



youth
coalition
of the ACT

Submission to the ACT Budget 2026-27

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.

This submission has been prepared by Thomas Stevens, Hannah Watts and Amy Betts. February 2026.

Summary of Recommendations

The Youth Coalition recognises the financial constraints of the forthcoming ACT Budget. Our Budget Submission builds upon existing initiatives and election commitments, identifying areas for cost-effective and targeted resourcing across both community and government.

For ease of reference, budget initiatives are listed by the relevant Directorate and Office

Health & Community Services Directorate – Office for Youth Engagement

1. Review the existing ACT Government youth engagement mechanisms.
2. Appropriate funding to co-design a Youth Strategy with both young people and youth organisations, which supports a whole-of-government and community approach to supporting youth wellbeing.

Health & Community Services Directorate – Housing ACT

3. Conduct a systematic and collaborative needs and assets assessment of the ACT youth housing and homelessness system, to understand system opportunities and constraints.
4. Ensure all young people able to receive crisis accommodation and adequate wrap around support through existing youth homelessness and domestic and family violence services.

Health & Community Services Directorate – Domestic, Family and Sexual Violence Office

5. Allocate ongoing funding for the 'Talk to Them' workforce training program beyond June 2026, ensuring sustained frontline capability across youth, education, health and community sectors.
6. Fund specialist domestic and family violence services for young people aged 12 to 25, including targeted group programs and individual support that addresses the unique needs and circumstances of this age cohort.
7. Restore funding for long term case management for people with complex and high risk family violence matters, ensuring young people experiencing domestic and family violence can access sustained support beyond crisis intervention.
8. Ensure domestic and family violence service design includes youth specific pathways, trauma informed approaches for adolescents and young adults, and integration with education, housing and mental health supports relevant to young people's lives.

Health & Community Services Directorate – Office for Mental Health & Wellbeing

9. Deliver ACT Labor election commitments to reduce CAMHS wait-times; including by establishing a CAMHS satellite clinic in Gungahlin, and increasing the capacity of the North Community Team.
10. Fund Canberra Health Services to implement a supported transport model, similar to that used for Muliyan, to enable young people to access The Cottage when it relocates to Tuggeranong in 2027, with planning commencing immediately.

Education Directorate

11. Publish the findings of the Flexible Education Program review and commit to funded implementation of its recommendations.

12. Provide immediate temporary accommodation for the Muliyan program to restore on-site capacity to 30 students, while the Flexible Education Program review is finalised and recommendations implemented.

Health & Community Services Directorate - Commissioning Community Services

13. Reform the Community Sector Indexation formula to reflect actual employer cost obligations, incorporating mandatory superannuation increases, long service leave levy changes and insurance costs, with retrospective adjustments to the baseline to recognise unfunded increases since 2021. The Youth Coalition endorses the lead analysis and proposed formula provided by ACTCOSS in its 2026-27 budget submission as the basis for this reform.
14. Commit to a sector-wide funding uplift commencing 2027-28 to address the cumulative impact of historic underinvestment driven by population growth, increasing service complexity and the structural inadequacy of current indexation arrangements, with distribution methodology developed in partnership with the sector.
15. Embed indexation reform within the commissioning policy framework so that multi-year funding agreements entered into over the next decade are based on a formula that reflects real cost growth from the outset.

Chief Minister, Treasury and Economic Development Directorate / Justice and Community Safety Directorate

16. Deliver on the 2024 election commitment to expand the Harm Mitigation Fund, including broadening eligibility to ensure a wider range of research and expert advocacy groups can access funding for evidence based gambling harm prevention activities.
17. Develop a new Strategy for Gambling Harm Prevention in the ACT in genuine partnership with experts, community organisations, and people with lived experience.
18. Allocate dedicated funding for the implementation of the new Gambling Harm Prevention Strategy that sits outside the Harm Mitigation Fund. The strategy should be co-designed with experts, community organisations, and people with lived experience. It should be pragmatic, evidence based and include funded implementation of actionable harm minimisation measures. Funding should be commensurate with the scale of gambling harm and the investment required to effectively deliver the strategy's recommendations.

Each of these items is discussed in further detail below. For more information, contact Hannah Watts at ceo@youthcoalition.net

Youth Coalition Submission to the ACT Budget 2026-27

The Youth Coalition of the ACT works in partnership with community and government to identify, develop and strengthen whole service systems, to improve outcomes for young people and their families.

The Youth Coalition recognises that the forthcoming ACT Budget is projected to be constrained. Significant existing infrastructure commitments, additional investment in the ACT health system, public debt, and limited revenue growth affect budget decisions. However, fiscal constraints cannot become a rationale for limiting investment in essential community services.

At a time of growing complexity and demand, sustained and adequate funding for both community organisations and government-run programs is critical. Investment in services for our community enables people to access available supports when they are needed, and reduces long-term pressure on crisis systems, including health, housing and justice. Strategic early investment is not an optional add-on - it is sound economic and social policy.

This submission primarily builds on existing initiatives and election commitments and identifies targeted, cost-effective opportunities for investment across both community and government.

For ease of reference, initiatives are listed under the relevant Directorate.

Health and Community Services Directorate: Co-Design a meaningful Youth Strategy

In 2024 we welcomed the [ACT Labor commitment](#) to co-design a Youth Strategy with young people (p. 111). A Youth Strategy provides a valuable opportunity to consider how the ACT can recognise and respond to the contemporary circumstances and intersectionality of young people's lives, including through whole-of-government and community approaches. A well developed youth strategy will enable the ACT Government to make policy, program, legislative and funding decisions that have been informed by young people's experiences, perspectives, and ideas. A 'wellbeing' perspective provides a unifying lens through which to consider this. A Youth Strategy may also consider how data collected through the ACT Wellbeing Framework could better serve the interests of young people.

Development of a Youth Strategy needs to be appropriately resourced and co-designed with both young people and key youth organisations. As part of this process, it would be valuable to review the purpose and functions of existing ACT Government youth engagement mechanisms, including the ACT Youth Advisory Council and ACT Youth Assembly. Processes and mechanisms should be genuinely youth-designed and youth-led, and enable a wide range of young people to participate in democratic opportunities.

We note that the [ACT Government's response](#) to the *Inquiry into the Electoral Amendment Bill 2021* welcomed "further opportunities to consult young people on the issues that are important to them, ensuring consultation occurs in a way that captures young people's attention, removes barriers to engagement and allows their voices to be heard". The response also expressed an openness to exploring broader opportunities to engage young people in democratic and participatory processes

to help shape our shared future, and to enhance the effectiveness of the Youth Advisory Council as a representative voice (p. 8). We believe the development of a co-designed youth strategy would progress these opportunities and allow more young people to engage in decision making that directly impacts their experience of growing up in the ACT.

Recommendations for ACT Health & Community Services Directorate Investment (Youth Engagement):

1. Review the existing ACT Government youth engagement mechanisms.
2. Appropriate funding to co-design a Youth Strategy with both young people and youth organisations, which supports a whole-of-government and community approach to supporting youth wellbeing.

Health and Community Services Directorate: Assess the ACT Youth Housing and Homelessness System

Needs and Assets Mapping of the Youth Homelessness System

During 2023–24, significant changes occurred within the ACT youth housing and homelessness sector due to sub sector commissioning. New programs were established and other programs and services ceased. Programs that ceased included those providing outreach and emergency accommodation support to young people experiencing homelessness.

The composition of the youth housing and homelessness system has shifted, and the impact of these changes is currently unknown. Anecdotally, youth services report that new gaps have emerged, and there has been a sharp increase in waiting lists of remaining programs providing street outreach to young people experiencing homelessness. There is currently no overarching ACT strategy pertaining to youth housing and homelessness in the ACT.

System mapping was not undertaken as part of the youth housing and homelessness sub sector commissioning process, which has consequently led to a knowledge gap regarding the current state of the system. To work towards developing a youth housing and homelessness system that is efficient and effective in preventing and reducing the adverse outcomes associated with youth homelessness, it is now necessary to assess the state of the system through identifying current needs and assets.

Investment in crisis accommodation and support for young people

There is also an ongoing gap in crisis accommodation supports for young people, including those who are not engaged with child protection services, and young people escaping domestic and family violence. These cohorts often need immediate accommodation support to keep them safe, as well as ongoing case management support. Despite this need, the youth homelessness commissioning process led to a 25% reduction in crisis beds for those aged 16–25. We currently have 18 crisis beds available in the ACT. In the period from January – June 2025, 220 young people reached out to Onelink and were assessed as requiring accommodation, but only 62 were able to be connected to

homelessness accommodation support. This means that 158 young people in one of the most vulnerable situations were turned away when they reached out for support.

This data aligns with findings from Domestic Violence Crisis Service (DVCS), which notes that young people experiencing domestic and family violence often struggle to engage with mainstream services, and that most existing services have eligibility criteria that exclude young people, such as requirements that the violence must be from an intimate partner, that they must be leaving a relationship, or that there is not a risk of violence to other clients if they enter group housing. DVCS has emphasised that age-appropriate housing and emergency accommodation has been highlighted by young people as essential to an appropriate response to their needs. As well as accommodation, the services supporting these young people need adequate funding to provide wrap around psychosocial support to ensure clients have the best chance at moving out of the homelessness system.

Address the delayed opening of the CIT Woden Youth Foyer

We are concerned the additional 20 beds allocated to support young people experiencing homelessness through the Youth Foyer in Woden are still not active. The 2024-25 budget including funding to expand the Youth Foyer program to the new CIT Woden Campus. Despite the campus being open since July 2025, and the infrastructure for this service being in place, the Youth Foyer is still not open to accommodate young people. To our awareness, the budget allocated for the running of this program during the 2025-26 fiscal year has not been reallocated to other youth homelessness programs.

Recommendations for ACT Health & Community Services Directorate Investment (Housing ACT)

3. Conduct a systematic and collaborative needs and assets assessment of the ACT youth housing and homelessness system, to understand system opportunities and constraints.
4. Ensure all young people able to receive crisis accommodation and adequate wrap around support through existing youth homelessness and domestic and family violence services.

Health and Community Services Directorate: Domestic and Family Violence Services for Young People

Young people aged 12 to 25 are victims of domestic and family violence in their own right, within their families or in their intimate relationships. National evidence confirms the scale and urgency of this issue. Data from the [Australian Institute of Health and Welfare](#) suggests that young women are more likely to experience intimate partner violence than older women and [Australian Institute of Family Studies](#) data shows that around 3 in 10 18-19 year olds reported at least one experience of intimate partner violence in the previous year. Despite this, there is a critical gap in specialist services designed to support this age cohort, and young people remain significantly underrepresented in

specialist DFV services. They account for fewer than 12% of all Domestic Violence Crisis Service clients. This disparity does not reflect lower need, it reflects systemic barriers and a service system that was not designed around young people's circumstances.

Expansion of workforce capability to support young people impacted by Domestic, Family and Sexual Violence

Young people experiencing domestic and family violence often struggle to engage with mainstream services. Research indicates that many young people do not recognise what they are experiencing as family violence or coercive control. They may seek information through informal and formal networks outside the specialist DFV service system. However, not all young people have access to trusted adults or peers with the skills, knowledge, or confidence to respond safely and appropriately. Without intervention, violence can escalate, trauma can compound, and pathways into homelessness, disengagement from education, and mental health impacts become more likely.

The Youth Coalition is consistently hearing from frontline workers, that problematic and harmful sexual behaviours among young people are a growing concern. These behaviours can occur within peer and intimate partner relationships and frequently intersect with coercive control dynamics that services must be equipped to identify and respond to. A related and deeply concerning trend is the normalisation of non-fatal strangulation among young people. Strangulation is one of the most significant predictors of future lethal family violence, yet it is increasingly encountered by services and educators as a behaviour young people may not recognise as dangerous or as violence. The widespread consumption of pornography is shaping young people's understanding of what is normal and consensual. Frontline workers need the knowledge, language and support to raise these issues safely with young people, and young people themselves need access to accurate, non-judgemental information that helps them understand their rights and their safety.

Recognising this gap, the Youth Coalition, in partnership with Relationships Australia (who delivered Got Your Back at that time), developed the 'Talk to Them' training in 2021. Now delivered by the Youth Coalition, this program equips frontline workers across government, community services and schools to identify signs of DFV in young people, respond in trauma-informed ways, and provide safe referral pathways to specialist support. Between August 2023 and June 2026, more than 250 practitioners will have participated in this training. Sessions consistently reach capacity and demand continues to grow across community, education, health and statutory sectors. However, funding for this program concludes in June 2026. Without a new investment in this program investment, this workforce capability initiative will cease, at precisely the time when service pressures are intensifying. A fully costed budget submission to support the ongoing delivery of this training, which has recently been updated to include information about strangulation, has been provided separately.

Invest in specialist DFV services for young people

Research highlights a substantial gap in support options for young people aged 12–24, and in particular those aged 15–19. There are very few specialist domestic and family violence (DFV) services for young people across Australia, and most child protection and family services are not designed or resourced to work effectively with young people over the age of 15. In the ACT, the 2024 closure of the Got Your Back group program, previously delivered by Relationships Australia, further reduced already limited youth-specific responses.

While early intervention programs such as PCYC's Solid Ground provide valuable early intervention and prevention-focused support, it is not designed to respond to young people in immediate danger, experiencing active violence, or facing homelessness due to family violence. For many young people in these circumstances, the only available options are youth programs or homelessness services, neither of which are designed or adequately resources to manage complex DFV risk, coercive control dynamic, safety planning at a specialist level, and a range of supports that young people escaping DFV often require.

Recent funding decisions will further weaken specialist Domestic, Family, and Sexual Violence support services capacity to respond. The ACT's Domestic Violence Crisis Service has been notified of a reduction in core funding from 2026 -27 that will affect crisis services, support for children, and complex case management services. As outlined previously, youth homelessness crisis services also cannot keep up with crisis accommodation demand, and young people fleeing violence need additional support to manage the family violence risk even if they are able to find emergency accommodation.

Additionally, the Commonwealth will no longer fund the Local Support Coordination program, the only dedicated case management program in the ACT responding to the needs of those experiencing high risk domestic and family violence beyond short term intervention. In 2024-25, this program supported 52 women experiencing high risk family violence matters. The ACT Government has determined they do not have resources within the National Partnership Agreement to fund this specialist high risk service response.

The changes outlined above, when taken together, will significantly increase pressure on an already constrained system and further limit safe, specialise responses for young people.

Research by Melbourne City Mission shows that young people experiencing DFV need clear information about their options, ongoing access to a trusted adult who listens to them and respects their decisions, therapeutic supports, and age appropriate housing and emergency accommodation have all been identified by young people as essential to an appropriate response to their needs. Young people often benefit from having a consistent case manager who knows their story, who they trust, and who advocates alongside them. Yet there are few options for this kind of support, and most have eligibility criteria that exclude young people accessing it.

Young people experiencing domestic and family violence have unique developmental, educational and social needs that differ from both children and adults. They require age appropriate, accessible services that understand the specific dynamics of youth relationships, family systems, and the intersection of violence with homelessness, mental health challenges and disconnection from education or employment. Without targeted investment, young people impacted by violence will continue to fall between systems not designed to meet their needs.

Recommendations for ACT Health & Community Services Directorate Investment (Domestic, Family and Sexual Violence):

5. Allocate ongoing funding for the 'Talk to Them' workforce training program beyond June 2026, ensuring sustained frontline capability across youth, education, health and community sectors.
6. Fund specialist domestic and family violence services for young people aged 12 to 25, including targeted group programs and individual support that addresses the unique needs and circumstances of this age cohort.
7. Restore funding for long term case management for people with complex and high risk family violence matters, ensuring young people experiencing domestic and family violence can access sustained support beyond crisis intervention.
8. Ensure domestic and family violence service design includes youth specific pathways, trauma informed approaches for adolescents and young adults, and integration with education, housing and mental health supports relevant to young people's lives.

Canberra Health Services: Improve Access to Existing Youth Mental Health Services

We welcome the [ACT Labor](#) election commitments to reduce wait times for CAMHS and deliver on the actions of the Child and Adolescent Clinical Services Plan.

The 2024 release of a [report by the ACT Audit Office](#) into the planning and delivery of services for young people with moderate to severe mental illness found that:

- Demand for CAMHS has increased, and there are long wait times to access support;
- There is increased demand and longer wait times on the northside of Canberra, prompting a recommendation that the North Community Team be expanded, particularly into the northern suburbs;

CAMHS satellite clinic in Gungahlin and North Community Team expansion

We are aware that CAMHS receives a high number of referrals and requests for support from families in the Gungahlin region contributing to higher wait-times for the North Community Team. There is also no physical premises for CAMHS in the Gungahlin region. The requirement that young people and families travel to Belconnen to access CAMHS is a barrier to access and engagement. A satellite clinic in the Gungahlin region, which could potentially use existing infrastructure, would be of great benefit to the local community, along with an expansion to the North Community Team.

Supported transport for The Cottage program

The Cottage is a day program within the Flexible Education Program for young people with moderate to severe mental health issues that impact their ability to attend mainstream school. Referrals come from within CAMHS (Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services), with the Education Directorate providing a classroom teacher and CAMHS providing other program staff and support through Canberra Health Services.

The Cottage is relocating from its current central location in Bruce to Tuggeranong in 2027. While this move will provide a fit-for-purpose facility, it will create significant access barriers for young people and families on the northside of Canberra, particularly in Gungahlin. Young people accessing The Cottage are currently highly reliant on family members being available to drive them to and from the program each day. The move to Tuggeranong will exacerbate these challenges, particularly for families who live and work northside, and will likely prevent some eligible young people from accessing the program at all.

A proven solution already exists within the Flexible Education Program. The Muliyan program includes a transport component in which youth workers transport young people from their homes to the program and back each day. This active transport support is critical to supporting students to attend and engage with the Muliyan program, and demonstrates the ACT Government's recognition that young people with complex needs require additional support to access alternative education settings.

Many young people referred to The Cottage have comparable or greater vulnerabilities to those accessing Muliyan. The principle of equity requires that these young people receive the same level of transport support to enable their access to education. We understand that Canberra Health Services has not undertaken planning to implement a supported transport model for The Cottage when the relocated program begins operations in 2027, despite this issue being raised in 2025.

Recommendations for Health & Community Services Directorate – Office for Mental Health & Wellbeing

9. Deliver ACT Labor election commitments to reduce CAMHS wait-times; including by establishing a CAMHS satellite clinic in Gungahlin, and increasing the capacity of the North Community Team.
10. Fund Canberra Health Services to implement a supported transport model, similar to that used for Muliyan, to enable young people to access The Cottage when it relocates to Tuggeranong in 2027, with planning commencing immediately.

ACT Education Directorate: Adequate Infrastructure and Equitable Access for the Flexible Education Program

The ACT Education Directorate offers the Flexible Education Program, which provides a range of alternative settings and services for students who experience barriers to mainstream schooling. These programs include Muliyan, Distance Education, Hospital School, Murrumbidgee School at

Bimberi Youth Justice Centre, The Cottage (operated by CAMHS), and Warugul Yardhura. These programs are intended to offer inclusive, safe and flexible learning environments for students requiring complex and intensive support.

Progress on Flexible Education Program Review

In our 2025-26 budget submission, we called for a review of the Flexible Education Program and investment in infrastructure for Muliyan. We welcomed Minister Berry's subsequent notification that the ACT Education Directorate has commenced a review of the existing Flexible Education Program, including consideration of infrastructure needs. Additionally, through the ACT Bilateral Agreement of the Better and Fairer Schools Agreement 2025-2034, \$4.3 million will be allocated to expand Murrumbidgee School (within Bimberi) and implement a bridging program for students transitioning from Bimberi back into their local community, expand the Hospital School Service for students accessing CAMHS, and to deliver a multidisciplinary outreach service for those who need extra assistance to transition back to school settings.

As the review progresses, we continue to recommend it be undertaken in partnership with the wider alternative education sector to enable shared and collaborative planning across the alternative education system. This is particularly important within the context of raising the Minimum Age of Criminal Responsibility. The review should identify supported pathways that provide continuity of education across services, including for young people in or exiting Bimberi, who are accessing residential care and youth homelessness services, or who have individual complexities. The review should also examine equity of access across the Flexible Education Program, including transport, location, and other structural barriers that may limit participation.

We call on the ACT Government to make the findings of the Flexible Education Program review, or its recommendations at a minimum, publicly available. Young people who depend on flexible education programs, their families, and the community organisations and government services that support them have a legitimate interest in understanding what the review has found and what changes are proposed. Transparency will also help ensure that reform is coordinated across the broader alternative education system, particularly for non-government services that intersect with flexible education programs and may be directly affected by recommendations without having been central to the review process. Equally important is a clear commitment to adequately fund and implement the review's recommendations. A review process that does not result in funded action is of limited value to the young people who rely on these programs to remain engaged in education.

Appropriate infrastructure for Muliyan

'Muliyan' is an off-campus flexible learning program for up to 30 public high school students who require additional supports. Students are referred by their usual high school, when identified as needing additional support and experiencing barriers to school attendance and engagement. Muliyan directly enables young people to participate in education, and is a positive demonstration of the ACT Government's commitment to ensuring all young people have access to education.

While Muliyan is adequately resourced through staffing, its infrastructure is inadequate. Consequently, capacity has reduced from 30 to 15 students participating on site. ACT Government Annual Report Committee Hearings within the ACT Legislative Assembly on 17 February 2025 indicated that the remaining 15 places have been allocated to an 'extended outreach program',

particularly targeted at young people who are involved with the youth justice and/or child protection systems. This outreach program has now been running for 12 months. While it provides an important pathway to reengage in education, there is limited opportunity for students to then reintegrate into a school based setting. Additional on-site placements at Muliyan will allow more students to access this important step in reengagement into mainstream schooling or further education, which is not currently possible due to the infrastructure limitations.

Muliyan is 'oversubscribed', with the program consistently receiving higher referrals than there are vacant places, and schools not being able to refer all students who should be eligible for support from this program. The limitations of the existing site are noted, i.e., its delivery within an office setting, which is not suitable for all students. A reduction in on-site places for Muliyan is directly inverse to what is needed: Muliyan should be expanded to 50 students to better meet the consistently high demand. With an infrastructure expansion, it would be cost-effective to increase student capacity through the existing staffing capacity.

We look forward to the Flexible Education Program review's recommendations regarding infrastructure needs, but urgent action is still required to locate appropriate temporary accommodation for the Muliyan program that would allow it to return to an on-site capacity of 30 students. This may be available through capital improvement of an existing vacant ACT Government site. Longer-term planning should identify fit-for-purpose sites on the north and south side of Canberra. There is an ACT Government precedent for providing temporary accommodation while undertaking longer-term construction: the ACT Government provided funds to temporarily accommodate the 'Gunnery Place' youth program, while awaiting construction of the permanent Gungahlin Youth and Community Centre.

Recommendations for ACT Education Directorate Investment:

11. Publish the findings of the Flexible Education Program review and commit to funded implementation of its recommendations
12. Provide immediate temporary accommodation for the Muliyan program to restore on-site capacity to 30 students, while the Flexible Education Program review is finalised and recommendations implemented

Health and Community Services Directorate: Funding Services for Young People: Indexation & Funding Uplift

Services for young people in the ACT operate within the same community sector funding architecture that is constraining the entire non-government sector. The pressures are well documented, and include rising workforce costs driven by mandatory superannuation increases, long service leave levy obligations, and increased insurance costs, combined with population growth and increasing client complexity. These pressures have outpaced the indexation that multiyear government contract funding provides. For organisations working specifically with young people aged 12 to 25, many of whom present with intersecting and complex needs across mental health, housing, domestic and family violence and education, these pressures are particularly acute. Specialist youth services are

often smaller organisations with limited capacity to absorb structural underfunding before it begins to affect the services young people rely on.

The ACT community sector peak, ACTCOSS, has provided detailed analysis of this problem in its 2026-27 budget submission and the Youth Coalition strongly supports the reforms it has proposed. The current Community Sector Indexation formula, calculated as a weighted average of wage price growth and CPI, excludes mandatory employer costs entirely. Superannuation alone increased by 2.5 percentage points between 2021 and 2025, yet none of this was reflected in indexation. The cumulative gap between what organisations are funded to deliver and what it costs them to operate widens every year, and the organisations working with young people are not exempt from this erosion.

The ACT Government's commissioning reform agenda, and the upcoming renewal of funding agreements across the community sector, create a time-sensitive opportunity to address this structurally rather than through repeated short-term remediation. Multi-year agreements entered into under the current formula will simply lock in the same unsustainability for the next contract cycle.

The Youth Coalition also supports the call for a one-off uplift to the community sector to ameliorate the impact of historic underinvestment. The ACT Government acknowledged the scale of the problem in the 2025-26 budget with a \$10 million two-year boost, but this was a temporary measure rather than a structural one. Young people's services need the underlying funding base to be stabilised before the next round of commissioning locks in arrangements for the years ahead.

Recommendations for ACT Health and Community Services Directorate Investment (Commissioning Community Services):

13. Reform the Community Sector Indexation formula to reflect actual employer cost obligations, incorporating mandatory superannuation increases, long service leave levy changes and insurance costs, with retrospective adjustments to the baseline to recognise unfunded increases since 2021. The Youth Coalition endorses the lead analysis and proposed formula provided by ACTCOSS in its 2026-27 budget submission as the basis for this reform.
14. Commit to a sector-wide funding uplift commencing 2027-28 to address the cumulative impact of historic underinvestment driven by population growth, increasing service complexity and the structural inadequacy of current indexation arrangements, with distribution methodology developed in partnership with the sector.
15. Embed indexation reform within the commissioning policy framework so that multi-year funding agreements entered into over the next decade are based on a formula that reflects real cost growth from the outset.

Chief Minister, Treasury and Economic Development Directorate & Justice and Community Safety Directorate: Strategic Investment in Gambling Harm Prevention

The ACT Government collects substantial and growing revenue from gambling, including \$21.7 million from the Betting Operations Tax on online wagering in 2023 to 24, projected to reach \$44.4 million by 2027 to 28. Despite this significant and rapidly increasing revenue stream from online gambling, no funding in the ACT is dedicated to preventing the harms it causes. While the Government has established a Harm Mitigation Fund, this fund operates within significant constraints and draws exclusively from venue-based gambling revenue. The current fund is derived from a 0.75 per cent levy on gaming machine licensees' Gross Gaming Machine Revenue and a 0.4 per cent contribution from each club's net revenue. Online gambling tax revenue, which now represents approximately 32 per cent of total gambling tax revenue in the Territory, contributes nothing to the fund or harm prevention efforts. These limited revenue sources create a funding pool that is insufficient to meet the scale of need for gambling harm prevention, research, and public education, and entirely disconnected from the fastest growing source of gambling harm among young people. Critically, the [2024 ACT Gambling Survey](#) found that the prevalence of gambling harm in the ACT has not reduced harm despite existing efforts, indicating that current approaches are insufficient and further investment in harm prevention activities is required. The need for this investment is further underscored by the survey finding that 98.5 per cent of people who are harmed from gambling, never seek support. Without adequately funded prevention campaigns and stigma reduction initiatives, this critical gap in help seeking will persist.

Increased gambling tax revenue should not be viewed as a fiscal win for the Government. Rising revenue reflects rising participation in gambling, which in turn reflects a growing toll on the community. This toll manifests in financial stress, relationship breakdown, mental health challenges, and increased demand for health, housing, and community services. The costs of gambling harm to the community and the burden placed on community services far outweigh the tax revenue received.

Expanding the Harm Mitigation Fund

[ACT Labor committed at the 2024 election](#) to expand the harm reduction research fund to ensure eligibility for a wider range of research and expert advocacy groups. The Youth Coalition calls on the Government to deliver on this commitment in the 2026 to 27 Budget. Anecdotally, the Youth Coalition has heard that the constrained funding envelope within the current Harm Mitigation Fund results in many worthwhile applications for much needed research, help seeking campaigns, and prevention initiatives being rejected. Expanding the fund and broadening eligibility would enable more community organisations to contribute to evidence-based harm prevention efforts.

Developing and Funding a New Gambling Harm Prevention Strategy

[The Strategy for Gambling Harm Prevention in the ACT: A Public Health Approach](#) has now concluded, and the Government will need to develop a new strategy in 2026. This creates an ideal opportunity for the Government to co-design with experts, community organisations, and people with lived experience to develop a robust, evidence-based strategy that addresses current gaps.

Critically, any new strategy must be adequately resourced to achieve its objectives. Without dedicated government investment in co-design, coordination, public education and ongoing evaluation, the strategy risks becoming an aspirational document. This investment must sit outside the Harm Mitigation Fund and be funded separately at a level adequate to support evidence-based harm prevention measures.

Investing in harm prevention is fiscally responsible. Early intervention and prevention reduce long term costs to the health system, community services, housing, and justice. Strategic investment in prevention represents an invest to save approach that aligns with the ACT Government's wellbeing led budget framework.

Recommendations for Chief Minister, Treasury and Economic Development Directorate & Justice and Community Safety Directorate:

16. Deliver on the 2024 election commitment to expand the Harm Mitigation Fund, including broadening eligibility to ensure a wider range of research and expert advocacy groups can access funding for evidence based gambling harm prevention activities.
17. Develop a new Strategy for Gambling Harm Prevention in the ACT in genuine partnership with experts, community organisations, and people with lived experience.
18. Allocate dedicated funding for the implementation of the new Gambling Harm Prevention Strategy that sits outside the Harm Mitigation Fund. The strategy should be co-designed with experts, community organisations, and people with lived experience. It should be pragmatic, evidence based and include funded implementation of actionable harm minimisation measures. Funding should be commensurate with the scale of gambling harm and the investment required to effectively deliver the strategy's recommendations.

For more information

For more information about the items included in the Youth Coalition's submission to the ACT Budget 2025-26, contact Hannah Watts at ceo@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.