

2020

**THE LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY FOR THE
AUSTRALIAN CAPITAL TERRITORY**

**GOVERNMENT RESPONSE TO THE
SELECT COMMITTEE ON COVID-19 PANDEMIC RESPONSE
INTERIM REPORT 1**

**Presented by
Andrew Barr MLA
Chief Minister
June 2020**

INTRODUCTION

The Government would like to thank members of the community and community groups who have provided submissions or evidence to the Committee.

The Government would also like to note that any responses which are noted or agreed in principle are contingent on future Government funding decisions.

OVERARCHING ACT GOVERNMENT COMMENTS

The COVID-19 health emergency has fundamentally changed the lives of all Australians. ACT Government measures and early action through the National Cabinet have, so far, proved highly successful in containing the outbreak of COVID-19 in the ACT.

COVID-19 Cases in the ACT

As at 2 June there have been 107 confirmed cases of COVID-19 in the ACT with 104 people recovering and three deaths recorded. The last confirmed case in the ACT was recorded on 2 May. This success has allowed the ACT to begin gradually easing COVID-19 restrictions. Further information on the easing of COVID-19 restrictions and social distancing requirements, which remain in place, can be found at the [ACT Government's COVID-19 website](#).¹

ACT Government health response to COVID-19

Testing

Canberrans can access dedicated testing for COVID-19 at the Weston Creek Walk-in Centre, a drive-through testing station at EPIC in North Canberra, assessment clinics in the Canberra Hospital and Calvary Bruce Public Hospital, Winnunga Nimmityjah Aboriginal Health & Community Services, YourGP@Crace and Lakeview Medical Practice Tuggeranong.

Current testing activity is around 300-400 tests per day, however capacity exists to significantly increase activity levels for a number of days or weeks if required. Guidance on COVID-19 symptoms and when testing should be sought is available on the [ACT Government's COVID-19 website](#).²

Public Health Directions

In line with the actions of other States and Territories, the ACT declared a public health emergency under the Public Health Act 1997 on 16 March 2020. The emergency declaration was extended on 7 April 2020 for a further 90 days and will remain in place until public health advice recommends otherwise.

¹ <https://www.covid19.act.gov.au/>

² <https://www.covid19.act.gov.au/protecting-yourself-and-others/getting-tested>

A number of other Public Health Directions have also been put in place for the duration of the Public Health Emergency Declaration including in relation to returned travellers, residential aged care facilities, self-isolation, non-essential gatherings and non-essential businesses and activities.

Ensuring the health care system is equipped to fight COVID-19

COVID-19 Surge Centre

The COVID-19 Surge Centre is a temporary facility located on Garran Oval. The Surge Centre is one part of the ACT's COVID-19 response plan, helping to boost our capacity and enhance our ability to respond to the pandemic. The COVID-19 Surge Centre will become operational only if the ACT sees a surge in COVID-19 infections.

Expanded services at Weston Creek Respiratory Assessment Clinic

The Weston Creek Respiratory Assessment Clinic has expanded its services to provide clinical support for COVID-19 patients who do not require hospital admission.

Telehealth

Canberrans requiring outpatient services can access appointments from home using a Telehealth Service video call. This service is being rolled out initially to Canberra Health Services outpatients, with Calvary Public Hospital Bruce appointments to follow. Using telehealth allows patients to stay home, protecting themselves from potential exposure to COVID-19.

Increasing the supply of personal protective equipment (PPE)

The ACT Government is continuing to work with the Commonwealth and State and Territory Governments to secure sufficient supply of PPE, particularly for front line acute health services and primary care staff. The ACT Government has also established a supply of PPE and hygiene products for non-government organisations, people with disability and carers.

Minimising the risk to aged care facilities

To assist in slowing the spread of COVID-19 in Australia, the National Cabinet has accepted the Australian Health Protection Principal Committee's advice to restrict visitation in aged care facilities. Advice on restricted visitation for all aged care facilities is available on the [ACT Government's COVID-19 website](https://www.covid19.act.gov.au/help-and-advice/aged-care).³

³ <https://www.covid19.act.gov.au/help-and-advice/aged-care>

ACT Government economic response to COVID-19

The ACT Government is delivering more than \$350 million in economic survival packages to support businesses and industry, protect as many jobs as possible, support Canberra households and support our most vulnerable. The measures in the packages are designed to complement action taken by the Commonwealth Government.

To support business and industry, the ACT Government has announced (amongst other measures):

- the establishment of a Canberra Business Advice and Support Service;
- waiver of upcoming food registration, outdoor dining and liquor licensing fees;
- all ACT businesses with Australia-wide wages of up to \$10 million can defer their 2020-21 payroll tax, interest free until 1 July 2022;
- businesses affected by the prohibited activities list are entitled to a six-month waiver of payroll tax;
- small business owners with electricity usage below 100 megawatts per year will see rebates of \$750 automatically applied to their next electricity bill in around June or July 2020; and
- commercial tenancy relief for business tenants and owner-operated commercial properties.

To protect as many jobs as possible, the ACT Government has:

- established the Jobs for Canberrans Fund which will allow the ACT Public Service to employ additional workers on short-term contracts to undertake specific tasks; and
- announced the fast tracking of infrastructure projects (including infrastructure and maintenance work on government-owned community buildings, schools and other facilities).

The community will benefit from a range of measures including:

- a land tax and rates rebate to landlords of residential properties who reduce rents by at least 25 per cent for tenants impacted by COVID-19;
- a moratorium on evictions for six months due to rental arrears;
- a \$150 rebate on the fixed charge component of all residential rates bills in 2020-21;

- households already receiving the Utilities Concession will receive an additional \$200 rebate through their electricity bill;
- Housing ACT will make a one-off bank payment of \$250 to all social housing households by June 2020; and
- the ACT Government will not charge any rent, for a six-month period from 1 April 2020, to community groups occupying ACT Government owned properties.

The ACT Government will also work with non-government organisation partners to develop a \$7 million Community Support Package to best meet increased service demand for emergency relief. In addition, we have announced \$4.5 million for mental health services and supports, \$1.7 million for health sector non-government organisations, and an additional \$580,000 for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations and services. These measures are particularly important in acknowledging the significant impact of COVID-19 on vulnerable Canberrans, families who are doing it tough, and wider community mental health and wellbeing.

Further information on the economic survival packages can be accessed on the [ACT Government's COVID-19 website](#).⁴

Collaboration with the Commonwealth and State and Territory Governments

To date, working collaboratively with other jurisdictions with respect to COVID-19 matters through National Cabinet and other fora has delivered quality outcomes for the ACT community. The ACT actively engages in the National Coordination Mechanism, led by the Commonwealth, and ministerial forums have played an important role in supporting the work of National Cabinet.

The ACT Government will continue to work with the Commonwealth, other jurisdictions and the community to deliver the best possible health, economic and social outcomes to the COVID-19 crisis.

⁴ <https://www.covid19.act.gov.au/business-hub/economic-survival-package>

GOVERNMENT RESPONSE TO COMMITTEE RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendation 1

The Committee recommends that the ACT Government prepare and publish a step-by-step process for easing restrictions in the Territory along the lines of the one prepared by the Northern Territory Government

Government Response

Agreed

The ACT Government has prepared a COVID-19 easing of restrictions Roadmap. The 3 Step Framework for a COVID Safe Australia approved by National Cabinet provides the basis for the ACT's approach to the easing of restrictions.

Progression through the steps will be informed by risk assessments and changing epidemiology.

Further information on the ACT Government's COVID-19 Easing of Restrictions Roadmap is available on the [ACT's COVID-19 website](#).⁵

Recommendation 2

The Committee recommends that the ACT Government remove the current 100-property limit on the land tax concession scheme for landlords, who rent their properties through a community housing provider at an affordable rent to low and moderate income tenants, and make this scheme permanent.

Government Response

Noted

As of 6 May 2020, there are 28 properties being rented under the Affordable Community Housing Land Tax Exemption pilot scheme. This is significantly lower than the 100 property limit for the scheme.

As part of the ACT Government's 2019-20 Budget Review the Government extended the pilot scheme until 30 June 2023. Before the end of the pilot program an evaluation will be

⁵ https://www.covid19.act.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0007/1551778/CV_Roadmap_Recovery-plan_ease-of-restrictions_0.4.1.pdf

undertaken to determine its effectiveness in increasing the supply of affordable rental properties.

The following links provide further information on the [Affordable Community Housing Land Tax Exemption pilot scheme](#)⁶ and the [ACT Government's 2019-20 Budget review](#).⁷

Recommendation 3

The Committee recommends that the ACT Government contact all landlords and tenants that have had their email details recorded when a bond was lodged to inform them of the supports available for renters and landlords alike

Government Response

Agreed

The Office of Rental Bonds will email all recorded tenants and landlords who have provided their email addresses with links to Government information on the supports available in the context of residential tenancies.

Information for tenants, occupants, landlords and real estate agents is available on the [ACT Government's COVID-19 website](#)⁸ and in this [media release from the Chief Minister](#).⁹

Further information is available on the ACT Government's investment in [mediation services to support landlords and tenants to resolve tenancy disputes](#)¹⁰ and the [Conflict resolution service](#).¹¹

Recommendation 4

The Committee recommends that the ACT Government create and make available a standard terms and rights document for tenants and landlords to assist them in understanding changes due to COVID-19.

⁶ https://www.revenue.act.gov.au/land-tax?result_1060955_result_page=6

⁷ https://apps.treasury.act.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0006/1479975/2019-20-budget-review.pdf

⁸ <https://www.covid19.act.gov.au/help-and-advice/residential-tenancies>

⁹ https://www.cmtedd.act.gov.au/open_government/inform/act_government_media_releases/barr/2020/more-information-to-support-tenants-and-landlords

¹⁰ https://www.cmtedd.act.gov.au/open_government/inform/act_government_media_releases/gordon-ramsay-mla-media-releases/2020/dispute-resolution-for-residential-tenants-and-landlords

¹¹ https://www.cmtedd.act.gov.au/open_government/inform/act_government_media_releases/gordon-ramsay-mla-media-releases/2020/conflict-resolution-service-now-providing-mediation-for-residential-tenants-and-landlords

Government Response

Agreed

The ACT Government has provided detailed information on the [rights and obligations of residential tenants and landlords](#)¹² on the ACT's COVID-19 website.

Recommendation 5

The Committee recommends that the ACT Government establish a tenant transfer system to allow for easier and more convenient change of tenants and retrieval of bonds for members of group houses.

Government Response

Agreed in principle

The ACT Government has introduced the Residential Tenancies Amendment Bill 2020 which includes an updated framework to facilitate changes in share housing arrangements.

Recommendation 6

The Committee recommends that the ACT Government develop a framework for the repayment of any rental arrears accrued during the COVID-19 eviction moratorium.

Government Response

Noted

The ACT Government is considering measures to support tenants to manage the repayment of any rental arrears accrued during the COVID-19 eviction moratorium.

Recommendation 7

The Committee recommends that the ACT Government develop a plan to prohibit a lessor or grantor from seeking termination solely on the basis of rent arrears accrued during the period covered by the Residential Tenancies (COVID-19 Emergency Response) Declaration 2020.

Government Response

¹² <https://www.covid19.act.gov.au/help-and-advice/residential-tenancies>

Noted

The protections cover only COVID-19 impacted tenants, not those with capacity to pay who may accrue arrears during the COVID-19 Emergency.

Although the current declaration is for three months, the Government has committed to a six-month moratorium.

The Government will continue to monitor the situation which could include extending the current declaration to further support Canberrans who have been adversely impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Recommendation 8

The Committee recommends that the ACT Government explore a method for renters in fixed-term leases to terminate their tenancies during the COVID-19 emergency, such as by using the same mechanism available to people on periodic tenancies, i.e. by providing three weeks' notice.

Government Response

Noted

The Government will continue to monitor the situation to determine whether additional regulations are required to provide more support for tenants and landlords throughout the course of the COVID-19 emergency declaration.

Further information is available on [Dispute resolution](#)¹³ for residential tenants and landlords, and the [Conflict Resolution Service](#) now providing mediation for residential tenants and landlords.¹⁴

Recommendation 9

The Committee recommends that the ACT Government consider providing financial mechanisms to assist community housing providers in expanding their property holdings to provide accommodation for people eligible for community housing.

¹³ https://www.cmtedd.act.gov.au/open_government/inform/act_government_media_releases/gordon-ramsay-mla-media-releases/2020/dispute-resolution-for-residential-tenants-and-landlords

¹⁴ https://www.cmtedd.act.gov.au/open_government/inform/act_government_media_releases/gordon-ramsay-mla-media-releases/2020/conflict-resolution-service-now-providing-mediation-for-residential-tenants-and-landlords

Government Response

Noted

The ACT Government is implementing actions outlined in the housing strategy and includes specific actions to support community housing providers. The Affordable Community Housing Land Tax Exemption pilot scheme currently underway, provides a land tax exemption for community housing providers (CHPs) that provide discounted rent to eligible renters.

To support CHPs during the health emergency further rates rebates are being provided to CHPs that support tenants with rent reductions. Further information is available on the [ACT Housing Strategy](#)¹⁵ and the [Affordable Community Housing Land Tax Exemption pilot scheme](#).¹⁶

Recommendation 10

The Committee recommends that the ACT Government make all necessary representations to the Commonwealth to assist community service organisations to obtain COVID-19 funding.

Government Response

Agreed

ACT Government Ministers will continue to make representations through existing Commonwealth mechanisms to assist community service organisations to obtain COVID-19 funding.

Recommendation 11

The Committee recommends that the ACT Government consider establishing a small infrastructure grants program to assist community organisations who may need extra support to help deliver services in response to COVID-19.

Government Response

Agreed

¹⁵ <https://www.act.gov.au/homes-housing/act-housing-strategy>

¹⁶ https://www.revenue.act.gov.au/land-tax?result_1060955_result_page=6

Funding of \$1 million through the Rapid Response Stimulus Grants program has been allocated to support organisations to adopt innovative and essential business model changes that adapt their service in response to COVID-19. This funding can be utilised to support costs of laptops, mobile phones and office equipment.

Further information is available on the [Rapid Response Stimulus Grants program](#).¹⁷

The Participation Community Support and Infrastructure Grants closed on 19 May 2020. These grants aim to support community organisations to deliver programs and services effectively and efficiently for the benefit of Canberrans under three categories: community support and capacity; non-fixed infrastructure and equipment; and minor capital works and fixed infrastructure.

Recommendation 12

The Committee recommends that the ACT Government ensure that disability service providers, aged care homes and similar service providers have adequate supplies of personal protective equipment (PPE) to protect and reassure both clients and staff.

Government Response

Agreed

The health and wellbeing of sector staff and clients is paramount and \$250,000 of the COVID-19 Stimulus package Community Support Package is dedicated specifically to address PPE supply.

More information is available on the [distribution of personal protective equipment to the community and allied health services](#).¹⁸

Recommendation 13

The Committee recommends that the ACT Government provide funding to enable service providers to shift to on-line delivery of services where possible.

Government Response

Agreed

¹⁷ <https://www.communityservices.act.gov.au/home/grants/covid-19-stimulus-rapid-response-grants-program>

¹⁸ <https://www.covid19.act.gov.au/protecting-yourself-and-others/protect-yourself#Distribution-of-personal-protective-equipment-to-the-community-and-allied-health-services>

The 2019-20 Participation – Digital Grants closed on 19 May. These grants support community organisations wishing to establish or enhance their capacity to effectively engage their communities and clients to participate fully in the life of Canberra through the use of digital technology.

Funding of \$1 million through the Rapid Response Stimulus Grants program has been allocated to support organisations to adopt innovative and essential business model changes that adapt their service in response to COVID-19.

Further information is available on the [Rapid Response Stimulus Grants program](#).¹⁹

Recommendation 14

The Committee recommends that OneLink expand its opening hours so that it is available later at night and on weekends.

Government Response

Noted

OneLink operates from 8am to 6pm Monday to Friday (excluding public holidays) and on weekends from 12:30pm to 5pm. During after hours, if people contact OneLink, they can leave a voice message for OneLink and OneLink staff will make contact the next day to follow up. At present, voice message data does not indicate sufficient demand to warrant a further extension of OneLink's opening hours at night or on weekends. OneLink and Housing ACT will continue to monitor demand for after-hours services from OneLink.

Recommendation 15

The Committee recommends that the ACT Government fund and participate in a Connections Week exercise at least twice a year to connect with rough sleepers and other people experiencing, or at risk of, homelessness and understand who they are and their individual circumstances and needs.

Government Response

Agreed in principle

¹⁹ <https://www.communityservices.act.gov.au/home/grants/covid-19-stimulus-rapid-response-grants-program>

The ACT Government funds a number of existing programs to meet this need. Two key services, St Vincent de Paul's Street to Home and the Early Morning Centre, provide specialised support to those sleeping rough. For 2019-20 the ACT Government allocated \$773,938 in funding to these services. On a daily basis, Street to Home program supports Canberrans sleeping rough. The Early Morning Centre also has strong connections with clients who are sleeping rough or homeless and provides a place where people can link in with a range of supports and services.

Recommendation 16

The Committee recommends the ACT Government prioritise the city centre as the next location for a COVID-19 testing facility, if testing facilities are expanded.

Government Response

Noted

At this stage the ACT Government has no plans to expand testing facilities. Existing capacity through the Walk in Centres and EPIC drive through, alongside the clinics within the public hospitals and the Commonwealth Government funded respiratory assessment clinics, is providing adequate capacity for handling demand.

Recommendation 17

The Committee recommends that the ACT Government report regularly to the Legislative Assembly, and the Garran community, on any alternative uses proposed for the pop-up Emergency Department while it is on Garran Oval.

Government Response

Noted

The Surge Centre has been designed to be used for COVID-19 purposes. In the very unlikely event that any change in the use of the facility is proposed, this will be reported to the Legislative Assembly and Garran community. No alternative uses are currently being considered.

Recommendation 18

The Committee recommends that the ACT Government prepare plans for the future use of the pop-up emergency building once it is removed from Garran Oval.

Government Response

Noted

Consideration will be given to the future uses of the facility. It has been engineered to be deconstructed after its use, with the majority of materials able to be accommodated in 20ft shipping containers for transport, storage and reuse.

Recommendation 19

The Committee recommends that the ACT Government require that hospitality workers undertake hygiene training specific to COVID-19.

Government Response

Noted

The Government will provide fee-free infection control training across four nationally accredited infection control skill sets for workers in customer facing roles from 5 June 2020. This training will help workers understand how to minimise the risk of COVID-19 spreading as more businesses start to reopen.

All registered food businesses are required to have at least one staff member who has a Food Safety Supervisor qualification. In the hospitality sector this qualification includes the competencies: *Use hygienic practices for food safety*; and *Participate in safe food handling practices*. This training is considered appropriate to manage hygiene related safety risks in a hospitality setting.

In addition, all other staff working in a registered food business are currently encouraged to undertake the I'm Alert food safety training which is a basic online course that can be accessed at no cost from [the Food Safety section of ACT Health website](#).²⁰ These courses are considered appropriate to provide training on safe food handling and hygiene practices, without placing an additional cost or regulatory burden on businesses. Businesses will be encouraged to include appropriate hygiene training for workers as part of the COVID-19 Safety Plans.

Further information is available on the [Food Safety Supervisor qualification](#)²¹ and [Food Safety Training](#),²² including the I'm Alert food safety training, on the ACT Health website.

²⁰ <https://health.act.gov.au/businesses/food-safety-regulation/food-safety-training-and-resources>

²¹ <https://health.act.gov.au/businesses/food-safety-regulation/starting-food-business/food-safety-supervisors>

²² <https://health.act.gov.au/businesses/food-safety-regulation/food-safety-training-and-resources>

Recommendation 20

The Committee recommends that the ACT Government prepare rules for the reopening of cafes, restaurants and other venues such as provision of hand sanitiser, distancing between tables, and cleaning of premises.

Government Response**Agreed**

Rules for re-opening cafes restaurants are dependent on the Public Health Directions, which are made by the Chief Health Officer.

On Friday 15 May 2020, the ACT Government published a COVID-19 Dine-in Checklist for Restaurants, Bars and Clubs looking to reactivate dining-in services. This document provides significant guidance on best practice with regard to physical distancing, cleaning and other matters and has been provided to all food businesses in the ACT

Recommendation 21

The Committee recommends that specific and targeted information is provided to patrons to ensure that social distancing measures are adhered to and highlighting the responsibility of each and every person.

Government Response**Agreed**

A range of posters and guidance material is available on the ACT Government's COVID-19 website. The Dine-in Checklist promotes their use within venues and provides a link to resources on the ACT's COVID-19 website.

Recommendation 22

The Committee recommends the ACT Government continues to work with the hospitality and club sector on occupancy arrangements, informed by up to date health advice, particularly with a view to reopening venues and increasing employment in the sector.

Government Response**Agreed**

The ACT Government will continue to work with all sectors to ensure businesses can operate in a safe manner, as per the most up to date health advice.

As part of the Government's COVID-19 Easing of Restrictions Roadmap step 2.1 the ACT will implement a scalable framework for our local hospitality sector to align maximum occupancy with the size and layout of their venue. Cafes, bars, restaurants and clubs will be able to cater for up to 20 people in each enclosed space. This framework allows larger venues with clearly separated enclosed spaces to cater for more patrons. Some of the larger venues in the ACT with multiple enclosed and outdoor spaces may be able to accommodate 150 or more patrons.

Recommendation 23

The Committee recommends the ACT Government give consideration as to whether the national and cultural institutions in the ACT could have a relevant patron limit set for them, informed by up to date health advice, particularly with a view to aiding tourism.

Government Response

Agreed

The Government has considered tourism and venues as part of the next step in the ACT's recovery plan announced on 26 May 2020.

In line with the COVID-19 Easing of Restrictions Roadmap step 2.1, galleries, museums, national institutions and outdoor attractions (such as the Zoo) in the ACT will be able to reopen. Numbers will be restricted to one person per four square metres, including staff. Any gatherings within the institutions will not be able to exceed 20 people

The ACT Government will be working closely with these institutions in the coming weeks as they start to reopen, as we start to welcome domestic visitation back to the ACT in the weeks ahead.

Further information on the COVID-19 Easing of Restrictions Roadmap is available on the ACT Government's [COVID-19 website](#).²³

²³ https://www.covid19.act.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0007/1551778/CV_Roadmap_Recovery-plan_ease-of-restrictions_0.4.1.pdf

Recommendation 24

The Committee recommends that the ACT Government develop and communicate the criteria and process for applying for commercial rates waivers due to COVID-19 pandemic impacts.

Government Response

Agreed

The criteria and process for applying for commercial rates assistance are available on the [revenue.gov.au website](https://www.revenue.act.gov.au/covid-19-assistance).²⁴

²⁴ <https://www.revenue.act.gov.au/covid-19-assistance>