



Dear Treasurer,

Uniting NSW.ACT is a committed advocate for people facing social and economic disadvantage. We believe society has an obligation to create pathways for those experiencing disadvantage to thrive.

Our 2026-2027 ACT Pre-Budget Submission addresses the growing challenges faced by vulnerable children, young people, and families in the ACT.

Through services such as early learning, family support, affordable housing, mental health services, and homelessness support, Uniting engages with thousands of individuals annually, promoting empowerment, independence, and long-term wellbeing. **The ACT is facing rising pressures, including a housing crisis, and growing demand for services.** We urge the ACT Government to invest in transformative policies that break cycles of disadvantage.

We advocate for increased investment in early intervention, especially in family preservation and parenting support programs such as NEWPIN. **Culturally relevant programs led by Aboriginal communities are crucial** for building trust and stronger support networks. **For young people, especially those leaving care, we recommend introducing youth development coaches** to guide them through transitions in housing, education, and employment.

Care leavers require ongoing support, including stable housing and coaching from ages 15 to 21. **This comprehensive approach will ensure their successful transition to independent living.**

We support the shift in drug policy under the Drugs of Dependence (Personal Use) Amendment Act 2022, and we strongly recommend **the establishment of Supervised Injecting Facilities in the ACT. This will save lives.**

These priorities reflect Uniting's commitment to supporting vulnerable individuals and communities in Canberra. **We look forward to sharing the outcomes of our innovative work, and to discussing the options we have identified for changes to policy, regulation, and funding.**

Tracey Burton
CEO
Uniting NSW.ACT

Priority areas for change

Priority Area 1: Strengthening Early Intervention for Families and Children

Outcome Sought: Ongoing, sustainable funding beyond February 2027 for family and early intervention services such as NEWPIN, a proven therapeutic program currently restoring and keeping 24 families together every year, in the ACT.

Every child successfully restored to their family saves government up to \$1million in long term care costs. Uniting recommends a 20% annual funding increase to support family preservation, parenting support, and Aboriginal-led programs, reducing the need for out-of-home care and strengthening community resilience.

Priority Area 2: Drug Law Reform Outcome Sought: Uniting recommends the establishment of integrated Supervised Injecting Facilities in the ACT as well as regular independent reporting on the implementation of the Drugs of Dependence legislation in addition to cultural change and education for government service providers.

Priority Area 3: Strengthening Accommodation Support for Care Leavers

Outcome Sought: Collaboration between the ACT Government, Uniting and other care providers to establish additional housing options, including headleasing for care leavers aged 15-21 to ensure successful, supported transitions to independent living.

Priority Area 4: Empowering Young People to Independence

Outcome Sought: The introduction of youth coaching for all young people aged 15+ in the child protection system. We recommend that this group be considered a priority population across government services, and we call on the ACT government to invest in preventative programs in schools to address domestic violence.

Early Intervention to Support Children and Families

Children thrive when they remain with their families, and this requires additional investment in early intervention. These services should focus on supporting families by offering parenting advice, guidance, and family preservation programs.

Family finding services further enhance early intervention efforts by building strong, sustainable networks of support for families within communities.

Aboriginal-led early intervention

Aboriginal led early intervention is essential for ensuring culturally safe environments for First Nations communities.

Empowering Aboriginal leaders to design and lead these programs respects and integrates cultural values. This culturally grounded approach strengthens community resilience and self-determination. Uniting calls for substantial investment from the ACT Government in the ACCCO (Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations) ecosystem.

Practical barriers to early learning

The ACT has strong participation rates for children in early learning but there are still some children who miss out. Building upon existing support programs that address practical barriers to early learning, such as transport, mental health, disability and language barriers will increase participation. This includes outreach to locate and assist families facing difficulties accessing services and maintaining participation.

Recommendation- early intervention to support children and families:

Uniting recommends a 20% annual funding increase for early intervention services, prioritising family preservation, parenting support, and advice services. This investment will keep children safely with their families and reduce entries into out-of-homecare. We also recommend that this additional investment should include ring-fenced funding for Aboriginal -led early intervention services.

Building Upon Drug Law Reform

Supervised Injecting

The ACT has recorded the **highest per capita rate of overdose deaths in Australia.**

We call on the ACT government to enable access to supervised injecting spaces by exploring the use of the existing infrastructure, specifically the already well-established needle and syringe program. It is not enough to merely provide clean needles and then knowingly turn people away from care. The evidence that supervision saves lives is incontrovertible.

Co-location of supervised injecting within needle syringe services would enable the government to utilise existing staff and health infrastructure and extend its offering to include the provision of safer and non-judgemental environments for drug use under appropriate supervision.

Rather than a single purpose-built facility, co-location is significantly cheaper and takes advantage of existing networks. Evidence shows that access to supervised injecting spaces will reduce public injecting, reduce publicly discarded syringes, reduce public overdoses, and crucially, reduce death and injury associated with drug overdose in Canberra.

The Australian Capital Territory (ACT) *Harm Reduction Cost-Benefit Analysis* report by the Burnett Institute and Australian National University (ANU), 2025 concluded that implementing and scaling up a supervised injecting facility through a nurse/peer-led implementation model to achieve 60% coverage by 2030 could avert 11 overdose-related deaths, 56 emergency responses, 61 injection-related infections and 28 hepatitis C infections. This would result in a \$39.6 million reduction in health and social costs.

It's important to note that in terms of estimating costs of establishing and operating supervised injecting spaces, the Burnett/ANU report relied upon high level modelling based on stand-alone Sydney and Melbourne services. Their estimates are far higher than the cost of co-located services.

Regular independent reporting

Uniting supports the Drugs of Dependence (Personal Use) Amendment Act 2022, which aims to shift from punitive penalties for small-scale possession of illegal drugs to health-focused interventions. This approach directs individuals towards health services rather than the criminal justice system, prioritising harm reduction, treatment and support.

To enhance this reform, Uniting advocates for regular independent reporting on the Act's implementation. This should include qualitative feedback from those with lived experience and an evaluation of broader social outcomes. Regular reporting will help refine policies and improve services for individuals with drug dependency.

Cultural change and education

Cultural change and education are also essential for shifting government services, particularly police, towards a more non-judgmental and harm-reduction-oriented approach. Educating officers and officials on the complexities of drug dependency will foster empathy, reduce stigma, and promote rehabilitation over punishment.

Recommendations:

1. The ACT should prioritise enabling access to supervised injecting spaces by exploring the use of the existing infrastructure, specifically the already well-established needle and syringe exchange services. This will provide safe, health-focused spaces for individuals with drug dependency, enhancing the Territory's harm-reduction strategy.
2. Regular independent monitoring and reporting on the implementation of the Drugs of Dependence legislation, incorporating feedback from those with lived experience and evaluating broader social outcomes.
3. Investment in cultural change and education for all relevant government services, including police, to better understand the impact of drug dependency.

Supporting young people to independence

Youth development coaches

Young people leaving out-of-home care face significant challenges including poorer life outcomes. Approximately 35% experience homelessness within the first year after care, and around 50% face unemployment, incarceration, or homelessness later in life.

Uniting's experience (based on a five-year pilot) shows that providing a youth coach from age 15 is significantly beneficial. Coaches offer tailored support, helping young

people set achievable goals in housing, education, and employment, while also enhancing health, social connections, and overall well-being.

Additionally, youth-focused domestic violence preventative programs are crucial for engaging young people at key stages in their development, providing them with the resources and support they need.

Recommendation- youth development coaches:

The ACT Government should provide youth coaching to all young people aged 15 years and over in the child protection system.

Recommendation- preventative programs:

The ACT Government should prioritise investing in preventative programs targeted at young people in schools. Providing education about domestic violence intervention through schools can help prevent the cycle from continuing.

Recommendation- priority population:

We call on the ACT Government to consider all dependents within the child protection system, and in aftercare, as a priority population, granting them access to government systems of support, including health care, housing and tailored programs in schools.

Accommodation support for care leavers

We applaud the ACT Government for completing the construction of a Youth Foyer at the Woden CIT campus which will deliver supported accommodation for young people at risk of, or experiencing, homelessness.

Uniting operates Sydney's Youth Foyer, which exclusively focuses on young people who've experienced out-of-home care and are also homeless, or at risk of homelessness. Those leaving out-of-home care have significantly higher rates of homelessness, mental health issues, and unemployment compared to their peers, highlighting the need for targeted support and stable housing solutions.

While the Woden Foyer might provide valuable assistance to some care leavers, Uniting believes that additional support is needed in the ACT to ensure young people with an out-of-home care history can transition to independent, thriving lives. This support should encompass housing solutions, such as Youth Foyers or headleasing, coupled with comprehensive wraparound services.

Recommendation: Youth Foyers

The ACT Government should collaborate with Uniting and out-of-home care providers to establish enhanced supports for transitioning care leavers to independence, including dedicated housing and coaching for young people aged 15-21.

