



YWCA CANBERRA



**ACT Budget Consultation 2026-2027**

YWCA Canberra

## **Acknowledgement of Country**

YWCA Canberra proudly recognises the rights of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to own and control their cultures and pays our respect to these rights. YWCA Canberra acknowledges the need to respect and encourage the diversity of Indigenous cultures and to respect Indigenous worldviews, lifestyles and customary laws. We extend our respect to the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women who for thousands of years have preserved the culture and practices of their communities on country. This land was never surrendered, and we acknowledge that it always was and will continue to always be Aboriginal land.

## **About YWCA Canberra**

YWCA Canberra is a feminist not-for-profit organisation that has provided community services and represented women's issues in Canberra since 1929. Our mission is 'We strengthen communities by supporting girls and women through our services and advocacy' and our vision is 'Girls and women thriving'.

We provide essential, quality services for women, girls and families in the ACT and surrounding regions. We work in the areas of children's services, community development, homelessness and affordable housing, youth services, personal and professional training, women's leadership and advocacy.

We are externally accredited against the [Quality Improvement Council \(QIC\) Health and Community Service Standards \(7th Edition\)](#). Accreditation against the QIC standards support us to improve client and community engagement, diversity and cultural appropriateness, management systems, governance and service delivery, while committing to a cycle of continuous quality improvement. In addition to the QIC standards, we are accredited against the following external client-related service standards for our key areas of work:

- [Australian Charities and Not for Profit Commission](#)
- [National Quality Standard for Early Childhood Education and Care and School Aged Care](#)
- [National Regulatory System for Community Housing](#)
- [Registered Training Organisations Standards](#)

Through our national Affiliate Association with YWCA Australia, we are part of the World YWCA network, which connects 120 countries across the globe.

## **Introduction**

YWCA Canberra have been long-standing contributors to the ACT Government's community consultation process on the Territory Budget. We use this process to draw attention to the lives of women, girls, and families in the ACT and put forward policy suggestions to improve our community for everyone.

More people than ever are turning to community services, some rely on us to help stock their pantry, access housing or tenancy support or find affordable early learning. The stubborn state of the local and national economy is impacting on utilities, services and living costs and means many people are still making difficult choices. Our food pantry service in Lanyon has seen a doubling of demand and a shift in user demographics over the past two years. Concurrently more dependent children are presenting to our domestic violence support service.

The shift in demand and client complexity must be continually foreshadowed by government and managed by a sustainable funding envelope that accounts for demand driven by natural population growth, legislative reform and ongoing living pressures. While the \$10 million injection into the community services sector in the 2025-2026 Budget was welcomed, when apportioned across the breadth of community services it did little to address significant pressures on services overheads. With additional funding relief tiered between \$5,000 and \$38,840 it was never going to be a panacea.

At the same time as our community services see a lift in demand, the public and political conversation about safeguarding within Canberra's early learning services is not adequately capturing the vital role that non-profit providers play in the matrix of child safety. This submission highlights the link between safeguarding and supporting non-profit ECEC providers to operate affordable services. The availability of peppercorn rates at our early learning services such as Condor and Reid allow us to provide critically underfunded programs such as the three-year old preschool initiative and emergency places for vulnerable and at-risk children on behalf of Child, Youth and Family Services. As a non-profit provider of early learning services our services are trusted by parents across Canberra who rely on quality and affordable early education. YWCA Canberra currently holds leases to operate early learning services across a number of government facilities under different rent models. Some facilities require us to pay commercial rent to the ACT Government while others are leased at nominal rates. While the quality of our services remains consistent across sites, peppercorn leases allow for greater affordability for parents and carers. The ACT Government can provide certainty by leasing facilities to non-profit providers at nominal rates across all government buildings.

## **Summary of Recommendations:**

- 1. Introduce nominal fee settings for non-profit providers of early education services where the service operates from a government owned building.**
- 2. Prioritise non-profit providers to deliver early education services in all ACT government buildings.**
- 3. Commit to retaining the existing peppercorn tenancies and offering new ones in line with demand and population growth, to allow for delivery of affordable and quality early learning services.**
- 4. Adequately resource the three-year old preschool initiative and the emergency placement program for children who are in early learning services without reducing capacity of services to provide mainstream places.**
- 5. Continue to fund specialist domestic violence case workers from the Safer Families Levy over the forward estimates and align contract end-dates with existing contracts for specialist children's workers.**
- 6. Ensure service contract renewals are appropriately administered to provide security to employers, clients and the workforce.**
- 7. Continue longer-term investment in homelessness responses and services to allow for flexible responses to increasing client complexity.**
- 8. Re-establish the homelessness portfolio with its own ministerial remit.**
- 9. Establish distinct social housing targets and policy agenda that is not conflated with the Territory's affordable housing strategy.**
- 10. Invest \$200,000 per annum toward a new Community Coordination model that allows for continuation of successful evidence-based, place-based early-intervention support and direct responses to data on at-risk children, young people and families across YWCA Canberra's service footprint to replace the loss of the ACT's core Network Coordination funding.**

## **Valuing non-profit early education services through sustainable tenure**

Peppercorn leases are an intrinsic part of community sector sustainability, and YWCA Canberra also considers them a core component in the matrix of safeguarding measures in early learning. The ACT Government currently owns the facilities hosting roughly 30 community-based early education centres. These facilities are managed by Infrastructure Canberra under nominal lease arrangements. However, despite being listed on the public register, some centres are no longer operating, and their future is uncertain, including the Civic Early Childhood Service. Retaining these peppercorn leases is pivotal to delivering affordable and quality early education to Canberra families and supporting the non-profit sector which consistently outperforms profit-based services.

YWCA Canberra currently holds leases to operate early learning services across a number of government facilities under different rent models. Some facilities require us to pay commercial rent to the ACT Government while others are leased at nominal rates. While the quality of our services remains consistent across sites, peppercorn leases allow for greater affordability for parents and carers. Services which operate out of existing government buildings that are not provided with nominal rent require higher price settings to manage significant outlays. For example, our early learning centre in Reid, which operates under a peppercorn lease, enables us to offer places at an average of \$30 less per day than other services in the area.

Moreover, nominal lease arrangements have been a critical feature in delivering the Government's three-year-old preschool initiative and emergency placements. In light of consistent underfunding of these programs however, the availability of peppercorn rates are now pivotal in maintaining viability. For example, following the failure to sufficiently fund the three-year old inclusion initiative, which provided placements for highly vulnerable children, some of our centres have made the difficult decision to reduce the number of places available or withdraw from the three-year-old initiative.

Further, it should be noted that the decision to apply nominal rent for critical services operating from government own facilities is an arbitrary one. Modern facilities like the Sue Salthouse Community Centre are not captured under peppercorn rents, a fact borne out in the demonstrative underutilisation of the building. The ACT Government can provide certainty by leasing facilities to non-profit providers of foundational education and community services at nominal rates across all government buildings.

- 1. Introduce nominal fee settings for non-profit providers of early education services where the service operates from a government-owned building.**
- 2. Prioritise non-profit providers to deliver early education services in all ACT government buildings.**
- 3. Commit to retaining the existing peppercorn tenancies, and offering new ones, in line with demand and population growth to allow for delivery of quality community services, including early learning services.**
- 4. Adequately resource the three-year old preschool initiative and the emergency placement program for children who are in early learning services without reducing capacity for services to provide mainstream places.**

### **Sustainably fund specialist domestic violence support workers**

In our 2024-2025 ACT Budget submission, YWCA Canberra identified a critical gap in our capacity to directly provide trauma-informed support directly to children and young people experiencing domestic and family violence. Following our advocacy, the ACT Government invested \$300,000/year to establish two specialist children's workers in our Domestic Violence Support Service. This investment has significantly strengthened our ability to support children as victims of family violence in their own right, in line with the National Plan to End Violence Against Women and Children 2022–2032. Already these roles are providing a tangible impact enabling developmentally appropriate interventions, safety planning, and recovery-focused support for children and young people.

With the ACT Government collaborating on the development of the new 10-year strategy on the prevention of domestic, family and sexual violence however, there is a pressing need to reflect on the sustainability of the existing funding envelope and the administration of complementary funding cycles.

In this regard, ACT Government funding has supported our Domestic Violence Support Service since July 2023, allowing us to employ two full time specialist Case Managers and receive warm referrals and self-referrals from the wider ACT Community Services Sector. Demand for this service has been consistently strong, growing by 30% over the 2024 calendar year. In order to accommodate this growth, and to manage worker load, the service received funding to expand in 2024 allowing us to recruit two additional case managers.

The current contract timelines for the specialist children’s workers and for the full-time case managers within our Domestic Violence Support Service do not align, however. Funding for the initial case managers under the 2023 contract (\$352,000/year plus indexation) will expire at the end of June 2026. The additional funding (\$350,000 plus indexation) to expand the service, which was received in 2024, will expire in 2027. Adding to this layering of contract timelines, the funding envelope for the specialist children’s workers will expire in 2029. This creates a confusing and uncertain funding framework for our service: our domestic violence case managers do not have long-term contract certainty and our newly funded specialist children’s workers cannot work in isolation without case managers to provide services to the protective parent who presents with a child.

When confronted with looming uncertainty, staff can feel compelled to transition to more sustainable jobs, including outside the community sector. This longstanding reality of work in the community sector, however, can and should be avoided. The ACT Government’s Safer Families Levy, applied to every rate paying household and landowner, presents a predictable and increasing revenue stream that should be prioritised to frontline services to avoid emerging funding cliffs. We call on the ACT Government to deliver certainty to the domestic violence response sector and ensure prioritisation of the frontline sector and that funding is guaranteed, and aligned with complementary programs, within a reasonable window prior to the end of existing contracts.

## **Recommendation**

- 1. Continue to fund specialist domestic violence case workers from the Safer Families Levy over the forward estimates and align contract end-dates with existing contracts for specialist children’s workers.**
- 2. Ensure service contract renewals are appropriately administered to provide security for employers, clients and the workforce.**

## **Homelessness resourcing and recognition**

Homelessness in Canberra is increasing. Since December 2024, the number of presentations to homelessness services from women ‘at risk’ of homelessness has increased 25%. This upward trend is not anomalous, however, rather it’s a continuation of a longstanding pattern of growth. Domestic violence remains a common co-presenting factor for service users, of whom women aged 18-45 are the largest cohort. Nationally, there has been a substantial

increase in rough-sleeping, particularly since the onset of COVID-19, and the cohort of homeless persons who are in employment is growing.<sup>[1]</sup> Canberra is not immune to these challenges, and in some cases, they have been exacerbated without a dedicated homelessness portfolio.

As we noted in last year's Budget consultation, the decision to remove the distinct *Homelessness* portfolio and conflate it into *Homes and New Suburbs* has further embedded a peripheralisation of homelessness policy and programs within Housing ACT. We believe that repeated delays to the commencement of crucial homelessness programs such as the central intake service and the Youth Foyer reflect the malaise of a policy area devoid of standalone ministerial accountability. And there is persistent confusion in understanding the distinction between income-based rent and affordable rent which has a tangible impact on the delivery of social housing. Compounding this is the growth in the number of applications for public housing and between September 2024 and 2025 there was a 50% increase in the number of applications for housing. While we have welcomed previous targeted investment, including the 2023-2024 \$20 million boost to homelessness services, the future of this commitment is uncertain. We call on the ACT Government to continue providing a sustained uplift in funding for the homelessness sector. Further, the ACT Government's social housing delivery and ancillary policy must be guided by standalone targets and funding streams and not conflated with affordable housing policy.

- 1. Continue longer term investment in homelessness responses and services to allow for flexible responses to increasing client complexity.**
- 2. Re-establish the homelessness portfolio with its own ministerial remit.**
- 3. Establish social housing targets and ancillary policy agenda that is distinct from the Territory's affordable housing strategy.**

### **Community coordination and innovation for young people**

YWCA Canberra has a 97-year history of providing community services to Canberrans, including for young people. We participated in good faith with the Commissioning process for CYFSP in the last term of government and raised concerns regarding the future of Network Coordination, a locally based role that links vulnerable young people with relevant services and support. In supporting the Network Coordination model, we showcased the positive impact of our own Network Coordination service in delivering and reporting on positive outcomes for

young people and their support networks. Based in Lanyon, this role worked with at-risk young people, schools, services and other critical touchpoints across Tuggeranong to connect them with local therapeutic support, group programs and other targeted measures.

In light of mounting evidence that increasing numbers of children in Canberra are developmentally vulnerable across five domains including emotional maturity, cognition and general wellbeing,<sup>1</sup> linking at-risk young people with support and community focused services is needed more than ever. Our own Southside Initiative model, a collaboration between YWCA Canberra & Woden Community Service's Network Coordination, demonstrates what can be achieved in shifting the trajectory for vulnerable young people.

We urge the government to reinvest in place-based and collaborative solutions for vulnerable children and young people. With sufficient funding, YWCA Canberra will be able to replicate the Southside Initiative across our service footprint including through Common Ground Dickson, Mura Lanyon Youth and Community Centre and through the scope of welfare services administered centrally. This footprint will allow us to bring the initiative across to young people across Canberra, enhancing opportunities for intervention and outreach prior to escalation.

**1. Invest \$200,000 per annum toward a new Community Coordination model that allows for continuation of successful evidence-based, place-based early-intervention support and direct responses to data on at-risk children, young people and families across YWCA Canberra's service footprint to replace the loss of the ACT's core Network Coordination funding.**

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<sup>1</sup> [https://cityfutures.ada.unsw.edu.au/documents/764/AHM\\_final.pdf](https://cityfutures.ada.unsw.edu.au/documents/764/AHM_final.pdf)

<sup>1</sup> [The AEDC Data 2024 \(NEW\) - Healthy Schools Network ACT](#)