

8 BUDGET CONSULTATION

Introduction

Thirty-seven budget submissions were received by the ACT Government from a range of community, business, sports, union and environmental groups. These groups were mainly responding to the letter issued by the Treasurer inviting input into the development of priorities for the 2002-03 Budget.

Some groups addressed their comments directly to the Government, while others provided a copy of the submission they had previously provided to Assembly Standing Committees.

Concurrent with the Government's budget consultation process, the issues-based Standing Committees of the ACT Legislative Assembly also conducted formal inquiries into service delivery and service prioritisation outcomes for the 2002-03 ACT Budget. These inquiries were initiated in response to an invitation by the Treasurer issued in the Assembly Chamber, on 13 December 2001 and followed by correspondence on 20 December 2001.

The Standing Committees received a total of 88 submissions from non-government groups and individuals. In some cases the same submission was given to all Committees. The reports of all the Standing Committee inquiries were tabled in the ACT Legislative Assembly on 9 April 2002. Of the six committees, only the Standing Committee on Community Services and Social Equity made content-related recommendations, while the other committees made recommendations regarding the process and endorsed the issues raised in community submissions, for government consideration.

Headline Issues for Consideration

Health

The areas of specific concern in relation to acute health services include after-hours primary care services, services for victims of violence, convalescent and aged services, and diabetes programs. An independent audit of the hospital system was sought, and the need to be mindful of demographic changes while planning fiscally responsible approaches to health was raised. Funding for community health programs for epilepsy education and to support the community methadone program were also sought.

Mental health was an area of particular concern for a significant number of groups. Specific concerns relate to comparative expenditure on services, accommodation options, free/low cost counselling services, carer support, services in corrections facilities, support for women with dual diagnoses and their children, and additional funding for Lifeline.

To address many of the health issues that have been raised in the public submissions, the Government has included funding for:

- Calvary Hospital Emergency Department to ensure patients are treated in clinically appropriate timeframes;

- the provision of convalescent care facilities to assist in the discharge of patients from the hospital and therefore improving the availability of the valuable hospital beds;
- an expansion of the Older Person's Mental Health Service and increased psychogeriatric care;
- the increased cost of wages for workers in the social and community services sector in line with Australian Industrial Relations Commission decisions;
- pharmacies participating in the community methadone program and other drug treatment schemes through the pharmacotherapy subsidy;
- the enhancement of several mental health programs including:
 - Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services Enhancement package;
 - CALCAM Adolescent Mental Health Day Program;
 - HACC Matching Funds; and
 - Mental Illness Educ CAT (MIEACT): Youth mental health education and literacy program;
- youth services in northern and western suburbs of Belconnen aiming to reduce anti-social behaviour and prevent family breakdown; and
- increased funding for respite care.

Housing

Broadly, there was a widespread call from community groups for an increase in the supply of appropriate low cost housing alternatives which meet the needs of a range of user groups. In addition, both supported accommodation and public housing issues were raised in the submissions.

In relation to supported accommodation, an expansion of emergency and crisis accommodation options was raised, as well as a need for the expansion of current services for women and children.

With regard to public housing, the submissions called for greater transparency in public housing programs, a review of the Residential Tenancies Tribunal and funding arrangements, the need for a public housing asset management plan, a focus on long term housing options, an enhanced focus on tenant participation, and specific housing options for older people with dementia and young people with mental illnesses.

The issue of public and community housing has been of concern to a wide range of community organisations since the introduction of wide reaching changes in 1998. The level of concern expressed this year is consistent with that of previous years. The Affordable Housing Taskforce, established by the Government to address these issues, is to report in October 2002.

To address many of the housing issues that have been raised in the public submissions, the Government has included funding for:

- the expansion of community housing;

- Ainslie Village to meet additional repair and maintenance requirements and to move the Village to a mixed housing development which continues the focus on increasing the supply of appropriate and affordable low cost housing alternatives;
- the Affordable Housing's Task Force to assist its ongoing investigations into ways of increasing the Territory's stock of low cost housing alternatives; and
- fire and safety improvements for ACT Housing's large flat complexes.

Disability Services

The level of concern and number of submissions raising issues in relation to disability service has risen this year, with a broad range of concerns being expressed. It is likely that the heightened level of concern regarding this issue is a response to the profile created by the conduct of the Board of Inquiry.

Specifically, groups called for an expansion of accommodation options, compensation for rising infrastructure costs (award payments, insurance, contract requirements and administration of tax reform), support for students with disabilities, and assistance for carers. It should be noted that some of these impacts have arisen from actions taken by the Commonwealth Government.

It should be noted that the government service provider, ACT Disability Services received a great deal of additional funding under the previous government to address infrastructure issues. This level of assistance was not, however, extended to the non-government sector which is now under growing organisational pressure.

Given that the Government is considering a broad range of structural, policy and administrative changes to disability services, it could be pre-emptive to announce major funding increases without the necessary policy and structural mechanisms in place.

To address many of the issues in disability services that have been raised in the public submissions, the Government has included funding for:

- a substantial increase in funding to support people with disabilities and their families over the next four years. The extra funding will support the development of reform and service improvements in partnership with people with disabilities, their families, service providers and peak bodies in response to the Board of Inquiry into Disability Services;
- the increased cost of wages for workers in the social and community services sector in line with Australian Industrial Relations Commission decisions; and
- additional home and centre-based respite services.

Education

There were a number of issues raised in relation to education, including increased funding for students at risk (especially those who drop out) and those with disabilities, a continued focus on early childhood and primary school class sizes, a need for greater IT resources, further research into alternative models of education and support, a stronger focus on literacy and numeracy programs, more resources for personal support and careers advice programs,

capital funding for school facilities maintenance, and a formula for funding non-government schools.

To address many of the educational issues that have been raised in the public submissions, the Government has included funding for:

- reduction in Year 3 Class Sizes expanding on the current reduction in class size program for years K-2 facilitating better education outcomes for primary students;
- high school development providing a resource team focussed on assisting high schools to plan educational programs to develop engaging, relevant and inclusive curricula;
- laptops for teachers program providing schools and teachers with quality desktop and laptop computers;
- schools IT capacity upgrade enabling a major upgrade of government schools infrastructure including the schools wide area network, security management arrangements and internet access; and
- three significant reviews which will be conducted during 2002-03. A review of schools' reporting to students and parents as well as arrangements for providing careers advice to students and a review of school counselling services to identify areas for improvement.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People

Concerns were expressed regarding funding for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander services, in both health and community services.

In particular, groups called for outreach and support programs for women and children, a general expansion of the small number of services for this community, a more holistic approach to addressing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health (specifically young people), and a dedicated, community-controlled detoxification service for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people.

A paper on service delivery for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people has recently been prepared by the Chief Minister's Department for consideration by Government. This paper recommends the formation of a Working Group to consider optimising current funding and establishing priorities for service provision.

To address the issues raised specifically concerning Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People in the public submissions, the Government has included funding for:

- an enhanced indigenous support program to increase the skill level of school staff working with indigenous young people to improve the home-school liaison for indigenous students;
- the establishment of indigenous specific detoxification beds through the indigenous youth alcohol and drug project;
- indigenous housing – access and choices to facilitate the development of an indigenous community housing sector which provides better and wider housing choices; and

- the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander family violence prevention program which will assist Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families experiencing family violence to establish alternative approaches to intervention.

Insurance

While the peak community agencies including YCACT, ACTCOSS, Volunteering ACT and COTA have expressed concern about rising insurance premiums for community organisations in the past two budget consultation processes, as well as during the election campaign, the issues raised this year represent a much heightened level of concern.

By way of example, one community organisation has had its public liability insurance premium rise from \$1,500 to \$11,000 in one year from a total grant of \$160,000 per annum. This year's consultations have seen additional concerns expressed by ACTSPORT, ACROD and the Canberra Business Council.

There is ongoing action being taken by the Treasurer, and amongst Territories, States and the Commonwealth to address the concerns raised. Whilst long term strategies are necessary, the ACT Government has passed legislation that allows the establishment of the Builders Warranty Fidelity Fund. In addition, legislation has been passed that provides relief to public charitable organisations and sporting groups by exempting them from stamp duty on their public liability insurance premiums.

In addition, negotiations are underway to include not-for-profit organisations in pooling arrangements being pursued by the NSW and Victorian Governments. The 2002-03 Budget includes a total of \$837,000 to strengthen resources within ACT Treasury to develop and implement proposals to improve accessibility and affordability of insurance.

Other

There are a range of concerns identified during the budget consultations that could not be grouped into the above themes. These include community facilities, planning and land development, the environment, transport, justice and safety and tourism. The Conservation Council want to see a commitment to the Office of Sustainability and proposed a number of revenue raising measures to preserve and improve the Territory's environment.

Several submissions were received seeking support for existing justice and victim-related programs, and for programs specifically appropriate for female offenders. Also, submissions relating to the need for improved programs to prevent crime and violence, especially family violence were received.

To address the issues raised specifically in the public submissions, the Government has included funding for:

- provision for victims of crime that may arise from litigation;
- the ongoing design and construction of an ACT correctional centre that accommodates the particular needs of female prisoners;

- the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander family violence prevention program which will establish alternative approaches to intervention to assist Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families experiencing family violence;
- the economic white paper which will develop a sound basis for future decisions regarding funding and support provided to tourism and related sporting events;
- the Office of Sustainability which will develop an across government sustainability framework in which to consider government agency proposals;
- the introduction of ACTION's single zone fare; and
- increases in ACTION's base funding.