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2025-26 ACT Budget Consultation - Proposal for additional operational funding for ACT-based environmental charities

Dear Budget Committee

This submission is written on behalf of the three ACT-based environmental charities—SEE Change, Conservation Council ACT (CCACT) and the Canberra Environment Centre (CEC)—and seeks an increase in operational funding by around \$150,000-\$180,000 per organisation per year from 1 July 2025 and funding certainty to 30 June 2030.

Canberra’s environmental NGOs are essential in the ACT’s journey to net zero emissions by 2045 and to build a more sustainable Canberra. Community-based organisations have a unique trusted relationship with the community, are nimble and deliver value for money. They understand local contexts and have long lasting staying power.

At present Canberra’s environmental NGOs do not have a sustainable funding relationship with the ACT Government.

- Our existing long-term contract with the ACT Government expires on 30 June 2025.
- The three ACT-based environmental charities have insufficient resources to meet additional costs due to inflation, rising insurance, complexity of work, financial accountability, management of risk, competitiveness in the ACT labour market, and the increased need for an online presence.
- Lack of funding certainty makes it difficult to invest in our people and systems, plan for the future and undertake the critical work needed to reduce anthropogenic climate impacts.
- Funding only supports less than one Full Time Equivalent staff member per organisation.
- A basic set of workplace entitlements and secure accommodation cannot be provided to meet contemporary employee expectations, such as EAP and training.

Additional funding would allow us to better assist the ACT government to achieve its carbon emissions targets and other high priority environmental objectives, including the Canberra Region Local Food Strategy, Light Rail, ACT Circular Economy Strategy and Action Plan, and conservation of biodiversity and Canberra's waterways through:

- harnessing volunteer effort that is currently turned away due resource constraints;
- increased community events and environmental education;
- increased participation in government policy and bringing the voice of community to submissions, consultations and through the provision of expert advice; and
- increased online presence, impact and reach to assist the government to build trust and engagement with the ACT community for improved environmental outcomes.

Recommendation

- That you support increased funding through the 2025-26 Budget process so the reach and impact of environmental NGOs in Canberra can be doubled.

Further background and supporting material are attached to this letter. We would appreciate the opportunity to discuss this proposal with you at the earliest opportunity.

Yours sincerely



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SEE Change



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Executive Director
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Introduction

This proposal seeks to increase the operational funding of the three ACT-based environmental charities—SEE Change, Conservation Council ACT (CCACT) and the Canberra Environment Centre (CEC)—by around \$150,000-\$180,000 per organisation per year from 1 July 2024 and provide funding certainty to 30 June 2030.

Additional funding and increased certainty would allow us to better assist the ACT government to achieve its carbon emission targets and other high priority environmental objectives, such as the Local Food Strategy, Light Rail, Circular Economy Strategy, and conservation of biodiversity and Canberra's waterways.

International experts agree that we cannot slow down on action to reduce carbon emissions and other negative human impacts on the environment.

“Urgent and transformative action is crucial, going beyond mere plans and promises. It requires raising ambition, covering entire economies and moving towards climate-resilient development, while outlining a clear path to achieve net-zero emissions. Time is running out, and immediate measures are necessary to avoid catastrophic consequences and secure a sustainable future for generations to come (The Sustainable Development Goals Report 2023: Special Edition).”

The three ACT-based environmental charities provide complementary, but distinct services and programs that bring the voice of community and local environmental action to government policy: SEE Change utilises its 150 volunteers to deliver grassroots, place-based, behaviour change programs in local ACT communities. The Canberra Environment Centre delivers environmental education from its Centre at Gungaharra homestead, while as a peak environmental advocacy body, the Conservation Council represents the voices of more than 40 local community organisations.

Main points

Canberra's environmental NGOs are essential in the journey to net zero emissions by 2045 and to build a more sustainable Canberra.

- Meeting the ACT's ambitious climate change target of net zero emissions by 2045 requires change within the Canberra community; deep and sustained community engagement will be essential for fostering this change.
- The three ACT-based environmental community organisations have been funded by the ACT government for more than 10 years, providing an effective and efficient way for the Government to build community awareness and trust, deliver environmental education programs, and promote practical, local action and behaviour change.
- There is high demand for our activities, with the three organisations delivering more than 300 successful workshops and repair cafes in 2023-24. Collectively, the organisations reach more than 20,000 people each week through social media, and engage Canberrans through in-person activities every month. Information and education are also provided to more than 8,500 newsletter subscribers each fortnight, and through Youtube videos, podcasts, participation in consultations, submissions, campaigns, advocacy, and expert advice.

Canberra's environmental NGOs do not have a sustainable funding relationship with the ACT Government.

- Inflation has risen by 26% in the past decade, contributing to high insurance and operational costs. Coupled with increased complexity of work, financial accountability, management of risk, competitiveness in the ACT labour market, and an increased need for an online presence, this means the current level of operational funding is unsustainable.
- Lack of funding certainty makes it difficult to invest in our people and systems, plan for the future and retain staff. Resources are also drained having to constantly search for additional one-off funding grants to supplement our core funding.
- Each organisation currently receives around \$130,000 to \$170,000 per year (currently until 30 June 2025, see Attachment B) which supports less than 1 Full Time Equivalent staff member.
- Our ability to meet increasing demand, as the community seeks more ways they can take action on climate change and environmental sustainability, is decreasing over time.
- The three organisations turn away community volunteers every week due to insufficient resources for volunteer management, insurance and back-office support for volunteer projects.
- Lack of funding for rent, cleaning and utilities has resulted in insecure and low standards of employee accommodation.
- There is limited funding to support basic workplace conditions for staff that are expected in a contemporary workplace (e.g., EAP, cultural fitness, training).
- No budget for information technology reduces the efficiency of business practices, creates increased cyber security risk and restricts our ability to build and maintain the necessary online presence to advertise community sector and government programs.
- Funding is insufficient to support grant applications, management, and the evaluation and reporting requirements for potential additional project funds, meaning the organisation's ability to deliver on the ACT Government's and public's desired outcomes is reduced.
- With few administrative resources, the part-time Executive Directors must take on all aspects of running the organisation (e.g. payroll, invoicing, staff management, reporting, strategic planning and Board support). This means reduced capacity for participating in government meetings and consultations or bringing the voice of community to policy development through submissions.
- While we are all registered charities, our ability develop any realistic and sustainable funding strategy and to build relationships with philanthropic organisations and corporates to diversify our revenue base is hampered by insufficient resources.

Community-based organisations have a uniquely trusted relationship with the community, are nimble and deliver value for money.

- Community-based organisations play a pivotal role in delivering government outcomes due to the community trust we have built over many years, the relationships we can forge, our networks of volunteers and influence, and our ability to deliver place-based programs in a nimble, cost-effective and effective way.
- Community-based organisations understand local contexts and have long lasting staying power.

Additional operational funding and longer-term funding agreements will provide the capacity to:

- deliver more diverse, impactful and engaging advocacy, community education and behavioural change programs to reduce anthropogenic impacts on climate;
- better promote climate change and biodiversity information, resources and advice through more community events, workshops and an extended media reach;
- participate in, contributing the voice of the ACT community, to more government consultations;
- provide more comprehensive and regular expert advice when requested from government;
- promote and upskill, provide practical essential equipment, training and meeting space for local volunteer groups;
- harness additional volunteer effort for sustainable and cost-effective projects that positively impact environmental outcomes and provide engaging and safe opportunities for volunteers;
- secure appropriate tenancies to improve working conditions for staff, and provide spaces for hosting more workshops, events and meeting spaces for other community organisations;
- support improved financial management, governance and reporting processes to meet a more complex governance landscape;
- apply for and better manage additional grants and programs and to leverage additional funding to complement government grants through philanthropic and business donations or contributions;
- provide more secure employment and appropriately remunerate staff; and
- support improved digital marketing, website and social media presence leading to increased engagement and reach for advertising government policy and programs.

A modest increase in our respective budgets for each organisation is requested. We request the total budget for the three organisations combined be increased to \$967,050 per annum (based on 2025-26 figures for all three organisations), which represents an additional \$519,050 when compared to 2023-24 funding. We also seek an extension of our funding agreements to 2030 to provide more certainty to invest in our staff and programs.

Details and justification are provided at ATTACHMENT A. An overview of the current activities of the organisations are at ATTACHMENT B.

Recommendation

- That you support increased funding through the 2025-26 Budget process so the reach and impact of environmental NGOs in Canberra can be doubled.

Background

History of funding

In recognition of the potential positive impact that community organisations can play in achieving public outcomes, the ACT government has provided operational funding to the three ACT-based environmental charities for more than a decade. All three organisations have a large reach across the ACT and a strong history of delivering on government programs.

Operational funding has been supplemented over the years with various grants, but grant funding is highly dependent on an organisation's ability to apply, manage, report on, and acquit additional grant funds. These grants are traditionally small, tied to specific project outcomes and provide little longer-term employment for staff, resulting in high turnover, skills loss, low rates of pay and lack of (even the most) basic training and support enjoyed by other employees across the ACT workforce, including in other community-based sectors.

All three organisations also rely on community volunteers, memberships, some user-pays for events and workshops, and donations through our charitable status to deliver outcomes. These additional inputs have supported the overachievement of contract outcomes at low cost to the ACT Government. However, volunteers, user-pay events and donations also require significant operational resources to manage (administration, regulatory requirements, training, insurance and financials).

Significant inflationary impacts and the pandemic have negatively impacted on budgets, causing increases in rent, insurance and complexity of work; shortage of volunteers; competitiveness in the ACT labour market; and an increased need for an online presence. The need to deliver multimedia marketing (and maintain adequate IT governance and security) is also beyond the organisations' current resources.

All three organisations are facing the prospect of budget deficits and funding cliffs that compromise future operations.

Community education and behaviour change: the role of the community sector

Alongside regulatory reform, behaviour change is key to reducing human impacts on the environment. Behaviour change is influenced by the complex interaction of societal, environmental and personal characteristics, and both top-down and bottom-up approaches are necessary.

Research finds that behaviour change is best served by a mix of interventions, delivered over an extended period of time and modified in response to measured impact. Trust in the validity of information and the deliverer is essential to engagement, with trust tending to be higher for community organisations than government. Community-based organisations can promote education and awareness, and cost-effective 'learning through doing' programs with trusted deliverers and appropriately targeted, place-based, programs. They are more nimble and flexible than the government in identifying and responding to local needs. While credible information delivered by government is important for informing consumers, it is rarely sufficient as it is based on the assumptions that all people lack knowledge (of what they should be doing) and that improving knowledge changes attitude and creates a desire to change.

Community programs can address the concerns of local people about the threat of climate change, which may evoke feelings of uncertainty and hopelessness, leading to complacency and inaction. These include evidence-based strategies such as: optimistic messaging, tailored information designed to reach a specific person or group; commitment programs (pledge-making); leveraging social networks, and

harnessing local leaders and energy champions, volunteers who help inform others in their social network (virtual or physical), community, or business about a certain issue or idea. Community sector organisations can also bring the voice of community to government to effectively inform policy development and to assist in community acceptance and implementation.

Insufficient resources negatively impact the ability of environmental organisations to deliver evidence-based programs and support the factors necessary to build trust in community organisations: transparency, integrity, reputation, leadership and strong outcomes.

Harnessing volunteer resources for positive environmental impact

Over the first two decades of the 21st Century there has been a significant decline in volunteering in Australia. The desire of government to increase the number and effectiveness of volunteer effort is explicitly recognised in recent policy including the National Strategy for Volunteering (2023-2033).

In contrast to national trends, all three environmental organisations have observed increasing numbers of people seeking volunteering opportunities due to heightened public awareness of climate change impacts in the community. However, in order to support sustainable and effective volunteering opportunities that harness 'in-kind' resources and contribute to outcomes for government, sound volunteer management processes must be in place. Insufficient resources impact on our ability to manage risk, safety, training, and project planning and management meaning that each week volunteers are turned away from our organisations – which represents a huge lost opportunity.

Advocacy

Canberra based environment organisations play an important role in advocating for protecting nature and climate action. Community environmental organisations can create both big-system and small-local impact and enroll more community action and capability by helping the government share power and enable the community and groups to take more collaborative action. For example, environmental organisations contributed to government strategies to reduce emissions on the pathway to net zero emissions by 2045, active travel, Preventative Health Plan, Canberra Switched On, Caring for Dhawura Ngunnawal, ACT Wellbeing Framework, Circular Economy and Local Food Strategy, and to restore and conserve natural places in the ACT region.

Climate change and nature destruction are the biggest challenges facing our region. CCACT, for example, runs a focused set of programs to improve community-led action, reduce emissions from gas and transport and to protect ecosystems in our region from development and deforestation.

As a representative organisation, CCACT acts as an umbrella for member groups and believe in empowering the local environmental community, to strengthen and grow the collective movement. This can be achieved by working together, collaborating across backgrounds, beliefs and sectors, empowering our community and providing a hub for action and resources. Community groups undertaking advocacy create systemic change through participating in policy development, publicly demonstrating community views and demanding investment and strategies for climate action.

Advocacy creates the social license for more ambitious policy through contributing to consultations and government strategies, providing research, innovative ideas and community views. Advocacy seeks to ensure that all people in our society can have a voice on issues important to them.

Community needs and action

The ACT community's need for information and skills for how they can take personal action to respond to climate change is indisputable. SEE Change, for example, hosted more than 185 local events in 2023-24, conservatively engaging more than 12,500 people. These events empowered Canberrans to repair their goods rather than send them to landfill, reduce consumption and waste, make pledges to reduce their environmental footprint, regenerate soils and parks, make their homes more sustainable and reduce their carbon emissions, including through active travel. The Canberra Environment Centre delivered over 170 events during 2022-23, including hosting sustainability advice, environment-focused education workshops and 99 free-to attend bike repair workshops. These are essential activities if the ACT is to meet Climate Change targets and outcomes.

Proposed annual operational funding for each organisation from 1 July 2024

Item	Cost, year 1 (2024-25)**	Reason
Executive Director	\$90,700	Part time ED currently funded under existing contract
Business Development Manager (part time, incl superannuation, long service and other leave and workplace entitlements)*	\$57,600	Improve administration and governance, enable better management of volunteers and grants. Enable the Executive Director to focus on delivering outcomes in community (submissions, expert advice, consultations) and to focus more strategically to increase the organisations' impact in line with Government policy.
Increased hours for existing part-time staff (incl superannuation, long service and other leave and workplace entitlements)*	\$67,100	Increasing the hours of the current project officer from 2 to 4 days would allow for improved event management, more workshops, improved community engagement and recruitment and retention of volunteers. This would include project management support for community-led volunteer projects to maximise efficiency and impact.
Communications officer (part time, incl superannuation, long service and other leave and workplace entitlements)*	\$43,700	The global move to online media was not anticipated when this contract was conceptualised. A communications officer would increase environmental impact through increased online engagement and reach, advertising of events, seminars and consultations.
IT equipment and support	\$4,200	Increased IT equipment for new staff, and to enable minimum required upgrades to existing equipment and systems to improve services and efficiency.
Office (rent, utilities, parking, security, subscriptions and cleaning/waste management)	\$20,000	Current funding does not provide for rent, cleaning and/or utilities to support secure and adequate tenancies, creating inefficiency and disruption. A modern office must pay for a basic set of subscriptions to allow for efficient operations and administration (Financial management software, MailChimp, antivirus, eCommerce and website hosting) of government programs. Providing funding would allow for an appropriate, clean and secure level of accommodation, and efficient administration to support staff, volunteers, local community groups, and to host workshops, consultations and events.
Staff Training	\$2,400	\$600 per staff member. Current funding does not enable the organisations to provide any formal training of staff. Funding would enable the organisations to meet the minimum for modern workplace standards, and allow for better attraction and retention of staff and enable improved services.

Employee Assistance Program	\$1,650	Current funding does not enable the organisations to fund an EAP, consistent with contemporary workplace standards.
Volunteer support	\$5,000	The organisations currently turn away a number of volunteers each week leading to lost opportunities. Funding is required to support volunteers to deliver better outcomes. Funding would provide for improved systems, appropriate levels of insurance, training and reimbursement of legitimate expenses (currently out of pocket for most volunteers).
Legal and financial management (audit and bookkeeping)	\$11,500	The regulatory, governance and workplace relations environment for the not-for-profit sector has become more complex. The organisations largely rely on pro-bono legal work or do not seek legal advice where they should. Increased support for legal funding would improve governance, administration and regulatory compliance. In order to meet the financial accountability standards of government, a bookkeeper and auditor must be employed, and these services have increased along with inflation and complexity of regulation. Funding would provide sufficient resources for ongoing financial management, including bank fees and audit, which would minimise risk to both government and the organisations.
Insurance	\$10,000	The costs of insurance have increased exponentially and will most likely continue to rise into the future. Increases in the complexity of work, number of volunteers and reach of the organisations have also increased costs beyond our capacity. Adequate funding would allow the organisations to fill gaps in current coverage and improve risk management.
Events, social media and publicity	\$8,500	Venue costs for festivals, workshops and events have increased exponentially, along with the costs of producing brochures, banners and other essential marketing material. Extra funding would support more events to increase impact and delivery of government outcomes, and increase the profile and therefore community trust of the organisations.
Total requested per annum per organization	\$322,350.00	

*Listed in the table are the current SCHADS Award levels for staff members. However, it is important to stress that these pay point levels are inadequate for the diversity of tasks, independence and level of responsibility required. The Award levels should be raised to appropriately reimburse staff.

**Indexation to CPI would be required in contract out-years.

Key Organisational Features

Feature	Canberra Environment Centre	Conservation Council ACT	SEE Change
Type of entity	Incorporated Association	Incorporated Association	Incorporated Association
Charity (ACNC)	Yes	Yes	Yes
Volunteer Board	4	10	8
CEO	Executive Director (Part time)	Executive Director (Part time)	Executive Director (Part time)
ACT Govt operational funding 2022&23	\$121k and \$144k Expires 30 June 2025	\$160k and \$173k Expires 30 June 2025	\$125k and \$131k Expires 30 June 2025
Staff (FTE) - operational grant - all revenue sources	0.9 2.0	0.9 2.7	0.9 1.8
Location / Tenure	Gungaharra Homestead, Harrison, ACT, 2914. Lease until June 2025	Unit 14/26 Barry Drive, Ground Floor, Lena Karmel Lodge, Canberra ACT 2601 Lease under negotiation	Room 4, Downer Community Centre, Downer, ACT, 2602 Month to month rental
Financial members	50 individuals and organisations	40 organisations	650+ individuals and organisations
Volunteers	30	20 through events and the office. (we upskill volunteer groups)	150 through 16 volunteer-led community groups
Followers: - Facebook - Instagram - YouTube - Newsletter	9,300 1620 8450 5148	3,100	10,000 through various FB pages 1,330 3,600

<p>Focus</p>	<p>Environmental education.</p> <p>Centre-based.</p> <p>Workshops on community gardens, composting, worm farms etc.</p> <p>Recyclery – bicycle maintenance, repairs and building new bikes from old.</p> <p>Resources on:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Composting • Local Food • Waste and circular economy • Active travel • Energy • Biodiversity <p>Podcast series, more than 400 downloads..</p>	<p>Environmental advocacy and campaigns.</p> <p>Since 1981 we have been at the centre of the region’s most important wins for wildlife, bushland and communities. Campaigns include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Climate Action • Nature and Waterways • Sustainable Transport • Resources and Waste <p>Mission: to protect nature and create a safe climate future in the ACT and region.</p> <p>We run campaigns, promote and upskill local groups, undertake research, advocate passionately, and engage and inform our community, and serve as a galvanising hub that promotes connection and collaboration between our member groups and works to amplify the voices of our local community. We provide resources, expertise and a physical meeting space/workspace for member groups.</p>	<p>Volunteer-led practical action.</p> <p>Programs delivered in local communities across the ACT.</p> <p>Supporting all Canberrans to take actions that change behaviour to be a fair and sustainable city through delivery of sustainability information, activities and programs through its 13 volunteer-led groups.</p> <p>Areas of focus:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Reducing carbon emissions including through active travel 2. Energy efficiency 3. Climate change adaptation 4. Circular economy 5. Conservation and Biodiversity
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