

Australian Capital Territory Budget
2025-2026

Pre-Budget Submission



Uniting



Dear Treasurer,

Uniting NSW.ACT is a committed advocate for people facing social and economic disadvantage. We believe a society should be judged by how we create pathways to thriving futures for those experiencing disadvantage.

Our 2025-2026 ACT Pre-Budget Submission addresses the growing challenges faced by vulnerable children, young people, and families in the ACT.

Through services like early learning, family support, affordable housing, mental health services, and homelessness support, Uniting engages with thousands of individuals annually, promoting empowerment, independence, and long-term wellbeing. The ACT is facing rising pressures, including a housing crisis, and growing demand for services. We urge the ACT Government to invest in transformative policies that break cycles of disadvantage.

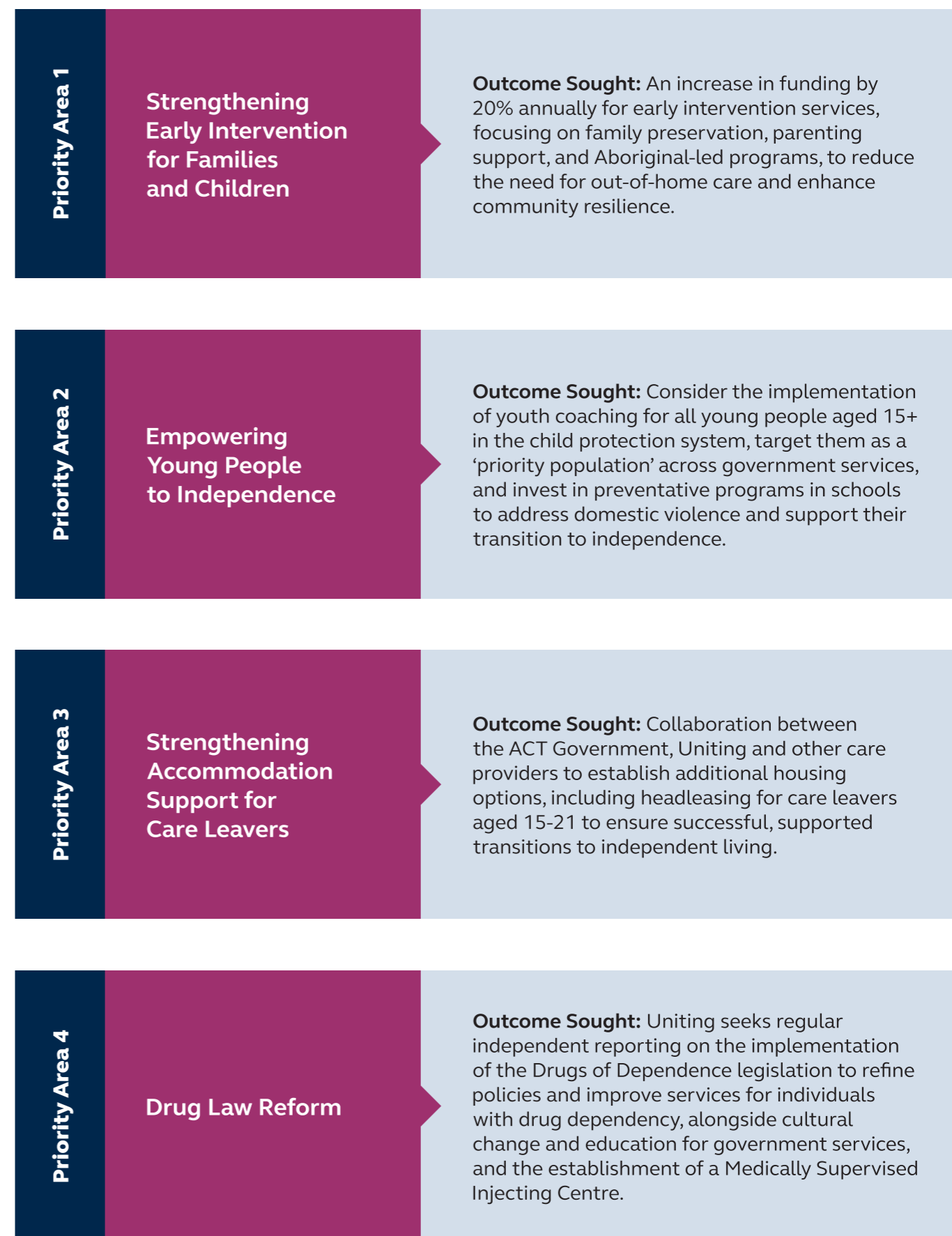
We advocate for increased investment in early intervention, especially in family preservation and parenting support programs. Culturally relevant programs led by Aboriginal communities are crucial for building trust and stronger support networks. For young people, especially those leaving care, we recommend introducing youth development coaches to guide them through transitions in housing, education, and employment.

Care leavers require ongoing support, including stable housing and coaching from ages 15 to 21. This comprehensive approach will ensure successful transitions to independent living. We also support the shift in drug policy under the *Drugs of Dependence (Personal Use) Amendment Act 2022*, advocating for independent monitoring, feedback from people with lived experiences, and cultural change within government services.

These priorities reflect Uniting's commitment to supporting vulnerable individuals and communities in the ACT. We look forward to sharing the outcomes of our innovative work, and to discussing further the options we have identified for changes to policy, regulation, and funding.

Tracey Burton
CEO
Uniting NSW.ACT

Priority areas for change





Early intervention to support children and families

Children thrive when they remain with their families, and this requires additional investment in early intervention services. These services should focus on supporting families through parenting advice, guidance, and family preservation programs.

Family finding services further enhance early intervention efforts by building strong, sustainable networks of support for families within communities.

Aboriginal-led early intervention

Aboriginal led early intervention is essential for ensuring culturally safe environments for First Nations communities.

Empowering Aboriginal leaders to design and lead these programs respects and integrates cultural values, building trust and engagement with families. This culturally grounded approach also strengthens community resilience and self-determination. Uniting calls for substantial investment from the ACT Government in the Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations ecosystem.

Practical barriers to early learning

The ACT has strong participation rates for children in early learning but there are still some children who miss out. Building upon existing support programs that address practical barriers to early learning, such as transport and language barriers, will increase participation among vulnerable communities. This includes outreach to locate and assist families facing difficulties accessing services and maintain participation.

Recommendation: Early intervention to support children and families

Uniting recommends a 20% annual funding increase for early intervention services, prioritising family preservation, parenting support, and advice services. This investment will keep children safely with their families and reduce entries into out-of-home-care. This additional investment should include ring-fenced funding for Aboriginal-led early intervention services.



Supporting young people to independence

Youth development coaches

Young people leaving out-of-home care face significant challenges, with poorer life outcomes. Approximately 35% experience homelessness within the first year after care, and around 50% face unemployment, incarceration, or homelessness later in life.

Uniting's experience (based on a five-year pilot) shows that providing a youth coach from age 15 can be significantly beneficial. Coaches offer tailored support, helping young people set achievable goals in housing, education, and employment, while also enhancing health, social connections, and overall well-being.

Additionally, youth-focused domestic violence preventative programs are crucial for engaging young people at key stages in their development, providing them with the resources and support they need.

Priority population

Young people within and exiting the out-of-home care system require significant support across a range of key social areas, including health care, and housing. To support this cohort, the ACT Government is encouraged to grant special priority status across all government systems of support, including ensuring that young people in schools are also included as a priority population for tailored programs and resources to address their unique needs.

Recommendations: Youth development coaches

The ACT Government should provide youth coaching to all young people aged 15 years and over in the child protection system.

Preventative programs

In addition, the ACT Government should prioritise investing in preventative programs targeted at young people in schools. Providing education about domestic violence intervention through schools can help prevent the cycle of domestic violence from continuing.

Priority population

The ACT Government should consider all dependents within the child protection system, and in aftercare, as a priority population, granting them access to government systems of support, including in health care and housing. Vulnerable young people in schools should also be included as a priority population for tailored programs.



Accommodation support for care leavers

The ACT Government, together with the Commonwealth Government, is nearing completion of a Youth Foyer at the Woden CIT campus to deliver supported accommodation for young people at risk of, or experiencing, homelessness.

Uniting operates Sydney's Youth Foyer, which exclusively focuses on young people with an experience of the out-of-home care system who are homeless, or at risk of homelessness. Those leaving out-of-home care have significantly higher rates of homelessness, mental health issues, and unemployment compared to their peers, highlighting the need for targeted support and stable housing solutions.

While the Woden Foyer might provide valuable assistance to some care leavers, Uniting believes that additional support is needed in the ACT to ensure young people with an out-of-homecare history can transition to independent, thriving lives. This support should encompass housing solutions, such as Youth Foyers or headleasing, coupled with comprehensive wraparound services.

Recommendation: Youth Foyers

The ACT Government should collaborate with Uniting and out-of-home care providers to establish enhanced supports for transitioning care leavers to independence, including dedicated housing in Youth Foyers, headleasing, and coaching for young people aged 15-21.



Building upon drug law reform

Regular independent reporting

Uniting supports the *Drugs of Dependence (Personal Use) Amendment Act 2022*, which aims to shift from punitive penalties for small-scale possession of illegal drugs to health-focused interventions. This approach directs individuals towards health services rather than the criminal justice system, prioritising harm reduction.

To enhance this reform, Uniting advocates for regular independent reporting on the Act's implementation beyond the initial review period, (October 2025). This ongoing assessment should include qualitative feedback from those with lived experience and evaluate broader social outcomes. Regular reporting will help refine policies and improve services for individuals with drug dependency.

Cultural change and education

Cultural change and education are also essential for shifting government services, particularly police, towards a more non-judgmental and harm-reduction-oriented approach. Educating officers and officials on the complexities of drug dependency will foster empathy, reduce stigma, and promote rehabilitation over punishment.

Recommendations:

1. Regular independent monitoring and reporting on the implementation of the Drugs of Dependence legislation, incorporating feedback from those with lived experience and evaluating broader social outcomes.
2. Investment in cultural change and education for all relevant government services, including police, to better understand the impact of drug dependency.

Additionally, it is recommended that the ACT should prioritise the establishment of safe injecting facilities where there is need in the ACT to provide safe, health-focused spaces for individuals with drug dependency, enhancing the Territory's harm-reduction strategy.

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