

FAMILIES ACT'S SUBMISSION TO 2023-24 ACT BUDGET CONSULTATION

Introduction

Families ACT is a territory peak, not-for-profit, organisation which advocates and works for vulnerable and marginalised children, young people and families in the ACT and surrounding region to improve their physical, social and emotional wellbeing. We take a broad and inclusive view of what constitutes a family and strive to improve the wellbeing of all families in the region.

We advocate to government on local and regional issues impacting vulnerable and disadvantaged children and families. As in previous years, this submission is underpinned by Families ACT's ongoing commitment to equity for all families, and the importance of prevention and early intervention. We support the united call from Canberra's community organisations to ensure that the ACT Government addresses the growing gap between those who enjoy Canberra's prosperity and liveability, and those who don't. This year's submission reflects our current advocacy focus areas of housing and homelessness, the Middle Years and child protection reform.

Our budget priorities

Funding commitment for the therapeutic support system underpinning the 'Raising the minimum age of criminal responsibility' legislative changes

Families ACT has long advocated raising the minimum age of criminal responsibility (MACR) to at least 14 years of age. We are a member of a working group consisting of legal, community and academic stakeholders led by *Change the Record* which is lobbying for this important reform.

Families ACT welcomed the ACT Government's announcement in October 2022 of its intention to raise the MACR in the ACT in a staged approach, firstly to 12 years upon commencement of the new legislation, then subsequently to 14 years.

However, we are insistent that this legislative change must be underpinned by major service reform which establishes a therapeutic support system equipped to work with children aged 7-13 with concerning and/or harmful behaviours. Such a support system does not yet exist in the ACT and if **the 'MACR' legislative changes are to be effective they will need to be accompanied by sufficient, sustainable funding to provide for both existing and newly created specialist and universal services.**

The new service model will need to be implemented during a transition period of up to 18 months, where any gaps and unmet needs can be identified and responded to. This transition period including its developmental evaluation by an external stakeholder/ organisation must be appropriately funded to ensure the success of these important reforms.

Funding for the secretariat and administration of the Child and Young People Mental Health Services network

The Office for Mental Health and Wellbeing in partnership with the Youth Coalition of the ACT and the Capital Health Network established a Child and Youth Mental Health Services Network (the Network) in 2022 to provide a structured ongoing formal mechanism for community and government to continue working together to address the complexity associated with children and youth mental health in the ACT.

The establishment of the Network including the development of an action plan were part of the recommendations of the [Understanding the 'Missing Middle': Children and young people with moderate to severe mental health concerns who experience difficulties accessing services](#) project report. The Network provides a structured, ongoing, formal mechanism for community, government and the private sector to continue working together to address the complexity associated with the 'missing middle', including to identify and progress key sector priorities, shared decision-making and improve communication, connection and collaboration.

Families ACT is a member of this Network as well as the recently established Service Development Working Group (the Working Group) offering advice and providing input into the development and implementation of new mental health projects and/or services for children and young people in the ACT.

While we welcome the establishment of the Network and Working Group, **we recommend that the Network receives dedicated longterm funding for its secretariat and administrative work. This funding is needed to allow appropriate resources and staff allocation ensuring the continuation of the Network beyond its initial establishment phase.**

Urgent funding of the WOKE Program, an ACT youth self-harm and suicide prevention program

The WOKE Program is an early intervention program for young people with characteristics of emerging borderline personality disorder (BPD). The Program was developed by the University of Canberra and implemented from mid-2019 to mid-2021 providing effective support to young people experiencing emotional dysregulation and suicidal ideation, who are at high risk of suicide, self-harm and future diagnosis of borderline personality disorder. It does this through delivering Dialectical Behaviour Therapy for Adolescents (DBT-A).

WOKE is an exemplar of a place-based program: it is evidence-based, evaluated, cost-efficient and cost-effective. It was developed to respond to a specific gap in the Canberra service system and to address unmet need within the target population. WOKE achieves positive outcomes for young people, along with their parents and families. Evaluation findings demonstrated significantly reduced suicidal ideation and distress, and improved coping strategies for young people. Furthermore, the WOKE program directly builds the capability of the mental health workforce in the ACT.¹

Families ACT was very concerned to learn that without continued funding, WOKE will end in June 2023. There are currently 73 young people and their families on the program waitlist, demonstrating the high demand for this Program and level of unmet need. If the program is discontinued, these young people and families will continue to be at risk of adverse outcomes. There are no other free, early intervention, youth focused DBT programs in the ACT.

Therefore, Families ACT supports the Youth Coalition of the ACT’s recommendation to fund the WOKE Program with a minimum of \$300,000 per year ensuring its continuation. For this, the program delivers two 14-week group programs to 30 young people and their family members (60 individuals). This includes a combination of group sessions and individual clinical support. Participants each receive up to 70 hours of clinical support.

Funding of interim youth and community space in Gungahlin

Families ACT supports the ACT Government’s commitment to establish a permanent Gungahlin Community and Youth Centre. However, as the development approval process, and the subsequent infrastructure build will take several years to complete, we strongly support the proposal to establish an interim youth and community space by our members Barnardos, Northside Community Service, Multicultural Hub and Relationships Australia as detailed in the Youth Coalition of the ACT’s budget submission.

Families ACT recommends that the ACT Government funds the infrastructure fit-out and contributes to the ongoing rental costs of these temporary premises, to provide continuity of support to young people in Gungahlin until the permanent centre is complete.

Investment in social housing and funding for housing and homelessness services

Families ACT has welcomed the ACT Government’s commitment under the Parliamentary and Governing Agreement (PAGA) to deliver an additional 400 public housing dwellings by 2025 and 600 additional affordable housing dwellings by 2025-26.² However, this commitment falls well short of the community’s need for social and affordable housing as evidenced by the number of people on the ACT Housing’s waitlist as well as the average wait time of more than five years for housing.

Housing affordability is a key factor in both causing and perpetuating homelessness. Stable, affordable accommodation is essential if people are to contribute to the community. There is currently a serious shortage of crisis and long-term affordable accommodation in the ACT.

Addressing housing is core to the fulfillment of all other wellbeing outcomes in the ACT Wellbeing Framework³, especially to the

¹ Prof D. Rickwood et al (2021): The WOKE program -final evaluation report. Available at <https://www.chnact.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/WOKE-Final-Evaluation-Report.pdf> (accessed 13 April 2023)

² ACT Government, *Parliamentary and Governing Agreement – 10th Legislative Assembly for the Australian Capital Territory* [PDF], ACT Government, 2020, accessed 2 May 2022.

³ ACT Government (2020): The ACT Wellbeing Framework. Available at: https://www.act.gov.au/data/assets/pdf_file/0004/1498198/ACT-wellbeing-framework.pdf (accessed 27 April 2023)

social determinants of health, and to justice. Housing has consistently presented the greatest cost of living pressure for low-income households in the ACT.

Therefore, Families ACT endorses ACTCOSS's recommendations on housing in their 2023-24 ACT Budget submission⁴. In particular, to:

- **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.**
- **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.**

Conclusion

In this submission, we highlight five priority areas which we believe should be considered for new or renewed funding allocation by the ACT Government to ensure all ACT citizens can afford a place to live and access health and community services including pathways to escape violence.

Families ACT will continue to work on realising its vision for *a Canberra where all families thrive!*

Should you wish to discuss our recommendations further or if you need further clarification, please don't hesitate to contact us on comms@familiesact.org.au.

⁴ ACTCOSS (2023): ACTCOSS ACT Budget Priorities 2023-24. Available at: <https://www.actcoss.org.au/publications/advocacy-publications/submission-actcoss-act-budget-priorities-2023-24>