

**2021**

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

**STATEMENT FOR THE PROGRESS UPDATE ON THE  
IMPLEMENTATION OF THE  
*ACT CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE'S COMMITMENT 2015-2025***

**Presented by  
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**May 2021**



I am pleased to have the opportunity to share our progress against the *ACT Children and Young People's Commitment 2015-2025* and outline our continued efforts to better support children and young people in the ACT. We have now passed the half-way point in the life of the Commitment and have delivered many successful initiatives driven by the Commitment's six priority areas.

The Commitment reflects the Government's vision for a whole-of-community approach to promoting the wellbeing of children and young people from birth to 25 years.

I acknowledge the impact of the events of 2020, and particularly the COVID-19 pandemic, on the lives of children and young people in the ACT. Some of the work I will outline in this statement demonstrates how we have responded to those events and worked to ensure that the services and supports that young Canberrans rely on have been able to adapt to changing circumstances.

The first priority listed in the Commitment is to provide access to quality healthcare, learning and employment opportunities for all children and young people in the ACT.

In this regard, the Government recognises the importance of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Community Controlled Organisations in providing holistic support for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in our community.

To support the delivery of culturally appropriate services during through the COVID-19 public health emergency, the Government provided a total of \$580,000 to support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations. This included:

- \$200,000 to Gugan Gulwan Youth Aboriginal Corporation to enhance their capacity to deliver youth support services and integrated services for families; and
- \$100,000 to Winnunga Nimmityjah Aboriginal Health and Community Service to deliver a range of holistic wellbeing supports for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander individuals and families during the pandemic. This was in addition to \$250,000 to support Winnunga's COVID-19 health response.

We have continued our focus on giving children the best start through the expansion of Koori Preschool hours and the introduction of free early childhood education and care for three-year-olds, providing access for those who need it most. We also implemented the first phase of the *Set-up for Success: An Early Childhood Strategy*, which outlines our plan for early childhood education and care in the ACT for the next decade.

While the Canberra community is lucky to have avoided the extended lockdowns experienced in other jurisdictions, the response to COVID-19 did cause disruptions to the usual ways of delivering education.

The Future of Education Strategy establishes the foundations that support our strong investment in digital learning in ACT public schools. Students are equipped to become skilled at the use of technology and the behaviours that support safe and responsible digital citizenship. The ACT Government has delivered against the 2016 Technology Enabled Learning election commitment to provide every ACT public high school and college students with access to a device.

This strong foundation meant that ACT public schools were well placed to support students during the remote learning period as a response to

the COVID-19 pandemic. Secondary students already had access to a device, and 11,000 devices were supplied to students in Years 4 to 6 to support their learning during this period. More than 600 internet dongles and sim cards were provided to families to ensure they had connection to the internet to support remote learning.

Ongoing support for teachers included delivery of professional learning for approximately 5,000 staff which allowed for enhancement of the technology enabled teaching delivered in schools. This collective effort ensured the ACT was well placed to support our public school students through the remote learning period, meeting students' social, emotional and educative needs.

Young people who were preparing to leave school and enter the workforce or further education were also heavily impacted by reduced opportunities for casual work during lock-down and changes to tertiary education offerings and schedules. To respond to these challenges, the ACT Government:

- fast-tracked CIT's Study Work Anywhere Any Time project to help CIT move its teaching and learning online;
- funded additional graduate positions in the ACT Public Service over the next two years, including cadet and apprentice recruitment; and
- extended the six-month COVID-19 payroll tax exemption for businesses who pay wages for new apprentices or trainees employed after 1 August 2020, from the start of employment until 30 June 2021.

The ACT Government is also supporting young Canberrans to access the Vocational Education and Training Sector by:

- providing training places through the JobTrainer Fund for job seekers, school leavers and young people in areas of skills need or employment growth; and
- continuing to subsidise training under the Australian Apprenticeships and Skilled Capital programs.

Libraries ACT has also supported flexible learning opportunities through the pandemic, including:

- gifting approximately 3,228 books to vulnerable families with children aged up to five years old;
- partnering with 14 community organisations to distribute approximately 911 book packs to vulnerable families; and
- helping families continue to learn more about different languages and cultures by moving Bilingual Story Times online.

The second priority of the Commitment is to enable conditions that allow children and young people to thrive.

The first 1,000 days in a child's life is a critical time for establishing physical, cognitive, social and emotional health and wellbeing. That is why we have committed to continue working, in partnership with the community, to further develop and implement a *First 1,000 Days Strategy*. This will build on a significant body of work that has identified a range of opportunities to better support children and their families in the early years.

Additionally, the *ACT Preventative Health Plan 2020-2025* supports Canberrans to be healthy and active throughout their lives. The plan acknowledges the critical importance of ensuring children are supported to develop to their fullest and increase the likelihood that they will become healthy and resilient adults. The First Action Plan under the Preventative Health Plan includes a focus on exploring options to optimise the healthy development of their children during the first 1,000 days, as well as work to maintain our nation-leading childhood immunisation rates.

We have also worked to improve health literacy and health promotion. This has been achieved through a range of programs, including:

- the 'It's Your Move' program, which empowers students to develop their own solutions towards healthier high schools;
- 'Kids at Play Active Play', which provides information, tips and resources to families and early childhood educators to help drive healthier decision making about physical activity and screen time;
- and 'Fresh Tastes: healthy food at school', a free ACT Government service helping schools make healthy food and drinks a bigger part of everyday life for Canberra's kids.

To date, these programs have reached more than 42,000 students across six ACT high schools, 38 early childhood education and care services, and 95 ACT primary schools delivering a real impact on improving students' health.

In late 2019, we also piloted a Year 7 Health Check to guide the future delivery of programs and services, helping us to continue to meet the needs of this age group and respond to emerging issues.

To understand the mental health and wellbeing of children and young people in the ACT, the Office for Mental Health and Wellbeing consulted with children and young people, as well as community groups and key stakeholders, to identify gaps and potential solutions to mental health issues facing children and young people. The review consulted more than 800 people including 314 who were under 25 years of age.

The Youth Aware of Mental Health program aims to get young people involved and talking about mental health in order to build resilience and promote early intervention and help seeking behaviours. This program has delivered sessions to more than 2000 Year 9 students in ACT schools.

We know that there are rising demands on our mental health services across Canberra. Several strategies are being progressed to enable services to meet this increasing demand, including:

- finalising plans for a dedicated 6-8 bed Adolescent Mental Health Inpatient Unit within the Centenary Hospital for Women and Children Expansion Project; and
- planning for the introduction of a home-based intensive support program and dedicated day program as an expansion of existing Children and Adolescent Mental Health Service.

In May 2020, the ACT Government provided funding of around \$4.5 million for a Mental Health Support Package to expand services and enable our mental health sector to adapt to the COVID-19 crisis. To ensure these services continue to be delivered, we provided an additional \$1.9 million in the 2020-21 Budget.

We have also provided around \$3.2 million for Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services to allow the continuation of the Adolescent Mobile Outreach Service. These initiatives will ensure the ACT is well positioned to deliver high quality mental health services for children and young people as the pandemic eases.

The \$2.4 million Youth Support Package built on the ACT Government's Mental Health Support Package to help young people through isolation. The Youth Support package targeted mental health support for young people through Menslink and a Youth Wellbeing Outreach Program delivered by CatholicCare.

We have also allocated funding to Housing ACT through the 'Screwdriver Ready Projects', to renovate a women and children's crisis accommodation property by 30 June 2021.

Through the COVID-19 public health emergency, the ACT Government has been assisting foster and kinship carers, as well as our young carers and young people transitioning into independent living, with a \$1.7 million 'Supporting Children, Young People and Their Families and Carers' package. This program recognises the complexities of caring responsibilities for these families, and aims to reduce the increased financial pressure they experience. This package includes:

- one-off payments to foster and kinship carers to support their wellbeing and ease financial stress;
- financial support for young people who are preparing to leave kinship, foster or residential care, or have already left care, to assist with living expenses, housing costs or connect them with training and employment;

- funding to support young carers to meet additional expenses, maintain their wellbeing and support their educational participation;
- payments to non-government service providers to assist service delivery for young people and families whose needs were not being met in the existing system, or where culturally appropriate responses were not available through mainstream services.

We have also allocated funding to support children and young people in their 'middle years' who are at risk of homelessness or coming into contact with the statutory care and youth justice systems. The 'Safe and Connected Youth' outreach pilot, delivered in partnership with the community sector, trialled an integrated service model for meeting the needs of these young people. This project also includes the refurbishment of a property into a purpose-built Respite Facility which would operate based on the successful Ruby's Re-unification Model from South Australia.

In addition to the immediate stimulus packages provided in response to COVID-19, the ACT Government Community Recovery Roadmap supports building community resilience and recovery in the longer term. The Roadmap complements the ACT Government Economic Recovery Roadmap, and outlines and identifies where actions to support the wellbeing of Canberrans, including the most vulnerable, can be undertaken to enable longer-term community recovery.

The third priority is to keep children and young people safe and protect them from harm.

In response to the changing circumstances surrounding COVID-19 and to ensure the continuation of care and protection services and youth

justice services in the community we adapted services provided by Child and Youth Protection Services by:

- establishing a Coordinated Response to Children and Young People at Risk of Abuse and Neglect Agencies Meeting involving key partners across government and the community sector;
- developing staff COVID-19 Practice Guides and new staff training; and
- transitioning several key training programs to online and face-to-face training with COVID-19 safety measures in place, to enable core sexual abuse, youth justice and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander policy courses to continue.

Through the implementation of COVID-19 safety measures, Bimberi Youth Justice Centre was able to continue providing face-to-face non-contact visits, acknowledging the importance of family relationships for young people in detention.

We know there is more to do to address the unacceptable over-representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people involved in the child protection system. The *Our Booris, Our Way* final report provided recommendations for systemic change in child protection and out-of-home care to:

- safely reduce the number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people entering care;
- improve their experiences and outcomes while in care; and
- reunite children and young people with their families where possible.

I am pleased to report last year we accepted all 28 recommendations. We have listened to the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community and we are committed to working with the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community and the *Our Booris Our Way* Implementation Oversight Committee to establish an ongoing reporting framework that captures the intent of these system changes and monitors progress, to drive reform to the child protection system.

We have also committed to the continuation of programs such as Family Group Conferencing delivered by Child and Youth Protection Services and Functional Family Therapy Child Welfare delivered by Gugan Gulwan Youth Aboriginal Corporation in partnership with OzChild.

Additionally, the 2020-21 Budget includes \$425,000 to further progress Labor's election commitment to deliver a new, purpose built facility for Gugan Gulwan, at their existing site in Wanniasa, to ensure that they can continue to provide all of their important and highly valued services to young people in the community.

All children and young people have a fundamental right to feel safe and protected in their community. The Government is committed to continuing to improve the ACT's response to domestic and family violence.

The Family Safety Hub has partnered with the ACT Children and Young People Commissioner to listen to young people so their voices could influence the development of services and supports to meet their needs.

Consultations took place over six months and heard from 70 young people across the ACT, 35 of whom had experiences of domestic and

family violence. These conversations have produced a series of insights that have shed light on the unique experiences and issues young people face when there is violence in their homes.

What we heard has helped identify improvements that could be made to services so that the needs of children and young people who have experienced, or continue to experience, domestic and family violence are met more effectively.

The fourth priority is to advocate for the importance of the rights of children and young people.

The *Disability Justice Strategy* is guiding an important shift in how the justice system interacts with people with disability in the ACT, including young people with disability. The *First Action Plan 2019-2023* describes the first four years of work to ensure the ACT provides equal access to justice for people with disability.

Through the plan, we have established a community of practice of disability liaison officers, funded education programs to improve supported decision-making of people with disability, and are translating key information into accessible formats such as easy-to-read guides. These initiatives empower people with disability to better engage with and navigate the justice system.

We have also developed a needs identification tool so that justice agencies can better identify the needs of people with disability and make reasonable adjustments to meet those needs. This will be trialled at the Bimberi Youth Justice Centre in 2021.

The ACT Government has also committed to raising the minimum age of criminal responsibility from 10 years to 14 years of age. This reform will

ensure that the consequences children face for harmful behaviour are not counter-productive nor are they increasing trauma for children and young people. This work will also look to reduce recidivism behaviour.

The Government is working to identify what therapeutic services will need support once the minimum age of criminal responsibility is raised and has committed \$120,000 for an independent review of implementation requirements.

Additionally, to ensure that children's legal matters can be considered appropriately, the ACT Government has established the Care and Protection Intensive List in the Children's Court for care and protection matters. This aims to address parental substance abuse issues, parenting capacity issues, family violence and mental health issues.

Children and young people have the right to live their lives free of discrimination and stigma and we as a community need to protect and affirm that right.

To improve outcomes for LGBTIQ+ Canberrans and to make Canberra the most welcoming and inclusive city in Australia, we released the First Action Plan for the *Capital of Equality Strategy 2019-2023*. A key focus of this strategy was to implement legislation banning harmful sexuality and gender identity conversion practices. This legislation was passed in September 2020 and came into effect earlier this year.

The ACT was also the first jurisdiction to invest in the *Writing Themselves In 4*, an important piece of research into the health and wellbeing of LGBTIQ+ young people aged 14 to 21. The ACT-specific results of this study were published earlier this month. The study highlighted the ongoing challenges of discrimination, violence and abuse

experienced by many LGBTIQ+ young people and the impact this has on their mental health and wellbeing. But it also reminds us that young people draw great strength from their friends and allies and are creative and socially minded advocates for their community.

The fifth priority area is to build strong families and communities that are inclusive and support and nurture children and young people.

To ensure every Canberra child has access to a great local school that is close to home, we are building and expanding schools for our growing city. In 2020, this included:

- new permanent learning spaces for an additional 300 students at the Gold Creek Junior School;
- refurbishment of Amaroo School to accommodate student growth;
- installation of high-quality transportable classrooms at Forrest Primary School, Telopea Park School and Lyneham High School;
- the new Evelyn Scott School which has now been delivered for the growing Molonglo Valley community.

We are also working towards:

- a new pre-school to Year 6 school at Throsby which will be ready to take students for the 2022 school year; and
- a new high school in Kenny to deliver more local public education options in one of Canberra's fastest-growing areas, to be ready in 2023.

Throughout 2019-20, we continued to progress work to evaluate the outcomes being achieved under *A Step Up for Our Kids Out of Home Care Strategy 2015-2020*. The Strategy emphasises the prevention of children and young people entering out of home care, restoring them

with their families, and where they cannot return home safely, providing permanent alternative family settings. The Mid-Strategy Evaluation Report was publicly released in August 2019 and work is currently underway for the Post-Strategy Evaluation.

The Mid-Strategy Evaluation identified that the impact of individual reforms were still developing. To enable the out of home care service system time to further mature we have extended the contracts which fund six agencies under *A Step Up for Our Kids* to June 2022.

Following a review by the Community Services Directorate in collaboration with our community partners, an updated Operational Framework was finalised in January 2020, which sets out how *A Step Up for Our Kids* is delivered in practice.

The final priority of the Commitment is to include children and young people in decision-making, especially in areas that affect them, ensuring they are informed and have a voice.

Throughout this statement I have outlined a number of key projects that engaged directly with children and young people to identify service improvements. This includes work recently undertaken by the Office for Mental Health and Wellbeing and the Family Safety Hub, as well as through the development of a purpose-build respite facility as part of the Safe and Connected Youth Project.

We have also continued our focus on giving students more of a say through initiatives such as the Minister's Student Congress.

The Congress is a student voice initiative that brings together ACT public school students to discuss topical issues that affect them and their education. It provides students with opportunities in leadership,

advocacy, networking and organisational skills. The Congress advances students' views on critical topics to the ACT Minister for Education and Youth Affairs through a diverse group of elected students called the Student Executive Team. An online discussion facilitated in 2020 involved ACT public school students talking about their experiences of remote learning and the transition back to face-to-face learning. This discussion continues to inform the Education Directorate's COVID-19 scenario planning.

The Youth Advisory Council provides young people aged between 12 and 25 years with an opportunity to take a leading role in participation and consultation activities on issues that affect them. The Council is highly valued for its contribution to a wide range of ACT Government consultations. Throughout 2020, the Youth Advisory Council provided input to government on the following issues:

- the development of a survey for young people to inform the government's response to COVID-19;
- the development of the Mental Health Online Youth Navigation Portal, which was a recommendation from the 2018 ACT Youth Assembly; and
- the development of the ACT Wellbeing Framework.

In 2021 the Minister's Student Congress and the Youth Advisory Council will work together to further expand the Government and community's ability to understand the issues students and young people care about.

The Canberra community has experienced its share of challenges in 2020. To ensure that we continue to support all Canberrans as we move forward in 2021, the ACT Government reaffirms its commitment to delivering positive, long term results for children and young people.

Through the services and programs outlined in this statement, I am pleased to report that we are well-positioned to ensure that children and young people in our community will be safer, healthier and better prepared to shape our city's future.