

2023

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

**Select Committee on Cost of Living Pressures in the ACT - Report - Inquiry into
Cost of Living Pressures in the ACT – Government Response**

**Presented by
Andrew Barr MLA
Chief Minister
September 2023**

Introduction

Cost of living pressures are continuing to be felt across the country. While Canberrans generally enjoy a high standard of living, there are some in our community doing it tough. High inflation and rising interest rates are continuing to place pressure on many households.

The ACT Government knows financial pressures can weigh more heavily on some Canberrans than others and we are committed to supporting equitable living standards and economic security across the Canberra community. We are committed to delivering targeted support to those in our community who need it most through a range of targeted discounts, rebates, and subsidies for essential services.

Cost of living was a key consideration in the preparation of the 2023-24 ACT Budget, which included new and expanded measures to further support households and individuals, including:

- Expanding the Utilities Concession eligibility criteria to include anyone with a Commonwealth Health Care Card, meaning 12,000 more households will benefit from this support, taking the total number of eligible households to 43,800.
- A one-off increase of \$50 to the Utilities Concession, raising the amount from \$750 to \$800 in 2023-24, to help further relieve cost of living pressures for 43,800 households.
- An additional payment of \$250 to households on Housing ACT's priority housing waiting list (as of 27 June 2023) in 2023-24, providing further cost of living support to some of the most vulnerable members of our community.
- Increasing the Taxi Subsidy Scheme's cap by 15 per cent – and removing the requirement to apply for additional trips – to ensure Canberrans with a disability or mobility restriction who are unable to use public or community transport can continue to access an accessible and affordable alternative and get out and about in the community.
- Increasing the means (income) test for access to Legal Aid assistance to better align with cost of living, to support more Canberrans to access legal representation if needed.

Beyond the changes announced this year, the Government will continue to review other aspects of our targeted assistance.

Many of the recommendations made by the Committee call for additional Government funding. Any additional government commitments are subject to future government decisions, considered through standard Budget processes. The Government uses the Budget process to weigh up competing priorities and makes funding decisions informed by community consultation, wellbeing impact analysis, and consideration of different policy options.

ACT Government Response to Recommendations

Recommendation 1:

The Committee recommends that the ACT Government continue to invest in nurse-led walk-in health centres.

Government Response: Existing Government Policy

In the 2022-23 ACT Budget more than \$3 million was invested to increase the number of Nurse Practitioners (NP) over four years to ensure there is an NP on each shift at each Walk-in Centre. This will increase the capacity of Walk in Centres in the ACT and the NP Scope of Practice will continue to evolve over time in response to community needs.

On 31 May 2023, the \$6 million Weston Creek Medical Imaging Service opened to provide further access to public medical imaging closer to home. The community-based medical imaging service is co-located with the Weston Creek Walk-in Centre and brings together a range of Canberra Health Services' functions in one location.

The ACT Government will be expanding community-based health centres across the city with more than \$16 million invested in the 2023-24 ACT Budget to commence design and construction for new health centres in South Tuggeranong, the Inner South and North Gungahlin. The new health centres will provide integrated multi-disciplinary health care with a focus on preventative care and advice, early intervention and the management of acute and chronic illness.

The Commonwealth Government is negotiating with all states and territories to develop Urgent Care Centre services that meet the needs of each jurisdiction. Acknowledging that the ACT already has a successful and well-established network of Walk-in Centres embedded in the ACT's health system, the Commonwealth Government is working with the ACT to consider how the Urgent Care Centres could best complement this network.

Recommendation 2:

The Committee recommends that the ACT Government increase the number of walk-in support places for mental health support across the ACT.

Government Response: Existing Government Policy

The ACT Government has recently funded two Safe Havens in the ACT. Safe Havens provide non-clinical crisis support to people in distress in a calm home like environment. Support is delivered by lived experience workers who can offer support in a non-traumatising environment. The first Safe Haven in Belconnen has been a great success and funding has been provided in the 2023-24 ACT Budget for a second Safe Haven based at the Canberra Hospital.

Recommendation 3:

The Committee recommends that a Community GP Liaison Unit be established in local community-based services.

Government Response: Noted

The ACT Government is committed to improving integration across our health system to ensure people are able to access care when and where they need it.

The Government is implementing and exploring a range of options to better support care closer to home, including expanding the number of community based health services, better coordination of care with primary care, and implementing better systems to encourage collaboration across services, such as case conferencing.

The 2022-23 Budget included funding to establish patient navigation services and paediatric nursing and liaison service for Canberrans that are more vulnerable or require greater care coordination, that aligns with the intent of the recommendation. The Government is also working with the Commonwealth Government to pilot new and innovative approaches to reduce the burden on the public hospital system in coordination with primary care through better supported pathways. The Government will continue to work across the health system to ensure that pathways and coordination is improved in partnership with primary care providers and our non-government stakeholders.

Recommendation 4:

The Committee recommends that the ACT Government expand access to free dental services, particularly for young people and people with disability.

Government Response: Agree in Principle

Responsibility for dental services in Australia are currently split between the federal government and the states and territories. The ACT Government is continuing to engage with national work on dental reform that aims to develop a long term sustainable public dental services and in particular for vulnerable groups.

The ACT Government's Oral Health Services program provides accessible and free or low-cost dental care for vulnerable people, including young people and people with disability in the ACT. The 2023-24 Australian Government Budget committed \$219.4 million to expanding access to free dental services, of which the ACT will receive \$1.9 million from 2023-24 to 2024-25.

Recommendation 5:

The Committee recommends that the ACT Government work with GP practices to support the increase of delivering of bulk-billed services to communities in need.

Government Response: Existing Government Policy

Ensuring equitable and affordable access to primary healthcare is the responsibility of the Commonwealth government. The Commonwealth funds 31 Primary Health Networks (PHN) to coordinate primary health care in their region. PHNs assess the needs of their community and commission health services so that people can get coordinated health care where and when they need it.

The Capital Health Network (CHN) is the PHN for the ACT. CHN is a key partner in the ACT health system and works closely with the ACT Health Directorate, Canberra Health Services and non-government organisations.

The Medicare rebate has barely changed in 10 years, and has not kept pace with inflation. Consequently, all GP services have been remunerated at relatively static rates for almost a decade while all the other costs of running their business – staff wages, rent, insurance, medicine and equipment – have gone up. General practices are private business and make business decisions about how much the practice will bulk bill.

The ACT Government notes the 2023-24 Australian Government Budget included \$445 million for the expansion of General Practice and a tripling of the bulk billing incentive. In recent years the ACT

Government has committed significant ongoing funding to services and programs, including after-hours GP services, working to reduce barriers to accessing mainstream primary health care.

In 2018, the ACT Government provided over \$1 million through the Bulk Billing General Practices Grant Fund to encourage the expansion or establishment of new general practices with a demonstrated commitment to bulk billing.

In light of a widespread lack of awareness of payroll tax by medical centres which engage general practitioners, the ACT Government will waive any payroll tax liabilities up until 30 June 2023 for practices which have not paid payroll tax on payments to general practitioners. This waiver will ensure general practice medical business are not subject to retrospective assessments which they have not planned for.

To support medical practices in the delivery of services to the community including bulk billing, the government is providing a further temporary payroll tax amnesty until 30 June 2025. The amnesty will be available to GP clinics that:

- bulk bill at least 65 per cent of GP attendances in a financial year; and
- have registered for MyMedicare.

The ACT Government has targeted primary care services to disadvantaged populations who face challenges in accessing mainstream public healthcare with \$5.919 million of funding under the 2019-20 and 2022-23 Budget initiatives *Delivering Better Care for Canberrans with Complex Needs*. This initiative targets people experiencing homelessness, those with alcohol or other drug related dependencies, young people at risk, refugees and asylum seekers and LGBTIQ+ Canberrans.

Also under the Delivering Better Care initiative, in 2022 the ACT Government provided \$910,000 in grants funding over two years (including a \$100,000 contribution from the Capital Health Network) towards innovative integrated care projects working with or through GPs to support vulnerable Canberrans.

The ACT Government has targeted primary care services to disadvantaged populations and will receive over \$14.7 million from the Commonwealth Government to deliver the Primary Care Pilot and Urgent Care Centres (UCCs).

The Primary Care Pilot will test an innovative model to improve health outcomes for people with chronic conditions and reduce pressure on Emergency Departments and public hospital demand.

The ACT Minister for Health continues to raise primary health funding and administration in every meeting with the Australian Government's Minister for Health and Aged Care. As Chair of the Health Ministers' Meeting, the Minister will continue to advocate for a more accessible and sustainable primary health system.

Recommendation 6:

The Committee recommends that the ACT Government provide significant additional funding to alcohol, tobacco and other drug rehabilitation services and programs.

Government Response: Existing Government Policy

The ACT Government continues to make significant investment in the alcohol and other drug treatment sector. In terms of core funding contracts and direct Alcohol and other Drug (AOD) Government and non-Government services, annual spending has increased from \$20 million in 2018-19 to more than \$26 million in 2023-24.

The 2022-23 Budget included a \$13 million investment into the AOD sector, including support for methamphetamine treatment and residential rehabilitation services. This included significant growth in frontline community services with new funding for residential rehabilitation services growing from \$250,000 last financial year to \$850,000 this financial year and then to \$1.2 million in the next two financial years. New funding specifically for methamphetamine services that commenced in the last quarter of last financial year.

The 2023-24 Budget builds on the significant investments made in the 2022-23 Budget and every budget since 2019-20, including the largest capital investment the ACT Government has made in residential alcohol and other drug rehabilitation services.

The Government has allocated \$49 million to deliver the Watson Health Precinct project over the next three years to construct three new purpose-built health facilities: a dedicated First Nations residential rehabilitation service; the Ted Noffs AOD residential rehabilitation facility for young persons; and the CatholicCare mental health residential facility for young persons.

The 2023-24 Budget also included \$8.4 million to the ACT Drug and Alcohol Sentencing Court to increase capacity by 20% for non-government organisations (NGOs) to provide AOD treatment to participants.

Recommendation 7:

The Committee recommends that the ACT Government increase funding for Legal Aid ACT by at least \$250,000 annually and support it to index its means test as a proportion of the Henderson poverty line into the future.

Government Response: **Noted**

As part of the 2023-24 Budget, the ACT Government provided Legal Aid ACT with increased funding of \$303,000 over two years to fund an increase in the income thresholds. The increase to current annual income thresholds will seek to address the current gap in access to legal services for vulnerable members of the ACT community. Further funding of \$243,000 will also be provided to Legal Aid ACT across 2023-24 and 2024-25 to employ an Aboriginal Torres Strait Islander and Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Client Liaison officer. This funding will seek to increase access to justice and further meet the needs of these clients.

Recommendation 8:

The Committee recommends that the ACT Government investigate how online gambling providers and online scams are targeting the most vulnerable in the community to get a better understanding of the impact on the community.

Government Response: **Agree in Principle**

The regulation of online gambling sits with the Australian Communications and Media Authority (ACMA). The ACT Minister for Gaming participates in meetings with Federal and State and Territory counterparts and will continue to raise the problematic issue of online gaming, including how providers target more vulnerable community members.

The fight against scams is led by the Australian Competition and Consumer Commission (ACCC), the Australian Securities and Investment Commission (ASIC) with the support of all State and Territory Consumer protection agencies. These agencies also work with law enforcement agencies to share intelligence, disrupt scams and raise awareness in the community about scams. The ACCC also collects data via its Scamwatch website and publishes a report annually highlighting the impact of scams activity across Australia, including information about financial loss, scam types and victim

demographics. The ACT Minister for Consumer Affairs meets annually with Federal and State and Territory counterparts and will continue to discuss the impact of scams on more vulnerable community members and the strategies to disrupt scam activities.

It is noted that the Australian Government recently announced that their 2023-24 Budget provided a funding package of \$86 million to target scams in Australia. This includes funding for:

- the establishment of the National Anti-Scams Centre within the ACCC from 1 July 2023;
- funding for ASIC to investigate and target investment scams;
- the development of a SMS sender identification register to stop scams replicating Government agency names; and
- the development of new industry codes relating to scams, particularly focused on banks and telecommunication providers.

Recommendation 9:

The Committee recommends that the ACT Government undertake a review of concessions with a view to expanding eligibility to ensure that their criteria allow programs to deliver stated objectives.

Government Response: **Existing Government Policy**

The ACT Government acknowledges the difficulties increased cost of living places on parts of the community. The ACT Government is committed to ensuring our concessions meet their objectives and are available to those who are most in need. Eligibility for concessions is reviewed on an ongoing basis as part of each Budget, with the cost of potential new, increased and expanded concessions weighed against other Budget priorities. Recent ACT Budgets have included additional, increased or expanded concessions. For example, in the 2023-24 Budget, the Utilities Concession was extended to Commonwealth Health Care Card holders, extending eligibility to an additional 12,000 households.

Recommendation 10:

The Committee recommends that the ACT Government improve targeted communication to raise awareness of concession schemes through Access Canberra.

Government Response: **Existing Government Policy**

The ACT Government has launched a whole of government campaign to ensure eligible Canberrans are aware of concessions, rebates and supports in place to help with cost of living, including through Access Canberra.

Recommendation 11:

The Committee recommends that the ACT Government investigate a system for concessions to be automatically applied to eligible people.

Government Response: **Agree in Principle**

The ACT Government supports improving the visibility and accessibility of concessions for which ACT residents are already eligible. The ACT Government has already built the foundations of a service that can apply concessions automatically across a range of government services over time.

In 2020, the ACT Government co-designed with ACT residents an automated concessions process to make it easier for people to prove their eligibility in order to access a range of concessions when using

ACT Government services. Through this process, over 60 different concessions for ACT Government services were identified with varying policy settings, business processes and ICT systems used, management arrangements, and user and service experiences.

In 2021-22, the ACT Government piloted the first digital concessions capability with three of the ACT Revenue Offices rates assistance concession services. This automated the verification of a person's Commonwealth concessions card status (Centrelink and Department of Veterans' Affairs) through their ACT Digital Account. This new digital experience was made available for use by the community in July 2022. To date, close to 1,000 applications have been received for these services.

In 2023-24, ACT Government will investigate automatic concession validation and pricing for public transport ticketing as part of the MyWay+ initiative.

Recommendation 12:

The Committee recommends that Access Canberra provide a liaison officer to provide information sessions with NGOs, local community services and groups around the different concessions and programs available.

Government Response: **Noted**

The ACT Government has launched a whole of Government campaign to ensure eligible Canberrans are aware of key concessions, rebates and supports in place to help with the cost of living. As a part of the campaign information is being developed for community organisations and NGOs to inform them of the concessions, rebates and services available. The ACT Government will continue to look for ways to engage the community sector.

Recommendation 13:

The Committee recommends that the ACT Government review their strategy for debt collection to consider the cost of living crisis and vulnerability of people, including those with disability.

Government Response: **Noted**

Debt recovery is an important component of tax system integrity helping to ensure voluntary on time payments and fairness between taxpayers who pay on time and those who don't. The ACT Revenue Office regularly reviews its approach to debt recovery. The ACT Revenue Office proactively informs taxpayers in arrears of the debt recovery actions it can pursue.

Debt recovery measures are flexible and an individual's circumstances, including their financial situation and factors of vulnerability, are considered prior to recovery action being undertaken. The time granted under a payment plan arrangement is to enable the taxpayer to settle their tax debt and ensure all tax obligations are paid in full within a suitable timeframe. It also provides time for the taxpayer to seek alternative financing, which may offer a lower interest rate on their debt over a longer period than the Revenue Office's statutory interest rate.

For taxpayers who are experiencing financial hardship, the Revenue office offers rates assistance in the form of rates deferral for eligible taxpayers who provide sufficient evidence of financial hardship.

Recommendation 14:

The Committee recommends that the ACT Government provide more support for financial counselling services.

Government Response: Existing Government Policy

In 2023-24, the ACT Government is directing a total of \$857,915 (GST exclusive) towards supporting financial counselling services.

In addition to ACT Government funding, the Australian Government also provides funding for financial counselling services including the National Debt Helpline.

Community Services Directorate (CSD) is progressing a large program of commissioning activities which supports new ways of designing, funding and delivering services and programs to meet the needs of our community. This is likely to have an impact on what community services are delivered in future years.

Through this work CSD is validating current trends, and the needs of the ACT population and identifying the current services and gaps in meeting that need. This work provides the opportunity to examine, shape and evolve the services and align them to the needs of the ACT population.

Recommendation 15:

The Committee recommends that the ACT Government provide funding for specialist financial counsellors for priority groups and develop a campaign to promote such services.

Government Response: Existing Government Policy

The funding provided through the ACT Government for financial counselling services is targeted towards low to moderate income earners and vulnerable consumers to support them to overcome debt through counselling, advocacy and raising community awareness. This support is offered, when needed, as an outreach service offering increased support to priority cohorts at service locations, they are more likely to frequent and are more comfortable with, increasing service user choice.

Financial counselling services in the ACT also provide targeted supports to individuals experiencing domestic and family violence, and those experiencing gambling harm.

High uptake of services demonstrates promotion is working. Financial counselling services are well promoted through other support providers including Emergency Material and Financial Aid providers and a range of known and promoted websites and information hubs.

Recommendation 16:

The Committee recommends that the ACT Government provide funding to the Salvation Army for extra staffing recourse to assist in the processing of no-interest loans.

Government Response: Existing Government Policy

The ACT Government currently funds Care Inc and the Salvation Army to administer the No Interest Loan Program (NILP).

The NILP is a microfinance program used to assist individuals on low to middle incomes that are experiencing financial pressure and need to access affordable credit to transition to financial stability.

The NILP assists individuals to access safe and affordable credit to purchase essential items.

The ACT Government is progressing a large program of commissioning activities which supports new ways of designing, funding and delivering services and programs to meet the needs of our community. This is likely to have an impact on what community services are delivered in future years.

Through this work the ACT Government is validating the needs of the ACT population and identifying the current services and gaps in meeting that need. This work provides the opportunity to examine, shape and evolve the services and align them to the needs of the ACT population.

Recommendation 17:

The Committee recommends that the ACT Government improve the ACT Taxi Subsidy Scheme.

Government Response: Existing Government Policy

The ACT Government is committed to ensuring that the Taxi Subsidy Scheme continues to serve its intended purpose of easing the burden of transport for people with disabilities. In the 2023-24 Budget, the ACT Government increased the Taxi Subsidy Scheme's cap by 15 per cent, reducing the cost of transport for scheme participants and removed the requirement to apply for additional trips, reducing an administrative barrier.

The ACT Government has also commenced work to improve the scheme's application process through the availability of an online form.

Recommendation 18:

The Committee recommends that the ACT Government acknowledges the ongoing community campaign advocating for more 'missing middle' housing and consider how to reform planning system to enable the construction of more homes within our current urban footprint.

Government Response: Existing Government Policy

The ACT Government recognises the importance of delivering greater housing choice and affordability across the ACT, including the provision of more 'missing middle' housing. This is part of Government policy through a range of documents. It is demonstrated through the ACT Planning Strategy, which includes a commitment to 'support sustainable urban growth by working towards delivering up to 70 per cent of new housing within our existing urban footprint, and by concentrating development in areas located close to the city centre, town and group centres and along key transit corridors.

The Government has undertaken a range of projects that involved extensive consultation and proposals for projects that will support delivery of housing and in particular typologies of housing to meet the needs of the community. This has included the housing choices work which has resulted in changes to the Territory Plan and informs ongoing considerations for the new Territory Plan and District Strategies (part of the Planning System Review and Reform Project). The Demonstration Housing projects have also been focused on looking at innovative approaches to provide housing to meet the needs of the community now and into the future.

Through the Planning System Review and Reform Project a number of proposed changes and reforms have been included and consulted on with the community that address housing supply and typology in the urban footprint. The District Strategies indicate areas where change could occur and where there is opportunity to increase density to provide more and a range of housing. The draft new Territory Plan that was publicly consulted on from November 2022 to March 2023 also included some proposed changes related to residential zones that are intended to encourage supply while also considering other relevant factors.

Recommendation 19:

The Committee recommends that the ACT Government promotes the social, environmental and economic benefit of the provision of more public housing.

Government Response: Existing Government Policy

The ACT Government is committed to promoting an inclusive Canberra where everyone, no matter their financial status can feel a valued member of the community.

The ACT Government uses a variety of communication methods to promote the social and economic benefits of the provision of public housing including sharing stories of the positive impact of public housing on individuals, families, neighbourhoods and the community at large.

Through the Vulnerable Household Energy Support Scheme (VHES), the ACT Government is working to improve the thermal performance and sustainability of existing social and public housing, whilst also offering support to reduce energy hardship for public and private tenants as well as homeowners on low-incomes or with chronic conditions.

VHES provides a pathway to ensure that all Housing ACT properties are compliant with the new minimum energy efficiency insulation standard for rental properties.

The ACT Government is currently progressing Property Condition Audits across the entire Housing ACT property portfolio (11,000+ properties) and we are on track to have 75 per cent of audits completed by the end of the year – these audits will enable the Government to determine the exact number of housing ACT properties that require insulation upgrades to meet the new standard.

VHES has supported electric retrofits and insulation upgrades in 113 public housing properties to date. This is leading to reduced energy bills, increased thermal comfort and improved health outcomes for public housing tenants.

These actions demonstrate the ACT Government's commitment to improving the quality of the Territory's public housing stock, and the environmental benefits that can be achieved through the provision of more public housing.

Recommendation 20:

The Committee recommends that the ACT consider ways to ensure that young people are not being discriminated against in the private rental market.

Government Response: Agree

The ACT Government does not condone age discrimination. Section 21 of the Discrimination Act 1991 expressly prohibits a person (including a landlord or agent) from discriminating against a prospective tenant on the basis of their age during the rental application process.

Complaints about alleged discrimination can be made to the ACT Human Rights Commission, who can investigate and conciliate complaints. The Human Rights Commission can also refer complaints to the ACT Civil and Administrative Tribunal (ACAT).

The Government will continue to monitor tenancy laws in the ACT, to identify opportunities for improvement.

Recommendation 21:

The Committee recommends that the ACT Government increase awareness of the Bond Loan Scheme among young people and consider additional financial support to young people to assist with up-front rental costs.

Government Response: Existing Government Policy

Consultation will occur with the Youth Coalition Council to devise effective methods to increase awareness of, and access to the scheme by young people. Regarding any new financial support, this will be considered but will be subject to ACT Budget processes, priorities, and requirements.

The ACT Government has launched a whole of Government campaign and website to ensure eligible Canberrans are aware of key concessions, rebates and supports in place to help with the cost of living. The Bond Loan Scheme features in the website and in targeted information for young people and those looking for housing support.

Recommendation 22:

The Committee recommends that the ACT Government speed up both the demolition of old vacant properties and the construction of new properties.

Government Response: Existing Government Policy

The Growing and Renewing Public Housing Program has been the main mechanism for expanding the stock of public housing in the ACT in the last four years. This program was designed as a long-term strategy to balance the sale of selected end-of-life Housing ACT properties and the redevelopment of selected Housing ACT properties with the purchase of some established dwellings and construction of new dwellings. Given the scale of the program and the number of Housing ACT tenants involved, some property vacancy was expected due to efficiencies resulting from “bundling” demolition and construction. For example, where multiple neighbouring properties can be consolidated to build multiple new dwellings (and therefore make more efficient use of land and resources), construction will be delayed until all existing properties are vacant.

Construction industry challenges over the past two years, including the supply of labour and materials alongside adverse weather conditions, have caused unforeseen delays to demolitions and development work. The backlog in development application processing experienced by the ACT Government has also contributed to longer-than-anticipated timeframes on some projects within the program.

With the construction industry showing signs of rebound, timeframes for projects are anticipated to continue reducing. Additionally, a Development Approvals review panel was funded in the 2023-24 Budget, which aims to improve the approvals process for construction projects.

The ACT Government is currently reviewing the policies and practices of the Growing and Renewing Public Housing program, in particular the decision-making process for relocations, as part of the response to the ACT Ombudsman’s report of 31 July 2023. Further changes to Housing ACT processes and policies are expected as a result of this work.

Recommendation 23:

The Committee recommends that the ACT Government substantially increase the capacity of Housing ACT to support the delivery of the Growing and Renewing Public Housing program.

Government Response: Agree in principle

Improving and growing public housing stock is a key ACT Government priority. Through the Growing and Renewing Public Housing program (the Program), the Government will deliver an additional 400 dwellings and renew 1,000 properties (totalling 1,400 dwellings) by 2026-27. The capacity of Housing ACT to deliver the Program targets has been impacted by a variety of complex external factors including market conditions in the construction sector, supply chain issues, worker shortages and unfavourable weather conditions.

Since 2019-20, the ACT Government has committed \$256.7 million of Budget capital to fund the Program to deliver the additional 400 public housing dwellings, with the 1,000 renewals funded through Housing ACT's own source revenue from asset sales. The ACT Government has provided 31 full-time equivalent (FTE) positions to support Program delivery, bringing Housing ACT's existing resources to 311 FTE.

As this Program is a high priority for Government, further funding of \$177.1 million over four years was provided in the 2023-24 Budget to ensure that Housing ACT is able to maintain its operations while still delivering on the Program's targets.

Delivery of the Growing and Renewing Public Housing Program is contingent on a variety of complex external factors including market conditions in the construction sector, supply chain issues and weather.

The ACT Government monitors program delivery through existing governance and reporting mechanisms, which includes an annual assessment through the Budget process of funding required to achieve program outcomes.

The ACT Government is currently reviewing the policies and practices of the Growing and Renewing Public Housing program, in particular the decision-making process for relocations, as part of the response to the ACT Ombudsman's report of 31 July 2023. Further changes to Housing ACT processes and policies are expected as a result of this work.

Recommendation 24:

The Committee recommends that the ACT Government limit the time between tenants moving out of an old public housing dwelling and the construction of a new public housing dwelling on that site.

Government Response: Existing Government Policy

The ACT Government does, to the best extent possible, limit the time between tenants moving out of a public housing dwelling and the construction of new public housing on that site.

There are several factors that may result in extended timeframes between when a property is vacant and a new property is constructed, for example, development approvals, procurement of builders or consolidation of multiple sites to allow for more efficient use of public land, construction market and supply chain issues.

As part of its ongoing focus on providing quality public housing homes for existing tenants and those on the waitlist, the ACT Government re-commits to continuous investigation of options to improve vacant property turnaround times and performance improvement wherever possible.

Recommendation 25:

The Committee recommends that the ACT Government continue to manage the sale of public housing properties to ensure that the portfolio of public housing properties is not in decline at any one time.

Government Response: Agree in principle

The ACT Government is committed to growing the number of public housing homes. The Government will continue to carefully manage the sale of public housing properties to balance the needs of existing public housing tenants with those on the waitlist as well as preparing to meet increased demand for public housing arising from population growth and cost of living pressures.

The process of growing the number of public housing homes sometimes means stock declines before it increases.

For example, sometimes Housing ACT will demolish a house in order to build multiple dwellings (such as townhouses, where zoning allows) on the same block. This results in a decline in stock numbers at a point in time (when the house is demolished), for a longer-term increase in stock numbers (when the townhouses are constructed).

While there might be short periods where there are stock movements, this metric will be monitored to ensure a gradual increase over time.

Recommendation 26:

The Committee recommends that the ACT Government honour its commitment in the Parliamentary and Governing Agreement to increase its public housing portfolio by 400 properties by 2025.

Government Response: Agree in Principle

This is existing Government policy. In 2020, the Parliamentary and Governing Agreement set out the Government's "aim to deliver a total of 400 additional public housing dwellings by 2025", while acknowledging the significant challenges in delivering additional housing.

While the Government is on track to deliver 400 new public housing properties by 2025, this won't result in an increase to the overall public housing stock by that time. This is because the 'growth' and 'renewal' parts of the Growing and Renewing Public Housing program involving a balance of sales, demolition, rebuilds and new builds, are being delivered simultaneously.

In 2022, the Minister for Housing and Suburban Development updated the Legislative Assembly that, due to complex external factors such as supply chain and labour shortages, the duration of the Growing and Renewing Public Housing Program has been extended. While all construction contracts will be entered into by the end of 2025, the delivery of dwellings will be finalised in 2026-27.

The ACT Government is also working with the Commonwealth Government and local community housing providers on a range of other projects that would contribute to increased social housing in Canberra. This includes the \$50 million of Social Housing Accelerator funds granted to the ACT, which need to be expended by 30 June 2025.

The ACT Government will continue to explore all feasible available mechanisms to meet the commitments in the Parliamentary Agreement.

Recommendation 27:

The Committee recommends that the Community Services Directorate determine publicly state how many applicants on the public housing waitlist require Class C adaptable properties.

Government Response: Agree in Principle

The ACT Government is committed to supporting Housing ACT clients in determining their housing needs, supporting both their immediate specific housing needs and facilitating tenants to age in place.

For those applying for public housing, the ACT Government does not collect the level of detail at application, to determine specific housing need, including those that may require a Class C property.

Information collected at application is for the client to identify they have a disability that will need to be considered as part of the housing allocation process.

This information is not confirmed until an intake assessment is completed which then determines the type of housing need required for the applicant.

This approach is currently being modified to allow for more detailed information on housing need to occur at the initial application process, which will continue to improve future portfolio planning.

However, using current data on existing tenancies and data collected via the current application and assessment process, Housing ACT is able to anticipate changing tenant demographics and needs, which informs modelling of property requirements, including Class C properties.

These commitments have been set drawing from our understanding of tenants needs and may change based on the needs of our tenants.

Recommendation 28:

The Committee recommends that the Community Services Directorate should continue to build public housing and purchase from the private housing market to grow the overall supply of public housing to cater to all levels of accessibility needs on the public housing waitlist

Government Response: Existing Government Policy

The ACT Government is committed to delivering more accessible public housing properties, which support the broadest range of tenants and aging in place.

The Growing and Renewing Public Housing Program (the Program) includes a target of 90 per cent of properties under the construction program designed to meet adaptability/liveable housing standards, in accordance with AS4299's adaptable Class C requirements and/or Liveable Housing Australia's Gold standard.

As at December 2022, the ACT Government had achieved 96 per cent of builds under the Growth and Renewal Program that meet at least one of these standards.

For more than a decade Housing ACT has regularly acquired properties from the private market to increase the supply of fit-for-purpose housing stock. As part of the Program, Housing ACT prepares an annual acquisition strategy to guide purchase activity in the areas of highest demand and greatest value for money.

Since the start of the Growing and Renewing Public Housing Program to June 2023 the ACT Government has acquired 131 dwellings from the market. In addition, there are currently 127 properties in the acquisition pipeline with offers accepted or contracts exchanged, to settle within the next two years.

Recommendation 29:

The Committee recommends that Auditor-General consider conducting a performance audit into the management of the Growing and Renewing Public Housing Program.

Government Response: **Noted**

The Auditor-General has announced that the Public Housing Renewal Program will be a 2023-24 performance audit topic, as part of the key performance area of delivering effective services to meet the expectations of the community.

Recommendation 30:

The Committee recommends that the ACT Education Directorate evaluate the Future of Education Fund and consider changes to allow schools to apply on behalf of students and to ensure that funding is supporting the vulnerable year-round.

Government Response: **Existing Government Policy**

The Education Directorate reviews and conducts improvements for the operation of the Future of Education Equity Fund each year prior to launching a new application round. The 2023 Round opened on 23 February 2023 and closes on 3 November 2023.

The Future of Education Equity Fund is currently being evaluated to identify improvements that may be made to its operation, including the feasibility of all year operation. The Education Directorate Equity Fund Team provide support to applicants when making an application through the Equity Fund Hotline and via email. Applicants may consent to a third party assisting with their application which may be a community-based organisation or a staff member within a school (noting that in most circumstances applicants should be referred to the Equity Fund team to limit the impost on school-based staff).

Recommendation 31:

The Committee recommends that the ACT Government evaluate the free meal program and assess the scope for expanding the program to all ACT public schools, prioritising need.

Government Response: **Existing Government Policy**

The ACT Government committed \$1.462 million to a trial of Meals at School at five ACT public schools by providing students with access to free breakfast and lunch for up to 120 days (three days per week throughout the school year) until the end of 2024. A phased rollout will see each of the five participating schools begin the pilot between term three 2023, and the beginning of the 2024 school year.

An evaluation of the Meals at School pilot will occur. The evaluation will inform consideration of any future expansion of meal provision in ACT public schools.

Recommendation 32:

The Committee recommends that the ACT Government add more courses to the free CIT course list, particularly in areas of acute skill shortage including building and construction, age care and mental health.

Government Response: Existing Government Policy

The ACT is implementing a 12-month plan to deliver over 2,500 Fee Free TAFE (FFT) places in the ACT. Fee Free courses include aged care, mental health, and construction. As at 10 July 2023, the following courses are available:

- Certificate III Individual Support
- Certificate IV Mental Health
- Certificate IV in Allied Health Assistance (Physiotherapy)
- Certificate IV in Community Services
- Certificate IV in Disability
- Certificate IV in Alcohol and Other Drugs
- Diploma of Community Services
- Diploma of Nursing
- Certificate II in Construction Pathways
- Certificate II in Electronics
- Certificate IV in Work Health and Safety
- Certificate IV in Building and Construction
- Diploma of Building and Construction (Building)
- Diploma of Project Management

24 new qualifications were added to the fee free course list on 24 May, including courses in nursing, community development and building and construction. A range of short courses are also available to give students an introduction to the industry.

Recommendation 33:

The Committee recommends that the ACT Government increase community awareness of free CIT courses.

Government Response: Existing Government Policy

The Canberra Institute of Technology (CIT) has commenced a marketing campaign promoting fee-free courses under FFT. The campaign incorporates digital and social media advertising targeting eligible Canberrans and the wider Canberra community; direct email marketing targeting future students, and industry, sectoral and community partners; and targeted information and enrolment events.

CIT is engaging with organisations and associations with direct links to priority cohorts (First Nations Australians, people out of work or receiving income support, unpaid carers, people with a disability, 17-24 year olds, veterans and women undertaking study in non-traditional fields) to raise further awareness of FFT courses among key target audiences.

The ACT Government has launched a whole of Government campaign and website to ensure eligible Canberrans are aware of key concessions, rebates and supports in place to help with the cost of living. Information about CIT's free courses feature in the website and in targeted information for young people and students.

Recommendation 34:

The Committee recommends that:

- *the ACT Government formally conducts a systemic and holistic review of the Targeted Assistance Strategy;*
- *updates the Targeted Assistance Strategy based on the outcomes of that review; and*
- *tables the report on the review and an updated Targeted Assistance Strategy in the Assembly.*

Government Response: Agree in Principle

Since the release of the Targeted Assistance Strategy (TAS) a decade ago, there have been significant changes and advancements made in assistance policies, programs and services. Some such changes originated with the TAS, while many others have occurred separately as a result of other Government policies in the intervening period.

As outlined in the Government's submission to the inquiry, the ACT Government provides more than 70 concessions and supports across a wide range of areas including:

- General residential rates rebates and deferral;
- Concessional conveyance duty and duty deferral;
- Rental bond loans;
- Mortgage relief;
- Public housing;
- Utilities concessions;
- Energy efficiency/home energy supports;
- Concessional or free public transport;
- Community transport services and taxi subsidies;
- Financial assistance for school and VET students; and
- Flexible payment terms for most fines and infringements.

Improvements have also been made to the assistance.act.gov.au website, making it simple for people to identify concessions they may be eligible for based on their individual circumstances.

Noting the wide range of ongoing and targeted assistance already in place, the government will continue to review and consider where additional supports may be required.

Recommendation 35:

The Committee recommends that the ACT Government consider introducing an online support platform for gig economy workers.

Government Response: Agree in Principle

The ACT Government supports improved working conditions for all workers including in the gig economy. We continue to monitor national developments and note that several recent publications have been focussed on providing additional guidance for operating in the gig economy.

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The ACT Government is committed to protecting Canberra workers through access to fair and secure employment. The Government is implementing a multi-faceted and mutually supportive suite of initiatives through a combination of regulatory and procurement powers, investment and workplace relations practices.

Independent contractors, including contractors working in the gig economy, are also able to voluntarily register and accrue portable long service benefits under the ACT's portable long service leave legislation if they work in an industry covered by the portable schemes.

More information about the portable long service leave expansion can be found by visiting the CMTEDD webpage [here](#) or the ACT Long Service Leave Authority webpage [here](#).

The ACT has also made a series of changes to ensure it is an informed purchaser, doing business with companies who meet their obligations to workers. The Procurement Values Direction was introduced in September 2020 and mandates that Territory entities consider the Charter of Procurement Values in the management of their procurement activities.

The "Transparent and Ethical Engagement" Procurement Value, requires Territory entities to be alert to modern day slavery and leverage national and inter-jurisdictional initiatives to abate such practices. The ACT Secure Local Jobs Code (SLJC) applies to procurements from industries that are susceptible to unfair and unsafe conditions for workers. For applicable procurements, suppliers must comply with WHS laws and hold a valid SLJC Certificate in order to tender.

To further support and promote safe and secure employment, the Government has developed an Insourcing Framework and Evaluation Methodology, responsive to a commitment that government services not be contracted out where they could be practicably performed by public servants.

While the gig economy may be prone to insecure working arrangements, insecure work may manifest in a variety of employment sectors including labour hire. In this context, from May 2021, the ACT Government introduced a labour hire licensing scheme designed to protect workers in the labour hire sector and promote the integrity of, and responsible practices by, labour hire providers.

The labour hire licensing scheme is administered by the ACT's work health and safety regulator, WorkSafe ACT. For more information refer to the WorkSafe ACT website [here](#).

The Office of Industrial Relations and Workforce Strategy continues to monitor national developments in the information available for the gig economy and its workforce. In particular, officials are working closely with national counterparts responsible for work health and safety and workers compensation legislative policy, in considering regulatory design and information available to better assist workers operating in the gig economy.

Recently, information and guidance material about WHS duties, managing risks and workers' compensation in the gig economy was published on the [Safe Work Australia](#) website. Safe Work Australia is the national tripartite body with policy responsibility for Australia's model WHS laws.

The ACT's *Work Health and Safety Act 2011* (WHS Act), which adopts the nationally agreed model laws, sets out the health and safety duties and obligations of persons conducting a business or undertaking in the Territory. Importantly, the WHS Act extends to all workers, including those that work in on-demand services, the gig and platform economies, ensuring that the legal obligations of the WHS Act apply to keep all workplaces healthy and safe.

Recommendation 36:

The Committee recommends that the ACT Government continuously review and update the ACT Government's Assistance website to ensure the information is accessible and up to date.

Government Response: Existing Government Policy

The ACT Government has launched a refreshed cost of living support website that has replaced the previous assistance website. The website displays concessions, rebates and supports in place to help eligible Canberrans with cost of living pressures and will be reviewed. The website will be promoted through a targeted advertising campaign and information through community organisations. It will also be regularly promoted across priority ACT Government communication channels including Our Canberra and whole of government social media channels.

Recommendation 37:

The Committee recommends that the ACT Government ensures that approaches to its OneLink information and connection service are answered and individuals are directed to effective supports in a timely manner.

Government Response: Agree

A recent upgrade to OneLink's phone system has resulted in improved access for OneLink clients and increased capacity for OneLink to collect a range of phone statistics for quality assurance purposes. The Community Services Directorate continues to collaborate with OneLink to enhance service delivery in response to the OneLink Evaluation.

Additionally, the planned homelessness commissioning central intake co-design process in the second half of 2023 will provide a valuable opportunity for the Government and sector to design a new central intake model to deliver an accessible and timely information and connection service for Canberra experiencing or at risk of homelessness.

Recommendation 38:

The Committee recommends that the ACT Government provide increased support for those experiencing or at risk of homelessness, including:

- *targeted support for young women at a high risk of homelessness;*
- *funding for peer mental health support programs; and*
- *funding for a pilot program to provide integrated and multi-agency support for ACT residents experiencing or at risk of homelessness being discharged from hospital with complex health conditions.*

Government Response: Noted

Any additional government funding commitments are subject to future government decisions, considered through standard Budget processes. The Government uses the Budget process to weigh up competing priorities and makes funding decisions informed by community consultation, wellbeing impact analysis, and consideration of different policy options.

The ACT Government is committed to supporting young women who are experiencing or at high risk of homelessness. The 2023-24 Budget provided an additional \$20 million in funding for the homelessness sector. This funding includes \$14.3 million over four years to support increased service delivery capacity, including homelessness services for women. This is in addition to the \$28 million per annum for the homelessness sector.

As part of the ACT Government's homelessness sector commissioning process, a co-design process is currently underway to design appropriate models of support for individuals with high and complex needs who are experiencing or at risk of homelessness. This co-design process is bringing together representatives from a range of community service organisations and across government, including ACT Health Directorate (ACTHD) to discuss and identify what the key features service delivery should like to deliver a more integrated and effective service response.

Funding a pilot program to provide integrated and multi-agency support for ACT residents experiencing or at risk of homelessness being discharged from hospital with complex health conditions requires ACT Government consideration.

The ACT Government recognises the complex housing and support issues that impact on people with complex or chronic health issues, including mental health issues.

The Mental Health Commissioning process will consider the needs of these people and the ACTHD will continue to work in partnership with the Community Services Directorate (CSD) and the Housing Coordinator General to ensure the support needs of this vulnerable group are met.

ACTHD currently provides funding for the Discharge Accommodation Program (DAP). Funding was received for a further two years for this program through the 2023-24 budget. Funding was also provided for an evaluation of this project. DAP provides short term accommodation and assistance with housing to support people exiting inpatient Mental Health Services.

ACTHD also actively funds and supports the use of peer workers in mental health services delivered by non-government organisations. Examples include the peer lead model delivered via Safe Haven and peer workers embedded in Step Up Step Down services.

ACTHD is also in the process of recruiting a lived experience director who will have a focus on lived experience workers in the ACT. This is on top of work underway to develop a mental health workforce action plan which will also attempt to address issues to increase the peer workforce.

The ACT Government funds several projects which provide holistic healthcare services to specific cohorts of people experiencing vulnerability, including homeless:

- General Practitioner-led services for people experiencing homelessness at the Early Morning Centre in Civic, delivered by Directions Health Services
- The 'Chat to PAT' mobile clinic providing wraparound, multidisciplinary support to Canberrans who cannot easily access health services, in particular those experiencing homelessness.
- Capital Health Network (CHN) – HealthPathways: through this project, the CHN undertakes the development, maintenance, review and promotion of clinical and referral pathways for specified medical conditions through the ACT and SNSW HealthPathways online portal, in order to improve the quality and appropriateness of referrals within the local health system and to support improved access to health services and reduce delays in priority areas. This project is co-commissioned with the CHN and the ACT Government to work towards the policy goals of the National Strategic Framework for Chronic Conditions
- The Homeless Outreach Team, which was funded in the 2022-23 Budget.
- In addition, the ACT is working in partnership with all jurisdictions to implement recommendations in the First Secretaries Group 'Improving Care Pathways' (ICP) report, which focuses on identifying practical improvements to Australia's health system, and specifically the connections between primary care, particularly GPs, and hospitals.

Recommendation 39:

The Committee recommends that the ACT Government evaluate community sport voucher programs in other jurisdictions to inform a community sport voucher program in the ACT.

Government Response: **Noted**

The ACT Government will continue to monitor other jurisdictions' policies. Currently, the ACT Government funds Every Chance, which provides financial assistance to children in need, to participate in sport through direct funding of participation fees.

The Government also funds the Housing Tenant Participation Grants that supports eligible public and community housing tenants and their families to participate in a range of activities for physical, social and personal development.

Further, the Future of Education Equity Fund can provide a one-off payment to low-income families to help cover education costs including sport equipment and activities.

Through these programs, the ACT Government is taking a targeted approach that is available to those Canberrans who don't get the same chances as others to participate in sport and the community activities.

Recommendation 40:

The Committee recommends that the ACT Government continue to work with relevant organisations to explore the feasibility of establishing a foodbank distribution centre within the ACT.

Government Response: **Existing Government Policy**

The ACT Government has been working closely with Foodbank NSW & ACT Limited (Foodbank) in recent months to ensure the supply of essential Foodbank items to the ACT continues in a sustainable way. As a result of this work, the Government has entered a direct arrangement with Foodbank for the 2023-24 financial year.

This arrangement continues the freight subsidy offered to small-to-medium community food pantries to access foodbank items from Foodbank's warehouse in Sydney. Recent work has shown this is the best outcome in the medium term to continue the flow of essential food items, particularly pantry staples.

The 2021-22 Budget committed additional funding to support food security in the ACT. A total of \$475,000 was allocated over four years to support work towards long-term solutions for food sustainability across Canberra. The project is community-led; planning and increasing data collection to support the development of a streamlined response to food security in the ACT. The project has established the Food Relief Network to enable members to share resources and information as well as an Advisory Committee which has developed an outcomes framework with a vision for food relief in the ACT and is working to identify opportunities for community, government and corporate partnerships to drive more effective and supportive food relief structures. This collaborative project will identify new processes to food security which may endorse the exploration of the feasibility of establishing a foodbank distribution centre within the ACT.

The outcome of this collaborative project, partnered with other evidence will inform the ACT Government's pathway to food security for all Canberrans.

Recommendation 41:

The Committee recommends that the ACT Government provide funding for freight and delivery costs for foodbank services in the ACT.

Government Response: Existing Government Policy

The ACT Government has been supporting small to medium community food pantries to access essential Foodbank items from Foodbank NSW & ACT Limited (Foodbank) in Sydney for several years. This support is offered by way of a freight subsidy.

Additional funding has been allocated in the 2023-24 ACT Budget to continue this support. CSD and Foodbank have entered a direct arrangement to drive streamlined operations and increase opportunities for creative solutions to challenges increasing the overall value of this additional investment.

Recommendation 42:

The Committee recommends that the ACT Government provide funding to community organisations to set up community-based food gardens.

Government Response: Existing Government Policy

The ACT Government provides community garden grant funding programs of approximately \$100,000 per annum. The ACT Government recently announced a significant increase in the Community Garden Grants Program from \$40,000 to \$100,000.

Recommendation 43:

The Committee recommends that the ACT Government:

- *explore establishing the Utilities Concession scheme as a percentage-based scheme;*
- *identify barriers to eligible persons receiving the Utilities Concession; and*
- *improve access to the scheme for eligible participants.*

Government Response: Noted

The ACT acknowledges the cost of utilities is a large part of cost of living and a source of financial stress for vulnerable Canberrans. From 2023-24, the Government is extending the Utilities Concession scheme to Commonwealth Health Care Card holders benefitting around 12,000 additional low income and low wealth households. The Government is further extending the one-off \$50 rebate for another year. The ACT Government has also partnered with the Commonwealth Government to provide energy bill relief to Canberrans through the Energy Bill Relief Fund.

The Utilities Concession, while delivered through energy bills, supports vulnerable households facing a broad range of cost-of-living pressures, including housing, transport, groceries and other household expenses. Any consideration of moving to a percentage-based or hybrid concession would need to be carefully considered and informed by analysis of their effectiveness compared to flat-rate concessions and taking into account other cost-of-living pressures, to ensure that changes do not unintentionally adversely impact some vulnerable households.

The ACT Government is committed to ensuring that the Utilities Concession is easily accessible to all those who are eligible and seeks to identify and address barriers to access on an ongoing basis.

Recommendation 44:

The Committee recommends that the ACT Government explore ways to extend the eligibility for the ACT Government Home Energy Support program.

Government Response: Existing Government Policy

The ACT Government provides ongoing support to reduce energy hardship for vulnerable households through initiatives such as the Home Energy Support Program (HESP). The HESP provides rebates and interest-free loans to eligible homeowners to assist with the up-front costs of installing energy-efficient products and sustainable home upgrades, including rooftop solar systems, hot water heat pumps, reverse cycle heating and cooling systems, better ceiling insulation, and efficient electric appliances.

Eligibility for the HESP was previously restricted to Australian Government Pensioner Concession and Veterans' Affairs Gold Card holders.

On 1 July 2023, HESP eligibility was expanded to include Australian Government Health Care Card holders. This change will enable an additional 4,500 ACT cardholders to access the HESP on top of over 44,000 cardholders already eligible. It expands eligibility to those receiving the ABSTUDY Living Allowance, AUSTUDY, JobSeeker, Family Tax Benefit A and Low-Income Health Care Card holders.

Recommendation 45:

The Committee recommends that the ACT Government explore ways to make public transport more accessible and affordable to those experiencing financial hardships and consider conducting a trial of free public transport.

Government Response: Noted

The ACT Government recognises the importance of access to public transport for wellbeing, including exploring ways to make public transport more affordable. The price of fares has been frozen since 2019, and many concession MyWay users enjoy free off-peak travel. However the Government considers that retaining the ability to charge fares is important to enhance the financial viability of public transport as well as to influence travel patterns.

Recommendation 46:

The Committee recommends that the ACT Government provide assistance to enable vehicle modifications for disabled drivers.

Government Response: Noted

The ACT Government currently provides support to people with disability to move through the community through a range of public transport concessions and Taxi Subsidy Schemes.

The ACT Government also recognises the importance of vulnerable road users, including people living with disability, being able to modify their vehicles so they can enjoy the same freedom of movement as others in the ACT community, and provisions regarding vehicle modifications in the ACT are outlined in sections 113 and 114 of the *Road Transport (Vehicle Registration) Regulation 2000*.

The ACT Government notes the potential impact of the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) on providers of disabled driver modifications in the ACT, with the current thin market limiting the ability for drivers with disability to readily access affordable modifications. The ACT Government will recommend that this issue be considered by the NDIS Independent Review.

Recommendation 47:

The Committee recommends that the ACT Government install bike racks on all ACT buses.

Government Response: **Agree in Principle**

Bike racks are fitted on all ACT buses with the exception of longer 'steer-tag' buses which are not able to be fitted with bike racks due to their extra length, which presents technical limitations and risks to safety involving vehicle length and turning circles on the limited roads on which the buses may operate.

Recommendation 48:

The Committee recommends that the ACT Government continue to advocate to the Commonwealth Government to regulate the Buy-Now-Pay-Later industry and impress on the Commonwealth Government the urgency of the matter.

Government Response: **Agree**

The ACT Government will continue to advocate for reforms to ensure that Buy Now, Pay Later (BNPL) products will be regulated as credit products. The Minister for Consumer Affairs and his state and territory counterparts have been calling for reforms for a number of years as the popularity of this convenient but unregulated form of consumer credit has grown with Australian consumers.

The Commonwealth Assistant Treasurer announced on 22 May 2023 that reforms will be made to the National Consumer Credit Protection Act 2009 to ensure that credit providers will be required to undertake a credit assessment and apply responsible lending principles when assessing applications for BNPL products.

The reforms will also require providers of BNPL products to have a credit licence, fees for missed payments will be capped, and users will be given more information about the requirements before they sign up.

Regulation of the reforms will sit with the Australian Securities and Investment Commission and while the full detail of the reforms are yet to be developed, the announcement is a step in the right direction in protecting vulnerable consumers.

Recommendation 49:

The Committee recommends that the ACT Government continue to advocate to the Commonwealth Government to introduce a 'cost of disability' supplement.

Government Response: **Agree in Principle**

The ACT Government will continue to advocate through national bodies, for appropriate and tailored income support for people with disability.

Recommendation 50:

The Committee recommends that the ACT Government advocate to the Commonwealth Government to provide greater supports to workers in the gig economy including information about workers' rights and mental health supports.

Government Response: **Agree**

The ACT Government remains committed to continuing to advocate for greater supports for workers in the gig and platform economies at the national level.

The ACT Government has committed to three years funding in the 2023-24 Budget to supporting mental health in the workplace.

Work health and safety regulatory arrangements are being amended to give greater focus and clarity to managing psychosocial hazards in the workplace, including an associated code of practice to assist persons conducting a business or undertaking to eliminate, where reasonably practicable, risks to psychological health.

In October 2022, WorkSafe ACT launched its Strategy for Managing Work-related Psychosocial Hazards 2021-2023 which emphasises the significant efforts of the WorkSafe team in implementing preventative measures to protect workers from psychosocial hazards and resulting psychological injury. WorkSafe ACT has also published a range of guidance material to support workers in understanding their rights and access mental health support, which in turn provides access links to information provided by Safe Work Australia.

Recommendation 51:

The Committee recommends that the ACT Government advocate to the Commonwealth Government to increase the rate of all income support payments to above the Henderson poverty line.

Government Response: **Noted**

The ACT Government's previous advocacy to the Commonwealth has referenced work which defines poverty based on 50 per cent of the median equivalised household income for all household with positive income. However, it is not the Government's place to determine the most suitable measure of poverty to use for increases in the rate of income support payments.

In 1973, the Henderson Poverty Line was set equal to the minimum wage plus child endowment in Melbourne in 1966 for a reference family consisting of two adults and two children. Adjustments were made for other household types. The Melbourne Institute has published quarterly updates of the poverty line since then, according to changes in per capita household disposable income. There are arbitrary elements to the standard, the adjustments made for families of different sizes, and the composition and method of updating over time. These arbitrary components to the Henderson Poverty Line may not generalise across Australia, and may become increasingly generous over time. The measure is also no longer used by most poverty researchers in Australia as other approaches are preferred to it. Poverty lines based on a proportion of median household incomes are now more common. There are still debates about how the poverty threshold is set (50 or 60 per cent of median household income) and how adjustments are made for family size and composition.

While the ACT Government has introduced several measures to address the rising cost of living, the Commonwealth Government can affect the welfare of Australians in a more direct manner. A recent

example of this is the impact of the Commonwealth Government's decision to increase Jobseeker during COVID-19 pandemic and the number of people in poverty and housing.

The ACT Government is committed to working alongside other states and territories to call for the Commonwealth Government to raise the level of all income support payments to a level that enables a decent standard of living.

Recommendation 52:

The Committee recommends that the ACT Government advocate to the Commonwealth Government to sustain current funding to support access to free vocational education and training.

Government Response: **Agree in Principle**

All states and territories are currently in negotiation with the Commonwealth for a new 5-year National Skills Agreement (NSA), which is expected to include an extension of Fee Free TAFE (FFT) places. The ACT Government will continue to advocate to the Commonwealth for current funding to be increased or sustained at a minimum.