

ACT COSS
Council of Social Service

Annual Report 2025-26

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Acknowledgement of Traditional Custodians

ACTCOSS acknowledges the Ngunnawal people as traditional custodians of the land on which we are meeting and recognises any other people or families with connection to the lands of the ACT and region. We pay respects to their elders, past and present. ACTCOSS celebrates the historic and ongoing contributions of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to the sector and society.

Funders and Partners

ACTCOSS received funding and financial support from:

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About ACTCOSS

The ACT Council of Social Service (ACTCOSS) is a non-profit organisation advocating for social justice in the ACT and representing not-for-profit organisations. We also work closely with colleagues in the nationwide Councils of Social Service (COSS) network and the national body, Australian Council of Social Service (ACOSS).

Our Vision

ACTCOSS's vision is for a thriving ACT, free from exclusion, hardship and poverty.

Our Purpose

We build a strong and sustainable community sector to challenge the systems, policies and structures that cause poverty and marginalization.

Strategic Objectives

- **Objective one:** Delivering policy priorities through purposeful advocacy and influence.
- **Objective two:** Empowering and uniting the community sector.
- **Objective three:** Building impactful partnerships and sector thought leadership.

Want to Know More?

Continue reading this report to get an idea about how we make a difference – and how you can join us to make a difference too! There are lots of opportunities for us to work together for positive social change.

You can also find out more on our website: https://actcoss.org.au/

2025-26 Annual Report Snapshot



161 members



95% of members surveyed believe the community sector in the ACT is stronger as a result of ACTCOSS' activity



44 meetings with MLAs*



27 member forums and peer network meetings held



22 peaks meetings held



75 supporter organisations for the ACT for Community campaign



3 pre-budget forums for the community sector and Treasury



94 participants in the ACTCOSS post-budget forum with Ministers



260 media mentions



9 publications and reports



31 submissions to Government**



7 Legislative Assembly hearings attended as witness



27 workshops and information sessions held



732 registrations at workshops and information sessions



19 eNotices distributed

11 sector development newsletters distributed



643 eNotice subscribers

283 sector development newsletter subscribers

* Does not include phone calls, meetings with ministerial advisors, informal meetings at public events or public events organised by ACTCOSS at which MLAs spoke. Includes Peaks meetings organised and attended on behalf of the peaks network. Each attendance by an MLA at a meeting is counted separately in this report.

** 20 submissions to ACT Government and 11 submissions to Commonwealth Government. Includes submissions led by ACTCOSS and submitted in collaboration with other organisations and peak bodies.



Chair's Report

Jeremy Halcrow

Firstly, I want to thank our CEO Dr Devin Bowles for his dedicated service to the mission of ACTCOSS over the past 3 ½ years, which he has led with great integrity and wisdom. Earlier this year Devin announced he will be stepping down as CEO at the start of 2027. On behalf of the Board, it is with great sadness that we farewell Devin.

One of Devin's most significant achievements has been strengthening the culture and building up the capability of the ACTCOSS staff team over the past three years. This leaves the organisation in a strong position to deliver on its strategic goals under a new leader. During Devin's tenure leading the ACTCOSS team, we have witnessed a transformation in our policy and advocacy work, shaping a constructive relationship with the ACT Government and across political parties. Devin's leadership has also been a catalyst, changing the way the community sector and ACT Government engage on the budget. The most recent ACT Government budget saw a 26% ($75 million) increase in funding for the community sector in a single year – this is more than 60% of the real increase over the last 17 years.

On a personal level, I will greatly miss Devin's deep policy insights, wisdom and collegiality in a number of advocacy areas dear to my heart, especially poverty alleviation, a just and equitable transition for struggling families to our green energy future as well as gambling reform. Devin strengthened ACTCOSS's research, with a keen eye to policy relevance.

ACT Government elections are the most important lever for ACTCOSS's advocacy on behalf of people experiencing poverty and the broader community sector. Stable leadership is necessary for at least 18 months prior, in order to build a coalition and shared platform within the community sector capable of effectively influencing political party platforms. The timing of Devin's departure does provide the next ACTCOSS CEO with sufficient runway to shape our strategy and approach to the next election. The Board is currently well advanced in our recruitment of the next ACTCOSS CEO and our schedule currently sees us on track for a start date for the new CEO in the first quarter of 2027.

Meanwhile the other major piece of governance work has been constitutional reform to ensure that we have an Aboriginal voice on the Board. I want to thank members for supporting the change to our constitution at the Special General Meeting last November to create a director position nominated by the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Elected Body (ATSIEB). I want to particularly thank Maurice Walker, Chair of ATSIEB, for his support and contribution to the ACTCOSS Board over the past year. This is particularly important as ACTCOSS auspices the Gulanga program, which seeks to build cultural understanding in our member organisations and to provide a community of practice for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workers in the community sector. This year we are proposing an additional constitutional change, creating a designated director position for any Aboriginal person nominated by an ACCO member, an affiliate member, or other member organisation. Related to this change, the Board want to see a thriving Gulanga program under an Aboriginal-led, community-led model. Ensuring ACTCOSS is a culturally safe ally for social justice outcomes for our local Aboriginal community will be a major goal for our new CEO.

Finally, I want to thank all our Board members and particularly our Vice Chair Lisa Kelly and our Treasurer Blessy Pascual-Guttierez for their significant contribution to supporting ACTCOSS through a significant time of change.



CEO's Report

Dr Devin Bowles

This year was a huge one for ACTCOSS and the community sector. As discussed in my message in last year's annual report, ACTCOSS sought to change the way the community sector and ACT Government communicated about the ACT Budget. We worked with Treasury to better understand government decision-making pathways. We then engaged with our members to explain how the sector could improve the timing of its submissions, who to target, and what information is required.

The result was historic – a 26% increase in funding for the community sector in real terms in a single budget. To put this in perspective, it is more than half of the total increase after inflation since 2009-10. My colleagues at ACTCOSS played a critical catalysing role in this, but I gratefully acknowledge the work and goodwill of both government and the sector as essential ingredients to this success. There is still more work to do to improve how effectively our sector engages with government spending decisions. The potential results for enhanced decision-making for the benefit of priority populations are enormous.

The ACT Government has a small number of major policy levers to reduce poverty and disadvantage. ACTCOSS continues to focus on the most important of these, noting that funding the community sector as a provider of essential services to people doing it tough is critical. We pushed hard on increasing public and community housing, with public housing receiving half a billion in the budget. The homelessness sector received over $15 million, and the housing crisis support fund was created.

Other increases in direct support from government included a $0.5 million increase in food relief funding. Our advocacy reduced gas network costs for consumers by $42 million.

We advocated for a more progressive revenue system, effectively advocating for the charge for Working With Vulnerable People cards to be scrapped for volunteers and successfully partnering with a wide range of allies to reduce the regressive health levy.

ACTCOSS released our first State of the ACT Community Sector Report and piloted a Toolkit to help community organisations adapt to climate change. Spoiler alert, this work would form the basis of ACTCOSS winning a national, CSIRO-led award in October 2026.

I gratefully acknowledge all ACTCOSS's members, who shape our work and provide critical services to Canberrans experiencing the most significant poverty and exclusion. Our actions and voices are strongest together. I thank the Board for its support and guidance over the year. I continue to learn from this group, and single out the Board Chair Jeremy Halcrow for his leadership and wise counsel.

I am extremely grateful to my staff colleagues for our work together over the year. I have never been prouder to be part of a team than I am now. The team has an exceptional collective imagination and intellectual rigor. Its dedication to ACTCOSS's mission and values is heartfelt. It is a privilege to work in an environment where there is so much support between colleagues, and in working with them I stand on the shoulders of giants.

Strategic Objective One: Delivering policy priorities through purposeful advocacy and influence

Outcome: Public housing receives $516.5 million in the 2026-27 ACT Budget

Housing costs are the single largest expense driver of poverty in the ACT, and public housing is often the only route to a secure tenancy for people on income support. Last year, the public housing waitlist reached 3,486 approved applications with a standard wait of almost five years. Meanwhile, tenants faced long waits for repairs in unsafe homes.

ACTCOSS advocated to increase investment in social housing so it could become at least 10% of housing stock by 2036. Echoing recommendations in the ACT Ombudsman's report, ACTCOSS joined ACT Shelter and Advocacy for Inclusion in calling for timely improvement to public housing repairs.

The 2026-27 ACT Budget delivered $301.98 million for 450 new public housing dwellings and $214.53 million for repairs and maintenance. The investment was welcomed, while recognising that the new dwellings represent less than half of the required amount to reach the government's commitment of 13,200 public housing homes by 2030. ACTCOSS will continue to advocate for a greater share of social housing in Canberra.

Outcome: Housing Crisis Support Fund receives $5.2 million in the 2026-27 ACT Budget

ACTCOSS joined Care and others to strongly advocate for the Housing Crisis Support Fund.

The Housing Crisis Support Fund was allocated $5.2 million in the 2026-27 ACT Budget, delivered over two years, to provide targeted assistance to low-income households experiencing rental stress. This includes $250 one-off payment for essential household expenses.

Outcome: Homelessness services receive $15.4 million in the 2026-27 ACT Budget

ACTCOSS advocated for sustained funding uplift for the homelessness sector to match rising demand, both ahead of the election and during the year.

The 2026-27 ACT Budget allocated $15.4 million for homelessness services to respond to increased demand and help sustain their long-term viability.

Outcome: Additional $42 million in gas network costs avoided for ACT consumers

During Evoenergy's 2026–30 gas network reset, ACTCOSS challenged proposals to shift excessive transition costs onto gas consumers.

The AER referenced ACTCOSS's affordability concerns when rejecting part of Evoenergy's accelerated capital recovery proposal and quoted ACTCOSS's submission when introducing a stronger 5% revenue-variance threshold, thereby reducing the amount Evoenergy was permitted to recover from consumers and limiting price increases during the transition away from gas. The AER's final decision approved $42 million, or around 9%, less over the five-year period than Evoenergy sought in its proposal.

Outcome: Food relief receives additional $0.5 million in the 2026-27 ACT Budget

ACTCOSS advocated for an additional $1 million of food relief to meet funding shortfalls. The 2026-27 ACT Budget partially took up this recommendation and included a $0.5 million funding boost that will ensure emergency food relief services can continue to operate in the immediate future.

Outcome: Justice system reform receives $1.8 million in the 2026-27 ACT Budget

ACTCOSS advocated as an ally for the establishment of an interim Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-led justice body to oversee implementation of recommendations made in the Jumbunna Institute's Independent Review into the Over Representation of First National People in the ACT Criminal Justice System.

The 2026-27 ACT budget included $1.8 million to strengthen oversight of justice system reforms and fund two independent justice advisors (youth and adult) to support the Jumbunna review response, and to expand capacity for the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Elected Body.

Outcome: ACT Government reduces health levy

ACTCOSS joined with a wide range of allies to advocate for the repeal of the 2025-26 budget health levy on the basis that it was a regressive income revenue stream. The health levy was reduced and only in place for one financial year. This was a positive outcome for people on low incomes as flat taxes disproportionally impact those with the least.

Strategic Objective Two: Empowering and uniting the community sector

Outcome: Community sector secures $75 million funding increase in ACT 2026-27 budget

ACT community organisations have struggled to respond to rising demand, more complex client needs, and escalating operating costs and workforce pressures, all while continuing to absorb the effects of long-term underinvestment.

ACTCOSS united 75 organisations – including members, the ACT Community Peaks Network and sector leaders – to champion the ACT for Community campaign ahead of the election. The shared advocacy agenda called for greater investment in community services, action on workforce sustainability and stronger support for the long-term viability of the sector.

ACTCOSS also strengthened the sector's engagement with the ACT Budget process, as detailed in the next section. In modelling effective engagement, ACTCOSS delivered a comprehensive Budget Submission across five priority areas and supporting organisations to build their own advocacy capability months earlier than previous years. Through sustained engagement with Ministers, MLAs and officials, ACTCOSS presented a clear, evidence-based case on behalf of the sector, calling for increased investment in the community services system and critical supports for Canberrans.

These collective efforts contributed to a record uplift in community sector funding, with investment growing from $252 million to $327 million in 2026-27, raising the sector's share of total government expenditure from 2.6% to 3.3%.

This was the most significant increases in community sector investment in the ACT's history and reflected recognition of the sector's role as essential social infrastructure. The additional funding will help strengthen frontline services, support earlier intervention and prevention, and improve outcomes for Canberrans experiencing poverty, disadvantage and social exclusion.

Outcome: Community sector receives $5 million ongoing, indexed funding boost to acknowledge historical underfunding

Funding for essential services has not kept pace with the real cost of service delivery amidst sharp rises in demand, workforce costs and operating expenses.

ACTCOSS has consistently highlighted the risks that this funding mismatch has created for organisational sustainability, workforce retention and the long-term viability of community services. ACTCOSS worked with members and sector partners to build the case for a sustainable funding response that acknowledged existing pressures rather than simply funding new programs.

In the 2026-27 Budget, the ACT Government committed to a permanent, indexed $5 million annual uplift for the community sector from 2027-28 as part of a broader $23.7 million funding package. Importantly, this investment was not tied to the delivery of additional

services, but instead recognised that many organisations had been absorbing increasing costs and demand pressures for years without corresponding funding growth.

This outcome provides a stronger foundation for a sustainable community sector, helping organisations maintain service quality, invest in their workforce and continue supporting the ACT community through periods of increasing social and economic pressure. It also reflects the impact of sustained, collective advocacy to secure greater recognition of the resourcing challenges impacting the sector.

Outcome: Volunteer participation protected through reversal of proposed Working With Vulnerable People (WWVP) Check registration fees

Volunteers are critical to the strength and sustainability of the ACT community sector.

ACTCOSS and Volunteering ACT advocated in the media and directly to government that the proposed introduction of fees for *Working With Vulnerable People* (WWVP) registration would create an unnecessary barrier to volunteering at a time when many organisations were already experiencing workforce and volunteer shortages.

The Government reversed the proposed changes, preserving free access to registration for volunteers and protecting volunteer participation across the ACT.

Outcome: Community organisations build resilience to climate change risks

In partnership with the ACT Government, ACTCOSS delivered a pilot that provided nine community organisations with funding and technical assistance to assess the potential impacts of climate change on their operations and services and to develop Adaptation Plans to improve resilience. The pilot generated valuable insights into the key climate risks facing community organisations and the opportunities and challenges involved in building climate resilience.

Strategic Objective Three: Building impactful partnerships and sector thought leadership

Outcome: Twelve ACTCOSS budget recommendations were partially or fully funded in the 2026-27 ACT Budget

The ACT Budget is one of the main mechanisms for ACTCOSS to influence Government to make better policies that support both the community sector and people experiencing poverty.

For the 2026-27 ACT Budget, ACTCOSS took a new approach to the organisation's budget submission. To strengthen the impact of its advocacy, ACTCOSS brought its Budget engagement process forward to better align with the ACT Government's Budget development timeline. ACTCOSS made its comprehensive submission to the 2026-27 ACT Budget consultation in November 2025, drawing on input from members to develop 19 recommendations across five priority areas. This enabled earlier engagement with Treasury, Cabinet Ministers and line directorates.

ACTCOSS also prepared a budget submission guidance document to help guide ACTCOSS members to develop budget submissions to the ACT Government and encouraged earlier engagement in the Budget process.

Twelve of the 19 Budget recommendations made by ACTCOSS were fully or partially implemented by the ACT Government.

Outcome: Climate change resilience receives two-year funding investment

Disadvantaged Canberrans are among the most vulnerable to the impacts of climate change. The community sector, which supports these populations, requires assistance to prepare and adapt to climate change.

ACTCOSS advocated for dedicated funding for sector-wide coordination for climate preparedness and strengthening collaboration between government and the community sector. The ACT Government is investing in a two-year climate policy advisor position to support sector resilience priorities and help build a more prepared and connected community sector in a changing climate.

Outcome: Twenty-nine submissions to the ACT and Federal Governments on issues affecting members and people experiencing poverty

In the 2025-26 financial year, ACTCOSS led or contributed substantially to 29 submissions. Almost all of ACTCOSS' submissions were undertaken in collaboration with member organisations or other members of the COSS network. Data on uptake of recommendations is limited due to reporting timelines.

For the 2024-25 financial year (where data was available), take up of recommendations was high.

Inquiry	Number of inquiry report recommendations that align with the ACTCOSS submission	Proportion of ACTCOSS recommendations that appear in the final report
Inquiry into the Human Rights (Housing) Amendment Bill 2025	3	60%
Inquiry into the Planning (Territory Priority Project) Amendment Bill 2025	1	20%
Inquiry into insurance costs in the ACT	8	38%
Inquiry into the management of strata properties	19	92%

Outcome: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Elected Body receives $0.74 million in the 2026-27 ACT budget

The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Elected Body is an important mechanism in the ACT to promote self-determination for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Resourcing constraints and the absence of full-time members limited the extent to which the Elected Body could advise government and advocate for the community.

ACTCOSS advocated as an ally for additional funding for the Elected Body. The 2026-27 ACT Budget allocated $0.74 million to the Elected Body.

Outcome: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander voices augmented on ACTCOSS Board

In response to the call to enhance Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander voices in ACTCOSS governance, members passed a Constitutional amendment that one member of the Board be nominated by the ACT Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Elected Body.

At the 2025 Annual General Meeting, members also requested that the Board develop a proposal to further strengthen engagement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in the governance of ACTCOSS, not limited to Board membership. The Board is to report back to membership through a Special General Meeting prior to the 2026 Annual General Meeting.

Financial Statements

STATEMENT OF PROFIT OR LOSS FOR THE YEAR ENDED 30 JUNE 2026		
	2026 $	**2025 $**
Government and other grant funding	1,791,073	1,523,557
Other revenue from operations	128,003	126,387
Other income	35,681	34,994
Total revenue and other income	**1,954,757**	**1,684,938**
Employee expenses	(1,535,675)	(1,386,716)
Depreciation and amortisation	(55,190)	(57,521)
External labour & consulting	(203,366)	(84,739)
Other expenses	(169,908)	(114,377)
Finance expenses	(1,519)	(1,923)
Surplus/(loss) from operations	**(10,901)**	**39,662**
Other comprehensive income		
Total comprehensive income for the year	**(10,901)**	**39,662**

STATEMENT OF CHANGES IN EQUITY FOR THE YEAR ENDED 30 JUNE 2026			
	Retained earnings $	**General reserve $**	**Total $**
Balance at 1 July 2025	218,140	681,626	899,766
Surplus/(loss) for the year	(10,901)	-	(10,901)
Transfer to reserves	-	-	-
Balance at 30 June 2026	**207,239**	**681,626**	**888,865**

Find the full financial statements for 2025-26 on the ACTCOSS website or visit https://actcoss.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2026/11/ACTCOSS-Financial-Report-30-June-2026-SIGNED.pdf

ACTCOSS Board

	Meetings attended	Apologies
Jeremy Halcrow, The Benevolent Society Chair	6/6	-
Lisa Kelly, Mental Health Community Coalition ACT Vice Chair	6/6	-
Blessy Pascual-Gutierrez, YMCA Canberra Treasurer	5/6	1
Amanda Tobler, Associate Member Ordinary Director	5/6	1
Jessi Claudianos, Australian Red Cross Ordinary Director	4/4	-
Lauren Anthes, Relationships Australia Canberra and Regions Ordinary Director	6/6	-
Lucy Hohnen, St Vincent de Paul Society Canberra/Goulburn Ordinary Director	3/6	3
Madhumita Lyengar, Initiatives for Women in Need Ordinary Director	3/4	1
Melissa Bell, Barnardos Australia Ordinary Director	6/6	-
Maurice Walker, ACT Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Elected Body nominated board member Ordinary Director	3/6	3
Sue Webeck, Domestic Violence Crisis Service Ordinary Director	4/6	2
Tracey Hall, Sexual Health Planning ACT Ordinary Director	4/6	2

Organisation Members

A Gender Agenda
ACT Disability, Aged & Carer Advocacy Service Inc
ACT Down Syndrome and Intellectual Disability Association Inc
ACT Mental Health Consumer Network Inc
ACT Playgroups Association Inc
ACT Shelter
Advocacy for Inclusion
Alcohol Tobacco and Other Drug Association ACT Inc
Amnesty International ACT/NSW
Anglicare NSW South, NSW West and ACT
ANTaR ACT
ANU Students' Association
Argyle Community Housing
Asthma Australia
Australian Association of Social Workers ACT Branch
Australian Multicultural Action Network Inc
Australian Red Cross - ACT/SE NSW
Barnardos Australia
Beryl Women Inc.
Canberra and Queanbeyan ADD Support Group Inc.
Canberra Alliance for Harm Minimisation & Advocacy
Canberra Alliance for Participatory Democracy
Canberra Community Law
Canberra Institute of Technology Student Association
Canberra Multicultural Community Forum (CMCF) Inc
Canberra Police Community Youth Club (PCYC)
Canberra Rape Crisis Centre
Canberra Refugee Support Incorporated
Capital Health Network
Capital Region Community Services
Care Inc
Carers ACT Inc
CHC Affordable Housing
Children Australia
Communities@Work
Community Options Inc
Community Services #1
Companion House
Conflict Resolution Service Inc
Conservation Council ACT Region
Council on the Ageing ACT
Directions Health Services
Domestic Violence Crisis Service
Doris Women's Refuge Inc
Environmental Collective Housing Organisation Inc
EveryMan Australia Ltd
Families ACT Inc
Fearless Women Incorporated
GetAboutAble
Grand Pacific Health
Hartley Lifecare Limited
Havelock Housing Association Inc
Health Care Consumers' Association
Hepatitis ACT Inc
Initiatives for Women in Need Inc
Jigsaw Australia
Justice Action
Karinya House Home for Mothers & Babies Inc
Karralika Programs Inc
Kidsafe ACT
Marymead CatholicCare Canberra & Goulburn
Menslink Inc
Mental Health Community Coalition ACT
Mental Health Foundation ACT
Mental Illness Education ACT

Meridian Inc
Multicultural Hub Canberra
My Coaching My Future
Northside Community Service Ltd
Palliative Care ACT
Parentline ACT Inc.
Perinatal Wellbeing Centre
Prisoners Aid (ACT) Inc
Rebus Theatre
Red Nose
Relationships Australia Canberra & Region Inc
Religious Society of Friends Canberra Inc
Roundabout Canberra
SEARMS Aboriginal Corporation
SEE Change Inc
Sexual Health & Family Planning ACT Inc
Sharing Places Inc
Sisters In Spirit Aboriginal Corporation
Softlaw Community Projects Limited
St John's Care
St Vincent de Paul Society Canberra/Goulburn
Tender Funerals Canberra Region
The Benevolent Society
Toora Women Inc
Tuggeranong Link Community Houses and Centres Inc
UCA Canberra Region Presbytery
Uniting Children and Families ACT
UnitingCare Kippax
VolunteeringACT
Warehouse Circus Inc
Wellways Australia
Woden Community Service Ltd
Women With Disabilities ACT
Women's Health Matters Inc
Women's Legal Centre (ACT Region) Inc
Women With Disability ACT
Yeddung Mura Aboriginal Corporation
Young Men’s Christian Association of Canberra Ltd
Youth Coalition of the ACT
YWCA Canberra
ZamZam Foundation

Affiliate Members

ANU School of Medicine and Psychology

Associate Members

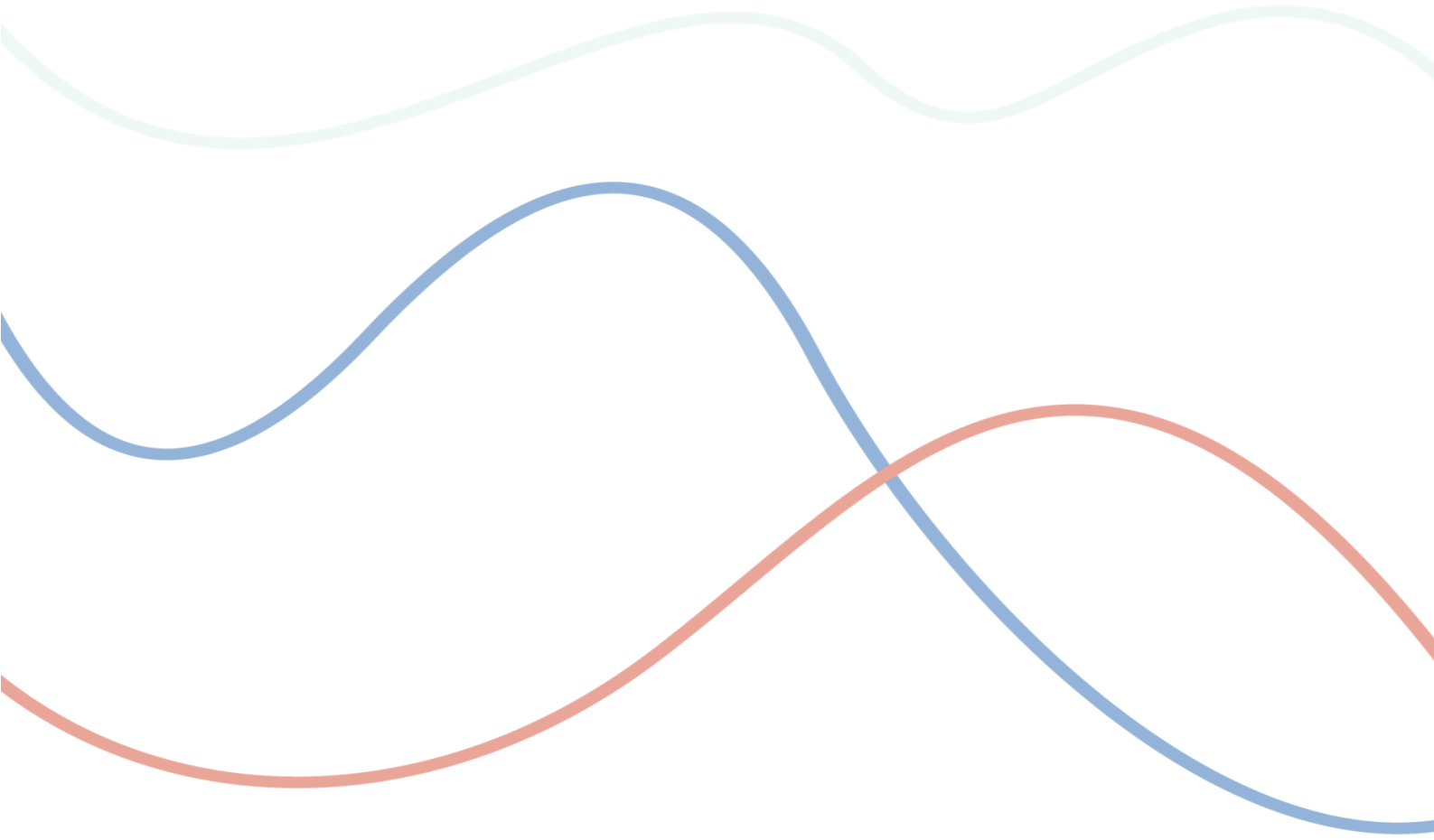
Alexander Dolan
Amanda Tobler
Bev Orr
Blessy Pascual
Cathi Moore
Dianne Lucas
Ed Wensing
Heather Fitt
Melvin Jap
Jamie Crosby
Jenny Kitchin
Kevin Cox
Ryan Joseph
Susan Helyar



Treasurer, Blessy Pascual-Guterriez (left), and Chair, Jeremy Halcrow (right), 2025 AGM



CEO, Dr Devin Bowles, State of the Sector Report launch



Thank you!

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