



youth
coalition
of the ACT

Submission to the ACT Budget 2024-25

Improving outcomes for children,
young people and their families

The Youth Coalition of the ACT acknowledges the Traditional Owners and continuing Custodians of the lands on which we work, and pay our respects to the Elders, families and ancestors.

We acknowledge that the effect of forced removal of First Nations children and young people from their families as well as past racist policies and actions continues today. We acknowledge that First Nations peoples hold distinctive rights as the original people of modern-day Australia including the right to a distinct status and culture, self-determination and land. We celebrate First Nations cultures and the invaluable contribution they make to our community.

The Youth Coalition acknowledges the First Nations youth workers, young people and families who have come to Canberra from all across Australia and are making an ongoing contribution to the culture and community of our city. We acknowledge previous generations who have contributed to the history and culture of Canberra.

About the Youth Coalition of the ACT

The Youth Coalition of the ACT is the peak youth affairs body in the Australian Capital Territory. The Youth Coalition's vision is for an ACT community that values and provides opportunity, participation, justice and equity for all young people. The Youth Coalition undertakes policy development, sector development, research and evaluation, advocacy and representation activities to improve outcomes for young people and their families.

A key role of the Youth Coalition is the development and analysis of ACT social policy and program decisions that affect young people and youth services. The Youth Coalition facilitates the development of strong linkages and promotes collaboration between the community, government and private sectors to achieve better outcomes for young people in the ACT.

For more information, contact info@youthcoalition.net or visit www.youthcoalition.net.

Executive Summary

The Youth Coalition of the ACT is committed to working in partnership with community and government to collaboratively develop and strengthen service systems that will improve outcomes for young people and their families. The ACT community continues to be affected by and adapt to the impact of COVID-19, whilst also working towards significant legislative and service system change across a range of areas. A range of opportunities exist to improve outcomes for children, young people and families through the final budget of the Tenth Assembly for the ACT.

In our 2024-25 Budget Submission, we highlight several key areas of unmet need:

1. Child and Youth Mental Health:

- a. **Urgent and longer-term funding for 'WOKE' and 'Stepping Stones'** to prevent the closure of these programs that provide evidence-based models of therapeutic support to children, young people and families. WOKE supports young people at high risk of suicide and self-harm. Stepping Stones is the only trauma support service for children aged 0-12 not engaged with CYPS.
- b. **Improving the efficiency and effectiveness of the ACT child and youth mental health system:** Continued investment for projects that seek to address system complexities, including MindMap, the CAMHS Single Point of Access Pilot, and ACT Child and Youth Mental Health Sector Alliance.
- c. **Mental health service capacity to support raising the Minimum Age of Criminal Responsibility:** Scoping to assess the capacity and capability of government and non-government mental health programs to respond effectively to children and families engaged with MACR reforms.

2. Adequately resourcing child, youth and family sector reforms: Current reforms that intend to improve outcomes for children, young people and families must be adequately resourced to ensure that services are appropriately funded and the workforce appropriately supported. Shared capability building, professional development and strengthening of infrastructure and technology to improve data collection is needed across government and community partners.

3. Preventing and responding to racism in schools and services: Funding to support actions to progress anti-racism strategies within schools and the community, following recent research findings demonstrating that children and young people in Canberra often experience and witness racism.

4. Investing in social and affordable housing: Financial investment for the strategies and actions proposed by ACTCOSS to address the housing crisis in the ACT.

Each of these items is discussed in further detail below. For more information, contact Erin Barry on erin@youthcoalition.net.

Youth Coalition Submission to the ACT Budget 2024-25

Our Budget Submission pertains to four key areas:

- Child and youth mental health, including (1) urgent and longer-term funding for key programs; (2) improving the efficiency and effectiveness of the ACT child and youth mental health system, and (3) mental health service capacity to support raising the Minimum Age of Criminal Responsibility;
- Adequately resourcing child, youth and family sector reforms;
- Preventing and responding to racisms in schools and services;
- Investing in social and affordable housing.

Child and Youth Mental Health

Child and youth mental health continues to be of significant concern in the ACT, with the ongoing impacts of COVID-19, and reported high rates of self-harm among both children and young people. As demonstrated in the *ACT Vital Signs 2021 Scorecard*, rates of self-harm among young Canberrans are the highest in Australia. It is critical that the ACT community works together to support children and young people to stay safe and well.

1. **Urgent and longer-term funding required for WOKE and Stepping Stones to avoid service gaps**

The Youth Coalition welcomed the interim funding provided by the ACT Government in 2023 to support the continuation of valuable Commonwealth-funded programs at risk of discontinuation, including WOKE and Stepping Stones. These clinical programs provide specialised, evidence-based models of therapeutic support to children, young people and families, that are difficult to access elsewhere.

The future of these programs remains uncertain beyond June 2024 and require urgent and longer-term funding. We value the efforts of the ACT Government to respond to gaps arising from time-limited Commonwealth funds, in order to piece together a cohesive service system and support evidence-informed, place-based service responses that meet the needs of the Canberra community.

The value of the WOKE program

The University of Canberra WOKE program provides effective support to young people experiencing emotional dysregulation and suicidal ideation, who are at high risk of suicide and self-harm. Through delivering Dialectical Behaviour Therapy for Adolescents (DBT-A), WOKE targets vulnerability factors and precursors for depression, anxiety, and problems with alcohol and other drugs. As such, it works directly with complexity, and targets the 'missing middle'.

WOKE is an exemplar of a place-based program: it is evidence-based, evaluated, cost-efficient and cost-effective. 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, as well as improved parenting skills and family

functioning. Furthermore, the WOKE program directly builds the capability of the mental health workforce in the ACT through training intern clinical psychology Masters and PhD students to deliver the program, thereby contributing to the objective of the *ACT Mental Health Workforce Strategy*.

The WOKE Program operated on a shoestring budget as a pilot program and was pared back to accommodate reduced funding in 2023-24. WOKE is led by a highly dedicated team who have been able to support a further 28 family units in 2023-24 through the funding provided by the ACT Government. However, WOKE will be unable to continue operating with precarious, short-term funding that does not adequately cover the program costs. There are currently 70 young people and families on the waiting list to access the program, who will continue to be at risk of adverse outcomes if the program is discontinued.

As this program has evolved, WOKE has become an increasingly valued and valuable program for young people and families within the ACT youth mental health sector. It requires a longer-term, adequately resourced investment to support its sustainable continuation.

The value of Stepping Stones

Stepping Stones provides free, specialised, therapeutic support to children aged 0-12 who are impacted by trauma, and their families, delivered by Marymead CatholicCare Canberra & Goulburn. These children experience moderate-to-severe, and sometimes acute, trauma and distress. Seventy-seven percent of children have experienced or witnessed domestic/family violence or sexual abuse.

The program provides occupational therapy and stabilising strategies based on the Neurosequential Model, trauma-focused CBT, EMDR, and trauma-focused parenting support and group programs. As the only trauma service for children not engaged with CYPS, it provides a clinical pathway for children and families not engaged in the child protection system; while also providing support to children who are engaged with child protection but not able to access Melaleuca Place.

At July 2023, Stepping Stones was supporting 56 families, with a further 132 families on the waiting list. Due to the short-term nature of the funding provided and high level of existing demand, Stepping Stones has not been able to receive new referrals – demonstrating a potentially high level of further unmet need.

It is unlikely that the forthcoming Head to Health Kids (H2H Kids) program will provide this specialised model of therapeutic support to children. It is understood that H2H Kids is intended to provide an early intervention option for children with mild to moderate mental health concerns. While this may not exclude children impacted by trauma, it is expected that H2H Kids would be a referral pathway to Stepping Stones, as part of a service system providing a continuum of, or complementary, support. Furthermore, as the ACT raises the Minimum Age of Criminal Responsibility, programs like Stepping Stones provide valuable avenues of clinical support.

2. Improving the efficiency and effectiveness of the ACT child and youth mental health system

The ACT Government's ['Missing Middle' project](#) identified a range of complex service and system constraints that create barriers for children and young people to access the right mental health care when they need it. The ACT child and youth mental health system is highly fragmented, under significant pressure, and experiences challenges providing seamless and timely care to children and young people. Several projects seeking to respond to these system complexities require continued investment.

MindMap – ACT Youth Navigation Portal

System navigation and service transitions continues to be an ongoing challenge. Young people and families have reported difficulties finding, transitioning between and exiting from ACT mental health services. Other services have also identified challenges determining where best to refer children and young people. The 'MindMap' Online Youth Navigation Portal provides navigation support, resources and clinical 'active holding' support to young people who are on waiting lists for mental health services, including in-clinic and outreach support.

MindMap is currently funded until December 2024. While the program is relatively new, processes are being implemented to support young people to transition into, transition between, and exit from services. As the only ACT child and youth-specific mental health navigation tool, the loss of this program would further exacerbate system navigation challenges. A funding extension will allow MindMap to continue to enhance its value proposition as a local mechanism to improve system navigation and pathways through the system for children and young people.

CAMHS: Single Point of Access Pilot

For several years, young people, families and services have cited a range of difficulties accessing CAMHS, including long wait-times for assessment and therapeutic care, inflexible modes of delivery, and turnover in case workers. We note that CAMHS has been receptive to this feedback and draw attention to the promising early outcomes of the CAMHS Single Point of Access (SPA) team over the past six months.

Through Phase 1 of delivery, the SPA team has delivered a new approach to engagement, intake and assessment with young people and families, allowing CAMHS to trial more efficient, effective and flexible processes. We understand that this has alleviated some pressures formerly experienced by the community teams, who were previously also responsible for conducting intake and assessment. This has enabled community team clinicians, who at any one time support a large number of children and young people experiencing mental health distress, to focus on the provision of therapeutic support to children and young people.

The Youth Coalition supports the intended continuation of the SPA team through Phase 2, to further enable the delivery of parenting groups and single session interventions for children and young people. The changes delivered by the SPA team create efficiencies that are likely to impact positively on young people's and families' experience of CAMHS; and will support CAMHS to more effectively respond to community need.

ACT Child and Youth Mental Health Sector Alliance

In response to the findings of the ACT Government 'Missing Middle' project, in 2023 the Office for Mental Health and Wellbeing and Capital Health Network, in partnership with the Youth Coalition, established the ACT Child and Youth Mental Health Sector Alliance in 2023. The Alliance provides a structured, ongoing formal mechanism for community, government, private services and people with lived experience to identify and progress key sector priorities, improve communication, collaboration and connection, and shared decision-making. It is intended that the Alliance provides a mechanism to support the highly fragmented child and youth mental health system to work towards a more cohesive service system.

Initial establishment funding provided by the ACT Government has allowed the Alliance to develop key structures and processes, and to undertake early planning activities. The Alliance includes strategic forums, a community of practice, project working groups and a Youth Reference Group. A Working Group has been established to progress activities to (1) improve young people's and families' experiences of mental health services, and (2) improve service and system responses to children and young people with mental health concerns and complex or co-occurring concerns.

In its first year, there has been a high level of engagement in Alliance activities from a range of stakeholders. It demonstrates a new way of working across sectors and in partnership between government and non-government stakeholders to respond to complex issues. Continued funding to support (1) delivery of the Youth Reference Group, (2) secretariat functions of the Alliance, and (3) brokerage for projects to achieve shared sector goals will support the Alliance to continue to be a valued mechanism for supporting collaboration and change.

3. Mental health service capacity to support raising the 'Minimum Age of Criminal Responsibility'

A range of welcome service system reforms are underway to support raising the minimum age of criminal responsibility (MACR) to 12, with a further increase to 14 in 2025. We note that key child and youth mental health programs across both government and non-government sectors are likely to be needed as part of the supports wrapped around children and young people who are referred to the Therapeutic Support Panel, and their families. This mental health support will need to be flexible and adaptive to respond to the unique and potentially complex circumstances of children, young people and families. It will also need to appropriately complement other services that young people and families may be engaged with; and allow practitioners the necessary time and space to develop trust and therapeutic relationships.

As such, scoping may be needed to assess the capacity and capability of both government and non-government mental health programs to respond effectively to this cohort. This would help to determine what additional support or resourcing may be needed to enable mental health services and the workforce to respond appropriately to this cohort of children and families.

Adequately resourcing child, youth and family sector reforms

A range of significant reforms and system changes are occurring across the child, youth and family services system, including but not limited to *Next Steps for Our Kids 2022-2030*, raising the Minimum Age of Criminal Responsibility, commissioning of the Child, Youth and Family Services Program (CYFSP) and other sub-sectors; as well as recent and forthcoming changes to the *Children and Young People's Act 2008*.

These are welcome reforms, that are intended to improve outcomes for children, young people and families across a range of domains. These reforms and their associated actions must be adequately resourced; to ensure that services across the government and non-government sectors are appropriately funded, and the workforce is supported to respond effectively to the changing landscape.

Shared capability building, professional development, and strengthening of infrastructure and technology to improve data collection is needed across both government and community partners; to break down silos and improve consistency across the service system. This is in keeping with the intention of the *Next Steps Action Plan 2022-2026*, which emphasises the need for shared professional development and governance across the system. Furthermore, the need for improved systems to support data collection, monitoring and evaluation, has been identified by both government agencies and community organisations, including through commissioning processes.

Preventing and responding to racism in schools and services

In 2023, the report [‘It really stabs me: From resignation to resilience – children and young people’s experiences of racism in the ACT’](#) was published by the ACT Human Rights Commission. It reported on a project conducted by Curijo Pty Ltd, Multicultural Hub Canberra and the ACT Children and Young People Commissioner. This research consulted with 2,456 children and young people about their views on and experiences of racism in the ACT.

The research found that racism occurs ‘often and everywhere’, in particular, schools; with children and young people describing experiences of racism from peers and also teachers. Children and young people reported experiencing and witnessing racism in public spaces, including public transport, online, and through sport. Young people highlighted the inadequacy of adult responses when they reported incidences of racism, feeling ignored and dismissed, including within schools.

Following the publication of the report, a cross-sector working group has been established to progress anti-racism strategies within the community and is seeking funding to progress a pilot project. The pilot project will support a small number of schools and services to participate in workshops to co-design a customised pledge with young people and teachers/executives in the school; to enact principles and practices to prevent racism, and to develop appropriate responses to children and young people impacted by racism within their school. The pilot will develop a range of resources, and be evaluated to assess feasibility for expansion to other sites.

Investing in social and affordable housing

The Youth Coalition supports the strategies and actions proposed by ACTCOSS to address the housing crisis in the ACT, including investing in social and affordable housing. We support the actions proposed by ACTCOSS to (1) increase the supply of social and affordable housing, (2) fund an independent evaluation of the ACT Housing Strategy, (3) strengthen supports and protections for renters, and (4) invest in targeted tenancy support for people with mental health issues.

For more information

For more information about the items included in the Youth Coalition's submission to the ACT Budget 2024-25, contact Erin Barry on erin@youthcoalition.net.

If you work in or have an interest in youth affairs in the ACT, subscribe to the Youth Coalition eBulletin at www.youthcoalition.net.