

2022

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

**GOVERNMENT RESPONSE TO THE SELECT COMMITTEE ON THE COVID-19 2021 PANDEMIC
RESPONSE - REPORT ON THE INQUIRY INTO THE COVID-19 2021 PANDEMIC REPONSE**

**Presented by
Andrew Barr MLA
Chief Minister**

Introduction

The Government welcomes the Select Committee's Report on the Inquiry into the COVID-19 2021 Pandemic Response.

On 16 September 2021, the ACT Legislative Assembly established a select committee to consider and report to the Assembly on any matter relating to the ACT Government's health and financial response and any other matter relating to the COVID-19 pandemic as it relates to the ACT.

As a part of the Inquiry into the COVID-19 2021 Pandemic Response, the Select Committee received 25 written submissions and spoke with a variety of witnesses over seven public hearings including several Ministers, government officials, and representatives of community organisations. The Government would like to thank the Select Committee and everyone who took the time to participate and contribute to the Inquiry.

The Committee made 33 recommendations.

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 managing COVID-19 in the ACT.

The ACT's managed approach to COVID-19

As the COVID-19 pandemic continues, our top priority remains to support the health and wellbeing of the ACT community. The ACT's public health objective continues to focus on limiting community transmission and severe disease through our strong vaccination program (which has seen the ACT become one of the most vaccinated cities in the world), and positive community compliance with public health measures such as mask mandates, density limits in venues and restrictions on high-risk settings.

These measures are combining to reduce pressure on our hospitals and protect those in our community who are most vulnerable and at risk of serious illness. It is important that we continue to implement proportionate measures to minimise the ongoing risk to all Canberrans.

With the arrival of the Omicron variant of concern in late 2021, the ACT Government has adjusted our approach to public health and safety measures on the advice of the ACT Chief Health Officer. Despite Omicron, the ACT remains in a strong position due to our high vaccination coverage and the community's positive response to both the booster and 5 to 11-year-old vaccination programs.

The ACT Government also continues to encourage positive COVID Safe behaviours, such as staying home if unwell, hand and respiratory hygiene and appropriate use of face masks for those who can wear them. We expect these basic measures to remain for the time being as we continue to learn to live with COVID-19.

Supported return to school

The ACT Government has engaged in significant planning since last year to prepare for the safe return of children and education staff to school and face-to-face learning in 2022.

On 24 January 2022, the ACT Government released its Back to School Plan for Term 1 2022. This plan outlines prevention, risk mitigation and response strategies developed and refined to enable our schools to both avoid and manage cases as they arise and to avoid school closures where possible. This includes the provision of Rapid Antigen Tests (RATs) for all school-based staff and students and indoor mask wearing on school sites, for staff and visitors at all schools and for students in years 7 to 12.

The ACT Government will continue to focus efforts on accelerating the vaccine booster program and completing the 5–11-year-old primary vaccination program to ensure our children are as protected as they can be.

Supporting businesses

Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic the ACT Government has provided a wide range of supports to businesses affected by the pandemic and the impacts of public health orders. Since the beginning of the pandemic, the Government has committed more than \$475 million in government assistance to support local businesses.

Recently, the ACT Government extended a range of existing support measures and introduced a 2022 funding round for the successful Amp It Up! grant program. The extension of these existing programs has provided further targeted financial support for affected local businesses. The first round of Amp It Up! contributed almost \$800,000 to local live music businesses by offsetting costs for live performances at their venues.

The ACT Government will continue to provide targeted economic support when and where it is needed.

Government responses to the Select Committee's recommendations

Recommendation 1

The Committee recommends that the ACT Government make publicly available all human rights compatibility statements with every public health direction made.

Government response

Noted

The Chief Health Officer has published an updated human rights statement for public health directions made during the COVID-19 Public Health Emergency, which outlines the considerations given to human rights in the implementation of public health directions. This statement was tabled in the Legislative Assembly by the Minister for Health on 6 October 2021 and is publicly available on the ACT Government COVID-19 website.

The *Public Health Amendment Bill 2021 No 2*, introduced in the Legislative Assembly on 2 December 2021, seeks to amend the *Public Health Act 1997* to require the Government to undertake consultation with the Human Rights Commission in the making of COVID-19 related public health directions and for a statement to be published for each public health direction outlining how it is consistent with human rights.

Recommendation 2

The Committee recommends that the ACT Government continue to explore ways to minimise the risk of COVID-19 infections at the AMC amongst detainees, particularly those vulnerable to COVID-19, including First Nations detainees, detainees who are elderly or have disabilities, pregnant women and new mothers, and those who may need to care for children or other family members.

Government response

Agreed

A range of preventative health measures have been implemented by ACT Corrective Services (ACTCS) at the Alexander Maconochie Centre (AMC) to ensure the health and safety of detainees, staff and visitors and to minimise the risk of COVID-19 infections. During the course of the pandemic these measures have included social distancing, alternative methods of conducting visits and increased cleaning and sanitation practices to reflect the current health risks.

ACTCS has detailed pandemic arrangements for COVID-19 which include well established procedures for the admission of detainees to the AMC, including the management of COVID positive detainees. As at 17 January 2022, when new detainees enter the AMC, they are placed into isolation and tested on day one and day five. If the detainee receives a negative test on day five, they are moved to an appropriate accommodation unit.

There is a focus on safe and appropriate handling of detainees, particularly new admissions, and wearing of masks and personal protective equipment by staff where necessary, remains key to preventing any spread of COVID-19 within the AMC.

As at 17 January 2021, there have been a small number of detainees at the AMC who have tested positive to COVID-19. Each of those detainees contracted COVID-19 while in the community. As of 17 January 2022, there has been no internal transmission of COVID-19 within the AMC between staff and detainees or between detainees.

In response to the first positive case of COVID-19 on Saturday 11 September, the AMC went into a full centre lockdown. On this occasion the lockdown and the restriction of detainees to their cells was short lived. While undesirable, full centre lockdowns can be used when necessary to protect staff and detainees from COVID-19.

Both staff and detainees have been reminded of the importance of getting vaccinated and receiving a booster shot. As of 12 January 2022, 85 per cent of detainees currently in custody have received their first COVID-19 vaccination and 82 per cent have received their second dose with 37 per cent having also received their booster dose. This number fluctuates as detainees enter and are released from custody. Ongoing COVID-19 vaccination clinics are being conducted to vaccinate new arrivals at the AMC who are not already vaccinated.

The RAT pilot which commenced at the AMC on 6 December 2021 continues and is a condition of entry into the AMC for any person, including staff. Following the start of the RAT pilot, ACTCS commenced a pathway back to contact social visits for detainees and their families. Visitors and detainees must wear masks throughout the duration of the visit. ACTCS continues to monitor the situation in the broader community and this may impact on operations at the AMC and visits in particular into the future.

Since the start of the pandemic there has been screening for people entering the AMC. This has included relevant and updated risk assessment questionnaires and the taking of temperatures.

Enhanced cleaning for key areas of the AMC and the requirement for the wearing of appropriate PPE continues within the AMC for staff, contractors and other visitors.

In cooperation with the ACT Courts, transport to and from Court is minimised through the use of AVL facilities where reasonably possible.

ACTCS temporarily suspended face-to-face visits during ACT's lockdown to protect the health of detainees and visitors. Since 25 March 2020, detainees have been provided with additional phone credit to assist with contact to their family and friends. The AMC has also introduced audio-visual (AV) tablet visits with family and friends with each detainee being eligible for one AV visit per week. Furthermore, detainees have been provided regular phone access to the Aboriginal Legal Services as required.

Recommendation 3

The Committee recommends that the ACT Government consider the impact of COVID-19 on those awaiting sentencing or trial.

Government response

Agreed in Principle

The ACT Government notes that section 22 of the *Bail Act 1992* requires a court or an authorised officer to consider the interests of the person and any relevant matter when making a decision about the grant of bail.

The ACT Government acknowledges the importance of concluding criminal proceedings in a timely manner to ensure an individual's right to a fair trial and ability to access justice are preserved. These matters continue to be considered and balanced in the Territory's response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The preventative health measures outlined in response to recommendation 2 that are in place at the AMC, are applicable to all detainees including those awaiting sentencing or trial.

Recommendation 4

The Committee recommends that the ACT Government review protocols between ACT Health and ACT Policing for dealing with breaches of isolation or quarantine orders in relation to individuals who are known to be potentially infectious in ACT Policing facilities, AMC and Bimberi Youth Justice Centre to protect front-line workers.

Government response

Noted

ACT Health and ACT Policing work closely to continuously review and improve compliance processes and protocols with the *Public Health Act 1997* and the related Public Health Directions. ACT Policing has a number of strategies and internal policies to ensure the protection and safety of its officers and staff in all ACT Policing facilities.

The ACT Watch House has standard protocols for managing people with infectious diseases. ACT Policing asks a series of questions to assess individuals' transfers to the facility to determine the most appropriate health and safety response. During the pandemic, this has included if a person is symptomatic, has travelled to a hotspot area in the past 14 days or is a close contact of someone who has tested positive for COVID-19. A COVID-19 test can only be undertaken at the Watch House if the person consents to the health procedure.

During lockdown, the Watch House instigated an interim/temporary technology solution for online conferencing of Court appearances for persons in custody for whom police bail was refused or unavailable. This process assisted in reducing COVID-19 exposure across multiple sites including ACT Corrective Services prisoner transport vehicles and ACT court cells.

Recommendation 5

The Committee recommends that ACT Policing review police powers for enforcing isolation or quarantine orders to ensure they are informed by public health considerations and that there are sufficient arrangements made with ACT Health to inform these powers.

Government response

Noted

ACT Policing routinely reviews powers derived from health directions and continues to engage with relevant stakeholders to ensure powers remain reasonable, required and best respond to the aspirations of the directions.

At all times, ACT Policing's focus is on maintaining an Engage, Educate, Enforce approach, in line with ACT Government's COVID-19 response.

ACT Policing officers always assess each situation on its merit and decide on the best course of action when applying their powers under a health direction. Charges are laid based on evidence and police officers take action when an offender has flagrantly or repeatedly breached a public health direction, preferring education and encouraging compliance over prosecution.

The Office of the Chief Health Officer consults with ACT Government Directorates, including ACT Policing and the Justice and Community Safety Directorate, in the making of public health directions related to isolation and quarantine. All public health directions are provided to relevant ACT Government Directorates and agencies upon notification for awareness across government.

Police will continue to engage with members of the public to ensure continued strong compliance of public health directions.

Recommendation 6

The Committee recommends that the ACT Government conduct ACT Civil and Administrative Tribunal hearings via video rather than over the phone, as it would allow for some of the issues faced by mental health consumers and other vulnerable cohorts to be better accommodated.

Government response

Noted

Under the *ACT Civil and Administrative Tribunal Act 2009*, the ACT Civil and Administrative Tribunal (ACAT) may decide its own procedure in relation to a particular matter in a hearing (section 23) and the ACAT sits at the times and places the President decides (section 28).

The ACAT is cognisant of responding to the needs of clients when holding virtual hearings. Through the period of lockdown, as well as the duration of the COVID-19 pandemic, the ACAT has held some hearings by videoconference, using WebEx (including for some mental health hospital hearings and some guardianship hearings). The ACAT generally held hearings

by phone rather than video due to technical constraints. These constraints will be reduced when the ACAT relocates to new premises with enhanced audio-visual capability later in 2022.

With the easing of COVID-19 modified operations from 1 January 2022, the following ACAT applications will usually be heard in person (although a party may request to participate in a hearing via an alternative mode such as videoconference):

- applications relating to Guardianship and Management of Property;
- mental Health hearings for inpatients at hospitals and new applications for outpatients at ACAT premises;
- energy and water hardship applications for new clients and some reviews;
- residential Tenancies Termination and Possession applications;
- civil dispute conference and immediate determinations; and
- final hearings for civil disputes, discrimination, administrative review, motor accident injuries, occupational discipline, and appeals applications.

Recommendation 7

The Committee recommends that the ACT Government continue to work with community sector providers to connect members of the community to services wherever temporary relief organisations cease operations, including examining the possibility of physical locations in each town centre where emergency relief can be provided in a COVID-safe manner.

Government response

Agreed

During the pandemic, the ACT Government has mobilised a collective effort with the non-government sector to establish the Canberra Relief Network (CRN), to support the provision of food and essential items to vulnerable Canberrans.

The Community Services Directorate provided food and material aid to the community sector through a centralised “on demand” CRN model. The Community Services Directorate will continue to connect members of the community to the community sector providers when temporary relief efforts are stood down, to ensure longer term, sustainable relief across Canberra.

Recommendation 8

The Committee recommends that the ACT Government work with businesses to ensure the application and implementation of public health directions are as clear and transparent as possible.

Government response

Agreed

Since March 2020, Access Canberra and the Health Protection Service have supported a joint proactive COVID-19 compliance program within the ACT. This has included support to businesses to assist them in understanding their requirements under the Public Health Directions through direct engagement, business forums, industry targeted emails, online and hard copy educational material, and webinars.

Communication occurs regularly between Government agencies and relevant stakeholder forums to advise of any changes to public health directions on each occasion they are imposed or amended. Materials are translated into multiple languages where appropriate to further support the business sector's understanding.

Positive feedback has been received from businesses in response to information and advice provided by compliance inspectors. Feedback regarding implementation of Public Health Directions and/or any inconsistencies is directly advised to the Office of the Chief Health Officer to ensure requirements are made as clear and transparent as possible.

Additionally, the Access Canberra Business Liaison line (02) 6205 0900 and COVID-19 Helpline (02) 6207 7244 have continued to operate and have provided timely advice and guidance to businesses and the Canberra community.

Recommendation 9

The Committee recommends that the ACT Government consider the financial impacts of public health restrictions on businesses when determining support measures for them.

Government response

Agreed

The ACT Government has and will continue to carefully consider the financial impacts of public health restrictions when developing business support measures. The measures implemented to date have been targeted towards particular industries or types of businesses as some sectors of the economy were impacted more than others as a result of the public health restrictions.

Recommendation 10

The Committee recommends that the ACT Government undertake a full review of the rollout of the Business Support Grant and the Small Business Hardship Scheme in consultation with local businesses and present the findings of its review to the Assembly by the end of 2022.

Government response

Agreed

This recommendation will be undertaken at an appropriate time once all support available under these programs has been provided to ACT businesses. This review will be informed by the audit of the Business Support Grant program that is currently underway.

Recommendation 11

The Committee recommends that the ACT Government continue to explore new ways to support local businesses in their recovery from the lockdown.

Government response

Agreed

The ACT Government is committed to supporting local businesses through the impacts of COVID-19. A range of broad and targeted supports have been delivered since the start of the public health emergency, and the ACT Government will continue to identify and implement appropriate ways to support local businesses.

Access Canberra continues to facilitate and deliver a range of ongoing support measures to businesses affected by the COVID-19 lockdown. This has included the establishment of an Outdoor Activation Taskforce to assist local businesses seeking to expand outdoors using available public spaces, as well as the implementation of a range of business licence fee waivers/reductions including:

- outdoor dining permit fee waivers until 30 June 2022;
- annual licence fee waivers for some liquor licensees have been tapered to provide a 50 per cent fee reduction from 1 April 2021 to 30 June 2022;
- 100 per cent waiver for rideshare annual licence fees for 12 months; and
- A waiver of late fees and a 20 per cent fee reduction for construction licensees who renew their annual licences between 1 June 2021 to 30 June 2022.

Recommendation 12

The Committee recommends that the ACT Government review its rate of interest for late or non-payment of duties and taxes in line with the cash rate set by the Reserve Bank of Australia.

Government response

Noted

As part of the Government's COVID-19 pandemic response, interest rates applying to ACT taxes for business were reviewed and interest free deferrals were provided for commercial rates and payroll tax.

Recommendation 13

The Committee recommends that the ACT Government review the wider impacts of its working-from-home arrangements for ACT Government employees.

Government response

Agreed in Principle

The ACT Government aspires to be the most progressive jurisdiction with regard to flexible work. The adoption of flexible working arrangements has allowed the ACT Government to

rapidly adapt to the evolving COVID-19 health crisis. This includes providing the opportunity for those staff who are able to, to work from home when it suits them and their business area.

The ACT Government is supporting more hybrid ways of working through the establishment of flexi-offices, initially being trialled in Belconnen and Tuggeranong. Once established, these will be accessible by office-based ACT Government staff, providing a workplace option outside the home or primary office-base. The ACT Government will continue to examine the impact of these arrangements for staff, including through staff surveys and other available data.

Recommendation 14

The Committee recommends that the ACT Government review the impact of contactless trade on the retail sector and take these industry-specific characteristics into consideration when determining the application of public health directions.

Government response

Noted

The Chief Health Officer's decision to enforce contactless trade reflected the level of risk to the community being managed at that time. As restrictions ease, ACT Health continues to liaise with relevant Directorates including Access Canberra and Economic Development, to ensure that the impact of public health directions on businesses is understood and can be balanced wherever possible.

Access Canberra receives regular feedback through the course of its compliance activities, including on issues faced by the retail sector. The ACT Government will continue to engage with the retail sector and support its efforts to operate in a COVID safe way.

Recommendation 15

The Committee recommends that the ACT Government continue to work with the hospitality sector and take into consideration industry-specific density limitations when determining the application of public health directions and industry-specific business support measures.

Government response

Agreed in Principle

The ACT Government will continue to work with the hospitality sector when implementing public health directions related to business and event restrictions through the whole of government communication networks.

The Office of the Chief Health Officer works closely with Economic Development Division within the Chief Minister, Treasury and Economic Development Directorate to understand the impacts of public health directions on all businesses, including those in the hospitality industry.

ACT Health understands the impact of density limits on businesses, particularly hospitality, and will continue to consider these as public health directions are implemented, noting that the ACT's Public Health and Social Measures are implemented in line with the National Plan to Transition Australia's National COVID-19 Response.

Recommendation 16

The Committee recommends that the ACT Government review its implementation of cross-border travel arrangements with NSW to inform any future decision-making on cross-border travel arrangements and report to the Assembly by the end of 2022.

Government response

Noted

Cross border travel restrictions are usually implemented with short notice to respond to a sudden increase in risk that requires immediate response. The response will be uniquely linked to particular risks of an individual situation or outbreak. Learnings from previous cross border restrictions will continue to be reviewed and these learnings implemented in any future decisions, noting that there are currently no domestic travel restrictions in the ACT.

Recommendation 17

The Committee recommends that the ACT Government continue to work with all stakeholders, so they are fully aware of decisions that impact their industries, including those who made those decisions, any assessment undertaken, and reasons for decisions.

Government response

Agreed

The ACT Government undertakes a whole of government approach in engaging with stakeholders and industries impacted by public health directions and advice related to COVID-19. Individual directorates seek views of their respective stakeholders and provide feedback directly to ACT Health Directorate to take into consideration in the making of public health directions.

ACT Health Directorate and the Community Services Directorate worked closely to ensure community sector partners remained well-supported during the pandemic, the consequent public health measures and their impacts on community service provision. This included advice to support organisations to plan the continuation of essential services during lockdown periods.

Contractual reporting obligations were relaxed for community sector partners during the lockdown periods, and they were encouraged and supported by the Community Services Directorate to be flexible in how deliverables were met.

Recommendation 18

The Committee recommends that the ACT Government review its decision to close the building and construction industry to inform future decision-making and present to the Assembly by the end of 2022.

Government response

Not Agreed

The Government worked closely with the building and construction industry to ensure the industry understood the implications of the lockdown and to develop guidelines to assist the sector to operate in a COVID Safe way. The decision to close the industry during the ACT's lockdown was taken in response to the significant concern relating to transmission risk across the Territory and was also informed by decisions of other jurisdictional governments. ACT Health will consider feedback received from the industry to inform and support future decisions and Public Health and Social Measures.

Recommendation 19

The Committee recommends that the ACT Government make any grant application processes more accessible with clearer communication on the eligibility criteria.

Government response

Agreed

The ACT Government will continue to make application processes and supporting documentation as accessible as possible. The ACT Government will also ensure that grant programs are managed and implemented with appropriate evidentiary requirements and sufficient assessment processes.

Recommendation 20

The Committee recommends that the ACT Government report COVID-19 cases in a more consistent manner across all industries.

Government response

Noted

Reporting of COVID-19 data continues to be reviewed and updated to reflect the epidemiological situation in the ACT, and where possible, align with other jurisdictions to provide consistency in COVID-19 communications.

Recommendation 21

The Committee recommends that the ACT Government ensure that unvaccinated front-facing ACT Directorate staff continue to be redeployed to non-front-facing roles and that their employment remains secure whilst the vaccination mandate remains in place.

Government response

Agreed in Principle

The ACT Government has adopted a compassionate yet pragmatic approach to the sensitive issue of vaccination. Recognising that this is a human rights issue, the policy framework in place (the ACT Framework – Considering Workplace COVID-19 Vaccination Requirements) ensures that wherever possible, staff are redeployed to alternative work. Where that has not been possible staff utilise leave. No staff have had their employment terminated by virtue of being unvaccinated.

There have been demonstrated advantages to the ACT Public Service from taking this approach to support and retain employees, as it has allowed the transferability of rare skills and experiences to benefit alternative areas of the Service as well as provided upskilling opportunities to the affected staff.

Recommendation 22

The Committee recommends that the ACT Government continue to provide targeted programs to improve access to services for young people, particularly in the areas of education, mental health, employment, housing, rental affordability, and homelessness in response to the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Government response

Agreed

The ACT Government is committed to supporting the community through the provision of targeted programs.

Throughout the pandemic the ACT Government has actively responded to the needs of affected cohorts in the community through a wide range of support programs. These include:

- support for young people experiencing or at risk of homelessness;
- Safe and Connected Youth pilot program;
- Youth InterACT Scholarships;
- Audrey Fagan Young Women's Enrichment Grants;
- ACT Women's Participant Grants;
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Grants Program;
- ACT Housing Strategy;
- MindMap 24/7 mental health tool;
- Youth Aware of Mental Health (YAM) Program; and
- Home Learning Site.

Further information on these programs can be found at [Appendix A](#).

Recommendation 23

The Committee recommends that the ACT Government disseminate lessons learnt on the effective partnership between the ACT Government, Capital Health Network and the Alcohol Tobacco and Other Drug (ATOD) sector in reaching priority populations with the broader NGO sector.

Government response

Agreed

The collaborative partnership model used between ACT Government and the community sector to support people from vulnerable populations resulted in many lessons learnt and reflections from this collaboration.

The Government is supportive of disseminating lessons learnt in reaching priority populations with the broader non-government organisation (NGO) as available from NGO and government evaluations.

The ACT Health Directorate is working with stakeholders including the Alcohol and Tobacco and Other Drug Association ACT and Canberra Alliance for Harm Minimisation and Advocacy (CAHMA) to achieve this. CAHMA has already presented at a national conference and ACT Health will continue to work with NGOs on sharing lessons learnt locally, including on the most effective mechanisms to disseminate this information.

Recommendation 24

The Committee recommends that the ACT Government ensure Canberra Health Services clinics are set up physically and technologically for telehealth.

Government response

Agreed in Principle

The telehealth service was setup as part of the initial COVID response in mid-2020 and is being used across a variety of clinical services including the COVIDcare@Home program.

It is not limited to the clinical staff in the COVIDcare@Home program. There are currently over 300 clinics set up to use telehealth across Canberra Health Services with over 10,000 telehealth video calls conducted from those clinics from July 2021 until late January 2022.

Recommendation 25

The Committee recommends that the ACT Government support front-line medical professionals, including training, to provide telehealth appointment options.

Government response

Agreed in Principle

When users request access to the telehealth service and are then granted access, they are sent links to the telehealth page that has training videos and support documentation.

Access to the telehealth service is not limited to the clinical staff in the COVIDcare@Home

program. If a cohort of users require further assistance, they can (on request) arrange a demonstration or training session with the System Administrator.

Recommendation 26

The Committee recommends that the ACT Government adequately support Access Canberra to ensure compliance of owners' corporations and managers with the Workplace Health and Safety Act 2011 in relation to COVID-19.

Government response

Agreed in Principle

ACT Health Directorate is finalising guidance material to support owners' corporations and managers to develop COVID Safety Plans and mitigate risk in their properties/facilities. The ACT Government has engaged with owners' corporations and industry to ensure they are aware of the necessary risk mitigation measures and obligations under public health directions.

Recommendation 27

The Committee recommends that the ACT Government work with Commonwealth and other State and Territory jurisdictions to progress national priorities for suicide prevention following the COVID-19 pandemic, including implementation of the new National Mental Health and Suicide Prevention Agreement.

Government response

Agreed in Principle

The ACT Government has agreed in principle to the draft of the National Mental Health and Suicide Prevention Agreement presented by the Commonwealth in December 2021. The Agreement is expected to be finalised in the first quarter of 2022.

Recommendation 28

The Committee recommends that the ACT Government further extend and increase as needed the funding of extra school psychologists to schools due to long-term collective stress experienced by children during COVID-19, noting that demand is currently outstripping supply and that the tail end of COVID-19 stress is likely to last for several years.

Government response

Agreed in Principle

The ACT Government has increased funding for mental health services in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition to existing resources for telehealth services, the ACT Government provided a further allocation of \$13,000 in Term 4 and another \$200,000 during terms 1 and 2 2022 was allocated for additional telehealth supports. This allocation has made available additional psychologists and support staff for the provision of online counselling for students and staff, through the ACT Education Telehealth Services.

The new MindMap youth portal is a joint government and Marymead initiative, which links children and young people to support services. This service helps individuals and families navigate the services offered in the ACT in a timely and supported way.

The Education Directorate will continue to work with the Office for Mental Health and Wellbeing and other community support agencies to:

- promote awareness raising and help-seeking;
- monitor service wait times; and
- respond to service needs of children and young people.

Students in ACT public schools have access to school psychologists and school youth health nurses in high schools. A recent increase in temporary funding has supported the delivery of the School Psychology Central Telehealth service which will continue to support students and families into 2022. This service will also help address any temporary psychology vacancies in schools. Recruiting and maintaining the psychology and allied health workforce is a priority for the Education Directorate.

Recommendation 29

The Committee recommends that the ACT Government investigate giving home educated students access to school psychologists and ensure that future restrictions about gathering for home educated children are consistent with restrictions placed on school educated children.

Government response

Agreed

The ACT Government will consider options enabling home educated students access to school psychologists. Options will need to balance issues such as resourcing and maintaining current supports for students enrolled with ACT public schools.

Including home-educated children and young people in the same category as school-educated children in any future ACT health orders/restrictions relating to the number of children who can gather for educational purposes will remove any unnecessary limitations placed on home-educated children in the ACT.

Recommendation 30

The Committee recommends that the ACT Government consider the benefits of remote learning for some children and consider whether to introduce this as an ongoing arrangement for those who are better suited to remote learning.

Government response

Agreed in Principle

The ACT Government is committed to ensuring students remain engaged with their education, and already provides several opportunities for students who cannot or choose not to physically attend school to continue engaging in learning. ACT teachers are supported

to identify the appropriate teaching method to support the relevant learning needs of all students.

Given delivery of remote learning over the last two years, schools adopted pedagogical approaches that built on the benefits of remote learning strategies to ensure learning content is provided online to enable students to access this content from home if required.

Where a regular school setting may not suit an individual student, the Education Directorate's Distance Education Program is also an offering provided through the Flexible Education team in partnership with the Finigan School of Distance Education.

Recommendation 31

The Committee recommends that the ACT Government work with the university sector to boost marketing Canberra as an attractive and liveable city targeted at drawing international students to Canberra.

Government response

Agreed

Economic Development, through the Study Canberra program and in consultation with the tertiary institutions, has commissioned work to produce a range of new traditional and digital marketing assets to promote Canberra as a study destination and to update content on our website and across social media channels. Work is also underway to develop an integrated marketing plan that aims to draw new international and interstate students to Canberra.

Recommendation 32

The Committee recommends that the ACT Government work with artists, musicians, event professionals and staff to provide targeted support, including more timely payments and rapid access to approvals where employment requires travel within and between states and territories.

Government response

Noted

The ACT Government will continue to work with artists, musicians, event professionals and staff to support them where possible to deal with the impacts of COVID-19 on their operations.

There are currently no domestic travel restrictions to the ACT, however ACT Health Directorate has previously provided support to individuals, event organisers, and venues to ensure any travel exemptions for people associated with events can be provided in a timely way.

Recommendation 33

The Committee recommends that the ACT Government work with other States and Territories to construct best practice and consistent COVID-safe regulations across all indoor and outdoor events, including sport, music and theatre.

Government response

Noted

The Office of the Chief Health Officer works closely with the Chief Minister, Treasury and Economic Development Directorate in the development of any COVID Safe guidance for event organisers to ensure that any restrictions can be effectively implemented

The Office of the Chief Health Officer participates in regular cross-jurisdictional forums to share best practice approaches for the implementation of COVID-19 restrictions for events to ensure there is a level of consistency in COVID Safe event management that is applicable to each individual jurisdiction.

The ACT's Public Health and Social Measures are guided by the National Plan to Transition Australia's National COVID-19 Response and informed by consultation with business and industry stakeholders in the ACT.

Response to Recommendation 22

Support for young people experiencing or at risk of homelessness

In 2021-22, the ACT Government is allocating over \$6.47 million to eight programs across the ACT Specialist Homelessness Services Sector to support young people aged between 16-25. Youth homelessness services provide young people with accommodation support, and assist young people with living skills development, counselling, and conflict resolution supports. This funding includes a 12.7 per cent increase in funding announced as part of the 2021-22 ACT Budget to expand specialist homelessness service capacity in the ACT.

The ACT Government has also committed to a second Youth Foyer model in the ACT. Approximately \$300 million is being invested to fund a purpose-built, contemporary and sustainable CIT campus in the heart of Woden that will include a multi-bed Youth Foyer. By being co-located with the CIT, the Youth Foyer will provide an integrated support services and opportunity to pursue education and training in one location. The early stages of the CIT Woden project are underway, and it is anticipated that students will be welcomed to commence education at the new campus in 2025.

Safe and Connected Youth

The Safe and Connected Youth pilot program commenced in 2019, offering outreach support, therapeutic case management and family mediation for children and young people aged 8 to 15 years and their families who are experiencing family conflict and are at risk of experiencing homelessness. The 2021-22 ACT Budget announced ongoing funding to continue and expand the Safe and Connected Youth Program to include therapeutic respite accommodation, building a coordinated service response.

While this commitment is not directly in response to the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic, as a result of the pandemic, the pilot program has seen increased conflict in families due to the pressure of public health measures and a higher number of COVID-19 cases. This is resulting in referrals becoming increasingly complex and supports the need for the ongoing and expanded program that is currently being commissioned for delivery from early 2022.

Support for young people's community participation

The Youth InterACT Scholarships provide funding of up to \$500 for individuals, or \$1,500 for groups of young people to participate in an activity, event or program. In 2021-22, a total of \$25,000 has been allocated to the Program, which is for young people aged 12 to 25.

Scholarships aim to support and encourage young people to enhance their professional and personal development through participation in various activities or events. This may include online mental health, self-improvement programs, skills-based learning courses or training, participating in sporting activities, community or civic engagement activities or events. Scholarships may also help to cover resources, equipment and materials to stay engaged in learning and personal development.

The aim of the Scholarships is to provide a small amount of funding to young people who have a genuine ability and determination, but without financial assistance would struggle to attend their event or activity or enable them to remain connected and engaged.

Audrey Fagan Young Women's Enrichment Grants

The Audrey Fagan Young Women's Enrichment Grants provide one-off funding of up to \$2,000 for young women aged 12 to 18 years. A total of \$10,000 is available annually. Enrichment Grants aim to inspire young women to enhance their skills and knowledge within their area of interest. It provides an opportunity for young women to make decisions, take responsibility, or initiate projects in collaboration with an experienced mentor of their choice.

Women's Grants

The ACT Women's Participant Grants offer community organisations up to \$20,000 and individuals up to \$5,000 to fund projects that align with the priorities of the ACT Women's Plan 2016 – 2026. The total funding available is \$80,000 annually. The Participation Grants support women and girls to participate in shaping their communities. Grants can fund projects like workshops, events, scholarships, education, resources or research. There is no age limitation for applicants of this grant program. Both young women themselves and applicants whose projects support the participation of young women in communities are funded through the grants.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Grants Program

The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Grants Program (the Grants Program) is available to organisations across the ACT and Canberra Region for the purpose of delivering activities to benefit the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community and broader Canberra community. The Grants Program provides funding to support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership training for both formal and informal development opportunities for participants. It also showcases the cultures of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples living in the ACT community through the development of innovative projects that contribute to sustainable communities by highlighting and promoting social harmony.

The ACT Housing Strategy

The ACT Housing Strategy (the Strategy) establishes an overarching policy framework to guide decisions about policy, planning, and the delivery of housing across the ACT. While the Strategy aims to improve access to safe, secure and affordable housing for all Canberrans, it includes a particular focus on low to moderate income households, and those experiencing or vulnerable to homelessness.

Through the Strategy, the ACT Government has introduced a range of reforms, programs, and funding initiatives, which span the full housing continuum. These are reflected through programs and initiatives that provide affordable home purchase and affordable rental opportunities, strengthen social housing assistance, respond to homelessness, and enhance innovation and equity in the housing market.

While the Strategy includes a particular focus on young people through actions which create pathways out of homelessness, a range of actions are focused on vulnerable and low to moderate households and improving affordability, and while this isn't specifically focused on young people, they may fall in those cohorts. The Strategy includes a range of actions which work more broadly towards 'increasing the supply of affordable housing' for households on low and moderate incomes. These actions are delivered through goal four of the Strategy, and include:

- *Housing targets* – a dedicated 15 per cent of Government annual residential land releases (in the Indicative Land Release Program) for community, public and affordable housing.
- *Priority access to land and dwellings for Community Housing Providers* – through housing targets and 'first right of refusal' for homes not sold to eligible applicants under the Affordable Home Purchase Scheme.
- *Community housing support* - In addition to establishing a pipeline of land through the housing targets to increase the supply of community housing, the Strategy also includes a range of initiatives, policies and programs to support the community housing sector. These commitments are reinforced through the Parliamentary and Governing Agreement for the 10th Legislative Assembly.
- *Rental tenancy support* - The ACT Government has demonstrated a proactive approach to assisting tenants in the private rental market who have experienced financial and other forms of hardship due to COVID-19. These included a range of temporary changes to the *Residential Tenancies Act 1997* and rates and land tax rebates for landlords who reduced rents by 25 percent (to June 2021). Under this initiative, the ACT Government matched 50 percent of the rent reduction through rebates to a maximum of around \$100 per week. The rebate aided over 750 households.

Further information about the Strategy can be found at <https://www.act.gov.au/homes-housing/act-housing-strategy>.

Mental Health Support

A new online tool, MindMap, has been developed to help young Canberrans, and carers, better navigate mental health services and resources. This will improve understanding and access to the many support services available so young people are empowered to make informed decisions for their mental health and wellbeing needs. The website helps children and young people under 25 to navigate support in a practical, safe and anonymous way by providing information on expected wait times, how to access services, advising if a referral is required and linking to resources which are best suited to their needs. MindMap is available 24/7 to find service support and information. It is staffed with Youth Navigators, including counsellors, from local service provider Marymead between noon and 11pm, seven days a week.

Since the launch in October 2021, MindMap has had over 7,300 page visits, with 11% returning visitors. The chat feature receives high usage from young people and over 42 calls have been received. Calls have predominately been made by services seeking support for their clients, parents calling to find support for their young people, and young people seeking help for themselves.

MindMap also includes an 'active hold' service, delivered by Marymead, where young people are able to be supported by a Clinical Youth Navigator if there is no capacity in the service that meets their needs. This feature has recently supported a young person in the community waiting to access the right service.

MindMap was co-designed by the ACT Government, Marymead, Australian National University, ACT Youth Coalition and the ACT Youth Advisory Committee. In addition, the design and development of MindMap has involved young people, parents and carers and service providers to align with the needs of the community. Marymead is the community partner leading the day-to-day management of the portal. www.mindmap.act.gov.au

Youth Aware of Mental Health (YAM) Program is an evidence-based program developed to promote mental health and address suicidal behaviour in young people. Commonwealth Government funding has enabled this program to be delivered to year 9 students in high schools across the ACT from 2020. As at December 2021, 16 schools and over 4,900 Year 9 students have completed the YAM program in the ACT.

Home Learning

During 2020 and 2021, all ACT schools offered high quality remote learning to all students during the lockdown periods. Coupled with this, the Education Directorate has also supported schools, families and students via the Home Learning Site with curriculum aligned materials, particularly when students were unable to return to school due to medical conditions.

The Education Directorate established a Home Learning offering through the Directorate website, providing all ACT families and young people access to online resources developed to support parents and children learning from home. The home learning resources were developed in 2020 to support families whose children were unable to return to school once on-campus learning had resumed after COVID-related school closures.

The online learning resource library is suitable for students of all ages with a wide variety of engaging lessons, activities, podcasts, video links and family guides. This website was developed in March 2020 and has been regularly updated including during the lockdown period in 2021, the website is also available to all members of the public.

During the 2021 lockdown period all ACT schools remained open for vulnerable children; children of parents who couldn't work from home; and children of parents who were required to work from home but couldn't reasonably provide adequate supervision at the same time. Those students attended their usual school and accessed the same remote learning program as their peers while at school, delivered by their usual classroom teacher/s.

Out of school hours care and early childhood education and care services also remained open for those that needed it during this period.

Teachers continued with their usual learning programs and adapted them to help students have the best possible experience learning online, ensuring that remote learning was as normal as possible for students.

In ACT public schools, all students in Year 3-6 were allocated a Chromebook, with all secondary students (Year 7-12) continuing to utilise the Technology Enabled Learning Program issued Chromebook. This enabled the students to access their teachers, classmates and education online. For those students who did not have internet at home, the Education Directorate provisioned Internet services to support those students. These tools enabled students to access learning and wellbeing supports.

In addition, in ACT public schools:

- Wellbeing resources have been made available to provide to their school communities including family activities, wellbeing booklets, gratitude journals, videos and factsheets.
- School psychologists have continued to provide support for students and their families. During the current lockdown, this support has taken the form of an Education Directorate's Telehealth Service (free online counselling sessions) with additional psychologists.