



youth
coalition
of the ACT

Submission to the ACT Budget 2025-26

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 Erin Barry and Hannah Watts. February 2025.

Summary of Recommendations

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 a constrained Budget, due to the recent injection of funds into the ACT health system. **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 (noting the Machinery of Government intentions for ACT Health and Community Services Directorate to merge in 2025).

ACT Health (Child and Youth Mental Health):

1. Deliver ACT Labor election commitments in full, to continue funding community-based mental health programs and initiatives.
2. Allocate funding for the *ACT Child and Youth Mental Health Sector Alliance* secretariat and project support; and, to continue existing youth lived experience initiatives within Government, through the Alliance Youth Reference Group (YRG).
3. Conduct a comprehensive review of the *Mental Health Act 2015*, to encompass a wider view of mental health, inclusive of mental illness, which provides greater scope for genuine whole-of-government and whole-of-community approaches to mental health.

Canberra Health Services:

4. Deliver ACT Labor election commitments to reduce CAMHS wait-times; including establishing a CAMHS satellite clinic in Gungahlin and increasing the capacity of the North Community Team.
5. Allocate funding to undertake scoping for a 'young adult' transition program/team, delivered collaboratively between CAMHS and AMHS, to better support young people aged 18-25, including those transitioning from CAMHS to community-based services; through co-design with young people with lived experience and parents/carers.
6. Expand access to the *Mental Health Service for People with Intellectual Disability* program to young people from age 12, including those with moderate ID presentations.
7. Re-establish a COPMI position within Canberra Health Services, as part of election commitments to provide support to children whose parents experience mental illness, especially young carers.

ACT Education Directorate (Flexible Education Program):

8. Urgent investment to locate appropriate temporary accommodation for the Muliyan flexible education program, to enable it to return to an on-site capacity of 30 students, with potential expansion to 50 on-site students.

9. Longer-term planning to invest in fit-for-purpose sites for Muliyan on the north- and south-side of Canberra.

10. Conduct a review of the Flexible Education Program, to consider how it may better provide supported pathways to education for young people impacted by raising the Minimum Age of Criminal Responsibility, who are exiting Bimberi, or accessing residential care or youth homelessness services.

ACT Community Services Directorate (ACT Child, Youth and Family Services Program):

11. Undertake scoping to understand the true cost of delivering community services through the CYFSP, the ACT Government's primary investment in community-based child, youth and family early support services.

ACT Community Services Directorate (Youth Engagement):

12. 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. This should include a review of existing ACT Government youth engagement mechanisms.

ACT Community Services Directorate (Housing and Homelessness):

13. Conduct a systematic and collaborative needs and assets assessment of the ACT youth housing and homelessness system, to understand system opportunities and constraints.

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

Youth Coalition Submission to the ACT Budget 2025-26

The Youth Coalition recognises that the forthcoming ACT Budget is projected to be a constrained budget, due to the recent injection of funds into the ACT health system. **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 (noting the Machinery of Government intentions for ACT Health and Community Services Directorate to merge in 2025).

ACT Health (Child and Youth Mental Health)

The ACT Government, led by **ACT Labor, has a strong track record in investing in youth mental health**. This includes responding to service system gaps for young people, supporting system coordination and collaboration, and rescuing community-based programs at risk of closure due to Commonwealth funding.

A recent [report by Prevention United](#), completed with funding from the ACT Government's Office for Mental Health and Wellbeing, describes the current youth mental health crisis both globally and in the ACT. The report points towards research on the global megatrends undermining youth mental health, including the higher rates of youth self-harm and psychological distress in the ACT, than other jurisdictions. The report reinforces the need for a continued focus on youth mental health.

Continued funding for community mental health programs

We welcome ACT Labor's 2024 youth mental health election commitments. The [ACT Labor 2024 Policy Position Statement](#) includes a commitment to continue funding for "critical community mental health programs such as MOST, WOKE, Stepping Stones, Youth Aware of Mental Health, MindMap, and the ACT Child and Youth Mental Health Sector Alliance" (p. 88). Longer-term program funding will deliver certainty for staff and clients of these programs.

The *ACT Child and Youth Mental Health Sector Alliance*, delivered as a partnership between the ACT Government, Youth Coalition and Capital Health Network (CHN), enables collaborative efforts to address systemic problems that persist across sectors, and which cannot be easily solved with 'more funding'. The Alliance membership includes a range of government and community sector members, including young people with lived experience.

In 2023-25, the Youth Coalition received funding to provide secretariat support and project brokerage for the Alliance, as part of this collaboration. The delivery of the Alliance in partnership with ACT Government and CHN, enables the Alliance to leverage the unique capabilities and strengths of each lead agency; whilst also fostering broader member engagement across stakeholder groups.

Funding for the Alliance should include allocation of resources for secretariat activities and projects, and also to continue existing youth lived experience initiatives within Government, through the Alliance Youth Reference Group (YRG). The work of the YRG and associated lived experience positions within ACT Health demonstrate a genuine commitment from Government

towards valuing and promoting lived experience in system-level planning, design, delivery and review.

A whole-of-government and whole-of-community approach to mental health

The Youth Coalition is of the view that **responsibility for child and youth mental health extends beyond any single sector, and is a shared, whole-of-community responsibility**. This view was supported in the recent [Prevention United report](#), which described the need for a whole-of-community approach and sustained leadership, resourcing and collaboration across sectors (p. 17).

Opportunities exist within the forthcoming ACT Mental Health and Suicide Prevention Strategy; and the review of the Mental Health Act 2015, to reframe the existing paradigm in the ACT, which often focuses primarily on clinical responses to mental illness. These key legislative and policy documents set the frameworks by which the ACT as a jurisdiction, as government, as service providers, and as community members conceptualise mental health, and design policy and service responses. Shifting to a paradigm that encompasses a wider view of mental health, whilst still being inclusive of mental illness, provides greater scope to work towards genuine whole-of-government and whole-of-community approaches. This requires a comprehensive and robust review of the *Mental Health Act 2015*.

Recommendations for ACT Health Investment:

1. Deliver ACT Labor election commitments in full, to continue funding community-based youth mental health programs and initiatives.
2. Allocate funding for the *ACT Child and Youth Mental Health Sector Alliance* secretariat and project support; and, to continue existing youth lived experience initiatives within Government, through the Alliance Youth Reference Group (YRG).
3. Conduct a comprehensive review of the *Mental Health Act 2015*, to encompass a wider view of mental health, inclusive of mental illness, which provides greater scope for genuine whole-of-government and whole-of-community approaches to mental health.

Canberra 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, and to ensure specific support is available for children whose parents experience mental illness, especially young carers.

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;

- There is a gap in service provision for young people once they turn 18 years old and are no longer eligible to access CAMHS, and transitions at this point are not well managed.

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.

Improved pathways from CAMHS for young people turning 18

In 2023, the Youth Coalition conducted consultations with young people and parents regarding their experiences of accessing CAMHS, which identified **ineffective transition pathways for young people turning 18 years old**. CHS Adult Mental Health Services (AMHS) generally work to a higher threshold of mental health severity, resulting in a system gap for young adults who require acute support but do not meet the threshold to access AMHS. The age cut-off for access to CAMHS once young people turn 18 does not align with community-based mental health services, which usually enables young people to access services up until the age of 25.

Scoping is required to examine the **feasibility of establishing a 'young adult' program or team, which may be delivered collaboratively between CAMHS and AMHS**. As an 'overlap' program between CAMHS and AMHS, this would require minimal resources, and would be a **cost-effective way to build capability and shared processes** between CAMHS and AMHS to support this age group; including to transition young people to community-based services where appropriate. Scoping to design a shared program and/or processes should be co-designed with young people with lived experience, as well as parents/carers, to build their input into service design.

Expanding access to the Mental Health Service for People with Intellectual Disability

Currently, **young people aged 12-17 with co-occurring mental health concerns and intellectual disability (ID) experience barriers to accessing support**. While children can access community paediatric services up to age 12; young people cannot access the *Mental Health Service for People with Intellectual Disability* (MHID) until after they turn 18. As a consultancy service providing clinical assessment and recommendations, MHID provides integrated support to people with co-occurring mental health and ID, and acts as a 'bridge' between systems.

Expanding access to MHID to young people from the age of 12, including those with moderate ID presentations, would allow these young people and their families to access specialist, expert knowledge; whilst supporting their therapeutic relationship with their existing practitioner or service provider (e.g. mental health or NDIS) to continue. This would increase services' capability to support this cohort of young people, enable shared care, and better respond to the needs of young people with complex and co-occurring needs, as identified through the [ACT 'Missing Middle' report](#).

Re-establishing supports for children of parents with a mental illness

We welcome the ACT Labor commitment to ensure specific support is available for children whose parents experience mental illness, especially young carers. [Over a decade ago](#), the ACT Government delivered a specialist position within Health to provide training to government and non-government organisations, and liaison to children of parents with a mental illness (COPMI) (p. 111, 114). **Re-establishing a dedicated COPMI position within ACT Health is a cost-effective way** to strengthen supports for children whose parents experience mental illness.

Recommendations for Canberra Health Services Investment:

4. 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.
5. Allocate funding to undertake scoping for a 'young adult' transition program/team, delivered collaboratively between CAMHS and AMHS, to better support young people aged 18-25, including those transitioning to community-based services; through co-design with young people with lived experience and parents/carers.
6. Expand access to the *Mental Health Service for People with Intellectual Disability* program to young people from age 12, including those with moderate ID presentations.
7. Re-establish a dedicated COPMI position within Canberra Health Services, as part of election commitments to provide support to children whose parents experience mental illness, especially young carers.

ACT Education Directorate: Adequate infrastructure for the Flexible Education Program (Muliyan)

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 are intended to offer inclusive, safe and flexible learning environments for students requiring complex and intensive support¹.

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 **well-resourced through staffing, its infrastructure is inadequate**. We understand that **consequently, student capacity has reduced from 30 to 15 due to a pause in referrals**. ACT

¹ ACT Education Directorate. (2024). Annual Report 2023-24. ACT Government, p 79.

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. It was indicated that sites for the outreach program need to undergo a WHS assessment.

Government officials at the Hearing confirmed that Muliyan is 'oversubscribed', with Muliyan consistently receiving higher referrals than there are vacant places. The limitations of the existing site were also noted, i.e., its delivery within an office setting, which is not suitable for all students. **Demand is likely to increase as the *Minimum Age of Criminal Responsibility* is raised in 2025. 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.**

Urgent action is needed to locate more appropriate temporary accommodation for the Muliyan program that allows it to increase its on-site student capacity. This may be available through capital improvement of an **existing vacant ACT Government site**. Longer-term planning is also needed to build 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 'Gunners Place' youth program, while awaiting construction of the permanent Gungahlin Youth and Community Centre.

Review the Flexible Education Program pathways, including to respond to MACR

Government officials at the **Annual Report Committee Hearings suggested that a review of the Flexible Education Program will occur**, to consider 'numbers' of students across all Flexible Education Program services, including in response to the forthcoming increase to the Minimum Age of Criminal Responsibility. **We would welcome a review, which should identify supported pathways that provide continuity of education across the program services;** including for young people in or exiting Bimberi, who are accessing residential care and youth homelessness services, or who have individual complexities. For example, this may include the development of transition/bridging programs based on throughcare principles that support young people transitioning between services.

Recommendations for ACT Education Directorate Investment:

8. Urgent investment to locate appropriate temporary accommodation for the Muliyan flexible education program, to enable it to return to an on-site capacity of 30 students, with potential expansion to 50 students.
9. Longer-term planning to invest in fit-for-purpose sites for Muliyan on the north- and south-side of Canberra.
10. Conduct a review of the Flexible Education Program, to consider how it may better provide supported pathways to education for young people impacted by raising the Minimum Age of Criminal Responsibility, who are exiting Bimberi, or accessing residential care or youth homelessness services.

Community Services Directorate: Bolster the ACT Child, Youth and Family Services Program (CYFSP)

The *ACT Child, Youth and Family Services Program* (CYFSP) funds a range of community-based service providers to deliver support to children, young people and families across the ACT. Administered through the Community Services Directorate, the CYFSP sub-sector has participated in an extended commissioning process since 2022, and were recently notified that the grants process for the future service system will be delayed by a further two years.

As a community-based system of accessible support, the **CYFSP both complements and supports a range of other sub-sectors**. For example, the CYFSP often supports young people who are receiving, or waiting to receive, mental health support. Young people with high levels of distress, and their families, may access CYFSP youth engagement programs, arts programs or family support services; which provide ongoing practical, emotional and social support. The **CYFSP is pivotal to providing early support to children, young people and families to deliver better outcomes for families at risk of involvement with the child and youth protection system**, as articulated in the Strategy [Next Steps for Our Kids 2022-2030](#) (p. 30).

CYFSP programs, including youth workers, are a **conduit to specialist DFV services** for young people and families impacted by family violence, and may be among the first to identify young people who are impacted by DFV and in need of support. With these, and a range of wider initiatives occurring, including raising the *Minimum Age of Criminal Responsibility*, **a robust, well-supported and appropriately resourced CYFSP is essential to supporting an effective service system**.

There has been **no substantial increase in funding to the CYFSP, aside from CPI, since 2013** (when additional youth engagement funding was delivered)². Between 2016 and 2024, **contracts were extended six times without additional funding**, contributing to program and workforce instability. Existing services were recently notified of another unexpected two-year extension from June 2025, using existing funding structures. Messaging delivered through the commissioning process has indicated that no additional funding will be available through a future grants process.

This **further two-year delay will have significant ramifications** for a sector that is already constrained in its ability to respond to increasing demand, especially in regions with substantial population growth over the past decade. Many services invested significant time in 2024, preparing for a grants process that was expected to take place in early 2025. It is **critically important that this further two-year delay be productive**, and lead to a future CYFSP service system that is appropriately resourced and supported.

Recommendations for ACT Community Services Directorate Investment (CYFSP):

11. Undertake scoping to understand the true cost of delivering community services through the CYFSP, the ACT Government's primary investment in community-based child, youth and family early support services.

² Community Services Directorate. (August 2022). Commissioning Discovery: Child, Youth and Family Services Program (CYFSP). Version 5: Consultation Draft.

Community Services Directorate: Co-Design a meaningful Youth Strategy

We welcome 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 '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, such as the Youth Coalition. As part of this process, it **would be valuable to review the purpose and functions of existing ACT Government youth engagement mechanisms**. 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* 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).

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

12. 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. This should include a review of existing ACT Government youth engagement mechanisms.

Community Services Directorate: Assess the ACT Youth Housing and 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 are emerging, 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 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.** This should be a systematic process conducted in collaboration with key services, to enable the ACT Government to understand current system opportunities and constraints, to inform future commissioning processes.

Recommendations for ACT Community Services Directorate Investment (Housing and Homelessness):

13. Conduct a systematic and collaborative needs and assets assessment of the ACT youth housing and homelessness system, to understand system opportunities and constraints.

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 on hannah@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.