



ACT 2026-27 Budget Submission

March 2026

Role of the ACT Children and Young People Commissioner

The ACT Children and Young People Commissioner (CYPC) is one of eight independent statutory roles that make up the ACT Human Rights Commission. These roles promote the human rights and welfare of all people living in the ACT and have legislative responsibility for protecting some of Canberra's most vulnerable citizens.

The role of the CYPC is to:

- Promote the rights, safety, and wellbeing of children and young people
- Consult and talk with children and young people and promote their participation in decision-making
- Ensure stakeholders listen to and seriously consider the views of children and young people
- Promote implementation of the ACT Child Safe Standards, and
- Provide advice to government and community agencies about how to improve services for children and young people.

The CYPC is also the ACT Public Advocate.

Opening statement

In 2025, the CYPC continued extensive engagement with children and young people across the ACT, building on the Listening Tour in 2024 and other consultations from previous years. The central question guiding these conversations is: "How can we make the ACT better for children and young people?"

Over the past two years of conducting listening tours, over 530 children and young people have engaged with the CYPC and shared hundreds of comments and ideas about how the ACT can be better. These ideas are analysed with the support of young people working alongside the CYPC as part of the CYPC's Young Thinkers at Work program. The message remains clear, and constant: **children and young people are deeply concerned about their futures and feel undervalued, unheard, and overlooked in decision-making processes.**

Not enough has improved for children and young people since my [2025 budget submission](#) and, sadly, the issues I raise in this submission reflect many of the same issues that children and young people continue to raise with me. I encourage you to refer to my 2025 submission in addition to this one, as well as my Listening Tour Report, '[We Have Big Dreams.](#)'

Children and young people feel their needs are not prioritised. They report high rates of anxiety and depression, disengagement from school, and a growing sense of disempowerment. They consistently ask for greater participation in decisions that affect them, improved access to services, and safer, more inclusive communities.

This 2026–27 Budget Submission is directly informed by children and young people, supported by evidence, and includes unedited quotes written in their own words. It amplifies their perspectives and asks the ACT Government to consider the rights, safety, wellbeing, and lived experiences of children and young people when making decisions that will shape their lives now and into the future.

Recommendations

1. Adopt a child rights-based approach across all ACT legislation, policy, and service design.
2. Clearly articulate spending targeted at realising children and young people's rights, safety, and wellbeing.
3. Apply a Future Generations policy lens to strengthen long-term budget decision-making.
4. Implement Child Rights Impact Assessments across all government initiatives.
5. Fund a dedicated position in the CYPC's office to support policy and service design processes informed by greater engagement of children and young people in Assembly Committee Inquiries.
6. Increase investment in mental health supports, including school-based counsellors and trauma-informed staff training.
7. Ensure services are child-friendly, culturally safe, and responsive.
8. Increase access to community services within schools to support mental health and safety.
9. Support the presence of animals in schools to enhance wellbeing and attendance.
10. Expand funding for sex education programs to ensure they are inclusive and implemented at appropriate ages.
11. Legislate to introduce explicit provisions banning corporal punishment.
12. Provide ongoing funding to strengthen safety by improving adult capability, early intervention, and consistent implementation of existing frameworks across schools, services, and communities.
13. Fund capability-building across community services to prevent and respond to racism.
14. Explore an ACT Active and Creative Kids voucher program to support greater engagement in sport.
15. Increase access to sports facilities and equipment outside club structures.
16. Fund inclusive, safe public playgrounds and play spaces.

Child rights-based approach to government decision making

Children and young people make up approximately one-third of the ACT population, and they will experience the long-term consequences of today's decisions. Their rights must be protected in the present and decisions must be made to ensure children's rights are also protected into the future. This requires the ACT government to assess the impact of legislation, budgets, and services from a child rights perspective. When doing so, both the immediate and future impact of decisions must be considered.

Budgets

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) requires governments to allocate resources to support the realisation of children's rights. Article 4 obliges governments to use the maximum available resources to fulfil children's economic, social, and cultural rights.

The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (UN Committee) emphasises that child-rights-based budgeting:

- contributes to the realisation of rights
- strengthens long-term economic and social outcomes, and
- supports sustainable and inclusive development.

To do so requires the undertaking of Child Rights Impact Assessments (CRIAs) when developing legislation, policy, guidelines, programs, and services. These assessments would ensure children's rights are upheld by government spending and enable a transparent analysis of how children's best interests are being supported by proposed spending or programming.

“Every State should consider how it can ensure compliance with article 3 (1) [best interest of the child] and do so in a way which further promotes the visible integration of children in policy-making and sensitivity to their rights.”¹

The UN Committee calls for governments to use CRIAs at all levels of decision-making, so that government obligations are upheld in the implementation of policy and legislation. Furthermore, the UN Committee considers that this self-monitoring and evaluation of the impact of laws, policies, and budgets is an obligation of governments.

¹ [GENERAL COMMENT No. 5 \(2003\), General measures of implementation of the Convention on the Rights of the Child \(arts. 4, 42 and 44, para. 6\), 2003:11](#)

Children and young people’s perspectives

“I want adults to know that when I’m frustrated no one listens to me.” (2025)

“I hate that adults don’t listen to me.” (2025)

Children have the right to participate in decisions that affect them, including public policy and budget processes. In 2024, the Standing Committee on Health and Community Wellbeing, recommended the ACT Government consider funding a dedicated position in the CYPC office to support greater engagement of children and young people in Assembly Committee Inquiries.

If this recommendation were enacted, my office would have capacity to provide technical expertise to facilitate participation of children and young people in a range of policy and budget processes. It would also enable my office to support CRIAs of policies, budgets, and programming to ensure children’s best interests are met and their rights, safety, and wellbeing reflected in decision-making (this determination itself requires adherence to article 12).

I therefore reiterate the value of allocating resources to my office for the purposes of both engaging children and young people in legislative processes/inquiries and meeting the budget and planning requirements of the UNCRC.

Recommendations

1. Adopt a child-rights approach across all ACT legislation, policy, and service design.
2. Clearly articulate spending targeted at realising children and young people’s rights, safety, and wellbeing.
3. Apply a Future Generations policy lens to strengthen long-term budget decision-making.
4. Implement Child Rights Impact Assessments across all government initiatives.
5. Fund a dedicated position in the CYPC’s office to support policy and service design processes informed by greater engagement of children and young people in Assembly Committee Inquiries.

Health and community wellbeing

Children and young people continue to express concern about the cost and accessibility of health services:

“We need more services for youth, especially for those who can’t be with their family.” (2025)

“ADHD and autism diagnosis is really hard to get... waiting lists for over a year.” (2024)

“If the services were there 5 days a week... we would feel more comfortable using their time.” (2024)

“In the ACT can be stigmatisation around seeking professional advice, especially for mental health related conditions. Some individuals may worry that they will be subjected to discrimination if they get diagnosed or seek help, making them hesitant to access necessary healthcare services, which may risk worsening their health over time.” (2025)

Children and young people consistently report that the cost and accessibility of health services are major barriers. They describe long waiting lists for mental health and diagnostic services, particularly for ADHD and autism assessments, which can extend beyond a year. Many also highlight the limited availability of bulk-billing, noting that the cost of General Practitioner visits for referrals prevents them accessing timely support.

School-based mental health services, while valued, are often oversubscribed, leaving students reluctant to seek help because they feel others may need it more. Young people also express that support is often only offered at crisis point rather than through early intervention, and that stronger relationships with school-based counsellors would make it easier to seek help.

The ACT Government has made progress, but young people report that demand still far exceeds capacity.

Recommendations

6. Increase investment in mental health supports, including school-based counsellors and trauma-informed staff training.
7. Ensure services are child-friendly, culturally safe, and responsive.

Education and life-long learning

Young people regularly raise concerns about school safety, support, and engagement.

Support

They describe a need for more accessible mental health and wellbeing services, including learning support rooms for students who become overwhelmed or overstimulated at school. Many want easier access to community services such as psychologists, youth workers, and legal aid through school-based outreach.

Students also express a desire for greater choice in subjects and more practical life-skills education to support their transition into adulthood. They report that the shift from high school to college can feel isolating due to reduced contact with teachers and increased workload, leading to students reducing their engagement in extracurricular activities such as sport, which further isolates them.

“I would like dogs in school.” (2025)

Animals in schools are repeatedly mentioned as a valuable support for mental health and attendance. This connection is emphasised across our consultations and is linked to feelings of wellbeing, connection, and safety.

Safety

“A safe school looks like one that actively supports students who do not feel safe.”
(2024)

“Improved safety within schools. People bring knives + fake guns to school.” (2024)

A number of students also comment on increasing safety concerns in schools. Comments regarding weapons, school lockdowns, and threatening behaviour by peers highlight the struggle to maintain engagement while in environments that are not always conducive to learning. Students suggest that greater links to community services, such as legal advice and mental health support, could be part of the solution.

Sex Education

“Anything [in sex education] that wasn’t heteronormative was all very bland.”
(2025)

“Sex education should be implemented sooner; it can be done in age-appropriate ways. We know that education increases reporting.” (2025)

During the Listening Tour in 2025, sex education was raised as an issue children and young people feel is not adequately addressed. Concerns are linked to the lack of understanding for some students of what is and is not acceptable in relationships, leading to some young people being vulnerable to grooming or unhealthy relationships.

Students also feel there is a lack of inclusion of the range of sexual preferences and identities, with some pointing out much of the education provided is heteronormative and assumptive (that is, that having sex at some point is a given and not a choice).

Students continue to suggest that open and honest conversations about sex and sexuality should start earlier than high school. Many share concerns that young students are not provided with safe and supportive messaging until well after they are exposed to sexual content online.

Recommendations

8. Increase access to community services within schools to support mental health and safety.
9. Support the presence of animals in schools to enhance wellbeing and attendance.
10. Expand funding for sex education programs to ensure they are inclusive and implemented at appropriate ages.

Social inclusion and safety

Violence and bullying

Feedback from children and young people consistently highlights significant distress related to bullying, exposure to violence, and feelings of being unsafe in a range of settings. Their contributions indicate that the issue is not limited to the presence of bullying or abuse but, critically, relates to gaps in adult responses and system-level failures to intervene in ways that genuinely protect them.

One young person noted,

“There’s a little more bullying than what they think.” (2025)

This comment underscores a disconnect between adult perceptions and children’s lived experiences. Others described the inequity of being penalised when attempting to protect themselves:

“Different kids hit each other, and others want to fight back, but they’re not allowed, and end up getting in trouble for nothing!” (2025)

Such statements reflect the complexity of situations children and young people are navigating without adequate support. They suggest that existing disciplinary and behaviour management approaches do not always prioritise safety or recognise the realities children face.

The emotional and psychological consequences of these experiences are significant. As one young person stated,

“I want more people to know that bullying could make people want to kill themselves and that people can’t control how they look.” (2025)

This is a direct and serious articulation of harm, not a hypothetical concern. It demonstrates the urgent need for trauma-informed, preventative, and responsive approaches to bullying and violence.

Safety concerns extend beyond school environments. Children and young people have also spoken about violence within the home:

“Less hitting of kids from parents/family.” (2024)

and expressed awareness that it should be:

“Illegal to put your hand on [a] child violently without consent.” (2024)

These statements reflect an understanding of their rights as well as a request for adults to take greater responsibility for preventing harm across all settings. Children and young people are currently the only group in the ACT not fully protected by law from violence. The fact that many children comment on violence perpetrated by adults demonstrates the need to address this gap.

In the ACT, the common law defence of ‘lawful chastisement’ is available for parents and those acting in a parental capacity. Eliminating this will enable us to strengthen protection for children and young people and bring their protection into line with the protection afforded to adults.

Overall, the message from children and young people is clear and consistent: they want protection that is proactive, compassionate, and grounded in their lived experiences. They are asking adults and systems to move beyond assumptions that current policies are adequate, and instead invest in cultures, capabilities, and responses that genuinely keep them safe in their homes, schools and communities.

Racism

Young people also continue to report widespread experiences of racism:

“You can’t protect yourself from racist people... they’re everywhere.” (2023)

“We want adults to listen and do something about it.” (2023)

The CYPC’s consultations in 2022 made it apparent that racism occurs across schools, public transport, workplaces, sports, and public spaces.

Children and young people often feel unsupported when reporting incidents. It is well established that children and young people who experience racism are more likely to experience poor mental health and there is also growing evidence that racism contributes to disengagement from school.

Although the ACT has made efforts to address racism, and there is now a positive obligation on ACT government agencies to combat racism, children and young people consistently report more needs to be done. They express the need for explicit and open conversations about racism, and report that adults seem ill equipped to conduct them. Support for adults in key positions is required to ensure children and young people have the guidance to identify, prevent, and respond to racism in constructive ways.

Recommendations

11. Legislate to introduce explicit provisions banning corporal punishment.
12. Provide ongoing funding to strengthen safety by improving adult capability, early intervention and consistent implementation of existing frameworks across schools, services and communities.
13. Fund capability-building across community services to prevent and respond to racism.

Sports and recreation

Young people continue to identify barriers to play and recreation:

“Have sport fee lower.” (2024)

“More disability friendly equipment.” (2024)

“There’s nothing for my age group.” (2024)

Children and young people identify significant barriers to participating in play, sport, and recreation. Many describe the high cost of extracurricular activities, particularly sports, as a major obstacle to families opting out. Without free access to sports facilities or equipment, opportunities to participate outside club structures are limited.

Young people also report feeling unsafe in parks and public spaces due to poor lighting and experiences of racism or homophobia during sports activities. Transport challenges, especially in outer suburbs, make it difficult to reach parks and sporting grounds, and a lack of footpaths further restricts safe access.

They also note that disability-inclusive play spaces remain limited, with only a small number of parks offering accessible equipment. Teenagers, in particular, feel there are few age-appropriate spaces where they feel welcome and able to relax.

Recommendations

- 14.** Explore an ACT Active and Creative Kids voucher program to support greater engagement in sport.
- 15.** Increase access to sports facilities and equipment outside club structures.
- 16.** Fund inclusive, safe public playgrounds and play spaces.