



**LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY**  
FOR THE AUSTRALIAN CAPITAL TERRITORY

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STANDING COMMITTEE ON EDUCATION AND COMMUNITY INCLUSION  
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Ms Nicole Lawder MLA (Member)

## Submission Cover Sheet

Inquiry into Loneliness and Social Isolation in the ACT

**Submission Number: 09**

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# YOUTH ADVISORY COUNCIL

Submission to the Inquiry into Loneliness and Social Isolation in  
the ACT

## Introduction

This submission to the Inquiry Loneliness and Social Isolation in the ACT was prepared on behalf of the ACT Youth Advisory Council (Council) and is representative of the lived experiences and diverse views of approximately 80,000 young people living in the ACT.

Council is comprised of 15 members aged 12 to 25 years at their time of appointment, and who reflect the diversity of young people living in the ACT. Membership includes young people who identify across the gender spectrum and within the LGBTQIA+ community; who live with disability; young people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities; and who have varying levels of educational attainment and employment status. Council recognises that many young people often have identities which intersect across a number of these areas and may identify with communities and experiences outside of those listed here.

Council is proud to serve as a link between young Canberrans (aged 12-25 years) and the ACT Government by facilitating young people's needs, ideas, aspirations, and concerns to be heard through participation in consultations, surveys, community forums, open meetings, and written submissions. Council welcomes the opportunity to make this submission to the Inquiry into Loneliness and Social Isolation in the ACT, and to elevate a youth perspective in the conversation.

Council acknowledges that we meet and prepare this submission on Ngunnawal land and pay our respect to the traditional custodians of this land and to the Elders of the Ngunnawal Nation, both past and present.

## Recommendations

**Recommendation 1:** That the ACT Government ensure measures to respond to loneliness and social isolation among young people in the ACT be supported by strong and sustained investment in mental health and wellbeing programs and services within both educational settings and the community.

**Recommendation 2:** That the ACT Government establish targeted funding opportunities to provide young people in the ACT with equitable access to and continued participation in sports and other recreational activities. This should include adopting a proactive and innovative approach to attracting and retaining girls and young people with specific needs by addressing their specific accessibility requirements.

**Recommendation 3:** The ACT Government subsidise and/or provide free driving lessons and travel on public transport for independent young people, young people with concession cards and young people from low-income families.

**Recommendation 4:** The ACT Government undertake a comprehensive review of bus timetables and location of bus stops to consider ways to improve the accessibility for young people.

**Recommendation 5:** The ACT Government improve the physical infrastructure of community centres and public recreational facilities, promote their availability and use, and explore ways to draw young people to attend youth-specific programs and events.

## The prevalence and cost of loneliness and social isolation among young people in the ACT

Data on the prevalence of loneliness and social isolation among young people aged 12 to 25 is lacking. Mission Australia's [2023 Youth Survey](#) found 21% of young people aged 15 to 19 in the ACT feel lonely "all" or "most of the time". While, according to the ACT Wellbeing Framework's [Loneliness Scale](#), young people are the most lonely and least socially connected cohort in Canberra, with 13.6% of people aged 18 to 29 answering they are 'often lonely' and only 15.1% saying they experience a 'high level' of social connection.

Council recognises the prevalence, experience, costs, and needs of loneliness and social isolation among young people in the ACT differ depending on a number of factors, including their age, whether they regularly attend an education setting, if they have a disability or diagnosed mental illness, identify as a LGBTQIA+ young person, or are a carer. Broadly, Council identified the costs of loneliness and social isolation among young people in the ACT as being exacerbated mental health issues, disengagement from the education system and a lack of sense of belonging.

Mental health services and access to them are paramount to reducing loneliness and social isolation in the ACT. Loneliness and social isolation contribute significantly to the mental health of a person and can lead to the development or exacerbation of mental health conditions. Not only this, but ill-mental health can itself cause loneliness and social isolation. A common effect of many mental health conditions is social withdrawal and self-isolation and the stigma associated with many mental health conditions can cause or reinforce feelings of loneliness. Council strongly advocates for any plan addressing loneliness and social isolation among young people in the ACT to be fortified by robust continued investment in mental health services.

**Recommendation 1:** That the ACT Government ensure measures to respond to loneliness and social isolation among young people in the ACT be supported by strong and sustained investment in mental health and wellbeing programs and services within both educational settings and the community.

## Opportunities to improve social connectedness for young people

Council views recreational activities as essential to preventing and resolving loneliness and social isolation among young people in the ACT. Both structured and unstructured recreational activities, including sports, music events, casual gatherings, and other extracurriculars, are important sites of socialisation that facilitate young people to connect with friends, develop social skills, meet new people, and establish a social network with the broader community. As Council is sure the Standing Committee will hear the benefits of regular and ongoing engagement in recreational activities, such as a stronger sense of belonging and better mental wellbeing, is well supported by research. For these reasons, YAC believes proactively supporting young people to meaningfully participate in a variety of recreational activities should be a priority of the ACT Government's plan to address loneliness and social isolation. In the section that follows, Council has chosen to highlight three notable barriers to social connectedness and engaging in recreational activities for young people in the ACT. They are cost, transport, and the accessibility of existing infrastructure and facilities.

### Cost

Participation in recreational activities often incurs significant costs, including registration fees and ticket, equipment, and transport costs. Council has heard that, especially as young people transition out of family homes and into independent living, opportunities for socialisation and recreational activity become viewed as discretionary spending and are often not prioritised over other necessary expenses, such as housing and food. This has been exacerbated by the increasing cost of living in the ACT. Similarly, for young people still living at home, the compounding costs (including time off work to provide transport and supervision) of keeping their child/ren engaged in recreational activities can be unaffordable and/or unmanageable for parents and carers. In addition to the isolation and social marginalisation that can occur when young people cannot afford to attend recreational activities, Council is aware that financial stress (either personal or recognised) can exacerbate loneliness and feeling of happiness and contribute to a general deterioration of a young person's wellbeing.

Playing a sport and participating in a physical activity is one of the key points of social connection in the ACT and Australia and plays a formative role in building key life skills such as teamwork, confidence, resilience, and leadership. Members of Council have experienced firsthand the positive impact regular engagement in sports can have on young people's self-esteem, social lives, and physical and mental health. Yet, [data shows](#) approximately 50% of young people aged 15 to 24 who live in the ACT do not participate in a sport-related activity at least once a week. Additionally, discussions at the 2023 ACT Youth Assembly corroborated evidence that, by their early teen years, girls are dropping out of sports at two times the rate of their male peers and illuminated the lack of inclusive recreation for neurodiverse young people and young people with disabilities.

Addressing the rising cost of living (see [Council's submission to the Inquiry into Cost of Living Pressures in the ACT](#)) and offsetting the costs of participating in or attending recreational activities, such as sports and local events, present strong opportunities to

reduce loneliness and social isolation for young people in the ACT. Specifically, Council recommends the ACT Government establish targeted funding opportunities that provide young people in the ACT with equitable access to and continued participation in sports and other recreational activities. Council believes particular attention should be paid to young people who have transitioned to independent living, including by funding an increased number of free social events for people aged 18 to 25 years.

Additionally, Council would like to see the ACT take a proactive approach to keeping girls engaged in their communities and playing sport from the age of 13 into early adulthood by increasing opportunities for them to see local women role models across a variety of sports, increasing the visibility of progression pathways, investing in community-based sports and infrastructure, and supporting their continued access and participation by subsidising registration and equipment fees and increasing the availability of teams.

**Recommendation 2:** That the ACT Government establish targeted funding opportunities to provide young people in the ACT with equitable access to and continued participation in sports and other recreational activities. This should include adopting a proactive and innovative approach to attracting and retaining girls and young people with specific needs by addressing their specific accessibility requirements.

## Transport

As Council highlighted in our [Submission to the 2023 Inquiry into the Cost of Living Pressures in the ACT](#), public transport and obtaining a driving licence are becoming increasingly unaffordable for young people in the ACT, making it difficult for them to attend social activities, increasing their reliance on parents and carers, and undermining opportunities for independence. For example, young people who are unable to practise driving with family or friends rely on driving lessons to get hours towards their provisional licence; the cost of which many cannot afford. While for those young people relying on public transport, unreliable timetables, lack of free travel for school-aged young people, disconnected servicing, and unsafe infrastructure make travel inaccessible and impractical.

Obtaining a driving licence and owning a car incurs significant up front and ongoing costs, including the upfront costs of paying for driving lessons and tests, purchasing a car, and the regular costs of petrol, insurance, parking, and repairs. These costs are rising due to the cost of living crisis. The ACT Council of Social Services' [2023 Cost of Living Report](#) shows Canberra has experienced a 37% increase in fuel prices and a 23% increase in public transport costs over the last five years. While Council's earlier-referenced submission details the significant costs young people face while obtaining their provisional licence in the ACT. These issues combine to obstruct young people's access to recreational and social activities, their autonomy, and their ability to stay socially connected outside of the school setting.

Council understands transport mobility as a social determinant of young people's health and wellbeing. If a young person does not have access to adequate transport, like those young people who cannot afford to obtain their licence, such is disconnected from their community and their opportunities for socialisation are significantly reduced; making them more vulnerable to social isolation and loneliness. As such, Council recommends the ACT

Government subsidise and/or provide free driving lessons and public transport fares for independent young people, young people with concession cards and young people from low-income families. Council believes this would substantially improve young people's independence, connection to community, opportunities for employment, and school attendance; positively benefiting their mental health and long-term wellbeing.

In addition, Council recommends the ACT Government undertake a comprehensive review of the bus system, including timetabling, stop location, and accessibility. For young people who do not have access to a car or a licence, or whose parents/guardians are unable to courier them, recreational activities are limited to those which can be accessed by public transport. In these circumstances, bus routes, frequency, and physical accessibility each limit a young persons' autonomy and choice. Especially for young people on tight schedules such as students who want to do after-school extracurriculars.

**Recommendation 3:** The ACT Government subsidise and/or provide free driving lessons and travel on public transport for independent young people, young people with concession cards and young people from low-income families.

**Recommendation 4:** The ACT Government undertake a comprehensive review of bus timetables and location of bus stops to consider ways to improve the accessibility for young people.

### **Accessibility and adequacy of existing facilities**

In a recent consultation, Council identified youth and community centres as valuable locations for improving social connectedness. However, Council has received feedback that public social and recreational facilities are not always accessible or promoted for use. For example, many public facilities such as community centres and schools have recreational facilities available for general use, but many young people are not aware of the existence of these facilities, their rights to access, what time/day they may be able to access those facilities, or whether they need to book, etc.

Additionally, Council has recognised a number of barriers to young people's attendance at and engagement with community centres, including unwelcoming environments (i.e., poorly maintained buildings, insufficient lighting, poorly located entries, dated interiors, etc.) and a lack of accessible and comprehensive information on the opportunities and processes for attendance. Comprehensive information is particularly important for vulnerable young people who are or have been involved in the child protection of youth justice systems, and who may have questions like: *Are the staff mandatory reporters? Are they trauma informed/trained? Are there forms to complete before gaining access? What happens if I don't have any ID?*

Council aspires to see public recreational centres and community facilities become vibrant sites for cross-generational, multicultural engagement. Council would like the ACT Government to improve the appeal, infrastructure, and accessibility of existing facilities, and to investigate ways to provide programs tailored to engaging young people in recreational and other opportunities. It is necessary such programs understand and provide for vulnerable young people such as those with experiences of the child protection and youth



justice systems, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people, and migrant or refugee young people.

**Recommendation 5:** The ACT Government improve the physical infrastructure of community centres and public recreational facilities, promote their availability and use, and explore ways to draw young people to attend youth-specific programs and events.

## Vulnerable cohorts

Council espouses the need for any plan to address loneliness and social isolation among young people in the ACT to meaningfully consider and provide for a number of vulnerable cohorts such as young people with a disability, young carers, LGBTQIA+ young people, young people with existing mental illnesses, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people, and young people in Out of Home Care or Youth Justice systems. Council has outlined additional considerations for three of these cohorts below:

### **Young people with a disability**

Young people with a disability face many challenges when it comes to being fully included, particularly within the school system. It is necessary for all schools to have and implement policies to adequately meet the needs of young people with a disability to promote regular attendance and protect against 'school refusal'; which can isolate a young person from their peers. Council supports the current [Inclusive Education: A Disability Strategy for ACT Public Schools](#), however believes that there should be a greater focus on not only supporting students with disability attending schools regularly, but supporting students with disability currently disengaged from the education system to transition back into regular learning.

Some young people with a disability, or who are autistic or neurodivergent, may have particular difficulty finding people they connect with. This emphasises the need for specific social groups and extracurriculars. However, these can often be difficult to access without an official diagnosis or NDIS support. Council has heard the processes involved in obtaining both can be unnecessarily long, expensive, and complicated. Council would like to see proactive steps taken toward increasing the availability and accessibility of recreational and social activities and events for young people with a disability.

### **Young carers**

Young carers often experience isolation and loneliness from their peers due to the caring responsibilities which may take up a large portion of their time. Between balancing this, school and/or work there is not much time, if any, left to socialise with others. Council has heard educational institutions and workplaces are often not accommodating to the needs of young carers such as by providing time off, approving extensions or exemptions from schoolwork, or negotiating flexible arrangements.

Council would like to see the ACT government promote the accommodation of young carers' needs within schools, universities, and workplaces by implementing systems to support them to manage both the young carers' caring responsibilities and work or studies, as well as social opportunities.

### **LGBTQIA+ young people**

LGBTQIA+ people experience higher levels of loneliness, lower perceived social support and are at greater risk of social isolation than non-LGBTQIA+ people. Discrimination and/or exclusion by their peers, families, and others is common; this can isolate a young person from their community, cause loneliness, and make it difficult to find a sense of belonging. Clubs and social groups are a way for young LGBTQIA+ people to feel like they belong, however even within these groups young people can feel isolated. Due to the LGBTQIA+

community being so broad and including such a wide variety of identities, not everyone can relate exactly to each other which creates a perceived sense of isolation.

Council aspires to a Canberra in which all stakeholders work collaboratively and proactively to make the ACT an inclusive and welcoming place for all young people.