

2022

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

**Update on Assembly Resolution 8 October 2021 – Part B - Position statement on youth
mental health recovery from COVID-19**

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February 2022**



**LOOKING FORWARD:
AN ACT GOVERNMENT POSITION
STATEMENT ON CHILD AND YOUTH MENTAL
HEALTH AND WELLBEING IN THE CONTEXT
OF COVID-19**

Office for Mental Health and Wellbeing

November 2021

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INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic (the pandemic) has undeniably had considerable effects on how we live, socialise, work, study and play. We entered the pandemic against a background of bushfires and hail that had already caused significant distress and heightened anxiety in our community. The pandemic restrictions and public health orders, while helping to balance the risks of infection, have resulted in significant impacts on our collective health, mental health and wellbeing and our social fabric. As we continue to ease out of restrictions, we are progressing into a new phase of the pandemic that is beginning to focus on recovery, re-entry, 'the new normal' and living alongside COVID-19 safely.

The mental health impacts of the pandemic and the associated restrictions have been a key consideration in the ACT since early 2020. We paid attention to evidence emerging from other jurisdictions, the emerging worldwide research and listened to our community in order to respond rapidly by increasing the capacity of existing services and supporting some of our community partners to digitise their services in response to these changing circumstances.

At the beginning of the pandemic children and adolescents were the lowest risk group with regards to the physical health concerns of COVID-19. As we have progressed through the different stages of the health response children and young people are now identified as a priority cohort due to the mental, social, economic and wellbeing costs of lockdowns, restrictions, the closure of schools and universities, the reduced access to sporting and social activities and the inability to interact with friends and wider relatives or family members. For our children and youth, the past two years have re-shaped what would be typical of a childhood, adolescence or young adult life. The pandemic's broader impacts are expected to be ongoing, particularly for children and young people.

The ACT Government is committed to fostering an environment where our children and young people can flourish. We need to build on some of the opportunities that have emerged during the pandemic. As we explore their current and ongoing needs in the medium to long term, we will need to be agile and responsive. Some of these needs will be obvious, others will emerge as we progress through the next phases of this journey. Much of what is to come is unknown and while we have some data to understand the reach of the pandemic in the present, we will all be learning how to best support our children and young people's recovery as we move forward.

This position statement has been developed to outline the key issues and the key priorities of the ACT Government as we look forward over the medium to long-term to continue to support the mental health and wellbeing of children and young people. It provides guidance on how we can continue to support the needs of our children and young people, and their families and support people, to not only recover from the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic but also have the tools needed to thrive as we all progress towards the new normal.

CHILD AND YOUTH MENTAL HEALTH DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Mental health and wellbeing impacts

During the pandemic, people of all ages have experienced heightened levels of psychological distress. Children and young people have been particularly affected by health restriction measures and the impacts these have had on social interaction, employment, remote work and home schooling.

The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW)¹ has regularly published data of service activity during the pandemic. Included in this analysis is data from the Medical Benefits Schedule (MBS) and Pharmaceutical Benefits Schedule (PBS) as well as Australian Government crisis and support organisations (including Lifeline, Beyond Blue and Kids Helpline). Detailed data is also being analysed at the jurisdictional level, noting this has only been published for New South Wales, Queensland and Victoria at this stage. The data reflect similar trends for the ACT and is consistent with ACT Health monitoring of health service activity within the ACT. The published data show an increase in the use of crisis and support services and in particular young people being more affected compared with people over the age of 25 years, and people aged 12-17 years being impacted to a greater degree. Service activity for the crisis and support services have reported increases ranging from 10-30% at varying times throughout the pandemic. These have been impacted further by increased and the subsequent easing of movement restrictions and specific lockdowns.

Research tells us that mental health and wellbeing outcomes in children and young people are strongly correlated with their ecological contexts and susceptible to their social and economic environments^{2,3}. Throughout the pandemic some children and young people have been learning to manage existing mental illness in new ways without some of the usual structures that would support them, in addition to experiencing the stressors and triggers associated with the pandemic. Others are experiencing mental distress or symptoms of mental illness for the first time and are requiring support to understand their thoughts, feelings and behaviours and how to manage them. The dynamic nature of the pandemic and the public health responses have meant uncertainty, change and disruptions to routines and activities that can result in anxiety, fear, social isolation and sadness⁴. We must acknowledge that these are reasonable and normal reactions to the abnormal conditions we have been experiencing collectively. Rather than pathologize these reactions, our role as a community is to recognise the experiences of our children and young people in response to the pandemic, understand

¹Mental Health Services in Australia COVID-19 impact on mental health <https://pp.aihw.gov.au/reports/mental-health-services/mental-health-services-in-australia/report-contents/mental-health-impact-of-covid-19>

²Benner, A. D., & Mistry, R. S. (2020). Child Development During the COVID-19 Pandemic Through a Life Course Theory Lens. *Child development perspectives*, 14(4), 236–243. <https://doi.org/10.1111/cdep.12387>

³Hammarberg, K, Tran, T, Kirkman, M, Rowe, H, Fisher, J. Preferred policy options to assist post-COVID-19 mental health recovery: A population study. *Aust J Publ Admin*. 2021; 80: 424– 434. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-8500.12507>

⁴Ibid.

their needs, and ensure that our service system and community supports are responsive to these needs.

Adverse mental health can impact the quality of life, physical health and developmental pathways. Some of the key impacts to mental health and wellbeing of the pandemic and the public health responses for children and young people are summarised in the following sections.

Education

Schools, universities, libraries and recreational facilities are important institutions that provide support structures for children and young people. Closures and restricted access to these settings in response to the threat of COVID-19 has been recognised across studies to be a potential trigger for mental distress^{5,6}. For children, in particular, research indicates that structure and routine associated with attending school are important to support positive social and emotional outcomes. These settings also provide important opportunities for social interactions with peers and teachers⁷.

With the shifts towards online learning not all aspects of what these settings provide have been reproduced or supplemented virtually. Some have found the disruptions to their routines and loss of access to their peers as a trigger for stress and anxiety, while others have become socially isolated. We have heard that some students have coped better with the new routines than others. Young people have advised that support is different across educational institutions. Moving to studies online has made classes more accessible for some students, while others felt disconnected, overwhelmed, and some students have dropped out of university classes. There is opportunity to explore avenues to review reasonable adjustments which could reduce anxiety for students and encourage students to remain engaged. Research data found that home schooling during the pandemic also increased psychological distress amongst parents⁸. Some, however, have found these new ways of learning resonate better with their needs, and it is worth considering what aspects of these changes might be kept in place for those students moving forward.

Social and relational

Children and young people tend to be reliant on the families and communities around them for support and these are important protective factors to promote mental health and wellbeing and healthy development⁹. Good practice from emergency responses

⁵Albuquerque, S., Teixeira, A. M., & Rocha, J. C. (2021). COVID-19 and Disenfranchised Grief. *Frontiers in psychiatry*, *12*, 638874. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsy.2021.638874>

⁶Jones, B., Woolfenden, S., Pengilly, S., Breen, C., Cohn, R., Biviano, L., Johns, A., Worth, A., Lamb, R., Lingam, R., Silove, N., Marks, S., Tzioumi, D. and Zwi, K. (2020), COVID-19 pandemic: The impact on vulnerable children and young people in Australia. *J Paediatr Child Health*, *56*: 1851-1855. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jpc.15169>

⁷Benner, A. D., & Mistry, R. S. (2020). Child Development During the COVID-19 Pandemic Through a Life Course Theory Lens. *Child development perspectives*, *14*(4), 236–243. <https://doi.org/10.1111/cdep.12387>

⁸Batterham, P., Calear, A., McCallum, S., Morse, A., Banfield, M., & Farrer, L. et al. (2021). Trajectories of depression and anxiety symptoms during the COVID-19 pandemic in a representative Australian adult cohort. *Medical Journal Of Australia*, *214*(10), 462-468. doi: 10.5694/mja2.51043

⁹OECD. (2021). *Supporting young people's mental health through the COVID-19 crisis*. [viewed 14 November 2021] Available at: <https://www.oecd.org/coronavirus/policy-responses/supporting-young-people-s-mental-health-through-the-covid-19-crisis-84e143e5/>.

internationally shows children do better when the adults in their lives are coping well¹⁰. Attention needs to be paid to how parents, caregivers, teachers and other important adults around them are coping and how they might be impacting children and young people. Qualitative research with young people has shown a clear awareness of the impacts of the pandemic on the people around them¹¹. Parents, in particular, will have a strong influence over their child's wellbeing. Some parents may be managing financial difficulties, job loss, grief and loss, social isolation, anxiety, depression or feeling overwhelmed by the challenges of having to support their children's learning from home¹². Our community partners have reported an increase in experiences of abuse and family violence by children and young people. The lockdowns and restrictions have meant that there are fewer mechanisms to observe issues that young people might be experiencing and fewer avenues for young people to access support.

ACT Government agencies and our community partners have also received positive feedback from children and young people on some of the changes that they have observed around them during the lockdowns. Many children and young people have responded positively to more quality time with their parents and families and seeing more people outdoors in streets and parks. There is an opportunity to learn about the benefits of these changes and explore ways that we can maintain them to support our children and young people.

Developmental

The convergence of the wide-ranging factors experienced by children and young people throughout the pandemic may have long-lasting effects on their development. We know that children and young people's developmental pathways can impact their mental health and wellbeing outcomes, and these are both impacted by the context within which they grow, work, learn and play. The life-course theory has been proposed as a useful lens through which to assess the potential long-term impacts of the pandemic. The life course perspective posits that historical forces shape the social trajectories of family, education, and work, and they in turn influence behaviour and particular lines of development. Through this lens, we can deduce that we may see intergenerational effects of the disruptions to developmental surveillance and disrupted education and employment in the earlier years and potentially worsened long-term mental health outcomes¹³.

Different age groups will have different developmental needs and therefore will need different kinds of supports. For the younger cohorts, the restrictions to social interactions with other children may be impacting the development of key social and emotional skills and how they might interact with their peers and people outside of the home. Students who have

¹⁰Pfefferbaum, B., & North, C. S. (2008). CHILDREN AND FAMILIES IN THE CONTEXT OF DISASTERS: IMPLICATIONS FOR PREPAREDNESS AND RESPONSE. *The Family psychologist : bulletin of the Division of Family Psychology* (43), 24(2), 6–10. <https://doi.org/10.1901/jaba.2008.24-6>

¹¹Larher V, et al. *Arch Dis Child* 2020;**105**:1192–1196. doi:10.1136/archdischild-2020-320040

¹²Benner, A. D., & Mistry, R. S. (2020). Child Development During the COVID-19 Pandemic Through a Life Course Theory Lens. *Child development perspectives*, 14(4), 236–243. <https://doi.org/10.1111/cdep.12387>

¹³Ibid.

experienced the transition points between primary school to high school, high school to college, or college to university “virtually” have also missed out on some important aspects that would usually support these transitions. These are known to be stressful and difficult times for some children and young people.

The economic impacts and the impacts to the labour market of the pandemic are disproportionately affecting young people. Lockdowns and restrictions through the pandemic have reduced opportunities for part-time employment or work experience for students and those due to graduate soon. Young people have expressed fear about the future and how these lost opportunities might impact them in the long run. Young people tend to be employed on a casual basis and have been disproportionately adversely affected by COVID-19 restrictions that have seen businesses closures in consumer facing roles such as in retail, hospitality, events, fitness, and entertainment industries. This has meant young people have been more susceptible to losing their jobs and/or having their hours reduced, as businesses face an uncertain future, which in turn causes financial stress and negatively impacts young people mental health and wellbeing. Research proposes that this may have ongoing effects on individuals as they progress through their careers, may impact over their life course and this may mean elevated risks for experiencing mental health issues. Unemployment is a major risk factor for poor mental health outcomes and an important consideration for a coordinated response as we look forward. Young people will need support structures to supplement the gaps in their education and working experience to support their career opportunities in the medium to long term^{14,15}.

For young people in the justice system, restrictions have inhibited the ability for meaningful suitability assessments for restorative justice conferencing in the care and protection system. Further, the pandemic has delayed or drawn out some young people's criminal justice matters which has contributed to heightened anxiety for those young people, due to a lack of certainty regarding significant matters. In the context where restorative justice conferences have also been delayed it has been challenging to keep young people engaged regarding offending that occurred months ago.

Disruptions caused by the pandemic have meant many are not able to engage in social activities, celebrate major milestones, participate in cultural activities or commemorate losses¹⁶. It will be worth exploring ways of supplementing these lost experiences of children and young people.

¹⁴OECD. (2021). *Supporting young people's mental health through the COVID-19 crisis*. [viewed 14 November 2021] Available at: <https://www.oecd.org/coronavirus/policy-responses/supporting-young-people-s-mental-health-through-the-covid-19-crisis-84e143e5/>.

¹⁵Fisher, J & Kirkman, M. (2020). *Disenfranchised grief amid COVID-19*. [viewed 14 November 2021] Available at: <https://lens.monash.edu/@medicine-health/2020/03/26/1379888/coronavirus-recognising-disenfranchised-grief-and-covid-19>.

¹⁶Ibid.

Diversity, equity and inclusion

Not all children and young people have been impacted by the pandemic to the same degree and in the same way. Existing inequalities and gaps in the system have been exacerbated by the increased pressures on mental health services and supports in response to increased help-seeking. The children and young people that are identified as more vulnerable to experiencing adverse mental health outcomes in the context of the pandemic are those who already experience poorer health and wellbeing outcomes, those that have more complex needs and those that experience increased barriers to accessing mental health and support services than the wider community. These may include those with existing mental illness, from low socio-economic backgrounds, people who experience barriers due to their culture or language skills, people with disabilities and other intersectional experiences that result in marginalisation and/or social disadvantage.^{17,18}

It is well documented that LGBTIQ+ youth experience poorer mental health outcomes compared to their non-LGBTIQ+ peers. The pandemic has likely exacerbated stress factors for LGBTIQ+ young people. For example, some young people needing to remain at home may have felt trapped in an environment where they are not 'out' or do not feel safe. For those children and young people who come from Asian backgrounds there may have been experiences of racism by them or people from their community in the recent racist attacks associated with COVID-19. Safe spaces and targeted supports must be accessible for these individuals. Services providing targeted mental health supports for example, to LGBTIQ+ communities, such as Meridian, reported having available counselling spots at capacity and long waiting lists.

Access to homelessness support and services for young people experiencing homelessness or unable to remain in their current living arrangement or who are couch surfing continues to be reported as requiring further attention.

¹⁷Jones, B., Woolfenden, S., Pengilly, S., Breen, C., Cohn, R., Biviano, L., Johns, A., Worth, A., Lamb, R., Lingam, R., Silove, N., Marks, S., Tzioumi, D. and Zwi, K. (2020), COVID-19 pandemic: The impact on vulnerable children and young people in Australia. *J Paediatr Child Health*, 56: 1851-1855. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jpc.15169>

¹⁸OECD. (2021). *Supporting young people's mental health through the COVID-19 crisis*. [viewed 14 November 2021] Available at: <https://www.oecd.org/coronavirus/policy-responses/supporting-young-people-s-mental-health-through-the-covid-19-crisis-84e143e5/>.

THE ACT GOVERNMENT'S RESPONSE TO DATE

The ACT Government has demonstrated a strong commitment to supporting the mental health and wellbeing of all Canberrans, including children and young people. Across the ACT, there is a wide range of mental health services and supports for children and young people, ranging from promotion, prevention and early intervention to acute care services. These programs and services are delivered directly by the ACT Government, by the ACT Government in collaboration with external providers, by non-government organisations (NGOs) or by private providers.

Targeted initiatives for children and young people in the ACT

Continuing to develop the supports and services available to children, young people and their families was a priority for the ACT before the pandemic. The Office for Mental Health and Wellbeing's *Review of Children and Young People's Mental Health*¹⁹ identified several key issues including making services more accessible, increasing education and awareness of mental health and supporting those individuals experiencing moderate to severe mental illness.

Two key projects recommended by the review have now been implemented in the ACT. The youth navigation portal MindMap²⁰ was launched in October 2021 and is an online triage navigation portal specifically focused on young people, parents and carers in the ACT who are seeking mental health-related support, services and information. MindMap supports the mental health of children and young people under 25 years in the ACT and was co-designed by the ACT Government, Marymead, Australian National University, ACT Youth Coalition and the ACT Youth Advisory Council.

The other project seeks to enhance evidence-informed mental health and wellbeing and education programs. Two programs are now available to schools across the ACT, Youth Aware of Mental Health (YAM) and Applied Suicide Intervention Skills Training (ASIST). YAM is an evidence-based program designed to promote mental health and address suicidal behaviour in young people through encouraging the development of skills to deal with stress and crisis, identify signs of distress in peers and feel confident in seeking mental health support. In 2020 and 2021, the YAM program has been rolled out to Year 9 students in ACT schools. To date, 25 schools and over 4,350 Year 9 students have completed the YAM program in the ACT, and these numbers will continue to increase as the YAM program continues. An evaluation of the YAM program is currently underway and will inform future directions for the continued implementation of YAM in ACT schools. ASIST is a two-day suicide prevention training program that is now available to all ACT Education staff. In ASIST, school staff learn to apply a suicide intervention model that helps to recognise when a young person may be at risk of

¹⁹Office for Mental Health and Wellbeing (2021). Retrieved 18 November 2021, from https://cms.health.act.gov.au/sites/default/files/2020-03/OMHW%20Children%20and%20Young%20People%20Report_0.pdf

²⁰Ibid.

suicide. ASIST explores how to connect with young people to understand and clarify suicide risk, increase their immediate safety and link them with further help.

Targeted investments in response to the pandemic

In direct recognition of the significant impact of the pandemic on the wellbeing and mental health of children and young people, the ACT Government has made a series of financial commitments over the past two years. In May 2020, the ACT Government provided funding for mental health services to address increased demand from the pandemic. This funding focused on increasing capacity of both government and non-government service delivery, as well as enabling new and innovative services, (e.g., the SafeHaven Cafés), and helping organisations to fill gaps where they identified an emerging need for additional mental health support within their services²¹.

The 2021-22 ACT Budget included additional funds to provide a more timely, supportive and accessible mental health system for young people and their families in the ACT. This included: expanding and improving alcohol and other drug services; the phased implementation of integrated face-to-face and digital mental care for young people through an online platform; a multidisciplinary outreach service that supports young people (12-25 years) living with mental health concerns; and support for parents through phone referrals, counselling, face-to-face sessions, and regular phone 'check-ins'²². The ACT Government also worked with the Commonwealth Government to secure additional funding to boost existing crisis, mental health and wellbeing services and provide additional support to young Australians and at-risk communities. An additional longer-term funding package for local mental health support programs was released in September 2021 and included support for: services and additional supports for people affected by eating disorders; extending services to young people suffering moderate to severe mental illness requiring more intensive support at home, and additional mental health programs for schools and individuals²³.

²¹\$4.5 million COVID-19 mental health support package to help Canberrans - Chief Minister, Treasury and Economic Development Directorate. (2021). Retrieved 18 November 2021, from [https://www.cmtedd.act.gov.au/open_government/inform/act_government_media_releases/rattenbury/2020/\\$4.5-million-covid-19-mental-health-support-package-to-help-canberrans](https://www.cmtedd.act.gov.au/open_government/inform/act_government_media_releases/rattenbury/2020/$4.5-million-covid-19-mental-health-support-package-to-help-canberrans)

²²Canberrans in need receive additional mental health support during lockdown - Chief Minister, Treasury and Economic Development Directorate. (2021). Retrieved 18 November 2021, from https://www.cmtedd.act.gov.au/open_government/inform/act_government_media_releases/davidson/2021/canberrans-in-need-receive-additional-mental-health-support-during-lockdown

²³Further support for Canberrans in need during the lockdown - Chief Minister, Treasury and Economic Development Directorate. (2021). Retrieved 18 November 2021, from https://www.cmtedd.act.gov.au/open_government/inform/act_government_media_releases/davidson/2021/further-support-for-canberrans-in-need-during-the-lockdown

Child and youth supports across the ACT Government

Across the ACT community, services pivoted and adapted in response to the needs of children, young people and their families. Any change required rapid and careful navigation in the changing landscape. Most services worked with young people to find innovative solutions and shifted to or added a virtual care component to their programs. Some examples include:

The Office of LGBTIQ+ Affairs

- The 2021 round of the ACT Government's Capital of Equality grants identified COVID-19 recovery as a funding priority. An organisation was funded to collect specific data on the impacts of the pandemic on LGBTIQ+ people seeking asylum, refugees and migrants (many of whom will be young people). This data will be available in 2022.
- A Gender Agenda received a grant to allow that organisation to continue to meet the high demand for trans, intersex and gender diverse services and to provide support for vulnerable parts of their community that have been affected by lockdowns.

Community Services Directorate

- The Office for Youth Engagement team used the advice from the Youth Advisory Council to inform the development of an ACT Youth Factsheet on services and resources to support young people in the ACT and to refresh the Youth page Community Services Directorate's website.
- Child and Youth Protective Services continue to monitor the health and wellbeing of young people in the out of home care system through individual care team meetings in consultation with ACT Health professional.

ACT Education

- Provided remote learning for students.
- Deployed a telehealth model to ensure psychological supports continued for ACT public school students and their families.
- Promoted online resources to young people, including wellbeing modules and remote interventions.
- Invested in building the capacity of educators to support student wellbeing during remote learning – an overall, shift in focus from achievement to the whole child approach.

Care and Protection system

Convenors of Restorative Justice Conferencing for young people:

- Adapted to virtual platforms, and worked to address issues of confidentiality, ensuring the young person felt safe
- Developed plans in case the young person became upset or would benefit from immediate in-person support.
- Increased focus on asking about the wellbeing of young people they were working with, giving them a chance to talk about their situation, how they were dealing with it, and the arrangements in place for online interactions.
- Supported service providers to ensure children and young people's voices in their mental health plans, and activities as identified by a child or young person.

Skills Canberra

A range of initiatives were implemented to assist Australian Apprentices (AAs), including:

- Field officer visits shifted to using digital platforms and referred AAs to mental health services where needed.
- Displaced AAs were supported to continue their off-the-job training with a Registered Training Organisation (RTO) for up to six months while finding a new employer and referred displaced AAs to the ACT's Apprentice Network Provider to enable matching with employers.
- Implemented the JobTrainer program (access to free training places job seekers, including displaced AAs and young people (aged 17 to 24) who have left school.
- Maintained the ACT Wage Entitlement Information Service to provide AAs and employers with expert advice on entitlements/industrial agreements.
- Published frequently asked questions and answers to assist AAs, employers and RTOs to access financial and other supports (also emailed to all ACT AAs).
- All Skills Canberra Field Officers completed Youth Mental Health First Aid training.

ACT Policing

- ACT Policing's Youth Liaison Officers within the Community Engagement Team recorded encouraging video messages for youth in residential care
- Organised a trivia competition through video conferencing.

Canberra Health Services

- Recruitment of a transitional clinician for 12 months to in-reach to hospital to support safe discharge, short-term follow-up and linking into systems for eating disorders as part of the COVID-19 Community Care Package supports the 12 month.
- Initiation of parenting groups for families waiting for family-based therapy to equip parents with skills to manage the eating disorder behaviours at home.
- Partnering with universities to implement STRIDE (Short-term Recovery Interventions for Disorders Eating) which is a psychology-led Student Clinic that provides early access to early intervention eating disorders therapy.
- Ongoing support from the Adolescent Intensive Home Treatment Team to provide post hospital follow-up for up to 2 – 4 weeks after an ED presentation or discharge from hospital.
- Ongoing support via the CAMHS in-reach consultation and liaison to Paediatric ward by allied health and psychiatry registrar for assessment and collaborative discharge planning.
- Ongoing implementation of THRIVE – 6-week therapeutic group for young people who presented with moderate mental health concerns such as anxiety and depression.
- Adolescent Mobile Outreach Service and CAMHS Cottage delivery of Care Packages to existing clients to support them during lockdown.
- Redeployed school-based services to areas of higher demand, such as perinatal mental health.

ACT Health Directorate

Funding packages in response to increase demand for supports during outbreaks of COVID-19 and periods of lockdown in the ACT. These include funding to support:

- expansion and improvement to alcohol and other drug services
- the phased implementation of integrated face-to-face and digital mental care for young people through an online platform
- delivery of multidisciplinary outreach service that supports young people (12-25 years) living with mental health concerns
- support for parents through phone referrals, counselling, face-to-face sessions, and regular phone 'check-ins'
- continued mental health education initiatives targeted children and young people
- ongoing engagement with children and young people to understand their experiences and needs

LOOKING FORWARD: THE ACT GOVERNMENT'S POSITION

As we move into a new phase of the pandemic focussing on recovery, re-entry and the new normal, there are new aspects for us to consider and address. The full scope of the ongoing impacts on the mental health and wellbeing of our children and young people are largely unknown at this stage and will only become apparent over time. Research to date exploring the issues suggests that the negative impacts to mental health experienced during the pandemic will have ongoing effects²⁴. Research also tells us that with adequate support and timely intervention, young people may be able to bounce back as we recover from the pandemic²⁵. We acknowledge that the children and young people that have endured the disruptions and the associated consequences to their mental health are also the future of our society. As they move through the different developmental stages into adulthood, they will navigate the ongoing psychosocial and economic legacies of the pandemic. We acknowledge that the policy choices we make now will have long-lasting effects throughout their life. Government, community and services need to continue to come together to understand the needs of young people that have arisen in the context of the pandemic and to respond appropriately.

Despite the uncertainty, our consultation and a review of relevant literature provide some guidance on the prioritisation of our efforts to support our children and young people to develop into mentally healthy and thriving adults who have the knowledge and tools to manage the inevitable obstacles of life.

What matters to children and young people matters to us

Children and young people have expressed their strong desire to participate in shaping the policies and services that impact them. The ACT Government will continue to seek the input of children and young people when developing new services or policy responses that are targeting their needs. We will work in collaboration with children and young people to understand their experiences through the COVID-19 pandemic and their needs as we progress through the next phases. Young people, in particular, have identified their desire for clear strategic plans that support youth mental health that is informed by young people and their involvement in social recovery²⁶. We acknowledge the agency and capabilities of our children and young people and will seek to give them the appropriate platforms to influence government and community response and be part of the social recovery process.

²⁴Child and youth mental health problems have doubled during COVID-19. (2021). Retrieved 15 November 2021, from <https://theconversation.com/child-and-youth-mental-health-problems-have-doubled-during-covid-19-162750>

²⁵Fisher, J & Kirkman, M. (2020). *Disenfranchised grief amid COVID-19*. [viewed 14 November 2021] Available at: <https://lens.monash.edu/@medicine-health/2020/03/26/1379888/coronavirus-recognising-disenfranchised-grief-and-covid-19>.

²⁶Hammarberg, K, Tran, T, Kirkman, M, Rowe, H, Fisher, J. Preferred policy options to assist post-COVID-19 mental health recovery: A population study. *Aust J Publ Admin*. 2021; 80: 424– 434. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-8500.12507>

The Youth Advisory Council (the Council) currently provides advice on youth issues, giving young people a voice in the ACT Government. The Council is highly valued for its contribution to a range of ACT Government consultations. Contributing to consultations ensures young people's voices are heard on issues that affect them. The Council has provided extensive feedback on the impact of COVID-19 on young Canberrans in a variety of forums, surveys and submissions to provide the ACT Government with a better understanding of the issues young Canberrans have faced or experienced because of COVID-19.

We will also seek to hear from the communities around our children and young people, including parents or carers, families, teachers and other mentors to ensure that we are getting a well-rounded perspective.

A whole-of-government and whole-of-community approach

In recognition of the interplay of the ecological, social and economic determinants in shaping mental health and wellbeing outcomes in children and young people in the context of the pandemic, the ACT Government will continue to endorse a whole-of-government and a whole-of-community approach to supporting and promoting mental health and wellbeing as we look forward. Policy responses will be required across different portfolios of the ACT Government, the mental health system and across the community to be responsive to the range of needs.

To continue to foster an ecological environment that is structured towards being supportive for positive mental health outcomes we recognise that we need to work together with parents, families, teachers and the communities around our children and young people. We will continue to drive mental health literacy initiatives that help identify emerging issues with children and young people, give guidance on how to respond and when to seek professional support. We also acknowledge that economic initiatives to support the community through the recovery of the impacts of COVID-19 will have flow-on effects on children and young people.

A mentally healthy community will be able to provide the supports needed for our children and young people to thrive. This starts with the recognition that support for the early years of life is crucial and the need for trauma informed ways of living and working. It is acknowledged that the first 1000 days can be critical in supporting lifelong health, mental health and wellbeing. We will also consider those that may have experienced or are continuing to experience domestic violence, abuse and bullying and ensure that there are avenues for them to safely raise these issues and access timely care and supports. We will continue to build on existing partnerships across schools, universities and workplaces to work collaboratively to support our children and young people.

We know that children thrive in the context of clear and consistent routines and structures and that many of the strategies used to reduce the spread of COVID-19 have reduced their access to these. We will continue to consider these critical needs of our children as public health responses to the pandemic continue. We will also seek to encourage opportunities for children to engage in extra-curricular activities including sporting, music and the arts in safe ways. We will also reflect on, and seek to embed some of the changes we know to be beneficial to certain groups of children and young people in the new normal.

We will continue to consider the broader social determinants of mental health and wellbeing for children and young people, and their families and communities, and how the pandemic may have created stressors that might impact mental health outcomes. These might include areas like access to secure housing, financial supports, education and employment opportunities to support their success in the long term.

We will need to continue monitoring data and partnering with researchers to understand the evolving needs of children and young people moving forward.

The Mental Health System

We will continue to prioritise early intervention and prevention approaches to supporting and promoting mental health and wellbeing for children and young people. These are current priorities of the ACT Government, and we will continue to explore how these can be implemented in the context of social recovery from the pandemic. Our goal is to prevent symptoms of mental distress from escalating by reinforcing protective factors and the structures that children and young people need to be mentally healthy. When mental health issues do arise, we want to support children and young people, their families and carers and the communities around them to confidently identify issues and to respond.

When mental distress requires a service response, we want to ensure that these are accessible, welcoming and that there are appropriate and targeted supports across the continuum of care. This will require a concerted effort to understand and continue to address gaps in the system as well as removing barriers to accessing care for different cohorts of children and young people.

We acknowledge that the increased need for mental health services by children and young people, and the wider community, throughout the pandemic has placed pressure on our mental health system. We will need to consider strategies that balance increasing capacity across the system and keeping children and young people well in the community where possible. We know that some children and young people prefer face-to-face services, and we will need to consider how we can make investments to supplement existing services to increase capacity and reduce current waiting periods, as well as being accessible geographically. There will be a focus on particular cohorts (such as young people with eating disorders and Perinatal services which have seen increased presentations during the

pandemic). There will also need to be a focus on services that provide targeted support to priority groups including young LGBTIQ+ people.

We will also need to consider strategies to enable flexibility in the system to be responsive to the potentially changing needs over time and across the different developmental stages and needs in response to the pandemic as we further understand the long-term impacts and needs.

Leveraging opportunities

The pandemic has also brought to the forefront the importance of taking care of our mental health and wellbeing and seeking help when needed. There is an opportunity for us to leverage this reduced stigma and increased momentum beyond the pandemic and improve baseline levels of community wellbeing²⁷. This may be pursued through improving mental health literacy across the community and ensuring that children and young people, parents and caregivers, families, teachers and broader communities around them are equipped with the strategies to support their mental health and wellbeing.

We are listening to the community feedback that has identified the benefits children and young people have found in doing things differently. The changes in online learning and service delivery or the increased time spent with parents and families have been more supportive of some young people's needs than business as usual. We will explore options for more flexibility in how we deliver education, mental health services and supports to better meet the needs of a broader section of children and young people moving forward.

We will continue to strengthen our relationships across government directorates and the community towards our shared goal of supporting our children and young people. The ACT Government is partnering with the Brain and Mind Centre at the University of Sydney to be an implementation site for the *Right care, first time, where you live program*²⁸. This program aims to ensure that young people have the support they need to get back to work, back to school and thrive in their communities. This research will combine local knowledge and expertise with advanced system modelling methods to understand the current youth mental health system and help to provide an evidence base to inform future initiatives in the ACT. Partnerships like these will be critical as we move forward to understand the specific needs of children and young people in our community.

We will also continue the work already in progress seeking to improve supports for children and young people. The ACT Government is progressing work on the election commitment to

²⁷Batterham, P., Calear, A., McCallum, S., Morse, A., Banfield, M., & Farrer, L. et al. (2021). Trajectories of depression and anxiety symptoms during the COVID-19 pandemic in a representative Australian adult cohort. *Medical Journal Of Australia*, 214(10), 462-468. doi: 10.5694/mja2.51043

²⁸Brain and Mind Centre Youth Model <https://www.sydney.edu.au/brain-mind/our-research/youth-mental-health-and-technology/youth-model-of-care.html>

develop a First 1000 Days Strategy that will outline approaches to support physical and mental health over the first 1000 days of a child's life.

We will continue to implement the recommendations of the *Review of Children and Young People's Mental Health* including the Missing Middle report which will reflect on findings from conversations with service providers in the ACT regarding their perspectives on children and young people with mental health issues who experience difficulties accessing appropriate mental health services.

Measuring success

To ensure the strategies that we implement to support the mental health and wellbeing of our children and young people through the recovery from the pandemic and into the long-term are successful we will need to consider how we will measure their effectiveness. As we progress, we need to identify the key measures that show us that we are addressing the increased needs and the broader social and economic needs that impact on mental health and wellbeing. Our monitoring systems will need to be agile and responsive to the emerging research and knowledge as we discover the long-term impacts.

There is a range of existing data sources being collected by the ACT Government and our community partners that are monitoring the mental health and wellbeing of the children and young people in our community. The Office for Mental Health and Wellbeing is currently collaborating with the mental health sector to develop agreed outcome measures for mental health and wellbeing in the ACT under the ACT Wellbeing Framework which will provide important insights on the mental health outcomes of this cohort.



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Office for Mental Health and Wellbeing

November 2021