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

ELEVENTH ASSEMBLY

**Standing Committee on Education and Community Inclusion - Report No. 13
Inquiry into Loneliness and Social Isolation in the ACT**

Government Response

Presented by

Suzanne Orr MLA

Minister for Seniors and Veterans

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On 2 November 2023, the Standing Committee on Education and Community Inclusion announced it would inquire into loneliness and social isolation in the ACT (the Inquiry).

The ACT Government tabled a submission in response to the Terms of Reference to the Committee on 29 February 2024.

On 27 August 2024, the Committee released its report and made 28 recommendations.

The final ACT Government response to the recommendations contained in the Committee Report is provided below.

Recommendation	ACT Government Response	
1. The committee recommends that the ACT Government establish a Minister for Loneliness and Social Isolation.	Not agreed	The Ministerial Appointments and Administrative Arrangements notified on 7 November 2024 do not include a Minister for Loneliness and Social Isolation. Nonetheless, loneliness and social isolation remain important matters which will continue to be addressed by the ACT Government through a range of existing portfolios.
2. The committee recommends that the ACT Government establish a government taskforce to coordinate a whole of government approach to address loneliness and social isolation.	Noted	The ACT Government will consider suitable governance arrangements to coordinate a whole-of-government approach to addressing loneliness and social isolation, noting this may or may not take the form of a taskforce.
3. The committee recommends that the ACT Government recognise the significant preventative health benefits associated with addressing loneliness and social isolation.	Noted	The ACT Government notes social isolation and loneliness have clear detrimental impacts on health and other social factors. Both are associated with increased mortality and have been linked to a wide array of physical and mental health conditions. The ACT Government further recognises the interplay between mental health and loneliness is complex and multi factorial.
4. The committee recommends that the ACT Government implement a whole of government social connection strategy to address loneliness and social isolation.	Noted	The ACT Government will consider options to address loneliness and social isolation in relevant forthcoming strategies and action plans.
5. The committee recommends that the ACT Government provide first-response training to recognise and address loneliness and social isolation across public, community and private	Noted	The ACT Government will consider options to promote training to recognise and address loneliness and social isolation being made available to ACT Government business units which provide services to the community. Noting implementation of the recommendation may/would be subject to consideration in future budget processes.

sectors, prioritising front-facing workers.		
6. The committee recommends that the ACT Government prioritise improving access to public transport. This should include: • focusing on the strategic placement of routes; • increasing the frequency of services; • addressing cost barriers among priority population groups including young people, people with a disability, carers, and older people; and • free public transport on public holidays.	Noted	The ACT Government is committed to planning a reliable public transport service which is responsive to accessibility and equity interests. Transport Canberra regularly reviews the public transport network to ensure the service makes best use of resources to deliver on its policy mandate. This includes ensuring frequencies and span of hours are achieved as far as possible and ensuring continued servicing key employment hubs, educational institutions, and healthcare facilities. Further, Transport Canberra ensures introduction of new bus routes, or the extension of existing routes coincides with new developments. The ACT Government is also committed to making public transport more affordable for priority population groups. Many groups enjoy free travel or free off-peak travel. Young people enjoy free access to transport on school days where they are eligible for the Student Transport Program, but also the costs are lower on school days for all school aged students. Transport Canberra will continue to work closely with stakeholders and the community to ensure fares continue to meet the needs of the community. Noting implementation of the recommendation may/would be subject to consideration in future budget processes.
7. The committee recommends that the ACT Government expand the Taxi Subsidy Scheme to include carers.	Noted	The Taxi Subsidy Scheme is intended to provide financial assistance to residents with a disability or significant mobility issues for whom the public transport system is not suited to their needs. Under the current scheme, there is no restriction on scheme members commuting with additional passengers on subsidised rides. This means carers can already travel at subsidised rates when travelling with a scheme member. However, expansion to other people with carers who are unable to travel on public transport, such as people with dementia, will be considered.
8. The committee recommends that the ACT Government increase the availability of third spaces which are accessible, located across Canberra, and well accessed by public transport, particularly for priority cohorts such as young people, people	Existing government policy	Property and Government Insourcing Group within Infrastructure Canberra (iCBR) are the custodians of 39 community hubs, 6 youth centres and 3 new community centre builds are underway. These community hubs have spaces available for community meetings and programs at reduced rental rates. Youth Centres have outreach activities directed at the youth cohort. Property and Government Insourcing have low levels of vacant space within its managed property portfolio. Vacant space is allocated in

with a disability, carers, and people from a culturally and linguistically diverse background.		accordance with the Community and Other Tenancies Allocation Policy.
9. The committee recommends that the ACT Government create and promote more programs and activities specifically for young people, such as gaming spaces, ensuring that these initiatives are developed with direct input from young people themselves. This consultation should make particular efforts to engage hard-to-reach youth, such as those who do not or cannot attend school, are home-schooled, or have left school early.	Existing government policy	The ACT Government supports a proactive, whole-of-community approach to youth engagement and provides a range of initiatives to support young people including: • Youth InterACT Scholarships which provide funding to help young people attend events, courses or other activities including sporting events. • Youth InterACT Grants which provide funding to help young people develop and deliver new and innovative projects in their communities. • ACT Youth Week (free events) which are normally held in April each year, celebrate and recognise the contribution of young people. • ACT Youth Week Grants which support projects, events and activities which involve and connect young people and celebrate their diversity and contributions to the ACT community. The ACT Government provides several avenues where young people can share ideas and views to inform and shape future policies, including: • <u>ACT Youth Advisory Council</u>, which is made up of up to 15 members aged 12-25 years from diverse backgrounds who provide advice to the Minister on issues affecting young people in the community. • <u>The ACT Youth Assembly</u>, which runs every 2 years and is a forum for young Canberrans aged 12-25 years to discuss how to advance youth issues and share their ideas with government.
10. The committee recommends that the ACT Government ensure that sporting facilities, as far as possible, be fee-free to access.	Existing government policy	The ACT Government remains committed to ensuring sporting facilities, as far as possible, be fee-free to access. Transport and City Services Sport and Recreation Facilities (TCCS SRF) are responsible for the ongoing management and maintenance of the Territory's community sportsgrounds and associated facilities and are committed to providing the community with fit-for-purpose access to recreation facilities. TCCS SRF currently manage 129 sport and recreation facilities across Canberra, and 113 of these are publicly accessible for free when not formally hired by sporting organisations. These 113 facilities include 62 neighbourhood ovals, 3 community recreational parks and 48 district playing fields. Sporting clubs can exclusively book sportsgrounds to enable club training and matchplay for a small fee as detailed here:

		https://actsportsgrounds.act.gov.au/information/booking-and-information .
11. The committee recommends that the ACT Government implement a public awareness campaign on the importance of social connection for health and wellbeing.	Existing Government Policy	The Office for Mental Health and Wellbeing already undertakes community awareness raising activities in relation to promoting mental health and wellbeing which includes messaging around the need to maintain social connection.
12. The committee recommends that the ACT Government ensure that any initiatives to address loneliness and social isolation minimise cost and logistical barriers to participation.	Agreed-in-principle	The ACT Government will consider cost and logistical barriers to participation as part of any new programs on a case-by-case basis.
13. The committee recommends that the ACT Government conduct an audit of programs lost since the introduction of the NDIS with a view to implementing similar programs in consultation with the ACT disability community.	Noted	The ACT Government acknowledges the intent of this recommendation and recognises the barriers faced by people with disabilities which contribute to experiences of loneliness and social isolation. The ACT Government will continue to work with the Commonwealth and state and territory governments to implement responses to the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) Review and Disability Royal Commission to establish an ecosystem of services and support systems which better meet the needs of people with disability. This will include the design of a foundational supports service system in the ACT to meet the needs of people with disability outside of the NDIS. The ACT Government will work with people with disability, their family, carers and kin to ensure that supports are contemporary, evidence-based and meet the needs of the community.
14. The committee recommends that the ACT Government implement a carers card.	Agreed-in-principle	The ACT Government supports measures that enable carers to more easily access services and supports. The proposed carers card would help carers when they engage with ACT Government agencies and community services, making it easier to self-identify as a carer. The ACT Government is committed to carefully scoping this recommendation, which will require coordination between multiple ACT Government directorates, including the Community Services Directorate (CSD), the Education Directorate and ACT Health, to explore how the card would be funded and administered. It would also require CSD to work with Carers ACT to develop eligibility criteria and scope options to ensure the card meets the needs of the carer community. This work aligns with the Government's commitment to explore the feasibility of a carer's recognition card.

		Implementation of the recommendation may/would be subject to consideration in future budget processes.
15. The committee recommends that the ACT Government increase availability of respite for carers, particularly those caring for people with complex needs.	Agreed-in-principle	The ACT Government understands the necessity to support carers so they can continue to provide high quality care to those they care for over the long term. We note the formal support provided by the Government for older people and their carers through respite services make a significant difference to both their wellbeing and the wellbeing of the person they care for. This also includes support for carers of people with mental illness, who without support can experience either their own mental health issues or issues with social isolation and loneliness. The ACT Government continues to work in partnership with Carers ACT to better support carers in line with the <i>ACT Carers Strategy 2018-2028</i>. This includes the design and implementation of carer policy, programs and information. A budget process would be required to implement and deliver expanded or additional respite care services in the ACT. Scoping options for increased respite care would include exploring current respite care services and whether these could be expanded. This would examine respite service models, eligibility parameters and the potential benefits for carers. The ACT Government could also consider options for repurposing existing respite centres and/or identifying options for a potential new site. This work aligns with the Government's commitment to explore options for a purpose-built carers respite centre in collaboration with Carers ACT. Potential new models of respite would consider integrated access to allied health services, counselling and physical therapy for short or medium time periods.
16. The committee recommends that the ACT Government implement social prescribing.	Existing Government policy	The ACT Government recognises social prescribing requires the availability of appropriate community services to which community members can be linked. The Government implements activities which align with social prescribing principles, for example: • <i>Delivering Better Care for Canberrans with Complex Needs in General Practice</i> grants program, which promotes interventions including increasing capacity to incorporate 'social prescribing' and/or connecting people to services which can provide support with housing, employment, transport, education and in workplace and family environments; and • <i>ACT Primary Care Pilot</i>, which focuses on diversion and prevention by making the connections to

		community, social and other services required to support wellbeing. This includes the use of social workers to support participating patients to access services to manage their health and wellbeing. While these activities are not carried out under the banner of a single jurisdiction-wide model or program, they are consistent with the consultation feedback and evidence presented in the Inquiry Report in acknowledging the importance of multiple referral points, involvement of General Practice, and Link Workers who are able to promote direct connections with patients. The Government's approach also conforms to national and international understandings of social prescribing, as reflected in: • The ACT Government's Submission to the Inquiry into Loneliness and Social Isolation in the ACT; and • The Australian Government's Primary Health Care 10-year Plan 2022-2032 Linking from General Practice to community services is appropriate. Having specific 'Link Workers' who are knowledgeable about the range of social prescribing options is also important. 'Link Workers' based within General Practice help vulnerable and disadvantaged individuals feel safe engaging with both the Link Workers and the social prescribing options. This setup also increases the likelihood of referrals from practice staff who are familiar with the Link Worker. In most social prescribing arrangements, referrals to non-clinical services are made by General Practitioners and practice nurses in primary care settings. The ACT Health Directorate will continue to work with the Capital Health Network to explore the expansion of social prescribing in the ACT and to promote both a national and local approach that connects primary care with community-based supports.
17. The committee recommends that the ACT Government make training available to community organisations to respond to loneliness and social isolation when working with individuals on social prescriptions.	Agreed in principle	The ACT Government will investigate options to tackle loneliness by supporting activities which build human connection and co-designing a social prescribing program with general practitioners and youth health services. Noting implementation of the recommendation may/would be subject to consideration in future budget processes.
18. The committee recommends that the ACT Government provide free	Noted	Transport Canberra is committed to planning a reliable public transport service which is responsive to accessibility and equity interests.

public transport for those who have a social prescription.		Transport Canberra offers free public transport to many concession groups who need it the most. Work to develop a fares strategy will include a review of options to further cater to those less able to afford the costs of mobility. Transport Canberra will continue to work closely with stakeholders and the community to ensure fares continue to meet the needs of the community. Noting implementation of the recommendation may/would be subject to consideration in future budget processes.
19. The committee recommends that the ACT Government support and fund the SPICE and SPICE for Life programs.	Agreed in principle	The ACT Government funded the SPICE pilot program which has subsequently secured ongoing Commonwealth funding until 30 June 2028 under <i>Strengthening Medicare Measures</i>. The SPICE for Life pilot has been funded by Carers ACT and will be considered by the ACT Government following finalisation and evaluation of this pilot.
20. The committee recommends that the ACT Government investigate the appropriateness of the SPICE program for other neurodegenerative diseases.	Not Agreed	The SPICE model is a pilot model combining evidence-based interventions for dementia care. Findings of the research remain preliminary at this point. There is no evidence the model is appropriate for other neurodegenerative conditions. Canberra Health Services provides rehabilitation services for other neurodegenerative conditions in line with evidence-based practice.
21. The committee recommends that the ACT Government facilitate spaces for the co-location of relevant services for addressing loneliness, social isolation, and the related health impacts.	Noted	The ACT Government acknowledges the benefits of co-locating different human and community services in one place or facility has been raised as an important theme for services in the Mental Health Non-Government Organisation Commissioning project being conducted by the ACT Health Directorate. Property and Government Insourcing have low levels of vacant space within its managed property portfolio. The ability to deliver co-located service delivery points is dependent on availability of premises within the portfolio that meet the suitability and needs of the services being sought.
22. The committee recommends that the ACT Government strengthen and increase funding the Community Directory with a view to: • ensure the directory is updated frequently and provides listings for the broadest possible range of community organisations; • support booking functionality; and • promote the directory to increase community awareness and usage.	Noted	The Community Directory is maintained by Volunteering ACT who works closely with the team and developers at Community Information Support Services to continue to improve the information available and ensure it is accessible, reliable, and up to date. The Directory is well used. Between June 2023 and June 2024 an average of 2,802 searches of the Directory were made daily, with 2,029 community organisations and groups delivering 3,336 services, from 2,702 locations across the Canberra region. Biannual formal planning occurs to review and improve services. Listings are prioritised for review with essential services such as emergency relief, health and food relief services being audited most frequently.

23. The committee recommends that the ACT Government maintain and promote a public social calendar of community events targeted at addressing loneliness and social isolation.	Noted	The creation of a new website would require funding and resourcing to implement.
24. The committee recommends that the ACT Government support older Canberrans to access the internet whilst continuing to provide in person services.	Noted	Libraries ACT has 77 public PCs which are available across the service that can be accessed for free by members of the public for the purposes of accessing the internet. Branches also have stable, free, publicly available Wi-Fi. While Libraries ACT staff are always happy to assist the community with accessing our PCs, branches are not adequately resourced to provide 1:1 support on all occasions. Opportunities to run programs to build digital literacy or finding ways to increase opportunities to improve 1:1 support is something being broadly explored in the future library strategy but would require funding and resourcing to implement.
25. The committee recommends that the ACT Government support the development of services and apps that utilise artificial intelligence to address loneliness and social isolation.	Noted	The ACT Government is supportive of an evidence-based approach for using AI within existing services for loneliness and social isolation.
26. The committee recommends that the ACT Government monitor the University of Canberra Health Research Institute's Connect Up pilot program, and if successful, providing funding in the future.	Noted	The ACT Government monitors the Connect Up Program through advice from the ACT Youth Advisory Council (YAC). The Canberra Health Research Institute (HRI) consulted with the YAC in August 2024 regarding the early model of the Connect Up pilot program. HRI sought feedback and ideas from the YAC as HRI moved into early implementation. The YAC gave positive feedback on the project's design, agreeing that it was well-developed and took into consideration the needs of the population and age demographic. The YAC agreed to explore ways to integrate into the working group or project activities, such as participating in planning sessions and providing feedback on community engagement strategies to enhance involvement and ensure young people's perspectives are included in project development.
27. The committee recommends that the ACT Government support community-based	Noted	The ACT Government notes the importance of community-based interventions and the role that programs and services play in seeking to improve social connection and reduce the impacts of loneliness within the ACT. The ACT Government

interventions such as Neighbours Every Day.		continues to support and fund initiatives through the Community Development Program. However, these are not specifically targeted to address loneliness and social isolation.
28. The committee recommends that the government priorities volunteerism and actively support residents in the ACT to engage in volunteering activities. This can be achieved by: • continuing to develop and implement the ACT Volunteer Strategy; and • exploring additional pathways to bolster the sector.	Existing Government Policy	The <i>ACT Volunteering Strategy 2024 – 2034</i> (the Strategy) and <i>First Action Plan 2024 – 2047</i> (Action Plan), co-designed by the ACT Government and Volunteering ACT (VACT), were launched in August 2024. The Strategy establishes a local framework for supporting volunteers and volunteer-involving organisation (VIOs) over the next 10 years and reflects the time required to embed meaningful and sustainable changes. The Strategy is supported by an Action Plan with 26 actions. Governance for the Strategy will be via a partnership between the ACT Government and VACT. An annual workshop will be one mechanism for monitoring implementation and informing development of future action plans.