

Families ACT's commentary on ACT 2023-24 budget announcements

This is a brief commentary on announcements in the 2023-24 ACT Budget. For a comprehensive overview and analysis of budget announcements affecting young people (12-25 year olds), please refer to the [Youth Coalition of the ACT's budget briefing](#). For a comprehensive overview and analysis of spending across the broader ACT community, please refer to the [ACTCOSS Budget Bulletin 2023-24](#). For more information on all the budget announcements, please refer to the [ACT Governments budget 2023-24 papers](#).

Overview

Overall, Families ACT welcomes the 2023-24 ACT Budget which delivers much needed funding across a wide range of areas including community services, health care, education, homelessness services, public housing and public transport. We are pleased that most of our recommendations from [our 2023-24 ACT budget submission](#) were taken up by the ACT Government recognising the importance of the work of community sector organisations supporting vulnerable children and families in the Territory.

While the lack of detail in the budget papers on how funding is shared between government services and NGO frontline services is frustrating at times, especially in light of the Commissioning principles of collaboration and true partnership, we are excited to learn more about some announcements in the coming weeks.

Key ACT 2023-24 budget announcements

In line with [our 2023-24 ACT budget submission](#), Families ACT especially welcomes the following ACT 2023-24 budget announcements:

- More than \$10 million over four years for **new service responses to raising the minimum age of criminal responsibility**, including for an ongoing Functional Family Therapy Youth Justice program, establishment of a Therapeutic Support Panel and intensive case management and support services including accommodation (page 131, Budget Outlook)

We applaud this funding for new service responses under the reforms required to raise the minimum age of criminal responsibility (MACR) and the broader service responses to young people who engage in, or are at risk of engaging in, harmful behaviours. Families ACT has long been insistent that the legislative change of raising the MACR must be underpinned by major service reform which establishes a therapeutic support system equipped to work with children aged 7-13 with concerning and/or harmful behaviours. This is a great first step in the right direction and we will continue to work with the ACT Government on these important reforms.

- Funding of \$2.178 million in 2023-24 for **children and youth mental health** including MindMap Online Youth Navigation Portal, Youth Aware of Mental Health Program, **WOKE** and Stepping Stones. Funding also includes establishment of the Child/Youth Mental Health and Wellbeing Services Network (page 163, Budget Outlook)

We welcome this pre-budget announcement to provide a one-year funding extension for local children and youth mental health programs including WOKE and Stepping Stones. Both of these programs were at risk of closure at the end of June 2023 under their current Commonwealth funding. We hope that this interim funding provides an opportunity to explore longer-term funding options including through the current Mental Health Commissioning cycle. We also welcome the funding of the newly formed Child and Youth Mental Health Sector Network of which Families ACT is a part of.

- Additional funding of \$65.4 million over four years under the *Next Steps for Our Kids Strategy 2022-2030* to establish a **new residential care provider** and **Chief Practitioner** (page 130, Budget outlook)

We generally welcome the somewhat unexpected announcement of establishing the '*role of Chief Practitioner to oversee practice development, training and quality improvement for the child protection and family sector in the ACT*' (page 130, Budget Outlook paper), but are seeking more detail about this initiative. We are particularly interested to know more about the Chief Practitioner role, its funding allocation and how it will be delivered – in joint collaboration with the community services sector or solely by government? We will continue to work with the ACT Government on the important child protection reforms.

- More than \$29million (\$26.877m in capital expenditure over three years and \$2.325m for the cost of services over four years) for the design and construction of a **Gungahlin Community Centre**. The centre will host a range of community services, including a **youth centre** and space for community activities. While the centre is under construction **an interim location will be rented to re-establish the youth centre** (, page 142, Budget Outlook)

Families ACT is delighted that the ACT Government will fund an interim location to re-establish the Gungahlin Youth Centre while the new premises are being built.

- More than \$345 million over four years in additional funding for housing and homes measures (page 65, Budget outlook) including:
 - \$177.068m in Housing ACT operations, repairs, and maintenance (page.168, Budget Outlook);
 - A \$60m Affordable Housing Fund, to grow the number of long-term affordable rental homes. This fund includes Build-to-Rent initiatives and support for the community housing sector (page .115, Budget Outlook)
 - \$55.9m for 140 new public housing dwellings (page 169, Budget Outlook)

- \$15.895m over four years to increase capacity of existing service providers. Partially funded through the Commonwealth National Housing and Homelessness Agreement in the first year (page 168, Budget Outlook)

In line with our [policy brief](#), we welcome the ACT Government's pre-budget announcement of \$345m in additional funding for housing and homes measures in the 2023-24 ACT Budget to improve social housing and housing affordability for Canberrans. The investment includes \$56 million for 140 new public housing dwellings and a \$60 million Affordable Housing fund to grow the number of long-term affordable rental homes. We will continue to advocate for stable, affordable housing options in the ACT as this is an essential element in people feeling connected and able to contribute to their community.

Other ACT 2023-24 budget announcements to note

- \$15m in **increased funding for the community sector (5.25% indexation rate)** (page 111, Budget Outlook)

Families ACT welcomes this announcement allowing community sector organisations to increase their existing staff wages.

- \$5.917m (capital) and \$53.160m (\$24.275m offset expenses) over four years for **universal access to preschool for three-year-olds** (page 141, Budget Outlook)

We applaud the announcement providing one day per week free early childhood education for all three-year olds in the ACT from January 2024 and investment in the early childhood education workforce.

- \$679,000 (fully offset) over two years for **implementing the external merits review process** for child protection decisions relating to care plans (page 127, Budget Outlook)

We welcome this announcement as Families ACT was consulted by the ACT Government on how the external merits review process could be improved and re-established. We are pleased to see funding for the implementation of this important review process.

- \$15.796m over four years (fully offset by the Health Funding Envelope) to **expand paediatric services in the ACT**, including the establishment of **a dedicated paediatric gender service** (page 163, Budget Outlook)

Families ACT is pleased about the announcement to expand paediatric services in the ACT meeting the increased demand for such a service.

Closing comment

Families ACT congratulates the ACT Government on their ACT 2023-24 budget allocating solid funding where it is most needed. We are excited to learn more about the details of the unexpected, but welcomed announcement of the Chief Practitioner role under the *'Next Steps for our Kids Strategy'*.

Given the lack of information and detail on some of the announcements, we will seek clarification from the ACT Government Directorates on those in the coming weeks. We agree with ACTCOSS¹ that it is essential that a fair share of government funding is allocated to community sector frontline services who are often best placed to deliver services as well as enhancing the Government's return on investment.

This commentary was prepared by Yvonne Gritschneider, acting EO of Families ACT. For any inquiries or comments, please email comms@familiesact.org.au!

¹ ACTCOSS Mediarelease 27 June 23: [ACT Budget 2023 – Solid Investments, Time for Greater Collaboration](#) (accessed 3 July 2023)