

**JUNE 2021**

# **2021-22 Pre-Budget Submission: ACT Regional Community Services Community Transport in the ACT**



**Communities  
@Work**



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This submission is a joint submission from the five ACT Regional Community Service Organisations. Community Services #1, Communities@Work, Woden Community Services, Capital Region Community Services and Northside Community Service.

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## Introduction

Everyone has the right to be connected to their community so they can be supported to thrive. Accessing services in our community whether it is health, education or leisure is essential in supporting people in our communities. For many living in the ACT accessing these services can be challenging, some do not have their own vehicle and using public transport is not viable.

Community Transport is an important service in our community providing an alternative option for people. Community Transport is a specialist service that is an alternative to, and distinct from, other forms of public, mass, and private transport available in the ACT.

Transport difficulties are consistently identified as a factor that restricts Australian families' capacity to access services and participate in activities.<sup>1</sup> Research from the Australian National University found that in April 2020, 45.8 per cent of Australian adults said they felt lonely at least some of the time.<sup>2</sup> The mental health and social impacts of COVID-19 have been significant and are long term.

Community transport has several distinguishing features compared with other mainstream transport modes. The most distinctive feature of community transport is the highly personalised nature of the services provided. Community transport benefits those who are otherwise isolated or excluded, enabling them to live independently, participate in their communities, and access education, employment, health and other services.

Being connected with our communities is now even more important than ever. Supporting those in our community who experience disadvantage is crucial in ensuring that no one feels isolated as a result of not being able to access transport options.

Addressing Community Transport will contribute to a number of priorities outlined in the ACT Parliamentary and Governing Agreement. The Regional Community Service Organisations; Community Services #1, Communities@Work, Woden Community Services, Capital Region Community Services and Northside Community Service have identified areas for action to improve the access to Community Transport in the ACT.

As the main providers of community transport in the ACT the actions within this submission demonstrate the importance of collaboration across the community not-for-profit sector and addressing community transport requires collective action. This document explores the opportunities to work with the ACT Government in support of those across Canberra who experience transport disadvantage.

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<sup>1</sup> Carbone, S., Fraser, A., Ramburuth, R., & Nelms, L. (2004). *Breaking Cycles, Building Futures. Promoting inclusion of vulnerable families in antenatal and universal early childhood services: A report on the first three stages of the project*. Melbourne: Brotherhood of St Laurence.

<sup>2</sup> Biddle, N., Edwards, B., Gray, M. and Sollis, K. (2020). *Tracking outcomes during the COVID-19 pandemic (August 2020) – Divergence within Australia*. Australian National University: Canberra

## Recommendations

1. That the Government develop principles to ensure Community Transport is considered within all government programs and policies.
2. That the ACT Government invest \$1,500,750 in a three-year pilot program focused on delivering family-oriented community transport options.
3. That the ACT Government fund the development of a centralised management system for the five Regional Community Service Organisation that supports flexibility and shared resources for community transport.
4. That the Government support ACTCOSS' recommendation for the development and implementation of a needs assessment of transport disadvantage in the ACT.
5. Findings from a needs assessment should inform new models of Community Transport in the ACT.

## Improving access to community transport contributes to the ‘access and connectivity’ domain within the ACT Wellbeing Framework

Community transport provides access to recreation, shopping, education, medical care and social services as well as providing a source of social contact for those in our community that are experiencing isolation.

Improving access to community transport options supports the ACT’s Government Wellbeing Framework (Framework), which includes 12 domains that reflect key factors that impact on the quality of life of Canberrans. One of the 12 domains is ‘Access and Connectivity’, this domain is focused on “Getting around to places we value and accessing the services we need. Our planning, mobility and service systems allow us to move around our liveable city and access the types of places and services we need, when we need them. Those who require additional support to gain independence can access responsive, tailored services.”<sup>3</sup>

Research has shown that community transport is essential to people’s ability to live independent lives. A study conducted in the United Kingdom by the Community Transport Association (CTA) found that while users of community transport may have had family or neighbours to provide them with transport, many indicated that they did not want to be too dependent on other people and their preference was to exercise choice and control.<sup>4</sup>

The inclusion of ‘Access and Connectivity’ is an important element within the Framework and highlights the importance the Government places on the role of Community Transport. Community Transport models must consider options to support recreational and social trips to encourage the establishment of social networks and to provide social opportunities for people who are otherwise isolated.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> ACT Government (2020). ACT Wellbeing Framework. Retrieved from [https://www.act.gov.au/\\_\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0004/1498198/ACT-wellbeing-framework.pdf](https://www.act.gov.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0004/1498198/ACT-wellbeing-framework.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> Davis, C., Rogers, J. & Clark, A. Journeys to well-being: a report on the nexus between Community Transport and the health of older Australians. ASCT. 2018.

<sup>5</sup> Zwart, J and Welsby, A. (2006). Community-based Transport Queensland Guidelines. State of Queensland and Local Government Association of Queensland

## Principles to ensure Community Transport is considered in all Government programs

Community transport is a means by which people who are otherwise unable to access community facilities and social activities are supported to connect with their community.<sup>6</sup> The following principles have been developed to inform Government policies and programs. The importance of access and connectivity should be seen as a whole of Government issue as community members have the right to access Health, Community Services, Education or Justice services. Community Transport is the key factor in ensuring that members of our community are connected and engaged.

- **Planning** – Government programs and policies must ensure that community transport is considered as part of any solution. Without access to community transport many programs aimed at supporting those in our community experiencing disadvantage need will not be accessed.
- **Lived experience** – Community transport models must be informed by those with lived experience. Those with lived experience provide a powerful and authentic voice and unique insights that can challenge assumptions and identify areas of change.<sup>7</sup> Involving those with lived experience helps ensure Community Transport models are designed to meet the needs and preferences of people affected by transport disadvantage.
- **Equity** - Community transport must be informed by a human right understanding that all people are entitled to appropriate and accessible transport. Many members in our community experience difficulties accessing services and are not socially connected. Community transport should be available to all people who cannot safely or effectively access other forms of transport.
- **Relationships** - Community transport is primarily about relationships and about putting relationships at the centre of meeting people's transport needs. The holistic approach of Community Transport must be part of the any solution.

### *Recommendation*

1. That the Government develop principles to ensure Community Transport is considered within all government programs and policies.

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<sup>6</sup> ACTCOSS (2016). *Community Transport - Our Shared Vision* <https://www.actcoss.org.au/publications/advocacy-publications/community-transport-our-shared-vision>

<sup>7</sup> CFE Research (2020). *The role of lived experience in creating systems change. Evaluation of Fulfilling Lives: Supporting people with multiple needs*. Community Fund.

## Improving Community Transport in the ACT so everyone is connected to our community

Community transport is funded from both the Federal and Australian Capital Territory (ACT) Governments. The Commonwealth Home Support Programme (CHSP) provides senior Australian with access to support services to live independently at home. Eligibility for this program is based on a person's support needs and must be:

- 65 years or older (50 years or older for Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander people), or
- 50 years or older (45 years or older for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people) and on a low income, homeless, or at risk of being homeless.<sup>8</sup>

Funding under this program provides Community transport or vouchers to attend appointments or activities. The waiting time for assessment to determine the level of support can be lengthy and difficult for some to navigate.

The ACT Government Community Assistance and Support Program (CASP) provides support for individuals and carers over a 12-week period who are finding daily living activities difficult due to a health issue. The National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) can provide access to funding for a participant for transport assistance if the participant cannot use public transport without substantial difficulty due to their disability. This funding does not cover transport assistance for carers to transport their family member with a disability for everyday commitments.

A challenge within the CASP program is the need for longer term support for people with chronic conditions, as it is getting more difficult to connect people to the NDIS and people still require support to live at home independently. The current 12-week period for the CASP program is often not long enough and occasionally some participants may require longer and more long-term support. It is not always possible or appropriate to refer to NDIS, CHSP, Aged Care Package or similar or there may be a much longer wait period while the referral is finalised.

### *Case study: Limitations of current eligibility criteria*

A client 40-year-old requires dialysis three times per week beginning at 7:45 am. With dialysis being a medical issue, the client is not NDIS eligible and being only 40 is not eligible for CHSP. The client has mobility issues and requires specific vehicles for transport. The client is from a low socioeconomic family and has special arrangements around contributions to the service.

Not only is the funding ad hoc, the types of services that are provided as Community Transport also vary. In addition to the services that are captured under the funded programs above in the ACT, the Community Regional Services operate the Community Bus Service that is funded by the Community Services Directorate. The information on the Community Services Directorate website states that "...is for people who are socially isolated because a lack of transport options." The Community Bus Service operates from Monday to Friday and generally within the regions of Canberra.

Data provided by a Regional Community Services Organisation indicated that the demand for the Community Transport Bus is high, with targets being met and, in some instances, going above. The organisation provides a minimum of 25 hours per week; however, these operating hours are

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<sup>8</sup> <https://www.myagedcare.gov.au/help-at-home/commonwealth-home-support-programme>

extended to meet community needs and on some weeks provide up to 38 hours of flexible service delivery a week.<sup>9</sup>

The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Bus provides opportunities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to connect with their communities and culture in the ACT and surrounding regions. This service is available to those who do not have access to regular bus.

The Flexible Bus Service is also a Community Transport Service in the ACT that is operated by the Government that provides free bus services to Seniors Card holders aged 70 years and above, Seniors Card holders with mobility issues, people living in a nursing home and/or retirement village and people with a disability or health problems. Services are provided between 9:30am and 1:30pm off a basic timetable which is flexible.

These Community Transport options provide vital services for members of our community however there are still a range of challenges in people being able to access them. This includes the operating hours, members in the community not being aware of potential services and not being eligible to access a particular form of Community Transport.

The Regional Community Service Organisations are proposing a range of actions to greater support Canberrans experiencing disadvantage. These are explored below.

#### **I. A pilot program focused on delivering family-oriented community transport options**

It is a common assumption that unmet community-based transport needs are those relating to providing access to medical treatment.<sup>10</sup> Organisations are reporting an increase in families requiring support for community transport. This support includes assistance in accessing health services, social groups, schools and early childhood education and care (ECEC).

Current eligibility criteria under existing programs provide limited community transport options that are suitable for families. Community transport vehicles are also limited in having the correct car seats required for transporting children and the space to transport both the parent/s or carer and the children.

Developing an innovative and flexible community transport option designed to support families would contribute to achieving numerous goals across the ACT Government. Creating family oriented community transport contributes to a range of Government strategies, such as the *First 1000 days Strategy*, *Future of Education Strategy*, *A Step Up for Our Kids Out of Home Care Strategy 2015-2020*, and *Set up for Success: An Early Childhood Strategy for the ACT*. Family oriented community transport also supports families currently accessing or trying to access Government funded programs such as Universal Access to ECEC for three-year-old children, services through the Child and Family Centres and Out of Home Care.

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<sup>9</sup> ACT Regional Community Service Organisation (2019). Performance report. Community Minibus Service. Provided by CRCS

<sup>10</sup> Zwart, J and Welsby, A. (2006). Community-based Transport Queensland Guidelines. State of Queensland and Local Government Association of Queensland



*Case study: Families experiencing disadvantage are not able to access community transport options*

Harry (name changed for confidentiality) is 3.6 years of age and currently enrolled in an Early Childhood Education and Care Service of a Regional Community Service Organisation.

Harry's parents have a family history of drug dependency and homelessness. In the first year of Harry's life they spent many months living in a car and couch surfing when possible, though this was not very often. Harry was deemed to be a child at risk and has previously been removed from his family and placed in temporary foster care. After his removal, his parents have sort intensive drug rehabilitation, engaged ongoing support services and were able to prove that they were able to provide for Harry, allowing Harry to be returned to their care.

Harry had been attending the ECEC while in the care of his foster carers. At first he was observed to be hesitant with strangers, to actively hide when someone he did not know entered the service and to display behaviours that were consistent with early life trauma.

Over the next six months Harry was able to grow trusting relationships with his educators and there was dramatic improvements in his health, wellbeing, learning and development. The ECEC Service was actively involved in supporting the foster care family and Harry's parents in the transition back to his parent's care. Harry continued to learn and develop, thriving at the service.

Harry's parents at the end of 2020, were required to seek housing in Queanbeyan, due to the high cost of living in Canberra. They attempted to transition Harry to an ECEC service closer to home, however Harry's learning and development began to regress and the family reported that they would attend the service to pick Harry up and the educators reported that he was in a constant state of distress all day.

Harry's family decided to return Harry to the Regional Community Service Organisation ECEC service to see if this would make a difference. After a few days Harry was back to his usual self with a happy disposition and again thriving.

Harry's family now are required to wake him at 5.00am, walk to the local bus stop, catch a bus to the Tuggeranong interchange, wait at the interchange for up to 20 minutes, catch a second bus to the service to drop Harry off. This trip can take anywhere from 1.5 hours to 2 hours. Harry's mother is then required to get back on a bus for a further 20 minute ride to her place of work. The whole process is repeated again in the afternoon for the return trip home, arriving at home well after 7pm, adding an extra 3 to 4 hours onto Harry's long day.

Harry's family live a short 21 minute drive from the service.

A three-year pilot project should be considered to develop and implement family-oriented community transport options. The following outlines the proposed phases of the pilot project.

*Phase One – scoping and design* - A scoping and design phase would aim to determine the demand across each of the Community Services Organisations to allow for planning and shared resources across services. This initial scoping phase would include a review of the current Assessment Criteria to ensure that eligibility requirements do not exclude families, and in particular families seeking support in transporting children to early learning of school-based settings. This phase would also include consideration of the legal requirements involved and the development of clear guidelines and frameworks for services to ensure

risks are mitigated. This phase of the project will also contribute to the existing Community Transport Working Group. The lessons from a scoping study will support the aims and efforts of the Working Group.

*Phase Two – implementation* - The implementation phase of the pilot program would require additional resources that allows for the inclusion of vehicles that are suitable for transporting families and in particular young children requiring car seats. This stage would also require services to increase their assessment and support capacity for assisting families. The implementation phase would focus on providing flexible and tailored transport options to families experiencing disadvantage so they can get to and from services so they can be active members of their communities. Training would also be required for staff and volunteers involved in the pilot to ensure parents, carers and children are appropriately supported.

*Phase Three – review* - The final phase of the pilot project would include a review of the pilot project in conjunction with a research institution to understand the lessons, benefits and potential gaps within pilot.

A pilot program that is a partnership between the Community Services, Education, Health Directorates and the Regional Community Service Organisations would support families across Canberra experiencing disadvantage access vital services that allow parents, carers and children be connected to their community.

#### *Recommendation*

2. That the ACT Government invest \$1,500,750 in a three-year pilot program focused on delivering family-oriented community transport options.

## **II. Improved management systems that allows for flexibility and shared resources**

The current approach to operating community transport across the five Regional Community Service Organisation is that they are operating separately and using different booking systems. This does not allow for shared use of resources or flexibility. An example of this is when a community bus is getting a mechanical service, it is unable to be in operation for the duration of the service, therefore leaving a gap in a community transport option. This gap could be filled by another services community bus.

A central and coordinated management system would allow for the Community Service Organisations to share resources. Developing a streamlined system where all regional Community Service Organisations are using the same booking system would allow for organisations to plan and coordinate when vehicles will not be available. A central management system that is managed within the sector would also allow for the Community Service Organisations to share transport vehicles when there are changes in demand. For example, if one of the Community Service Organisation's social group is no longer meeting then there will be a reduced demand for the bus service allowing it to be available for another service provider to use or to assist with another service provider where demand is high.

Previous efforts to centralise community transport focused on the management system sitting within Government. Placing a centralised management system within the Community Services Organisation would create opportunity for services to be flexible and responsive as demand changes across regions. A centralised data system would also allow for data to be collected on the demand across regions, demographics of those using community transport and frequency. It would also allow

Community Service Organisations to track trends across seasons to allow for coordinated planning of services.

A centralised system could allow each Community Service Organisation to have a separate account that would permit each organisation to see what vehicles are available from other organisations. This would allow for organisations to plan scheduled maintenance on vehicles and share resources when demands change. This flexibility would allow for organisations to liaise with clients and offer alternative options when the usual vehicles are not available.

Improved systems also allow for the potential to increase the technical capacity of booking systems, with all-community transport vehicles having GPS tracking systems, that allow for text messages to be sent when vehicle is arriving. It could also allow for the trial of the use of mobile phone applications for community members to book community transport.

#### *Recommendation*

3. That the ACT Government fund the development of a centralised management system for the five Regional Community Service Organisation that supports flexibility and shared resources for community transport.

### III. Support ACTCOSS' call to undertake a needs assessment of transport disadvantage in the ACT

Everyone in our community should be able to get where they need to go, no matter their circumstances. However, we know that this is not the case. Financial stress is just one barrier for people in having their own private vehicle or accessing public transport. The recent *ACTCOSS 2020 ACT Cost of Living Report* found that housing, food, and transport account for around half of household expenditure. With 13.4% of household expenditure being attributed to transport.<sup>11</sup> This is particularly concerning given that approximately 30,000 people live below the poverty line in the ACT.<sup>12</sup>

Transport disadvantage has been defined as “a difficulty accessing transport as a result of cost, availability of services or poor physical accessibility.”<sup>13</sup> Research has also stated that transport disadvantage in Australia is not limited to access but also the difficulties associated with maintaining private transport.<sup>14</sup>

There is a lack of information on the current demand for Community Transport in the ACT. This makes it challenging for service providers to adequately plan, maintain volunteers and staff and support their clients. This gap in knowledge results in a lack of funding and resources which results in not being able to be flexible for the clients and not being able to open Community Transport options to a wider group of people.

The ACT Age-Friendly City Plan 2020-2024 (Plan) provides a road map for how the Government will address barriers faced by older Canberrans to live their best lives. Focus area four of the Plan of ‘A city for all ages’ includes an action item of “Undertaking a review of community transport services to better support community needs, including those of older Canberrans.”<sup>15</sup>

Community Regional Services have reported an increased demand in the need for ‘out of hours’ transport support, such as weekends and after hours. It has been noted that Regional Community Service Organisations try to assist where they can, however the higher wage cost involved in weekend transport can create budget challenges.

Understanding the demand and ability to meet the needs of people experiencing disadvantage is essential in ensuring Regional Community Services continue to support our community. The *ACTCOSS 2020 ACT Cost of Living Report* recommended “Carry out a comprehensive community needs assessment to ensure transport design, planning, integration, and implementation address the needs of those with transport disadvantage.”<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> ACTCOSS (2020). *ACT Cost of Living Report. Tracking changes in the cost of living for low-income households in the Australian Capital Territory*. ACT Council of Social Service. <https://www.actcoss.org.au/sites/default/files/public/publications/2020-report-ACT-Cost-of-Living-Sep2020.pdf>

<sup>12</sup> ACTCOSS (2020). *ACT Cost of Living Report. Tracking changes in the cost of living for low-income households in the Australian Capital Territory*. ACT Council of Social Service. <https://www.actcoss.org.au/sites/default/files/public/publications/2020-report-ACT-Cost-of-Living-Sep2020.pdf>

<sup>13</sup> Rosier, K. and McDonald, M. (2011). *The relationship between transport and disadvantage in Australia*. Australian Institute of Family Studies: Canberra

<sup>14</sup> Currie, G., Richardson, T., Smyth, P., Vella-Brodick, D., Hine, J., Lucas, K., Stanley, J., Morris, J., Kinnear, R., & Stanley, J. (2009). Investigating links between transport disadvantage, social exclusion and well-being in Melbourne – Preliminary results. *Transport Policy*, 16, 97–105.

<sup>15</sup> ACT Government (2020). *ACT Age-Friendly City Plan 2020-2024*

[https://www.communityservices.act.gov.au/\\_\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0011/1544870/Age-friendly-City-Plan-2020-2024-Trifold.pdf](https://www.communityservices.act.gov.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0011/1544870/Age-friendly-City-Plan-2020-2024-Trifold.pdf)

<sup>16</sup> ACTCOSS (2020). *ACT Cost of Living Report. Tracking changes in the cost of living for low-income households in the Australian Capital Territory*. ACT Council of Social Service. <https://www.actcoss.org.au/sites/default/files/public/publications/2020-report-ACT-Cost-of-Living-Sep2020.pdf>

Given the lack of data, a needs assessment is crucial in understanding the current needs of the community and identify those in our community that are not accessing Community Transport. The Regional Community Services support ACTCOSS in calling for Government funding and implementation of a needs assessment so future Community Transport options are informed by local data.

#### *Recommendations*

4. That the Government support ACTCOSS' recommendation for the development and implementation of a needs assessment of transport disadvantage in the ACT.
5. Findings from a needs assessment should inform new models of Community Transport in the ACT.