



# ACTCOSS ACT Budget Priorities 2023-24

April 2023

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# About ACTCOSS

ACTCOSS acknowledges Canberra has been built on the land of the Ngunnawal people. We pay respects to their Elders and recognise the strength and resilience of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander peoples. We celebrate Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander cultures and ongoing contributions to the ACT community.

The ACT Council of Social Service Inc. (ACTCOSS) advocates for social justice in the ACT and represents 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.

The membership of the Council includes the majority of community-based service providers in the social welfare area, a range of community associations and networks, self-help and consumer groups and interested individuals.

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

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## April 2023

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# Acronyms

ABS	Australian Bureau of Statistics
ACAT	ACT Civil and Administrative Tribunal
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
CASP	Community Assistance and Support Program
CDNet	Community Development Network for the ACT and Region
CHIA	Community Housing Industry Association
CHN	Capital Health Network
CHPs	community housing providers
CPI	Consumer Price Index
CRA	Commonwealth Rent Assistance
CYPS	Child and Youth Protection Services
DFV	domestic and family violence
DSP	Disability Support Pension
DSS	Department of Social Services
GDP	gross domestic product
ICT	information and communication technology
LFiT	Large-scale Feed-in Tariff
LGBTIQA+	lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, gender diverse, intersex, queer, asexual and questioning
NDIS	National Disability Insurance Scheme
NPMs	National Preventative Mechanisms (bodies established to ensure ACT compliance with the OPCAT)
OOHC	out-of-home care
OPCAT	Optional Protocol to the Convention Against Torture



PAGA Parliamentary and Governing Agreement for 10th Legislative  
Assembly

SLA Suburban Land Agency



# Introduction

The ACT Council of Social Service (ACTCOSS) welcomes this opportunity to present community sector priorities for the 2023-24 ACT Budget. This submission has been developed through consultation with [ACTCOSS members](#).

Our vision is that Canberra is a just, safe, and sustainable community in which everyone has a fair share of resources and services.

The ACT has the highest average weekly earnings in Australia, but 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, such as housing, food, transport, health services and utilities. The situation has become even more dire over the last few years as the cost of living has risen substantively. More than 38,000 Canberrans are living below the poverty line, and community sector organisations are reporting significant increases in demand for services.

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I am seeing clients who are struggling to live day to day due to rising interest rates, rents and everyday cost of living increases including food and petrol. People on moderate incomes who are accessing emergency relief and food banks because they cannot afford groceries, they are extremely stressed and overwhelmed and cannot access adequate mental health supports to assist them with the anxiety and stress that comes with financial difficulty. Clients are turning to unsuitable loan products and Buy Now Pay Later products to get by, landing them in further debt and financial difficulty. Clients who are on Centrelink income support struggle even more.

- Community Sector Worker, ACT, 2022

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The Australia Institute notes in their recent report on the [distribution of economic growth in Australia](#) that only the top 10% of income earners have benefited from economic growth in Australia over the last 14 years. Though the mid-year ACT Budget showed an improvement to the forecast deficit for 2022-23, the ACT Government must ensure that the most vulnerable members of our community, including those on low incomes, women, people with disabilities, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, older Canberrans and people from LGBTIQ+ communities, benefit from our favourable position and are prioritised in all policy and funding decisions.

In recent years, Canberra has experienced price increases across range of essential goods including transport, electricity and gas, medical and hospital services,



housing, education and food. These cost increases have meant that more people are relying on emergency relief and support services from the community sector to meet their everyday needs. Two thirds of community sector organisations in the ACT have reported an increased level of demand in the community over the last year, with 56% of organisations reporting that levels of poverty and disadvantage have increased in Canberra. Services are turning more and more people away because they do not have the capacity to respond to this increasing need. Organisations are also finding themselves less able to participate in government consultation processes because of staffing capacity issues. Without significant and sustainable increases to funding for the sector, vulnerable Canberrans will be left without much-needed supports.

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Staffing is at a critical point, we are turning families away every week, sometimes daily because we don't have the staff to accommodate them. We are experiencing more regular closures to services because of the lack of staff.

- Community Sector Worker, ACT, 2022

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We know that increases in demand and lack of sufficient funding particularly impacts Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCOs). Compared with other jurisdictions, the ACT has relatively few ACCOs to support the community, despite Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in Canberra experiencing worse outcomes across many areas of life. The National Agreement on Closing the Gap recognises that ACCOs are better for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, achieve better results, employ more First Nations people, and are often preferred over mainstream services.

These services are stretched and struggle to engage with systemic advocacy or government consultation processes. This means that the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community members can be overlooked in policy design. We strongly urge the ACT Government to ensure full resourcing of ACCOs, including for participating in Commissioning processes and to facilitate cross-directorate collaboration. We also urgently need to see an Aboriginal Community Controlled housing provider established in the ACT.

Of course, lack of affordable housing remains the number one concern for many Canberrans. We are the second most expensive city for renters, completely unaffordable for most people who rely on income support, and for many essential workers. The housing crisis exacerbates existing inequalities and adds strain to our health, justice, child protection and mental health support systems. The average wait time for standard public housing is now more than five years and if we do not act urgently, we will see the number of people experiencing homelessness increase dramatically.





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Housing affordability is a major factor that is starting to create an expanding base in our service. The demographics that are accessing the service are changing/expanding.

- Community Sector Worker, ACT, 2022

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This submission to the ACT Budget process includes recommendations in relation to the rising cost of living, the value of the community sector, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander self-determination, housing, children, young people and families, climate and energy, disability, health, human rights, justice, mental health and planning and transport.

Across all areas, we encourage a holistic approach that puts people with the least at the centre of all policy and funding decisions.

## Summary of Recommendations

### Priority Recommendations

#### Cost of Living

- Trial **free public transport** and analyse the costs, benefits and distributional impact
- Introduce an **income-based approach** to ACT Government fines, fees and other charges
- Review and update the **Targeted Assistance Strategy** to ensure concessions are adequate and targeted to need
- Review and reform utilities concessions, including implementing **percentage-based concessions**
- Invest in a **just transition**
  - Expand the Home Energy Support program
  - Ensure social housing tenants are supported on the pathway to electrification
  - Incentivise landlords to ensure rental properties are energy efficient

#### Valuing the Community Sector

- Ensure **commissioning** processes respond to increased demand and complexity of need across all directorates
- Increase sector **funding to cover all costs** including staffing, engagement in commissioning, policy process and monitoring and evaluation





- Review and address ageing **community facilities** to allow delivery and continuity of services with dignity to vulnerable clients
- Ensure annually renewed contracts and grants are indexed adequately
- Work with the community sector through the Industry Strategy Steering Group (ISSG) to develop a workforce strategy and career pathways to recruit and retain staff, as outlined in the [April 2019 Workforce Data and Community Needs Analysis](#)
- Increase funding to facilitate community connection initiatives and employ dedicated community development staffing across all regions
- Renew the ACT Volunteering Strategy

#### Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander Self-Determination

- Increase investment in **Community Controlled organisations**, including an Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander **Peak Body** in the ACT
- **Commission of Inquiry** into the **overrepresentation** of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people in the justice system
- **Raise the Minimum Age of Criminal Responsibility to 14** with no exceptions & fully fund the suite of recommended services and programs required
- 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**
- Ensure sufficient support to participate in and benefit from **commissioning processes**

#### Housing Crisis

- Fund and support an Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander community-controlled housing provider
- Fund a fully independent outcome and impact evaluation of the ACT Housing Strategy to ensure baseline figures, clear targets, achievements and overall housing stock levels for social housing and affordable rentals are clearly reported on a regular basis, and identify opportunities to increase housing supply
- Enable and empower community housing providers through access to and release of affordable land, rezoning and rates exemptions, including:
  - Providing direction to the Suburban Land Agency to specify restrictions for land allocated to community housing providers that result in sufficiently discounted valuations to allow construction
  - Consider variation to the Planning Act to facilitate discount of land valuations for social purposes, and consider government retention of a portion of equity of dwellings constructed to be reimbursed at time of future sale
- Meet land release targets and reassess share released for social housing, especially community housing, versus affordable housing
- Set a zero target for homelessness as everyone has the right to a home
- Maintain complete funding for the Rent Remittance model for social housing providers



- Improve housing responses for LGBTIQ+ Canberrans including: a LGBTIQ+ housing strategy, a trauma informed homelessness and housing support service and funding for ongoing LGBTIQ+ awareness training for housing and homelessness services
- Fund a disability housing advisory and advocacy service
- Fund provisions for specialist homelessness services including data collection capacity, and auditing accessibility of existing accommodation for people with disability

## Further Recommendations

### Children, Young People, and Families

- Invest in perinatal wellbeing including through in-patient parent and baby care
- Fund implementation of the [ACT Play Space Strategy](#)
- Fund implementation of a fully inclusive education model to ensure accessibility and inclusion for all students at all ACT schools
- Support implementation of [Next Steps for our Kids 2022-2030 Strategy](#)
- Invest in early childhood education and preschools with early intervention strategies for children with developmental delays
- Provide additional funding for youth crime diversion programs and enablement of evidence-based early interventions, including holistic assessments, appropriate case management and improved staffing (particularly those programs supporting youth in advance of the increased age of criminal responsibility)
- Invest in an expanded Youth Justice program facilitating Functional Family Therapy (FFT)
- Implement and fund all recommendations from the Inspector of Correctional Services Healthy Centre Review of Bimberi Youth Justice Centre
- Resource and implement robust internal and external review mechanisms in the ACT child protection systems
- Invest in early intervention and supports for families at risk of engagement with child and youth protection services, particularly for families with disability and Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander families
- Develop a new, fully funded ACT Prevention of Violence Against Women and Children Strategy
- Expand the PACER intervention program to provide DFV crisis support
- Provide additional funding to community-based specialist women's services including domestic violence services, community legal services and housing and homelessness services
- Fund DFV services to provide evidence-based prevention and early intervention programs
- Provide greater investment in integrated and accessible front-line service provision for domestic and family violence and sexual assault response
- Replace funding for the Escaping Violence Payment.

### Climate and Energy

- Implement percentage-based utilities concessions



- Expand eligibility for the Home Energy Support Program and Sustainable Household Scheme to include renters, a wider range of concession card holders and people on low incomes who do not have concession cards
- Ensure public and community housing tenants are supported on the pathway to electrification. Install solar panels on public and community housing properties
- Strengthen and enforce minimum energy efficiency standards for rentals and incentivise landlords to ensure these standards are met
- Equitably distribute costs when phasing out the gas network. Provide targeted support for transition, disconnection, and abolishment costs.

### Disability

- Fund a Disability Liaison Officer in Canberra Health Services
- Ensure adequate and ongoing funding for the implementation of the Disability Health Strategy, ACT Disability Strategy, ACT Disability Justice Strategy, and Inclusive Education Strategy
- Provide ongoing funding for Disability Inclusion advocacy in violence crisis services
- 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 DFV services
- Increase funding to disability service providers struggling to meet the rising costs of staffing and compliance
- Address lack of accessible and affordable housing for people with disabilities

### Health (including Alcohol and other Drug Treatment)

- Provide targeted, affordable, and accessible primary healthcare
- Prioritise investment in early intervention and disease prevention for people on low incomes and Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people
- Make it easier and cheaper to see a doctor when you need to
- Fully fund the ACT Drug Strategy Action Plan
- Invest in community-based responses for people with co-occurring mental ill-health and alcohol and drug use, including residential rehabilitation and day programs
- Make permanent and continue to fund the CanTEST Health and Drug Checking Service
- Develop 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 a dedicated palliative care unit
- Fund an Individual Advocacy Service so that individuals managing complex and co-occurring conditions regarding safety and quality of care can access support navigating the health system.

#### Human Rights

- 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 access to legal supports for all ACT residents, including women and children, Aboriginal and/or 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 migrant groups settling in the ACT
- Commit to review police complaints handling mechanisms to ensure greater practical independence, accountability and transparency of investigations
- Invest in solutions to address racism experienced by children and young people as outlined in the [ACTHRC 'It really stabs me' Report 2023](#)
- Fund a multicultural health service to provide culturally sensitive care.

#### Justice

- Implement all recommendations from the [2022 Healthy Prison Review of the Alexander Maconochie Centre](#) and remaining recommendations from the [2019 Healthy Prison Review](#)
- Resource the Disability Justice and Justice Reinvestment Strategies
- Fund a health promotion program for women in the AMC
- Resource a financial literacy and education program at the AMC
- Ensure the community sector is adequately funded and supported to provide services and programs within the AMC
- Implement a needle and syringe program for the AMC.

#### Mental Health

- Significantly increase funding to community-managed mental health services
- Fund community-based support for people with co-occurring ATOD and mental health issues
- Provide ongoing funding for a residential perinatal mental health facility
- Invest in housing with integrated mental health support
- Fully fund and implement the Mental Health Workforce Strategy
- Fund mental health support services for carers
- Fund hoarding support services on an ongoing basis
- Adequately fund child and youth mental health services, especially for girls and young women
- Increase funding for mental health services for people with intellectual disabilities



- Support the recommendations in the Re-envisioning Older Persons Mental Health and Wellbeing in the ACT Strategy
- Provide ongoing funding for Safewards

#### Planning and Transport

- Establish a social planning unit that advocates for the needs of vulnerable Canberrans
- Rethink zoning regulations to allow for more medium density housing in well-located suburbs
- Have a trial of free public transport, analysing the costs, benefits, and effect on different groups
- Further invest in community transport including for vulnerable children unable to attend early learning centres due to transport barriers
- Invest in transport equity including expanding the sustainable households scheme to include access to loans to purchase electric bicycles and scooters
- Support active travel including maintenance of and investment in walking and cycle paths and separated cycleways
- Invest in adequate and affordable transport for students, including free public transport for school students and sufficient transport options for university and CIT students
- 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 new ACT planning system supports and advocates for people with disabilities
- Assist community organisations that require freight transport (e.g., food pantries) to cover fuel levy expenses.



# Background on Priorities

## Cost of Living

### Recommendations

- Trial **free public transport** and analyse the costs, benefits and distributional impact
- Introduce an **income-based approach** to ACT Government fines, fees and other charges
- Review and update the **Targeted Assistance Strategy** to ensure concessions are adequate and targeted to need
- Review and reform utilities concessions. Implement **percentage-based concessions**
- Invest in a **just transition**.
  - Expand the Home Energy Support Program and Sustainable Household Scheme
  - Ensure social housing tenants are supported on the pathway to electrification
  - Incentivise landlords to ensure rental properties are energy efficient.

Wellbeing domain 9: Living standards

Wellbeing domain 2: Economy

Our 2023 ACT Cost of Living report is still under development, but preliminary research suggests that CPI increases, and cost of living unaffordability have worsened throughout the past year.

Canberra continues to have the most expensive overall median rent prices<sup>1</sup> and is the least affordable jurisdiction in the country for people on low incomes.<sup>2</sup> Over half of Commonwealth Rent Assistance recipients in the ACT and over 60% of private renters in the ACT experienced rental stress in 2022 (paying more than 30% of their income on rent).<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, Canberrans have been hit with back to back interest rate rises throughout February and March 2023 meaning many homeowners are also struggling.

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<sup>1</sup> N Field, [Most Affordable & Expensive Capital Cities For Rent In Australia](#), Canstar website, 2023, accessed 16 March 2023.

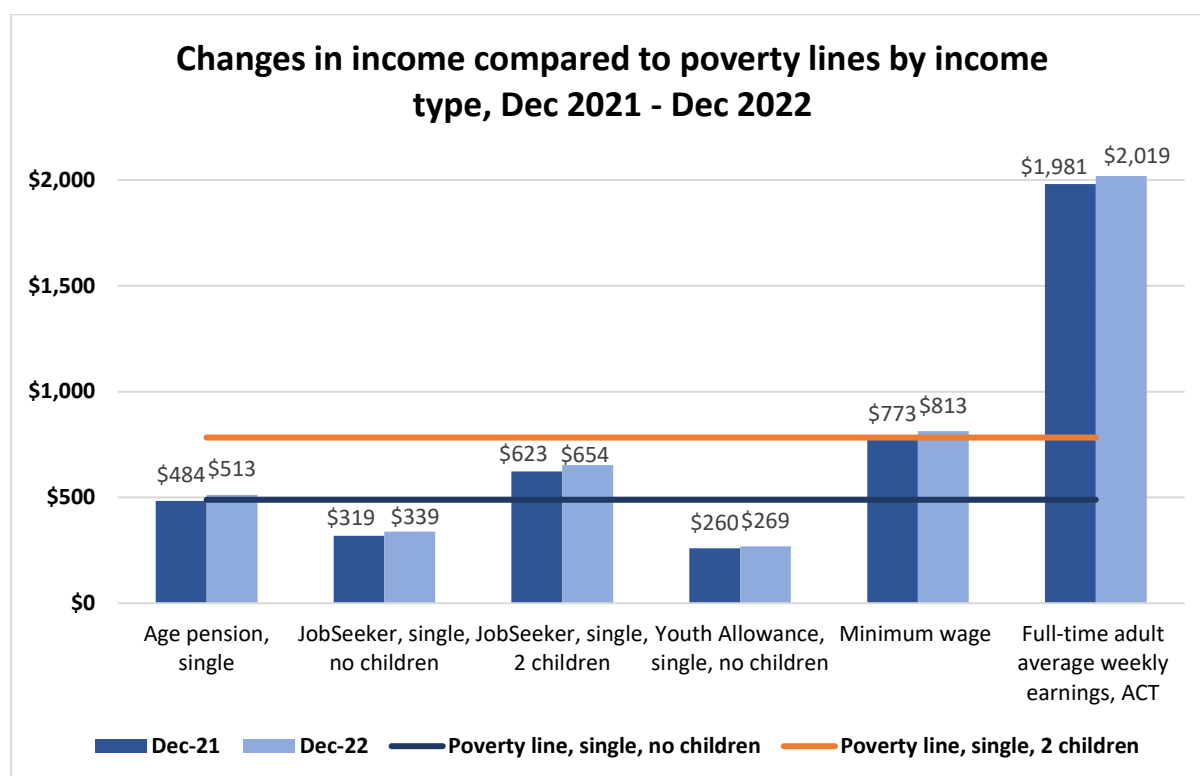
<sup>2</sup> SGS Economics & Planning (SGSEP), [Rental Affordability Index](#), SGSEP, 2022, accessed 17 March 2023.

<sup>3</sup> Productivity Commission, [Report on Government Services 2023: G Housing and homelessness](#), Productivity Commission, Australian Government, 2023, accessed 17 March 2023.



Commonwealth income support payments were recently indexed. However, the average increase was just under \$2 a day.<sup>4</sup> For Canberrans on Commonwealth income support payments their level of income below the poverty line means they are unable to afford the fundamentals of a healthy life including housing, food, transport, healthcare and energy. As of March 20, 2023:

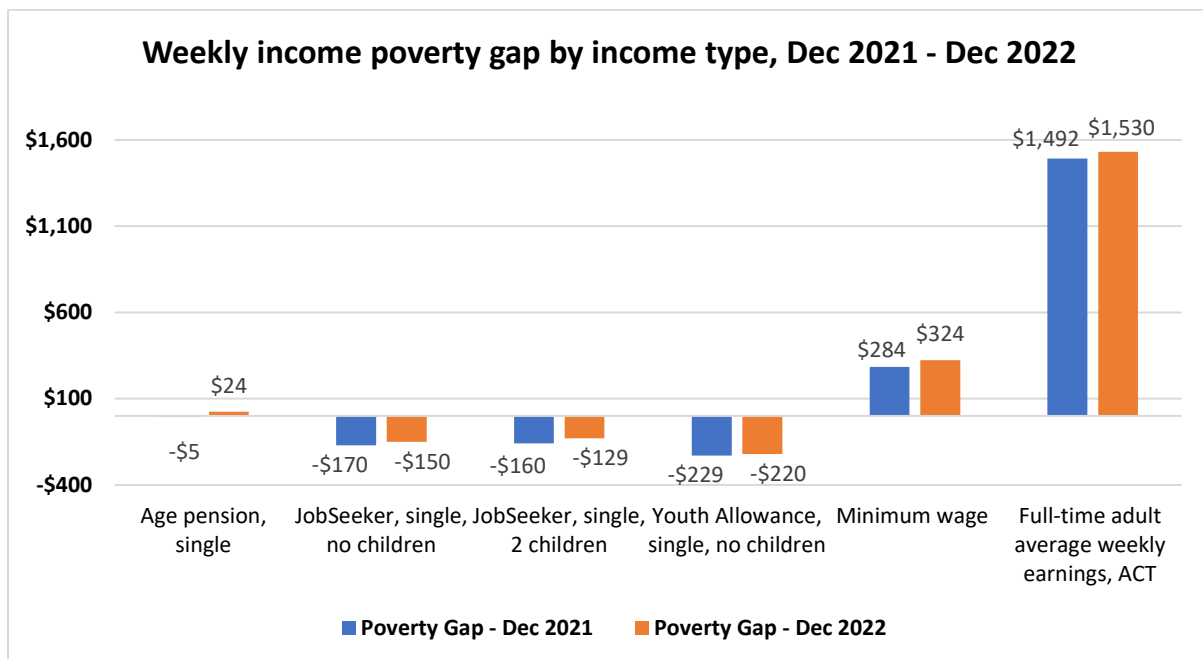
- A single person without children on JobSeeker has an income \$138 below the poverty line of \$489 per week
- A single person on Youth Allowance (other) has an income \$204 below the poverty line of \$489 per week
- A single parent with two children, on JobSeeker has an income \$115 below the poverty line of \$783 per week.



Source: Services Australia, [A guide to Australian Government payments](#), Historical versions 1 December 2022 to 31 December 2022 and 20 September 2021 to 31 December 2021, Services Australia, Canberra, 2023, accessed 4 April 2023; P Davidson, B Bradbury and M Wong, [Poverty in Australia 2022: A Snapshot](#), ACOSS, 2022, accessed 4 April 2023.

<sup>4</sup> V Winter, [‘Multiple Centrelink payments are increasing today. Here’s which ones are going up and by how much’](#), ABC News, 20 March 2023, accessed 24 March 2023.



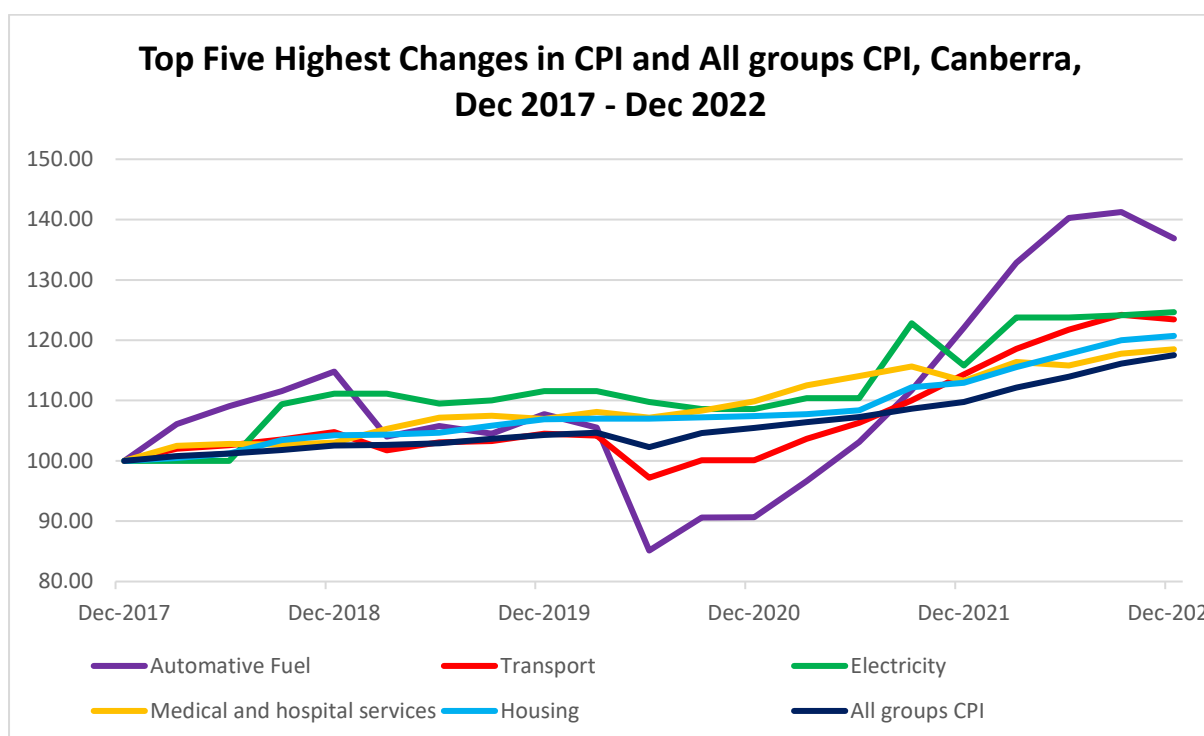


Source: Services Australia, [A guide to Australian Government payments](#), Historical versions 1 December 2022 to 31 December 2022 and 20 September 2021 to 31 December 2021, Services Australia, Canberra, 2023, accessed 4 April 2023; P Davidson, B Bradbury and M Wong, [Poverty in Australia 2022: A Snapshot](#), ACOSS, 2022, accessed 4 April 2023.

Consultation with our members indicates that there has been a significant increase in demand for their services in the past year, along with a broadening in the range of people seeking support. Results from the forthcoming ACOSS Community Sector Survey show that two thirds of organisations in the ACT saw increased demand and increased complexity of need in 2022, with 56% of organisations reporting that levels of poverty and disadvantage in the Canberra community have increased. As we note in our [2022 ACT Cost of Living Report](#), the removal of the Coronavirus supplement saw the rate of poverty in the ACT almost double, with more than 38,000 Canberrans now living below the poverty line.

Over the past five years (2017 – 2022), Canberra has experienced significant price increases for a range of essential goods.

- Automotive fuel (37%) and transport (23%)
- Electricity (25%)
- Medical and hospital services (19%)
- Housing (21%) and rents (17%)
- Education (20%)
- Food (18%), meat and seafood (24%), fruit and vegetables (16%)



Source: ABS, [Table 11. CPI: Group, Sub-group and Expenditure Class, Percentage change from previous quarter by Capital City](#), ABS website, reference period December Quarter 2022, 2023, accessed 4 April 2023.

As noted in our recent [submission](#) to the Inquiry into Cost of Living pressures in the ACT, to address cost of living 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 and healthcare.

## Valuing the Community Sector

### Recommendations

- Ensure **commissioning** processes respond to increased demand and complexity of need across all directorates
- Increase sector **funding to cover all costs** including staffing, engagement in commissioning and policy process and monitoring and evaluation
- Review and address ageing **community facilities** to allow delivery and continuity of services with dignity to vulnerable clients.
- Properly fund ACT Government strategies & ensure **fair division of investment** between public service and community sector
- Ensure annually renewed contracts are also **indexed** adequately



- Work with the community sector through the Industry Strategy Steering Group to develop a **workforce strategy and career pathways** to recruit and retain staff, as outlined in the April 2019 Workforce Data and Community Needs Analysis
- Increase funding to facilitate community connection initiatives and employ dedicated **community development staffing** across all regions
- Renew the **ACT Volunteering Strategy**.

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)

The ACT community sector is a significant partner in delivering services on behalf of the ACT Government. The sector also plays a key role in advocating for vulnerable Canberrans. The impact of cost-of-living pressures and the ongoing, underlying COVID pandemic has seen a reported rise in demand for services and an increase in the complexity of cases<sup>5</sup>. These rising demands have coincided with the Government's reform agenda of [Commissioning](#) for Outcomes which, along with ongoing inadequate funding, impacts on the ability of the sector to effectively and efficiently implement their programs.

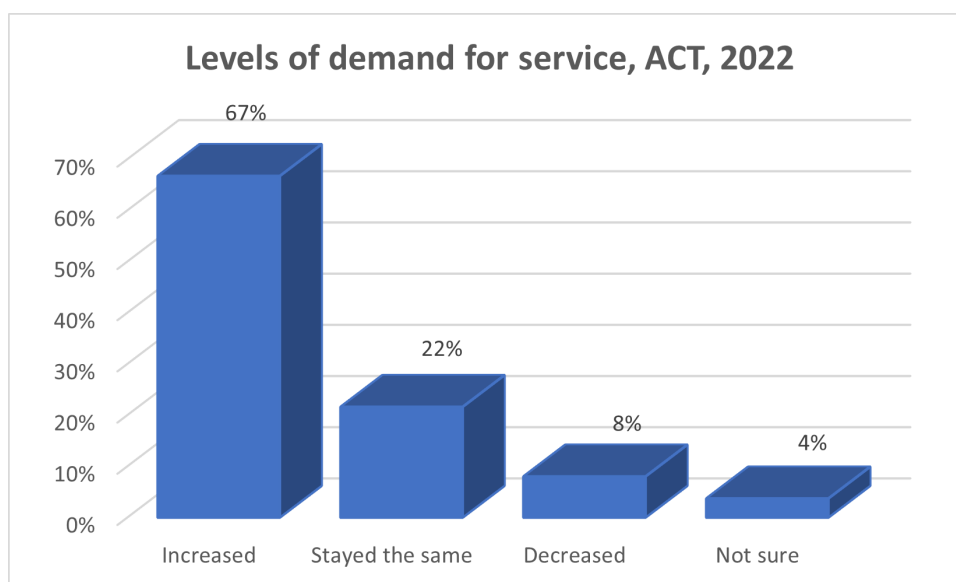


Figure 1 Source: 2022 Australian Community Sector Survey (ACSS) unpublished data

Community sector funding must cover the full costs of policy development and program delivery including rising indirect costs such as salaries, rent and transport. Funding is needed to enable workforce development, volunteer management, and

<sup>5</sup> 2022 Australian Community Sector Survey (ACSS) unpublished data



build monitoring and evaluation capacity as the Government implements Commissioning. Adequate funding needs to flow to Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander organisations to enable self-determination and full engagement in commissioning processes. Additionally, there are a number of ACT Government grants that have remained static amounts and have not been appropriately indexed over many years. In addition, the Government needs to advocate for ongoing, proper indexation for all co-funding with the Australian Government.

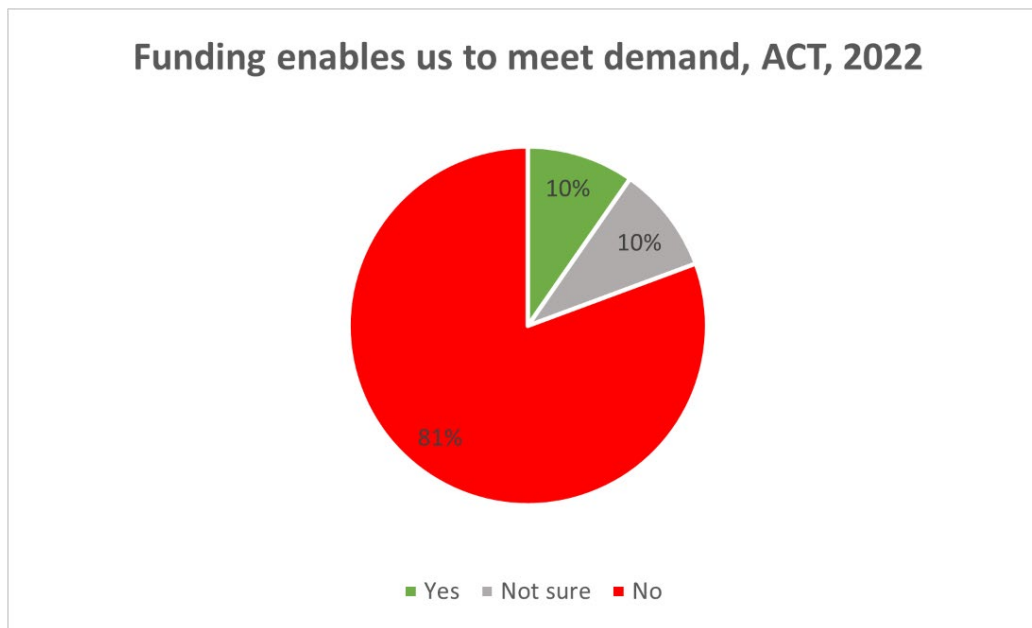


Figure 2 Source: 2022 Australian Community Sector Survey (ACSS) unpublished data

Many organisations are operating in ageing ACT Property Group facilities that are inadequate to meet the growing needs the community, struggling with both a lack of office space and service delivery space. A lack of appropriate investment means that a significant number of ACT Property Group facilities have serious, ongoing maintenance issues and are neither accessible nor suitable for a changing climate. There is also a shortage in property to enable a growth in Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander community-controlled organisations in the ACT.

## Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander Self Determination

### Recommendations

- Increase investment in **Community Controlled organisations**, including an Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander **Peak Body** in the ACT
- **Commission of Inquiry** into causes and impacts of disadvantage for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in the ACT



- **Raise the Minimum Age of Criminal Responsibility to 14** with no exceptions & fully fund the suite of recommended services and programs required
- 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**
- Ensure sufficient support to participate in and benefit from **commissioning processes**

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

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 system<sup>6</sup> and the child and youth protection system<sup>7</sup>, experience worse health and education outcomes<sup>8</sup>, and are more likely to experience homelessness, housing stress and overcrowding.<sup>9</sup> Despite making up less than 2% of the population, Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people make up a quarter of the population in the Alexander Maconochie Centre (AMC)<sup>10</sup>, and 18% of specialist homelessness service clients.<sup>11</sup> Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander children are almost 14 times more likely than non-Indigenous children to be in out-of-home care (OOHC), and 12 times more likely to be in detention.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> ABS, [Prisoners in Australia](#), Prisoner characteristics, States and territories, ABS, 2022, accessed 30 March 2023.

<sup>7</sup> Australian Government Productivity Commission, [Report on Government Services: Community Services](#), Australian Government Productivity Commission, 2023, accessed 25 January 2023.

<sup>8</sup> Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), [Data by region: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples](#), ABS, 2019, accessed 17 March 2022.

<sup>9</sup> Australian Government Productivity Commission, [Report on Government Services: Homelessness Services](#), Australian Government Productivity Commission, 2023, accessed 25 January 2023.

<sup>10</sup> ABS, [Prisoners in Australia](#), ABS, 2022, accessed 30 March 2022.

<sup>11</sup> Australian Government, Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, [Specialist Homelessness Services Monthly Data: Australian Capital Territory](#), Australian Government, Updated March 2023, accessed 30 March 2023.

<sup>12</sup> Australian Government Productivity Commission, [Report on Government Services: Community Services](#), 2023, accessed 25 January 2023.



**Figure 3 Rate per 1000 children in at least one out-of-home care placement during the year, ACT, 2021-22**

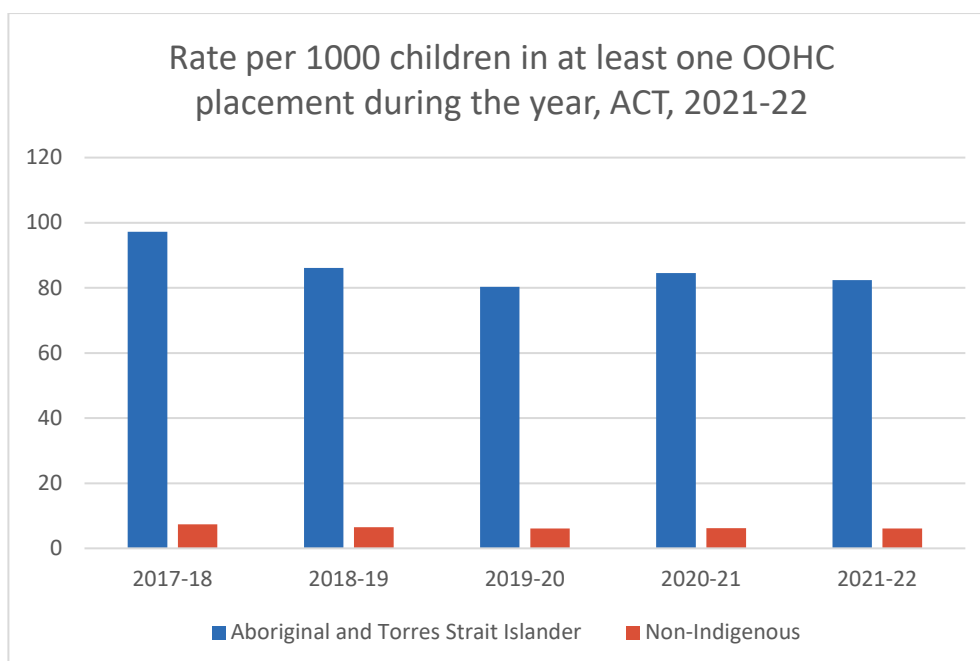


Figure 3 Source: Australian Government Productivity Commission, [Report on Government Services: Community Services](#), Australian Government Productivity Commission, 2023, accessed 25 January 2023.

These problems are well documented. Rather than an indictment of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people, 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 lead 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 and to scope the necessary investment and need for an Aboriginal Peak Body 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 Aboriginal lead organisations through investment in services and capacity building for the First Nations community sector workforce. This should include full resourcing of ACCOs to participate in commissioning processes.

We recognise and appreciate 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 will make a significant difference for CYPS and youth justice outcomes, as will the establishment of a new Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander care and protection legal advocacy service. Similarly, investment in reducing incarceration rates is promising. The ACT Government must ensure this



work does not happen in silos, and that there is adequate resourcing to enable cross-directorate collaboration and strong partnership with the community sector.

## Housing

### Recommendations

- Fund and support an Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander community-controlled housing provider
- Fund a fully independent outcome and impact evaluation of the ACT Housing Strategy to ensure baseline figures, clear targets, achievements and overall housing stock levels for social housing and affordable rentals are clearly reported on a regular basis, and identify opportunities to increase housing supply
- Enable and empower community housing providers through access to and release of affordable land, rezoning and rates exemptions, including;
  - Providing direction to the Suburban Land Agency to specify restrictions for land allocated to community housing providers that result in sufficiently discounted valuations to allow construction
  - Consider variation to the Planning Act to facilitate discount of land valuations for social purposes, and consider government retention of a portion of equity of dwellings constructed to be reimbursed at time of future sale
- Meet land release targets and reassess share released for social housing, especially community housing, versus affordable housing
- Set a zero target for homelessness as everyone has the right to a home
- Maintain complete funding for the Rent Remittance model for social housing providers
- Improve housing responses for LGBTIQ+ Canberrans including: a LGBTIQ+ housing strategy, a trauma informed homelessness and housing support service and funding for ongoing LGBTIQ+ awareness training for housing and homelessness services
- Fund a disability housing advisory and advocacy service
- Fund provisions for specialist homelessness services including data collection capacity, and auditing accessibility of existing accommodation for people with disability.

### Wellbeing domain 7: Housing and Home

Addressing housing is core to the fulfillment of all other wellbeing outcomes, especially to the social determinants of health, and to justice. Housing has consistently presented the greatest cost of living pressure for low-income households in the ACT.

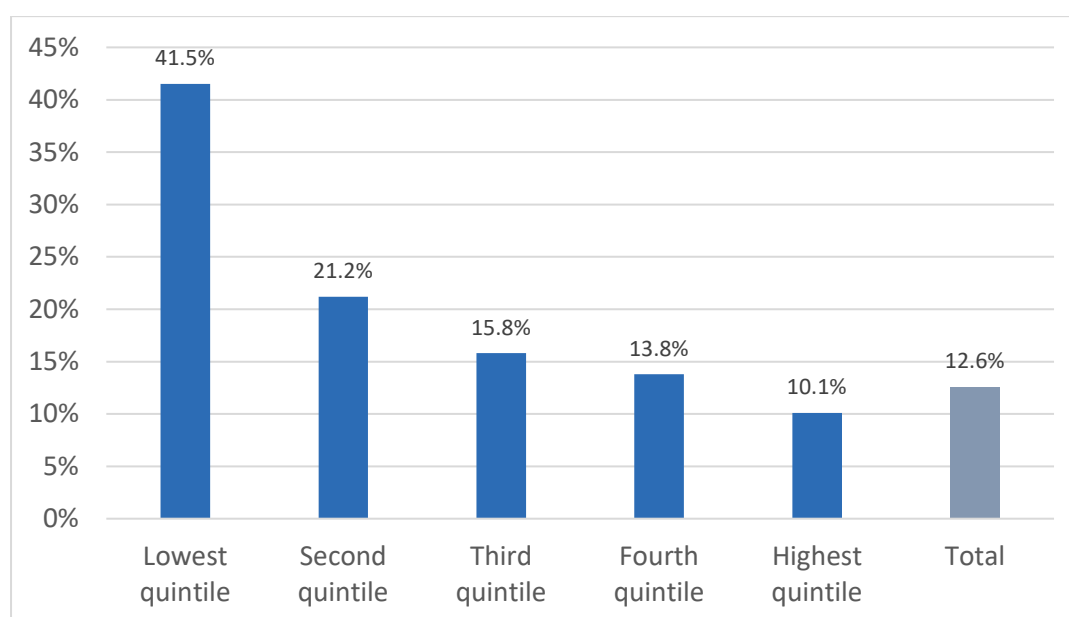




## Housing Costs

Housing costs low-income Canberran households on average between 21.2% and 41.5% of their gross household income (Figure 1). As the second most expensive capital city in Australia to purchase a house in, Canberra's cost of purchasing a home is completely unaffordable.<sup>13</sup> Likewise, Canberra's private rental market is also becoming less and less affordable. The recent [Priced Out report from Everybody's Home](#) shows that Canberra is particularly unaffordable for essential workers, with aged care workers spending 76% of their income on rent and childcare workers spending 78% of their income on rent.

**Figure 4 Housing costs as a proportion of gross household income, ACT, 2019-20**



Source: ABS, 'Table 12.23 Housing Costs as a Proportion of Gross Household Income, Selected household characteristics, States, and territories, 2019-20', [Housing Occupancy and Costs, 2019-20 financial year](#), ABS, 2023, accessed 29 March 2023

We know that a household in the two lowest income quintiles is in housing stress when spending more than 30% of gross household income on housing. The ACT has Australia's highest rate of rental stress among lower income private rental households at 61.3%.<sup>14</sup> The ACT also has the highest proportion of households receiving Commonwealth Rent Assistance who are being paid at the maximum payment rate – 82.1% compared to 76.3% nationally.<sup>15</sup> More than half (53.9%) of

<sup>13</sup> Domain, [March 2022 House price report](#), Domain website, n.d., accessed 2 May 2022.

<sup>14</sup> Productivity Commission, 'Table GA.3 Proportion of lower income private rental households paying more than 30 per cent of income on housing costs, by State and Territory' [data tables], [Report on Government Services 2023: G Housing and homelessness](#), Productivity Commission, 2023, accessed 2 February 2023.

<sup>15</sup> Productivity Commission, 'Table GA.12 Income units receiving CRA and paying enough rent to be eligible for maximum assistance, by jurisdiction' [Data Tables], [Report on Government Services 2023: G Housing and homelessness](#), Productivity Commission, 2023, accessed 2 February 2023.



ACT households receiving CRA are experiencing rental stress and 28.4% are experiencing severe rental stress (paying more than 50% of income on rent).<sup>16</sup>

The 2022 Rental Affordability Index found that Canberra is the least affordable Australian city for low-to-moderate income households to rent in.<sup>17</sup> It shows that ACT rents are extremely unaffordable for a single person on JobSeeker Payments, a single pensioner, and a single part-time worker parent on benefits. ACT rents are severely unaffordable for a pensioner couple and a hospitality worker, and unaffordable for a minimum wage couple and a student share-house occupant.

Anglicare's Rental Affordability Snapshot found that only 5 (0.3%) individual properties in the ACT were suitable for at least one household type living on income support payments without placing them in housing stress.<sup>18</sup> Further, only 36 (2.65%) individual properties in the ACT were suitable for at least one household type living on minimum wage without placing them in housing stress.<sup>19</sup>

We need to see serious intervention to address the severe lack of affordable rental dwellings and meet the Parliamentary and Governing Agreement (PAGA) commitment to providing 600 new affordable rentals, against a modelled need of 2,400.<sup>20</sup> The government needs to invest in empowering Community Housing Providers (CHPs) as experts in providing affordable rental properties, including by: releasing affordable land, rezoning, subsidising land prices and making rates exemptions.

## Social and public housing

The chronic shortage of affordable private rentals is exacerbated by, and in turn worsens the impacts of the shortage of social and affordable housing in the ACT.

The ACT has (at least):

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<sup>16</sup> Productivity Commission, 'Table GA.13 CRA Income units paying more than 30 per cent of income on rent, with and without CRA, by selected equity group' & 'Table GA.14CRA Income units paying more than 50 per cent of income on rent, with and without CRA, by selected equity group' [Data Tables], [Report on Government Services 2023: G Housing and homelessness](#), Productivity Commission, 2023, accessed 2 February 2023.

<sup>17</sup> SGS Economics and Planning, National Shelter, Beyond Bank and Brotherhood of St. Laurence, [Rental-Affordability-Index Nov 2022 low-resolution.pdf \(sgsep.com.au\)](#), SGS Economics and Planning, 2022, accessed 30 March 2023.

<sup>18</sup> E Bourke and M Foo, [2022 Rental Affordability Snapshot](#), Anglicare Australia, 2022, accessed 2 March 2023.

<sup>19</sup> E Bourke and M Foo, [2022 Rental Affordability Snapshot](#).

<sup>20</sup> L Troy, R van den Nouwelant & B Randolph, [Estimating need and costs of social and affordable housing delivery \[PDF\]](#), UNSW City Futures Research Centre, Sydney, 2019, p 3, accessed 29 March 2022.



- A shortfall of 3,100 social housing properties, with 8,500 additional social housing dwellings needed by 2036 to meet the ACT's current and projected need<sup>21</sup>
- A current shortfall of 2,400 affordable housing dwellings in the ACT, with 3,400 additional affordable housing dwellings required by 2036 to meet current and projected need.<sup>22</sup>

Government investment in social housing stock is essential to address this major shortfall. ACTCOSS has welcomed the ACT Government's commitment under the PAGA to deliver an additional 400 public housing dwellings by 2025 and 600 additional affordable housing dwellings by 2025-26.<sup>23</sup> However, this commitment falls well short of our community's need for social and affordable housing.

The urgency of investment is underlined by the 3,157 applications for social housing in the ACT as of 10 March 2023. These applications for standard housing are facing an average waiting time of 1,827 days – more than five years (Table 3). This underscores the need for the government to increase investment in this area.

**Table 3 Housing ACT social housing waiting list and average wait times, 10 March 2023**

Application Category	Number of Applications	Average Waiting Time (days)
Priority Housing	158	323
High Needs Housing	2,037	1,166
Standard Housing	962	1,827
Total applications	3,157	n/a

Source: ACT Government Community Services Directorate, [Social Housing Waiting List](#), ACT Government Community Services Directorate, 30 January 2023, accessed 2 February 2022.

Responding to chronic homelessness and the housing affordability crisis requires direct public investment in social housing. This is a cost-effective way to boost growth in jobs and incomes while also avoiding significant social costs associated with homelessness and related issues such as domestic and family violence.<sup>24</sup> It has been estimated that for every \$1 million of public investment in social housing, gross domestic product (GDP) is boosted by \$1.3 million.<sup>25</sup> Affordable rents, security of

<sup>21</sup> J Lawson, H Pawson, L Troy, R van den Nouwelant and C Hamilton, [Social housing as infrastructure: an investment pathway](#), AHURI Final Report 306, Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute Limited, 2018, p 63, accessed 22 June 2021.

<sup>22</sup> L Troy, R van den Nouwelant & B Randolph, [Estimating need and costs of social and affordable housing delivery \[PDF\]](#), UNSW City Futures Research Centre, Sydney, 2019, p. 3, accessed 29 March 2022.

<sup>23</sup> ACT Government, [Parliamentary and Governing Agreement – 10th Legislative Assembly for the Australian Capital Territory \[PDF\]](#), ACT Government, 2020, accessed 2 May 2022.

<sup>24</sup> Equity Economics, [Nowhere to go: the benefits of providing long-term social housing to women that have experienced domestic and family violence](#), Equity Economics, 15 July 2021., accessed 5 May 2022.

<sup>25</sup> KPMG, [Housing Ministers' Advisory Committee: Social Housing Initiative Review \[PDF\]](#), prepared by KPMG for the Department of Housing, September 2012, p 2, accessed 22 June 2021.



tenure and other supports available to financially vulnerable people in social housing reduce their risk of homelessness by more than half.<sup>26</sup>

## Homelessness

The cost pressure of housing has serious implications and is leading to increased rates of insecure housing and homelessness. The ABS recorded that in 2021 the ACT had a rate of 39 in 100,000 people experiencing homelessness, representing 1,770 people (an increase on 1,600 people in 2016).<sup>27</sup>

Homelessness services in the ACT report the highest rates of persistent homeless for their clients in the nation, with 43% of service users experiencing homelessness for at least seven months over the last two years.<sup>28</sup> For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander service users, this number is even higher, with almost half experiencing persistent homelessness over the last two years. This speaks to an urgent need for an Aboriginal Community Controlled housing provider, and a targeted strategy to address First Nations homelessness and housing precarity.

A zero-target for homelessness is well within the ACT Government's capacity, particularly given the emergency response during the pandemic which significantly boosted the number of people supported to access temporary accommodation. With homelessness in the ACT getting worse, we need to see investment in the supply of wrap-around support services, additional funding for specialist community sector homelessness providers and significant investment in supply of temporary and long-term accommodation.<sup>29</sup>

## Inclusion

For marginalised peoples, the housing crisis compounds existing risk of disadvantage, including Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander peoples, people with disability, the LGBTQIA+ community, women, and gender diverse people. We need to see the ACT Government take action to ensure access to stable housing is not limited to the most privileged.

The ACT is the only state/territory that does not have specific Aboriginal Community Controlled housing provider in Australia. The Productivity Commission Report on Government Services 2023 found that 77% of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander homelessness service clients did not have their demand for accommodation

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<sup>26</sup> D Prentice and R Scutella, [What are the impacts of living in social housing? \[PDF\]](#), Technical Paper No. 1/18, Infrastructure Victoria, Melbourne, 2018, accessed 5 September 2020.

<sup>27</sup> ABS, [Census of Population and Housing, Estimating Homelessness, ABS, Canberra, 2023](#), ABS, Canberra, 2023, 'Table 1.3 - STATE AND TERRITORY OF USUAL RESIDENCE, Number of homeless persons, by selected characteristics, 2006, 2011, 2016 and 2021', accessed 29 March 2023.

<sup>28</sup> Productivity Commission, [Report on Government Services 2023: Section 19 Homelessness services](#), Productivity Commission, Australian Government, 2023, accessed 2 March 2023.

<sup>29</sup> ACTCOSS, [Urgent action needed to address ACT's worsening housing and homelessness crisis](#) [media release], ACTCOSS, 24 January 2023, accessed 2 March 2023.



services met in 2021-22.<sup>30</sup> The lack of an Aboriginal Community Controlled housing provider is a glaring gap and of critical importance to implement.

There also needs to be a concerted effort to improve housing responses for LBTQIA+ Canberrans given disproportionate risks of housing instability. By creating and funding an LBTQIA+ housing strategy, the ACT Government could ensure a trauma informed homelessness and housing support service, as well as providing ongoing LBTQIA+ awareness training for housing and homelessness services.

Further, there is significant concern from homelessness service providers about the implications of reviewing the Rent Remittance Model. Within the current model, community service providers play a major role in responding to complex homelessness cases and supporting transition to longer-term tenancies. In doing so, these services directly contribute to achieving the objectives of the ACT Housing Strategy. Any reduction in funding or lifting of rent caps would force specialist homelessness services to draw upon their own resources to house extremely vulnerable Canberrans – an essentially untenable prospect for already underfunded services. In particular, the provision of subsidised rent is currently keeping countless women out of homelessness, including those escaping violence and/or being forced to sleep rough or in cars with children. Maintaining funding for the Rent Remittance Model and supported housing is fundamentally important to keeping women and gender diverse people in stable, safe housing.

For disabled clients of homelessness services, 97% did not have their demand for accommodation services met in 2021-22.<sup>31</sup> People with disability often face unsuitable, unaffordable housing options that are not fit-for-purpose. We are supportive of recommendations from ACT disability and housing specialist organisations and services to ensure that people with disability have consistent access to safe, appropriate social and affordable housing that meets needs. Particularly, providing support to households with disability to access social and affordable housing, funding a disability housing advisory service, and funding disability provisions for specialist homelessness services including data collection capacity, and auditing accessibility of existing accommodation for people with disability.

## Further Priority Areas

### Children, Young people and Families

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<sup>30</sup> Productivity Commission, [Report on Government Services 2023: Section 19 Homelessness services](#), Productivity Commission, Australian Government, 2023, accessed 2 March 2023.

<sup>31</sup> Productivity Commission, [Report on Government Services 2023: Section 19 Homelessness services](#), Productivity Commission, Australian Government, 2023, accessed 2 March 2023.



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. The ACT Government must ensure that all children are supported and made to feel welcome and included. For further recommendations on supporting women in the ACT, please see our recent submission to the [ACT Women's Plan](#) consultation.

To ensure that vulnerable families and children receive the necessary supports and inclusive practices to be able to thrive, the ACT Government must:

- Invest in perinatal wellbeing including through in-patient parent and baby care
- Fund implementation of the [ACT Play Space Strategy](#)
- Fund implementation of a fully inclusive education model to ensure accessibility and inclusion for all students at all ACT schools
- Invest in early childhood education and preschools with early intervention strategies for children with developmental delays.

We also know that keeping children and young people out of the justice system is essential to positive development outcomes. Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander children are 12 times more likely than non-Indigenous children to be in detention in the ACT, and almost 6 times more likely to be under community-based supervision orders.<sup>32</sup> We commend the ACT Government for committing to raise the age of criminal responsibility, however we would urge a minimum age of 14 with no exceptions. We also need to see appropriate supports and diversionary programs put in place to ensure that vulnerable young people do not slip through the cracks.

Likewise, ensuring children are supported to remain with their families wherever possible is imperative. ACT Government spending per child on protective intervention services, care services, intensive family support services and family support services remains the lowest in the country at \$935, well below the national average of \$1450.<sup>33</sup> Significant investment is needed to keep families together and ensure that the child protection system is truly restorative in nature.

To reduce the number of children (particularly Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children) in the child protection and youth justice systems, the ACT Government must:

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<sup>32</sup> Report on Government Services 2023, '[Child protection services](#)' (table 16A.2), *Australian Government Productivity Commission*, accessed 1 March 2023.

<sup>33</sup> Report on Government Services 2023, '[Child protection services](#)' (table 16A.8), *Australian Government Productivity Commission*, accessed 1 March 2023.





- 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
- Invest in an expanded Youth Justice program facilitating Functional Family Therapy (FFT)
- Implement and fund all recommendations from the Inspector of Correctional Services Healthy Centre Review of Bimberi Youth Justice Centre
- Invest in early intervention and supports for families at risk of engagement with child and youth protection services, particularly for families with disability and Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander families.

Investing in a safe and equitable community also requires the prevention of domestic and family violence (DFV) and gendered violence. Frontline and community services must be appropriately funded to meet client demand and provide wraparound services including domestic violence services, community legal services and housing and homelessness services.

The ACT Government must ensure funding for DFV prevention and response is appropriate and sustainable, and:

- Develop a new, fully funded ACT Prevention of Violence Against Women and Children Strategy
- Expand the PACER intervention program to provide DFV crisis support
- Provide additional funding to community-based specialist women's services including domestic violence services, community legal services and, housing and homelessness services
- Fund DFV services to provide evidence-based prevention and early intervention programs
- Greater investment in integrated and accessible front-line service provision for domestic and family violence and sexual assault response
- Replace funding for the Escaping Violence Payment.

Further recommendations can be found in:

- [ACTCOSS Submission: Achieving equity for women and girls in the ACT](#)

## Climate and Energy

Wellbeing Domain 4: Environment & Climate

Wellbeing Domain 9: Living Standards





## Wellbeing Domain 6: Health

Climate change is a social justice issue and is 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 peoples, are more likely to be negatively impacted by climate change.<sup>34</sup> 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 adaptation measures must not entrench or exacerbate disadvantage. Instead, climate action should aim to reduce poverty and inequality and improve wellbeing.

Just 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 narrow eligibility criteria and barriers to access.

To ensure an equitable pathway to net zero emissions, the ACT Government must invest in a just 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 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 the transition to sustainable and climate friendly energy solutions 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. To target energy support for priority households, the ACT Government must:

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<sup>34</sup> N Islam & J Winkel, [Climate change and social inequality](#) [PDF], DESA Working Paper No. 152, United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, October 2017, accessed 18 September 2022.



- Implement percentage based utilities concessions. This would improve equity across households, be more responsive to changes in price and circumstances and would cost the ACT Government less<sup>35</sup>
- Expand eligibility for the Home Energy Support Program and Sustainable Household Scheme to include renters, a wider range of concession card holders and people on low incomes who do not have concession cards
- Ensure public and community housing tenants are supported on the pathway to electrification, including investigating the installation of solar panels on public and community housing properties<sup>36</sup>
- Strengthen and enforce minimum energy efficiency standards for rentals and incentivise landlords to ensure these standards are met. Commit to adding measures in the next stage including draught proofing, double glazing and curtaining to ensure the benefits of ceiling insulation are fully realised. It is also critical that there is 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.

Further detail can be found in a range of ACTCOSS' submissions:

- Inquiry into EV Adoption in the ACT: [submission](#) and [testimony](#)
- [A Just Gas Transition in the ACT](#)
- [Submission to ACT's Climate Strategy to a Net Zero Emissions Territory](#)

## 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 disabilities has a significant flow-on effect to the wellbeing of all community members. People with disabilities experience discrimination and segregation in all areas of life, which inevitably has negative impacts on mental and physical health.

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<sup>35</sup> D Lombard, K Caught and R Law, [Reforming electricity concessions to better meet need](#), ACOSS and SACOSS, 2022, accessed 17 March 2023.

<sup>36</sup> 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.



Adults with disabilities are significantly less likely to report experiencing good or excellent health at 24%, compared to 65% of people without disabilities.<sup>37</sup> In addition, 32% of adults with disabilities experience high or very high psychological distress compared with only 8% of adults without disabilities<sup>38</sup>.

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.<sup>39</sup> A further 45% of reported accounts occurred in Australian state or territory Government settings or health settings, and a significant number of participants particularly highlighted discriminatory practices in health settings, including problems accessing correct diagnoses and appropriate disability support provision.<sup>40</sup> Close to half of adults with disabilities have experienced violence.<sup>41</sup> 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%.<sup>42</sup> 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.<sup>43</sup> 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.

To ensure that people with disabilities are supported to live full lives in an inclusive community, the ACT Government must:

- Fund a Disability Liaison Officer in Canberra Health Services
- Ensure adequate and ongoing funding for the implementation of the Disability Health Strategy, ACT Disability Strategy, ACT Disability Justice Strategy, and 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

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<sup>37</sup> Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW), [People with disability in Australia 2022](#), Australian Government, accessed March 20, 2023.

<sup>38</sup> AIHW, *People with disability in Australia 2022*.

<sup>39</sup> 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, accessed 22 March 2023.

<sup>40</sup> Disability Royal Commission, *Seventh progress report*.

<sup>41</sup> AIHW, *People with disability in Australia 2022*.

<sup>42</sup> AIHW, *People with disability in Australia 2022*.

<sup>43</sup> AO Hill, N Amos, A Bourne, M Parsons, C Bigby, M Carman, & A Lyons, [Violence, abuse, neglect and exploitation of LGBTQIA+ 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.



- 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 DFV services
- Increase funding to disability service providers struggling to meet the rising costs of staffing and compliance
- Address the lack of accessible and affordable housing for people with disabilities, including through refining the criteria for accessing the Disability Duty Concession Scheme as recommended in the ACT Housing Solutions Innovation Group submission.

ACTCOSS has joined with ACT-based Disabled Peoples Organisations and Disability Representative Organisations to develop [ACT Budget Priorities: A Shared Statement from ACT Disability Organisations](#). We endorse and support the recommendations made in submissions by DPOs and DROs in the ACT.

For further details on how the ACT Government can act to improve the lives of people with disabilities, see the following ACTCOSS submissions:

[Submission: Dhulwa Inquiry](#)

[Submission: ACT Disability Strategy](#)

[Submission: Auslan Accessibility Letter](#)

[Submission: Inquiry into the Waste Management of Absorbent Hygiene Products](#)

[Submission: Federal Inquiry into the Culture and Capability of the NDIA](#)

## Health

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/or Torres Strait Islander peoples, are much more likely to suffer from chronic disease.<sup>44</sup> To prevent and effectively manage chronic disease, people must be able to see a doctor before their illness becomes dire. 40% of Canberrans have a long-term health condition.<sup>45</sup> However, there is a distinct lack of affordable primary healthcare in the ACT.

HealthEngine.com.au lists four bulk billing general practices (GPs) in the ACT, but there is variation in who these clinics choose to bulk bill. HotDoc.com.au lists three

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<sup>44</sup> P Breadon, L Fox, O Emslie, [The Australian Centre for Disease Control \(ACDC\): Highway to health](#), Grattan Institute, 2023, accessed 17 March 2023.

<sup>45</sup> ABS, [Region summary: Australian Capital Territory](#), ABS website, n.d., accessed 24 February 2023.



fully bulk billing GPs in the ACT and the ACT Disability, Aged and Carer Advocacy Service (ADACAS) lists seven.<sup>46</sup>

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 bulk billed.<sup>47</sup> When they do see a doctor, people on low incomes are more likely to wait longer for an appointment.<sup>48</sup> The ACT also has the highest out of pocket costs in the country for GP, specialist and allied health appointments.<sup>49</sup> Forty percent of chronic illness is preventable, so the government needs to provide healthcare that prevents people from becoming chronically ill.<sup>50</sup>

For people on low incomes to be able to access the healthcare they need, the ACT Government should:

- Provide targeted, affordable, and accessible primary healthcare
- Prioritise investment in early intervention and disease prevention for people on low incomes and Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people<sup>51</sup>
- Make it easier and cheaper to see a doctor when you need to.

As well as issues with primary healthcare, consultation with our members indicates that people who have complex and co-occurring conditions, including mental ill health and drug and/or alcohol dependence, often have poor outcomes. People seeking treatment for these kinds of conditions in the ACT often receive inadequate treatment or find support for their condition is limited. To ensure that Canberrans with complex needs are cared for the ACT Government should:

- Fully fund the ACT Drug Strategy Action Plan
- Invest in community-based responses for people with co-occurring mental health and alcohol and drug use, including residential rehabilitation and day programs
- Make permanent and continue to fund the CanTEST Health and Drug Checking Service
- Develop a sexual and reproductive health strategy based on lived experience, including communications about how people can access free abortions

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<sup>46</sup> ACT Disability, Aged and Carer Advocacy Service (ADACAS), [Bulk Billing General Practitioner clinics](#), ADACAS website, n.d., accessed 2 March 2023.

<sup>47</sup> 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, accessed 2 March 2023; M Davey, '[Almost impossible to get bulk billed: patients avoid seeing doctors due to out-of-pocket costs](#)', *The Guardian*, 12 May 2022, accessed 2 March 2023.

<sup>48</sup> 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](#)'.

<sup>49</sup> Productivity Commission, [Report on Government Services 2023: 10 Primary and community health](#) [data set], Productivity Commission, Australian Government, 2023, accessed 17 March 2023.

<sup>50</sup> 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.

<sup>51</sup> P Breadon, L Fox, O Emslie, *The Australian Centre for Disease Control (ACDC): Highway to health*.



- Further invest in the ACT Women's Health Service and provide subsidized 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 a dedicated palliative care unit
- Fund an Individual Advocacy Service so that individuals managing complex and co-occurring conditions regarding safety and quality of care can access support navigating the health system.

Further detail can be found in our recent submissions:

- [Submission to Inquiry into Abortion & Reproductive Choice in the ACT](#)
- [Submission to Inquiry into the Period Products and Facilities \(Access\) Bill 2022](#)

## Human Rights

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 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 are at the greatest risk of having their human rights breached. The [ACTHRC 'It really stabs me' Report 2023](#) found that 54% of culturally and linguistically diverse identifying children/young people surveyed reported experiencing racism, (with 92% of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander children/young people reporting racism). In order to safeguard oppressed peoples from experiences of discrimination we need to see a strong commitment to equity and anti-racist strategy.

To ensure that the ACT is truly human rights compliant, the ACT Government must:

- Fund the ACT National Preventative Mechanisms (NPMs) - Inspector of Correctional Services, the Human Rights Commission and the ACT Ombudsman adequately to carry out monitoring relating to the implementation of OPCAT requirements in the ACT
- 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/or 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 migrant groups settling in the ACT
- Commit to review police complaints handling mechanisms to ensure greater practical independence, accountability and transparency of investigations
- Invest in solutions to address racism experienced by children and young people as outlined in the [ACTHRC 'It really stabs me' Report 2023](#)
- Fund a multicultural health service to provide culturally sensitive care.

## Justice

Wellbeing Domain 5: Governance & Institutions

Wellbeing Domain 7: Housing & Home

Wellbeing Domain 10: Safety

The ACT community deserves better from our justice system. The rate of re-imprisonment in the Alexander Maconochie Centre (AMC) remains at 77%, the highest in the country and well above the national average of 60%.<sup>52</sup> The prison population has been increasing since the prison opened, and the facilities are no longer fit to provide for the needs of the detainees.<sup>53</sup> The 2022 Healthy Prison Review (HPR) found that 79% of detainees reported experiencing boredom most of the time, and 80% disagree that the work they do in the AMC will help them gain employment after release.<sup>54</sup> The percentage of eligible detainees receiving education and training is at an all-time low at 11.5%, well below the national average of 23.7% and significantly lower than the 68% in 2020-21.<sup>55</sup> Detainees struggle to access healthcare services and 71% reported they found it difficult to access psychological supports.<sup>56</sup> The Hume Health Centre and Winnunga Nimmityjah are attempting to service close to or more than double the number of detainees they are resourced for.<sup>57</sup> These statistics highlight the need for more investment in preventative and diversionary services to keep people out of prison.

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<sup>52</sup> ABS, [Prisoners in Australia](#), ABS, 24 February 2022, Table 15, accessed 20 March 2023.

<sup>53</sup> Australian Government Productivity Commission, [Report on Government services 2023: Justice \(Corrective Services\)](#), 31 January 2023, Table 8A.4, accessed 16 March 2023.

<sup>54</sup> 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, accessed 15 March 2023.

<sup>55</sup> Australian Government Productivity Commission, [Report on Government services 2023: Justice \(Corrective Services\)](#), Table 8A.11.

<sup>56</sup> ACT Inspector of Correctional Services, [Healthy prison review of the Alexander Maconochie Centre 2022: Summary report](#).

<sup>57</sup> ACT Inspector of Correctional Services, [Healthy prison review of the Alexander Maconochie Centre 2022: Summary report](#).





Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people remain significantly overrepresented in the prison population at 26%.<sup>58</sup> The number of unsentenced detainees is also continuing to increase. At present, 41% of detainees are on remand compared to 28% a decade ago.<sup>59</sup> 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.

ACTCOSS acknowledges and appreciates the significant investment in justice reform and response made in the 2022-23 ACT Budget, including for the establishment of a dedicated Indigenous Justice team within the Justice and Community Safety Directorate. There have also been substantive investments into community-controlled responses to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander overrepresentation in the justice system, and we urge the ACT Government to ensure these are continued and strengthened in future budget cycles.

To promote equitable justice policy and a human rights approach to justice and corrections, the ACT Government must:

- Implement all recommendations from the [2022 Healthy Prison Review of the Alexander Maconochie Centre](#) and remaining recommendations from the [2019 Healthy Prison Review](#)
- 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 early intervention services
- Resource the Disability Justice and Justice Reinvestment Strategies
- Fund a health promotion program for women in the AMC
- Resource a financial literacy and education program at the AMC
- Ensure the community sector is adequately funded and supported to provide services and programs within the AMC
- Implement a needle and syringe program for the AMC.

For more evidence to support the above recommendations on justice and corrections reform, please see the following submissions:

[Submission: Healthy Prison Review](#)

[Submission: Corrections and Sentencing Legislation Amendment Bill](#)

[Submission: Inquiry into Dangerous Driving](#)

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<sup>58</sup> Australian Government Productivity Commission, *Report on Government services 2023: Justice (Corrective Services)*, Table 8A.4.

<sup>59</sup> ABS, *Prisoners in Australia*, Table 14 and 15.



# Mental Health

Wellbeing Domain 6: Health

Canberra is in the middle of a cost of living and housing affordability crisis.<sup>60</sup> Financial stress, energy hardship, and housing instability all affect our well-being and mental health.<sup>61</sup> Many people are going without food and other necessities like medication.<sup>62</sup> Others are putting off mental health treatment due to cost. Over 2021-22, 22.8% of people with a mental health condition in the ACT, and 31% of people without a mental health condition, delayed or avoided seeing a psychologist due to cost.<sup>63</sup> Major service gaps are also preventing people from accessing care.<sup>64</sup> 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.<sup>65</sup> 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 halved.<sup>66</sup> 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.<sup>67</sup>

To deliver affordable mental health services that respond to people's needs, the ACT Government must:

- Significantly increase funding to community-managed mental health services
- Fund community-based support for people with co-occurring ATOD and mental ill-health
- Include a dual diagnosis ward for mental health and ATOD in the Northside Hospital Planning Project

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<sup>60</sup> ACTCOSS, [2022 ACT Cost of Living Report: Tracking changes in the cost of living for low-income households in the Australian Capital Territory](#), ACTCOSS, May 2022, accessed 27 March 2023.

<sup>61</sup> 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.

<sup>62</sup> ACTCOSS, *2022 ACT Cost of Living Report*, pp 5, 32.

<sup>63</sup> Productivity Commission, [Report on Government Services 2023: E Health](#), Productivity Commission, 2023, figure 13.5, accessed 23 March 2023.

<sup>64</sup> 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, n.d., accessed 27 March 2023.

<sup>65</sup> CHN, *Capital Health Network (ACT PHN) 2021–2024 Needs Assessment*, p 63.

<sup>66</sup> Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW), [Mental health: Expenditure](#), AIHW, 22 December 2022, figure exp.1, accessed 22 March 2023.

<sup>67</sup> 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.



- Provide ongoing funding for a residential perinatal mental health facility
- Invest in housing with integrated mental health support
- Fully fund and implement the Mental Health Workforce Strategy
- Fund mental health support services for carers
- Fund hoarding support services on an ongoing basis
- Adequately fund child and youth mental health services, especially for girls and young women
- Increase funding for mental health services for people with intellectual disabilities
- Support the recommendations in the [Re-envisioning Older Persons Mental Health and Wellbeing in the ACT Strategy 2022-2026](#)
- Provide ongoing funding for Safewards.

## Planning and transport

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.<sup>68</sup> Planning decisions we make now will affect our health, wellbeing and equity in the ACT for years to come.<sup>69</sup> 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.<sup>70</sup> We must also put the needs of vulnerable and disadvantaged groups at the forefront of decision-making and consultation processes, as they will be most adversely affected by poor planning decisions.

To ensure we develop a fair and equitable planning and transport system, the ACT Government must:

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<sup>68</sup> ACT Government, [ACT Population Projections: 2022 to 2060](#), ACT Government, n.d., p 3, accessed 23 March 2023.

<sup>69</sup> World Health Organization (WHO), [How to develop and sustain healthy cities in 20 steps](#), WHO, 2022, pp 2-4 , accessed 23 March 2023.

<sup>70</sup> ACTCOSS, [Urgent action needed to address ACT's worsening housing and homelessness crisis](#) [media release], ACTCOSS, 24 January 2023, accessed 23 March 2023; ACTCOSS, [Submission to the ACT Planning System Review](#), ACTCOSS, March 2023, accessed 23 March 2023.



- Establish a social planning unit that advocates for the needs of vulnerable Canberrans<sup>71</sup>
- Rethink zoning regulations to allow for more medium density housing in well-located suburbs<sup>72</sup>
- Have a trial of free public transport, analysing the costs, benefits, and effect on different groups
- Invest in community transport including for vulnerable children unable to attend early learning centres due to transport barriers
- Invest in transport equity including expanding the sustainable households scheme to include access to loans to purchase electric bicycles and scooters
- Support active travel including maintenance of and investment in walking and cycle paths and separated cycleways
- Invest in adequate and affordable transport for students, including free public transport for school students and sufficient transport options for university and CIT students
- 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 new ACT planning system supports and advocates for people with disability
- Assist community organisations that require freight transport (e.g., food pantries) to cover fuel levy expenses.

Recent ACTCOSS submissions on planning and transport:

[Submission: Inquiry into Planning Bill 2022](#)

[Submission: ACT Planning System Review](#)

[Submission: Inquiry into Planning Bill 2022](#)

[Submission: Missing Middle Canberra Submission on the Territory Plan](#)

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<sup>71</sup> For further information see ACTCOSS, *Submission to the ACT Planning System Review*, p 8.

<sup>72</sup> For further information see ACTCOSS, *Submission to the ACT Planning System Review*, p 10.

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