



Contact: Paula Mance
Executive Director
SEE Change (Society - Environment - Economy)
Room 4, Downer Community Centre, Downer, ACT
P.O. Box 7025, Watson, ACT, 2602

Shane Rattenbury MLA
Minister for Climate Change and Sustainability
ACT Legislative Assembly

Cc: Rebecca Vassorotti MLA, Minister for the Environment
Andrew Barr MLA - Chief Minister
Yvette Berry MLA - Deputy Chief Minister
Chris Steel MLA – Minister for Transport and City Services
Mick Gentleman MLA – Minister for Planning and Land Management
Rachel Stephen-Smith MLA – Minister for Health, Families and Community Services

Proposal for additional operational funding for ACT-based environmental charities

Dear Minister

Executive Summary

This proposal seeks to increase the operational funding of the three ACT-based environmental charities—SEE Change, Conservation Council ACT and the Canberra Environment Centre—by around \$150,000-\$180,000 per organisation per year from 1 July 2024 and provide funding certainty to 30 June 2030.

- Canberra’s environmental NGOs are essential in the journey to net zero emissions by 2045 and to build a more sustainable Canberra.
- Community-based organisations have a unique trusted relationship with the community, are nimble and deliver value for money. They understand local contexts and have long lasting staying power.
- Canberra’s environmental NGOs do not have a sustainable funding relationship with the ACT Government.

- The three ACT-based environmental charities have insufficient resources to meet additional costs due to inflation, rising insurance, complexity of work, financial accountability, management of risk, competitiveness in the ACT labour market, and the increased need for an online presence.
- Lack of funding certainty makes it difficult to invest in our people and systems, plan for the future and undertake the critical work needed to reduce anthropogenic climate impacts.
- Funding only supports less than one Full Time Equivalent staff member per organisation.
- A basic set of workplace entitlements and secure accommodation cannot be provided to meet contemporary employee expectations, such as EAP and training.

Additional funding would allow us to better to assist the ACT government to achieve its carbon emissions targets and other high priority environmental objectives, including the Canberra Region Local Food Strategy, ACT Circular Economy Strategy and Action Plan, and conservation of biodiversity and Canberra’s waterways through:

- harnessing volunteer effort that is currently turned away due resource constraints;
- increased community events and environmental education;
- increased participation in government policy and bringing the voice of community to submissions, consultations and through the provision of expert advice; and
- increased online presence, impact and reach to assist the government to build trust and engagement with the ACT community for improved environmental outcomes.

Recommendation

- That you support and advocate for increased funding through the 2024 Budget process so the reach and impact of environmental NGOs in Canberra can be doubled.

We would appreciate the opportunity to discuss this proposal with you at the earliest opportunity.

Yours sincerely



Paula Mance
Executive Officer
SEE Change



Elle Lawless
Executive Director
Conservation Council ACT



Fiona Veikkanen
Executive Director
Canberra Environment Centre

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Introduction

This proposal seeks to increase the operational funding of the three ACT-based environmental charities—SEE Change, Conservation Council ACT and the Canberra Environment Centre—by around \$150,000-\$180,000 per organisation per year from 1 July 2024 and provide funding certainty to 30 June 2030.

Additional funding and increased certainty would allow us to better assist the ACT government to achieve its carbon emission targets and other high priority environmental objectives, such as the Local Food Strategy, Circular Economy Strategy, and conservation of biodiversity and Canberra’s waterways.

The three ACT-based environmental charities provide complementary, but distinct services and programs that bring the voice of community and local environmental action to government policy: SEE Change utilises its 120+ volunteers to deliver grassroots, place-based, behaviour change programs in local ACT communities. The Canberra Environment Centre delivers environmental education from its Centre at Gungaherra homestead, while as a peak environmental advocacy body, the Conservation Council represents the voices of more than 40 local community organisations.

International experts agree that we cannot slow down on action to reduce carbon emissions and other negative human impacts on the environment.

“Urgent and transformative action is crucial, going beyond mere plans and promises. It requires raising ambition, covering entire economies and moving towards climate-resilient development, while outlining a clear path to achieve net-zero emissions. Time is running out, and immediate measures are necessary to avoid catastrophic consequences and secure a sustainable future for generations to come (The Sustainable Development Goals Report 2023: Special Edition).”



Main points

Canberra's environmental NGOs are essential in the journey to net zero emissions by 2045 and to build a more sustainable Canberra.

- Meeting the ACT's ambitious climate change target of net zero emissions by 2045 requires change within the Canberra community; deep and sustained community engagement will be essential for fostering this change.
- The three ACT-based environmental community organisations have been funded by the ACT government for more than 10 years, providing an effective and efficient way for the Government to build community awareness and trust, deliver environmental education programs, and promote practical, local action and behaviour change.
- There is high demand for our activities, with the three organisations delivering more than 300 successful workshops and repair cafes in 2022-23. Collectively, the organisations reach more than 20,000 Canberrans each week through social media and engage more than 300 Canberrans through in-person activities every month. Information and education is also provided to more than 8,500 newsletter subscribers each fortnight, and through Youtube videos, podcasts, participation in consultations, submissions, campaigns, advocacy, and expert advice.

Canberra's environmental NGOs do not have a sustainable funding relationship with the ACT Government.

- Inflation has risen by 26% in the past decade, contributing to high insurance and operational costs. Coupled with increased complexity of work, financial accountability, management of risk,

competitiveness in the ACT labour market, and an increased need for an online presence, this means the current level of operational funding is unsustainable.

- Lack of funding certainty makes it difficult to invest in our people and systems, plan for the future and retain staff. Resources are wasted repeatedly asking for increased funding.
- Each organisation currently receives around \$130,000 to \$170,000 per year (currently until 2025, Attachment B) which supports less than 1 Full Time Equivalent staff member.
- Our ability to meet increasing demand, as the community seeks more ways they can take action on climate change and environmental sustainability, is decreasing over time.
- The three organisations turn away community volunteers every week due to insufficient resources for volunteer management, insurance and back-office support for volunteer projects.
- Lack of funding for rent, cleaning and utilities has resulted in insecure and low standards of employee accommodation.
- There is limited funding to support basic workplace conditions for staff that are expected in a contemporary workplace (e.g., EAP, cultural fitness, training).
- No budget for Information Technology reduces the efficiency of business practices, creates increased cyber security risk and restricts our ability to build and maintain the necessary online presence to advertise community sector and government programs.
- Funding is insufficient to support grant applications, management, and the evaluation and reporting requirements for potential additional project funds, meaning the organisation's ability to deliver on the ACT Government's and public's desired outcomes is reduced.
- With few administrative resources, the part time Executive Directors must take on all aspects of running the organisation (e.g. payroll, invoicing, staff management, reporting, strategic planning and Board support). This means reduced capacity for participating in government meetings and consultations or bringing the voice of community to policy development through submissions.

Community-based organisations have a uniquely trusted relationship with the community, are nimble and deliver value for money.

- Community-based organisations play a pivotal role in delivering government outcomes due to the community trust we have built over many years, the relationships we can forge, our networks of volunteers and influence, and our ability to deliver place-based programs in a nimble, cost-effective and effective way.
- Community-based organisations understand local contexts and have long lasting staying power.

Additional operational funding and longer-term funding agreements will provide the capacity to:

- deliver more diverse, impactful and engaging advocacy, community education and behavioural change programs to reduce anthropogenic impacts on climate;
- better promote climate change and biodiversity information, resources and advice through more community events, workshops and an extended media reach;
- participate in, contributing the voice of the ACT community, to more government consultations;
- provide more comprehensive and regular expert advice when requested from government;
- promote and upskill, provide practical essential equipment, training and meeting space for local volunteer groups;
- harness additional volunteer effort for sustainable and cost-effective projects that positively impact environmental outcomes and provide engaging and safe opportunities for volunteers;

- secure appropriate tenancies to improve working conditions for staff, and provide spaces for hosting more workshops, events and meeting spaces for other community organisations;
- support improved financial management, governance and reporting processes to meet a more complex governance landscape;
- apply for and better manage additional grants and programs and to leverage additional funding to complement government grants through philanthropy and business;
- provide more secure employment and appropriately remunerate staff; and
- support improved digital marketing, website and social media presence leading to increased engagement and reach for advertising government policy and programs.

A modest increase in our respective budgets for each organisation is requested. The total cost per year is \$967,050 (based on 2024-25 figures for all three organisations), an additional \$519,050 when compared to 2023-24 funding. Details and justification are provided at ATTACHMENT A. An overview of the current activities of the organisations are at ATTACHMENT B.

Recommendation

- That you support and advocate for increased funding through the 2024 Budget process so the reach and impact of environmental NGOs in Canberra can be doubled.

Background

History of funding

In recognition of the potential positive impact that community organisations can play in achieving public outcomes, the ACT government has provided operational funding to the three ACT-based environmental charities for more than a decade. All three organisations have a large reach across the ACT and a strong history of delivering on government programs.

Operational funding has been supplemented over the years with various grants, but grant funding is highly dependent on an organisation's ability to apply, manage, report on, and acquit additional grant funds. These grants are traditionally small, tied to specific project outcomes and provide little longer-term employment for staff, resulting in high turnover, skills loss, low rates of pay and lack of (even the most) basic training and support enjoyed by other employees across the ACT workforce, including in other community based sectors.

All three organisations also rely on community volunteers, memberships, some user-pays for events and workshops, and donations through our charitable status to deliver outcomes. These additional inputs have supported the overachievement of contract outcomes at low cost to the ACT Government. However, volunteers, user-pay events and donations also require significant operational resources to manage (administration, regulatory requirements, insurance and financials).

Significant inflationary impacts and the pandemic have negatively impacted on budgets, causing increases in rent, insurance and complexity of work; shortage of volunteers; competitiveness in the ACT labour market; and an increased need for an online presence. The need to deliver multimedia marketing (and maintain adequate IT governance and security) is also beyond the organisations' current resources.

All three organisations are facing the prospect of budget deficits and funding cliffs that compromise future operations.

Community education and behaviour change: the role of the community sector

Alongside regulatory reform, behaviour change is key to reducing human impacts on the environment. Behaviour change is influenced by the complex interaction of societal, environmental and personal characteristics, and both top-down and bottom-up approaches are necessary.

Research finds that behaviour change is best served by a mix of interventions, delivered over an extended period of time and modified in response to measured impact. Trust in the validity of information and the deliverer is essential to engagement, with trust tending to be higher for community organisations than government. Community-based organisations can promote education and awareness, and cost-effective 'learning through doing' programs with trusted deliverers and appropriately targeted, place-based, programs. They are nimbler and more flexible than the government in identifying and responding to local needs. While credible information delivered by government is important for informing consumers, it is rarely sufficient as it is based on the assumptions that all people lack knowledge (of what they should be doing) and that improving knowledge changes attitude and creates a desire to change.

Community programs can address the concerns of local people about the threat of climate change, which may evoke feelings of uncertainty and hopelessness, leading to complacency and inaction. These include evidence-based strategies such as: optimistic messaging, tailored information designed to reach a specific person or group; commitment programs (pledge-making); leveraging social networks, and harnessing local leaders and energy champions, volunteers who help inform others in their social network (virtual or physical), community, or business about a certain issue or idea. Community sector organisations can also bring the voice of community to government to effectively inform policy development and to assist in community acceptance and implementation.

Insufficient resources negatively impact the ability of environmental organisations to deliver evidence-based programs and support the factors necessary to build trust in community organisations: transparency, integrity, reputation, leadership and strong outcomes.

Harnessing volunteer resources for positive environmental impact

Over the first two decades of the 21st Century there has been a significant decline in volunteering in Australia. The desire of government to increase the number and effectiveness of volunteer effort is explicitly recognised in recent policy including the National Strategy for Volunteering (2023-2033).

In contrast to national trends, all three environmental organisations have observed increasing numbers of people seeking volunteering opportunities due to heightened public awareness of climate change impacts in the community. However, in order to support sustainable and effective volunteering opportunities that harness 'in-kind' resources and contribute to outcomes for government, sound volunteer management processes must be in place. Insufficient resources impact on our ability to manage risk, safety, training, and project planning and management meaning that each week volunteers are turned away from our organisations.

Advocacy

Canberra based environment organisations play an important role in advocating for protecting nature and climate action. Community environmental organisations can create both big-system and small-local impact and enroll more community action and capability by helping the government share power and enable the community and groups to take more collaborative action. For example, environmental

organisations contributed to government strategies to reduce emissions on the pathway to net zero emissions by 2045, active travel, Preventative Health Plan, Canberra Switched On, Caring for Dhawura Ngunnawal, ACT Wellbeing Framework, Circular Economy and Local Food Strategy, and to restore and conserve natural places in the ACT region.

Climate change and nature destruction are the biggest challenges facing our region. CCACT, for example, runs a focused set of programs to improve community-led action, reduce emissions from gas and transport and to protect ecosystems in our region from development and deforestation.

As representative organisations, CCACT acts as an umbrella for member groups and believe in empowering the local environmental community, to strengthen and grow the collective movement. We believe this can be achieved by working together, collaborating across backgrounds, beliefs and sectors, empowering our community and providing a hub for action and resources. Community groups undertaking advocacy create systemic change through participating in policy development, publicly demonstrating community views and demanding investment and strategies for climate action.

Advocacy creates the social license for more ambitious policy through contributing to consultations and government strategies, providing research, innovative ideas and community views. Advocacy seeks to ensure that all people in our society can have a voice on issues important to them.

Community needs and action

The ACT community's need for information and skills for how they can take personal action to respond to climate change is indisputable. SEE Change, for example, hosted more than 75 local events in 2022-23, conservatively engaging more than 12,500 people. These events empowered Canberrans to repair their goods rather than send them to landfill, reduce consumption and waste, make pledges to reduce their environmental footprint, regenerate soils and parks, make their homes more sustainable and reduce their carbon emissions, including through active travel. The Canberra Environment Centre delivered over 170 events during 2022-23, including hosting sustainability advice, environment-focused education workshops and 99 free-to attend bike repair workshops. These are essential activities if the ACT is to meet Climate Change targets and outcomes.

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