



Youth Coalition of the ACT – Opening Statement to the Select Committee on Estimates 2014-15

The Youth Coalition of the ACT welcomes the opportunity to appear before the committee today. We are the peak youth affairs body in the ACT, and represent the interests of young people (aged between 12 and 25), and the people who work with young people. We are a membership based organisation with approximately 100 organisational, program, and individual members.

Each year the Youth Coalition analyses the ACT Budget through a youth affairs and social justice lens. We seek to provide comment on budget initiatives and gaps that directly affect young people, as well as initiatives that young people or the youth sector might have particular views on.

Young people form approximately 20% of the Canberra population. Therefore, we believe that the ACT Government, and the ACT community broadly speaking, should take a keen interest in supporting young people's economic, social and political participation.

Broadly speaking, the Youth Coalition is supportive of the vision and values underpinning the ACT Budget 2014-15. We also welcome the Chief Minister's roundtables held in the time between the announcement of the federal budget and the ACT budget.

This year, the Youth Coalition's budget analysis highlights education, as well as youth unemployment and underemployment as key challenges facing the ACT community. These are issues that sit at the intersection of ACT Government and federal government jurisdiction, and the Youth Coalition acknowledges that changes to federal policy and funding pose significant challenges to the ACT Government, Canberra's young people, and community services who support young people.

The Youth Coalition has increasingly called for the ACT Government to respond to the gaps created by the reduction or withdrawal of federal funding to programs that support young people.

Of significant concern to the Youth Coalition is the impending gap in services to support vulnerable young people to engage in education and employment pathways. The federally funded Youth Connections program, which currently provides these services, will cease in December of this year. This is a hugely successful program, which has supported 74,000 young people nationally since 2010, and with 93% of participants still engaged in school or work 6 months after completing the program. Locally, Youth Connections supports between 300 and 350 young people each year.

The Youth Coalition is very concerned about the loss of skilled specialist services and workers that currently assist vulnerable young people to transition to further education, training or employment. Our experience is that when youth specific services close there is an expectation that young people will seek help from generalist services. However, we find that this expectation is rarely realised.

Our budget submission called on the ACT government to find ways to make sure that young people can continue to access youth specific programs that assist them to engage in education and employment pathways. We continue to call for ACT Government leadership on this issue.

If I can make a broad statement about the investment in education contained within the ACT Budget for 2014-15, we had hoped to see more expense initiatives for the Education and Training Directorate. We continue to advocate for greater health and mental health integration in schools, and greater engagement and coordination between the community services and education sectors. The Youth Coalition is pleased to see the adoption of the *Engaging Schools Framework* in the ACT, however, we are concerned that the opportunity presented by the Framework will be missed if there is no clear cross-sector resourcing associated with its implementation.

With a current youth unemployment rate of 11.3% in the ACT, we are increasingly hearing young people voice their concerns about jobs and employment pathways. In light of this, we welcome the Young Business Connect initiative in the budget, and seek continued engaged between the ACT government and young people on the issue of jobs creation and support.

We also welcome the package of infrastructure investment contained within the 2014-15 Budget. We call for ACT Government leadership in ensuring that these projects create jobs for those who are vulnerable to unemployment, and young people in particular.

In closing, I will turn to the Youth Coalition's analysis of government investment in community services. We welcome initiatives such as the trial of the Human Services Blueprint Local Service Network in the West Belconnen region, and funding for preparatory work on the Out of Home Care Strategy. We note, however, that many of the initiatives funded under the Community Services Directorate only include funding for one year. We understand that there is intent for future roll outs of the Human Services Blueprint in other regions, and that the Out of Home Care Strategy is yet to be finalised, however, these are key initiatives that must be fully funded in order to fully realise their potential.

Canberra is a fantastic community to live in. However, we still have a way to go to ensure that young people are invested in and able to develop to their full potential.