crucially, we are there when Canberrans need us the most. Our work directly supports people during critical life periods. Canberrans rely on the Community Sector every day, however, we are already turning people away, as our ability to help people is under increasing threat and at risk of collapse in some areas.

We specialise in operating at the frontline supporting children, young people and families, older people, those with mental ill health, people experiencing alcohol and other drug issues or surviving domestic and family violence, health care consumers, people with disability, carers and volunteers. Our services promote wellbeing and connection in our communities which positively impacts the quality of life of Canberrans. The community have always counted on us, and we don't want to let them down.

Despite an increasing population and a cost-of-living crisis which has seen increasing demand for services and support, the Community Sector has not received a significant increase in funding for many years. Organisations are struggling to fulfil their commitment to being available when people need them, services are being delivered from facilities that are not safe or welcoming, there are no financial reserves for responding to community and climate emergencies and the resources available are antiquated and no longer fit for purpose.

The Government has publicly acknowledged that it is underfunding community organisations and is committed to working to build and support a more sustainable community sector. To date there has been no funding increases in most community services.

With a commitment to serving our community, the sector has papered over the cracks of unsustainable funding, but is now at breaking point. In some areas there is a danger of market failure in the next 12 months, which would leave the most vulnerable Canberrans without required supports. We need the Government to commit to increasing its investment in the provision of essential community services through non-government organisations.

We are crucial partners for policy dialogue and program development, playing a constructive, strategic role in these processes. We draw on community networks and lived experience to inform our engagement.

In the 2024 ACT Election, as Peaks we call on all parties and candidates to commit to:

1. Ensure the quality of life for all Canberrans by sustainably funding the Community Sector that supports them.

Chronic under-investment and rising demand for services impacts on Canberrans' ability to access timely, quality services to meet their needs. Current Government funding to the Community Sector does not cover the full cost of running programs and engaging in policy reform. Significant program costs including monitoring and evaluation, and oncosts for staff including workforce development and training, supervision, and volunteer management, are currently mostly unfunded.

To ensure sustainability of the Community Sector to deliver services to meet the needs of all Canberrans, significant systemic investment is needed to build and maintain a skilled, fairly paid workforce including the management of volunteers. This would enable staff and volunteers to develop skills and capacity through training, backfill staffing gaps and to avoid burnout.

We ask that the Government fully fund all recommendations from the Sector Sustainability Project and the Counting the Costs Report.

2. Ensure recent and long-term Canberrans have access to support

The ACT has changed dramatically in recent years. Our population has grown by almost 30% from 365,600 people in 2011 to 472,000 in 2023. While the Government provides approximately \$200 million per year in funding to the Community Sector, funding has mostly remained static for well over a decade. In effect, Government is expecting services to deliver more for less. This cannot go on.

To supplement current indexation for inflation, we ask that the Government:

- a. develop a Population Level Adjustment that reflects that year's population growth as a minimum additional annual increase in funding for all community sector contracts, to reflect increasing demand for community support, particularly by those in lower income quintiles; and*
- b. implement a staged approach to closing the funding gap that has emerged since 2010 due to population growth unmatched by additional funding.*

3. Provide the right spaces for Canberrans to receive the help they need

The community has a right to access services and supports in locations that are safe, accessible, fit for purpose, welcoming and environmentally sustainable. The majority of community services provided through non-government organisations are delivered through buildings that are no longer appropriate or safe. This is due to a lack of funds to pay commercial rents and being offered space in Government-owned old schools or buildings no longer needed or fit for use by others. Many organisations have limited or no disability access and do not have appropriate spaces to deliver programs or provide adequate workspaces for staff. Many are working in buildings that are not easily accessed through public transport. Many are working in buildings without adequate heating or air flow.

Canberrans in need are missing out on quality care because of a lack of suitable Community Sector premises. Significant investment is required to provide adequate space for services to run programs and accommodate staff.

We ask that the Government ensures specific Community Sector premises which are fit for purpose, accessible, located across the Territory and scaled for all future Territory plans and building.

4. Protect the community from climate change

People experiencing poverty and disadvantage will bear the brunt of climate change, but no one is immune to its effects. Community organisations play an essential role in assisting the community to respond to disasters, including those that are climate related. Many also provide critical services that cannot afford to be disrupted by such disasters or by other impacts caused by a changing climate. We must ensure Community Sector organisations are prepared for a future that includes severe climate risks, and are funded to respond appropriately. It is critical that Community Sector organisations continue to operate in a future with more frequent and severe climate hazards and so are prepared for these risks.

We ask that the Government establishes a \$4 million annual Community Sector Adaptation Fund for individual organisations to execute their climate adaptation plans.

Authorised by Devin Bowles for ACT Council of Social Service