



ACT 2025-26 Budget Submission

May 2025

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 together 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 2024, the Children and Young People Commissioner (CYPC) conducted a Listening Tour with children and young people in the ACT. The main question asked was 'How can we make the ACT better for children and young people?'. This consultation was used to inform the Commissioner's 2025-26 Strategy. It also informed this submission.

After receiving over 600 comments and ideas, three young people supported the office of the CYPC to analyse and organise the information into key themes. The overriding message is that children and young people are worried about their futures and feel undervalued and ignored by decision makers.

Through a number of similar consultations over the past five years, as well as my daily work, I repeatedly hear that children and young people feel their needs are not being considered. Children and young people are experiencing higher rates of depression and anxiety, increasing levels of disengagement from school, and a growing sense of disempowerment. Those I have spoken to are asking for more say in decisions that affect them, better access to services, and safer more inclusive communities.

The following budget submission aims to amplify their perspectives so that you can keep the children and young people of the ACT in mind as you make decisions that will have a lasting impact on them as individuals, and as a cohort. This budget is an opportunity for the ACT government to explicitly articulate how children and young people's rights have been considered and thereby strongly communicate that they are valued.

The information in this submission is directly informed by children and young people and supported by evidence referenced throughout. The quotes have not been edited, so are included here exactly as the children and young people wrote them.

Recommendations

1. The Committee establish appropriate mechanisms to enable children and young people to contribute to this and future Budget consultations in age-appropriate ways.
2. Clearly articulate spending that is specifically targeted towards realising children and young people's rights, safety, and wellbeing, so this can be accurately tracked over time.
3. Continue to advocate for more accurate population projections for the ACT to ensure funding for services can better align with actual demand.
4. Apply a Future Generations policy lens to enhance budgetary decision-making.
5. Maintain the focus on increasing mental health services for children and young people in the community and increase the number of professional mental health services provided in schools.
6. Increase incentives and support for GPs to offer bulk billing services, with particular focus on children and young people up to 18.
7. Make every effort to increase access to a range of community services at all schools in the ACT.
8. Investigate opportunities to increase the presence of animals in schools to support mental health and attendance supports.
9. Ensure all schools are appropriately funded for education essentials to reduce the burden of fundraising.
10. Provide appropriate funding to build the capability of community services (including schools, sports groups, and public transport) to prevent and respond to racism experienced or witnessed by children and young people.
11. Explore implementation of an Active and Creative Kids voucher, similar to that available in NSW, to reduce costs to families of children and young people engaging in sport, culture, and arts activities.
12. Increase access to sports facilities and equipment that is not reliant on being a member of sports clubs (such as through sport equipment libraries, for example).
13. Increase funding to ensure access to public playgrounds and play spaces is inclusive and facilities, such as bathrooms, are safe.

Children and young people’s perspectives

Any consultation with the ACT community should consider the perspectives of children and young people. It is children and young people who will experience the future impact of today’s spending. They are also the biggest cohort in the ACT, comprising one-third of the Territory’s population.

Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) affirms that children and young people have the right to participate in decisions that affect their lives. This not only includes decisions relating directly to their individual circumstances, but also policies, frameworks, and legislation that affect children and young people as a cohort and as citizens. The ACT Budget, therefore, must include children and young people’s perspectives in order to be in line with Article 12.

Hearing from children and young people themselves provides an important and different perspective to that of adults.

Recommendation

1. The Committee establish appropriate mechanisms to enable children and young people to contribute to this and future Budget consultations in age-appropriate ways.

Guidance on child rights-based budgets

The Convention on the Rights of the Child requires budgets at the national and state and territory level to support the implementation of children’s rights. Article 4 states

“States parties shall undertake all appropriate legislative, administrative and other measures for the implementation of the rights recognised in the Convention. With regard to economic, social and cultural rights, States parties shall undertake such measures to the maximum extent of their available resources...” ([Article 4, CRC](#)).

The Committee on the Rights of the Child outlines guidance on managing budgets to achieve the realisation of children’s rights and highlights, unequivocally, that children’s rights should be at the forefront of decision making:

“The Committee reiterates that prioritising children’s rights in budgets, at both national and subnational levels, as required by the Convention, contributes not only to realising those rights, but also to long-lasting positive impacts on future economic growth, sustainable and inclusive development, and social cohesion.” ([General Comment No.19](#))

It is clear that the ACT government has an obligation to both seek the views of children and young people, and to prioritise their rights when shaping the Territory’s budget.

We note the difficulties in population projections highlighted in the Budget Papers 2024. Inaccurate population predictions and the corresponding Federal contributions to the ACT budget is likely to have a significant impact on services for children and young people. We acknowledge this is a difficulty the Territory Government is trying to address.

Recommendations

2. Clearly articulate spending that is specifically targeted towards realising children and young people’s rights, safety, and wellbeing, so this can be accurately tracked over time.
3. Continue to advocate for more accurate population projections for the ACT to ensure funding for services can better align with actual demand.
4. Apply a Future Generations policy lens to enhance budgetary decision-making.

Health and community wellbeing

“The comparison to other people, leads you to think your issues are not big enough to seek help. You feel you should leave the services to people who need it more so then you can’t get support.”

“ADHD and autism diagnosis is really hard to get and it seems to affect young people. There are waiting lists for over a year.”

“If the services were there for 5 days a week, rather than 2 or 3 then we would feel more comfortable using their time.”

“My high school only introduced me to support when it got to crisis, never at early prevention point. If the counsellor had been out on the playground or talking in assembly, in classes you would build a relationship. If you are not familiar you would not be comfortable speaking to them.”

Access to health services is a key concern for children and young people we have spoken to. Concerns include the expense of medical appointments, lack of access to bulk billing and excessive waiting lists.

We acknowledge increased numbers of mental health practitioners in schools is a priority for this government as outlined in the Ministerial Statement – Chief Minister’s Priorities¹ and we would like to highlight that children and young people report this remains a significant gap, and urgent action is required. Despite the presence of mental health workers in some schools, students report that these services are so over-subscribed the students themselves opt out when they feel their needs are not as great as their peers. This leaves many students with significant mental health concerns not accessing any support.

Children and young people also report the lack of bulk billing in the ACT creates barriers to accessing diagnosis and support due to the additional cost of GP visits to gain referrals. We note the commitment to the pilot fund to increase bulk billing for all patients under 16 and recommend this be extended to include children and young people up to 18 to ensure this support is available throughout their schooling.

Recommendations

5. Maintain the focus on increasing mental health services for children and young people in the community and increase the number of professional mental health services provided in schools.
6. Increase incentives and support for GPs to offer bulk billing services, with particular focus on children and young people up to 18.

¹ Cabinet number 25/603, 29/1/2025

Education and life-long learning

“A safe school looks like one that actively supports students who do not feel safe at school or out of school due to issues at home or otherwise. For example, a safer or more secure way for students to report incidents that happen on and off school grounds.”

“Easier access to general support networks: Psychologists, youth workers, legal aid.”

“More learning support rooms for students who get overwhelmed/over stimulated with school life.”

“chose what subjects to learn the most of”

“Improved safety within schools”

“teach me life skills, intergration into adult life”

“I want there to be more social emotional dogs at school for people who need them.”

Children and young people often raise issues about school. As noted, mental health services are oversubscribed in the ACT, and the demand for school psychologists far exceeds capacity. Students also noted the need to increase the accessibility of other community services (such as legal aid) by locating these services within schools, for example through outreach programs.

Students want greater choice over subjects to enhance their engagement and note a desire for more practical lessons that support transition into independence and adulthood. More is required to support students when transitioning between high school and college, as many note a significant shock and a feeling of isolation results from lower contact with teachers.

Animals were also identified as crucial to mental health. According to a study profiled on Frontiers in Veterinary Science, therapy dogs are increasingly used in Australian schools to address stress and anxiety, facilitate learning, and promote wellbeing. This same study notes the growing evidence that therapy dogs can support engagement in learning and positive attitudes to the classroom, as well as decreasing task avoidance and aggression. Practical support and funding for schools to implement ‘Animals in School’ programs could support positive connection and increased attendance.

Students report significant inequality in facilities between schools and want more transparent allocation of funds. Public schools regularly hold fundraisers within their communities for essentials such as early readers, soap dispensers, IT equipment, and sports gear. They also comment on persistent maintenance issues, such as inadequate heating or cooling.

Recommendations

- 7.** Make every effort to increase access to a range of community services at all schools in the ACT.
- 8.** Investigate opportunities to increase the presence of animals in schools to support mental health and attendance supports.
- 9.** Ensure all schools are appropriately funded for education essentials to reduce the burden of fundraising on their communities.

Social inclusion and safety

“You can’t protect yourself from racist people. They’re everywhere. Teachers friends, partners, friends’ parents and much more.”

“...it’s everywhere and you can’t stop it.”

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

“its a very hard and big conversation to have and cant just be taken as a small thing”

In 2022, the CYPC partnered with Multicultural Hub and Curijo to consult with 2,456 children and young people about their experiences of, and perspectives on, racism in the ACT. The consultation found that racism is ubiquitous in the ACT. Children and young people reported experiencing it, or witnessing it, in almost all aspects of their daily lives, including at school, work, public transport, extracurricular activities, public spaces, and shops. Racism is being perpetrated by their peers, teachers and other adults and when children and young people report instances of racism, little to no appropriate action is taken.

This results in children and young people employing a range of coping mechanisms themselves, which include hiding their cultural differences, standing up to perpetrators only to find themselves getting into trouble for doing so, and avoiding situations in which racism occurs (leading to isolation).

The impact of racism is significant and multifaceted. It has been well documented in many studies, both in Australia and internationally. The CYPC report, [*It really stabs me: From resignation to resilience - Children and young people’s experiences of racism in the ACT*](#), describes the impact in children and young people’s own words, as well as linking to other relevant research.

Although the ACT has made efforts to address racism, and there is now a positive obligation on all ACT government organisations to combat racism, the experience of children and young people demonstrates that this is an issue that will require concerted and ongoing attention.

A cross-sector working group was formed to work on the report’s recommendations and ensure anti-racism strategies are enacted within the community. This group designed a pilot project and sought funding. The pilot project was designed to support a small number of schools and services to:

- co-design a pledge with young people and staff in the school or service
- establish principles and implement practices to prevent racism
- develop appropriate responses to children and young people impacted by racism.

The pilot was intended to lead development on a range of resources and evaluated with the aim of expansion to other sites. However, due to lack of funding and a government delivery partner, the organisations involved in developing the project are no longer able to resource the project.

Recommendation

- 10.** Provide appropriate funding to build the capability of community services (including schools, sports groups, and public transport) to prevent and respond to racism experienced or witnessed by children and young people.

Sports and recreation

“More lights in city @ night -> self defense”

“make buss and public transport free for kids”

“Have sport fee lower”

“More disability friendly equipment/playgrounds”

“More sports equipment for public use”

“There’s nothing for my age group”

“More age appropriate areas for all ages and abilities”

In 2023, the CYPC consulted with 755 children and young people in the ACT about their access to play and recreation. This consultation was grounded in Article 31 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, which outlines the right of the child to rest and leisure, to engage in play and recreational activities appropriate to the age of the child.

The report from this consultation, [More Big Kid Swings: Children and young people’s views on the right to play and recreation in the ACT](#), outlined the barriers to accessing play and recreation for children and young people. These were reinforced by the Listening Tour I conducted in late 2024, during which many children and young people noted the barriers to accessing sport and recreation.

The barriers included:

- **Cost of extracurricular clubs, such as sport** is significant and leads to families opting out of sports. A lack of free access to sports facilities and equipment means that, without joining a club, the ability to play sport is diminished.
- **Feeling unsafe** due to lack of lighting in parks and surrounding streets, and experiences of homophobia and racism during sports games.
- **Limited transport** to and from parks and sporting grounds, particularly in some of the outer suburbs, as well as a lack of footpaths to ride bikes or walk to and from parks and sports grounds.
- **Limited disability access** due to there not being enough play and recreation spaces that are accessible for people with disability (according to the [Park Finder](#) website, there are only ten parks that have disability access as well as accessible play equipment).
- **Not enough options for teens**, despite the availability of youth centres. There is inequality in the standard of youth centres between regions, and many teenagers do not feel welcome in public spaces and indicate that it is difficult to find age-appropriate spaces to play and relax.

Recommendations

11. Explore implementation of an Active and Creative Kids voucher, similar to NSW, to reduce costs to families of children and young people engaging in sport, culture, and arts activities.
12. Increase access to sports facilities and equipment that is not reliant on being a member of a sports clubs (such as through sport equipment libraries, for example).
13. Increase funding to ensure access to public playgrounds and play spaces is inclusive and facilities, such as bathrooms, are safe.