



LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY

FOR THE AUSTRALIAN CAPITAL TERRITORY

STANDING COMMITTEE ON JUSTICE AND COMMUNITY SAFETY

JEREMY HANSON CSC MLA (CHAIR), MARISA PATERSON MLA (DEPUTY CHAIR), JO CLAY MLA

Re Inquiry into referred 2019–20 Annual and Financial Reports and Budget Estimates 2020-21

QUESTION ON NOTICE

ELIZABETH KIKKERT: To ask the President of the Human Rights Commission

Ref: Budget Statements D, Disability, Output class 1.5 Protection of Rights

In relation to: Community engagement

1. For each year since the establishment of the Commission, how many community engagement events did the commission participate in?
2. Since the gradual relaxation of COVID-10 restrictions, what plans and targets does the Commission have to increase community engagement?

1. Dr Helen Watchirs: The answer to the Member's question is as follows:–

Output description: community engagement				
Number of community engagement activities undertaken by the Commission				
	Target	Actual	Variance	Note
2016-17	30	59	97%	1
2017-18	30	67	123%	2
2018-19	50	102	104%	2
2019-20	70	67	4%	3
2020-21		From 01.07.20- 31.12.20: 35	-	

1. Above target outcome was mainly due to a more active period of engagement associated with the formation of the new Commission.

2. Above target outcome was due to a high level of activity conducted by the Commission during the period, engaging with the community at a wide range of functions and enabling the Commission to reach its client base effectively.

3. For 2019-20, the Commission amended the target to 70 events. However, COVID-19 restrictions resulted in fewer community engagements, as the Commission adapted and broadened its outreach and communication.

2. Dr Helen Watchirs: The answer to the Member's question is as follows:—

In response to COVID restrictions, the Commission has moved some of its community events online. Examples follow:

- Commissioner Karen Toohey did a Facebook live Q & A event with the then Minister for Justice, Shane Rattenbury on human rights in the time of COVID (April 2020). This event was well attended with people asking a range of questions about the potential impact of COVID-19 on rights.
- A live event on external merits reviews of child protection, originally planned in face to face format for March 2020, was subsequently run online on 22 July 2020, with 45 people participating including several inter-State presenters from Queensland and Victoria.
- The Commission also traditionally runs a lunchtime forum on December 10, International Human Rights Day. This was also moved online platforms, attracting an audience of 65 people (with registrations nearly double that figure) chaired by President Dr Helen Watchirs and Commissioner Karen Toohey. Commission President published an accompanying opinion piece in The Canberra Times. The event recording and media article was shared on social media and YouTube, engaging a further 120 people.

In December 2020 the Commission updated its Community Engagement Strategy ([Attachment A](#)) to include more online and social media events, taking into account COVID restrictions. The Commission continued to publish information for the community via a range of platforms.

- The Commission published guidance on COVID-19 and human rights on its website
- The Commission engaged consistently with the mainstream media and via social media platforms to communicate about issues related to pandemic restrictions including an increase in demand for Victim Support ACT services; an increase in concerns about racism and discrimination against temporary visa holders in accommodation, employment, public places and online; concerns raised by frontline workers and their families about being refused services such as transport or childcare.

In the early phase of the lockdown, mainstream media and social media engagement was the most effective way of reaching out to the community and informing them that Commission services remained open. Commission mainstream media coverage increased more than 30 per cent in the 2019-20 year, partly as a result of more pro-active media engagement over the 2019-20 year.

In response to the gradual relaxation of COVID 19 restrictions, the Commission will increase face to face community engagement activities as allowed.

Dr Helen Watchirs OAM
President and Human Rights Commissioner



9 March 2021



ACT HUMAN RIGHTS COMMISSION

Australian Capital Territory

Human Rights Commission

Communications strategy: Update October 2020

1. Background

The ACT Human Rights Commission (the Commission) is a well-respected organization with a strong, positive image in the wider Canberra community and with stakeholders, including civil society, the legal sector, the Justice and Community Safety Directorate (JACS), the Community Safety Directorate (CSD), government ministers and the Members of the Legislative Assembly (MLAs).

A responsive strategic communications plan will:

- guide media and public outreach, especially in terms of how, and how frequently, the Commission communicates information to the community
- build on the strong brand of the Commission
- ensure that the Commission responds, appropriate to its remit, to new issues as they emerge in the public domain and the Canberra community.

The Commission consists of:

- the President and Human Rights Commissioner
- the Discrimination, Health Services, Disability and Community Services Commissioner (DHSDCSC)
- the Public Advocate and Children and Young People Commissioner (PACYPC)
- the Victims of Crime Commissioner (VOCC).

Media and communications outreach, and public comment from the Commission and individual Commissioners, is relevant to all four priorities from the Strategic Plan 2017-2020:

- Make human rights relevant to everyone
- Lead systemic change to address vulnerability
- Enhance services and service delivery
- Increase community engagement.

Communications post-COVID

From March 2020 onwards, in the light of COVID-related restrictions, the Commission has had to reimagine some of its public events and forego others.

Some large, annual face-to-face events which had previously provided the Commission with an excellent platform from which to communicate with the general public and specific audiences were cancelled (for example, Seniors Expo in March 2020; the Careers Fair in August 2020). Other events were postponed (for example, national NAIDOC week, postponed from June 2020 to November 2020).

The Commission was able to adjust some events, moving them to online/virtual events; or broadcasting relevant information via social and mainstream media. The Commission's substantive external media coverage increased 40 per cent in the 2019-2020 year, compared to the previous year. Part of this can be attributed to greater proactive media outreach on the part of the Commission, in response to other fora closing down post-COVID.

However, in the light of COVID restrictions, the Commission re-assessed its annual event and community engagement plans to ensure that we were still able to effectively communicate with the public, specific audiences and stakeholders during the period of these restrictions.

2. Communication objectives

Through its communication activities, the Commission seeks to:

- raise awareness and understanding of human rights particularly in target audiences, such as with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, victims of crime, people with disabilities, and children and young people
- raise awareness about Commission services, including:
 - how, when and why the public can contact the Commission
 - the types of services provided
 - what to expect from Commission services
- contribute meaningful and informed comment to relevant public debates – the Commission and individual Commissioners currently comment on relevant issues in the public/media domain including human rights, discrimination, children and young people and issues related to victims of crime
 - this is done both responsively and proactively – for example, responding to media requests for comment; and pitching angles/story ideas/opinion pieces when there is an issues or new program/initiative requiring publicity
- publicise local, national and international human rights days and occasions such as the International Day against Homophobia, Biphobia, Intersexism and Transphobia (IDAHOBIT), the anniversary of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP), International Women’s Day (IWD), International Human Rights Day and the International Day of People with a Disability (i-day) via a combination of social media posts and mainstream media comment through press releases or opinion pieces.

3. Target audiences

Whole of Commission external audiences	
Primary	Secondary
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Service users – e.g. people seeking to use the complaint service Victim Support ACT (VSACT) clients, Public Advocate (PA) clients • The general ACT community, and/or specific groups depending on the issue/event • Minister(s) • ACT Directorates particularly the Justice and Community Safety 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Members of the Legislative Assembly (MLAs) • All of government • Peak bodies such as the Australian Council of Human Rights Authorities (ACHRA)

Directorate (JACS), the Community Services Directorate (CSD) and the Health Directorate <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The legal, academic and non-government sector in the ACT 	
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President and Human Rights Commissioner external audiences	
Primary	Secondary
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The general public • Groups/individuals whose rights are infringed, or vulnerable to infringement including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, older people, the LGBTIQ+ community, people with disabilities, women • ACT Law Society • ACT Bar Association • Legal Aid • Community Legal Centres 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ministers • JACS • CSD • non-government peak bodies • MLAs • All of government • Peak national bodies such as ACHRA

Discrimination, Health Services, Disability and Community Services Commissioner external audiences	
Primary	Secondary
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Service users- e.g. people seeking to use the complaint service including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, older people, vulnerable people, the LGBTIQ+ community, children and young people, people with disabilities, women, victims of crime, and people seeking to report systemic issues not related to individual complaints • Non-government agencies representing and supporting such groups • service providers including Canberra Health Services (CHS), CSD, JACS, 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • national and other state/territory discrimination and health service commissioners • MLAs • All of government • Australian Health Practitioners Regulation Agency (AHPRA)

private sector businesses and community organisations	
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Victims of Crime Commissioner external audiences	
External	
Primary	Secondary
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> victims of crime, their families and carers justice sector including ACT Policing, the Director of Public Prosecutions (DPP), courts and the ACT Civil and Administrative Tribunal (ACAT) broader community 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> other justice sector organisations including the ACT Law Society, ACT Bar Association, Community Legal Centres and Legal Aid ACT other non-government agencies who provide community services

Public Advocate and Children and Young People Commissioner external audiences	
External	
Primary	Secondary
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> children and young people, particularly those experiencing additional challenges (eg. care and protection, youth justice, family violence, homelessness, LGBTIQ+, disability, mental health, complex needs, etc) parents, carers and guardians, non-government/community sector service providers supporting people experiencing vulnerability people with complex mental health/disability needs and their families/carers/guardians/friends 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> academic/research organisations Australian and New Zealand Children's Commissioners and Guardians (ANZCCG) Australian Guardianship and Administration Council (AGAC) government agencies relevant to PACYPC cohorts (eg CSD, JACS, the Education Directorate (ED), CHS) Courts, ACAT, ACT Policing

Internal audiences are also important and include Commission staff, JACS and CSD staff, and all ACT government employees. As required, the Commission will inform, update and brief internal stakeholders with:

- emails, meetings, personal outreach

- whole of government emails, the JACS newsletter and Commissioner emails to all staff.

5. Key messages

Key messages will be tailored to fit the relevant event or issue, and will be developed by the Commissioners with the assistance of staff. Messages will be succinct; crafted to particular audience segments; timed to fit media cycles/deadlines; and appropriate to the media in question.

Some examples follow:

- open letter on the Minimum Age of Criminal Responsibility signed by the PACYPC and Commission President, covered in [print and electronic media](#)
- articles on the spike in demand for family violence support services, with comment from the VOCC covered in the [print and electronic media](#);
- comment on the need for [COVID restrictions to be balanced against human rights](#), by the Human Rights Commissioner, covered in the print and electronic media

In addition, core messages underpinning the work of the whole of the Commission will be developed. These will be grounded in priorities from the strategic plan, but be tailored to suit an external audience.

6. Issues and risk management

As a statutory body, the independence of the Commission and its history of making independent comment is generally well-respected by stakeholders, the ACT government and the local media. However, the very nature of the Commission's core business, the way in which its work intersects with the law, discrimination issues, access to services, public policy and human rights means that the Commission will often be commenting on topics generating significant interest and sometimes controversy, in the public domain. Further, no media activity is ever entirely risk free.

Potential media risks include:

- human rights-related considerations/advice from the Commission re: Territory laws, where the Commission's position is potentially at odds with, or clashes with other stakeholders such as the police, DPP, ACT Government
- negative media outlet responses to particular public comments/stance of the Commission
- media attention given to disaffected complainants/members of the public following interaction with the Commission
- possible leaking of an internal Commission document/position to the media.

Under the Commission's governance and corporate support protocol, the President should take reasonable steps to inform the Minister for Justice (and/or relevant Ministers) and the JACS Director-General (and/or other relevant Directors-General) of any media contact that is likely to be controversial, unless the nature of the contact makes it inappropriate to do so.

In the case of negative publicity, critical media or a public statement from another stakeholder criticising the Commission, the Commission's response should be:

- a clear, swift and well-judged public statement/clarification/rebuttal

- where needed, clear advice/briefing to Commission staff about the issue
- private interventions with key local stakeholders, as required, to defuse the issue.

7. Communication approach & method

Events

As a result of COVID-19 restrictions, several key annual events were cancelled. During such restrictions the Commission should consider replacing live events (forums, stalls, celebrations) with smaller, online, targeted events; and will continue to reassess ways of reaching out to target audiences within public health limits.

These could include:

- Online forums:
 - This was done successfully with the Commission hosted forum on external review of decisions made by Child and Youth Protection Services (CYPS). A live event, scheduled for March 2020, was cancelled. A July 2020 webex with +40 participants was attended by key stakeholders and decision makers, including the relevant Minister and senior CYPS staff. The ability to host interstate speakers via webex was also beneficial in terms of strongly putting the case for change.
 - In March 2020, the Discrimination Commissioner also took part in a live facebook Q&A with the Minister for Justice on rights in the time of COVID. This was well-attended and enabled members of the community to ask questions on the day.
 - Online information sessions on the complaint process, coverage of the Discrimination Act and workplace discrimination have been delivered by the DHSDCSC team
 - The PACYPC joined with the Commissioner for Children and Young People, Victoria, for an online webinar about children's rights and participation in National Child Protection Week that attracted over 200 participants from Australia and New Zealand.
- Media campaigns
 - As noted earlier, our substantive media coverage increased significantly in the 2019-20 year. We have a strong media standing and successfully generate coverage when we go out to the media. We are therefore well-placed to replace some traditional celebrations and events with media campaigns and coverage.
- Different venues for Commission stalls
 - The Commission could also consider having stalls at external locations (for example, Garema Place or similar outdoor locations or shopping centres), subject to a COVID-safe assessment of venue and staff safety.
- Video messaging
 - The PACYPC drew strong community support through her video messages sent out via social media challenges (including being featured on ABC Facebook Live).

Media and communications outreach

The Commission's strong local standing and image means that pitches to the media are rewarded with strong, positive and sometimes extensive coverage. In this way, the Commission is consistently able to lend its voice to relevant public, legal and policy debates. However,

media and communications outreach needs to be tailored within the Commission's moderate communication budget and available human resources (0.6 position in the media officer role).

Given our public audience and client/consumer base, the Commission's communication outreach will be easy-to-understand and accessible (including compliant with web content accessibility guidelines). Outreach will include the following:

External audiences:

- Media releases and alerts
- Providing media comment in response to requests
- Pro-active placement of opinion pieces in the Canberra Times; and pitching specific stories to selected journalists/outlets
- Letters to the editor
- Social media content across the Commission's three platforms (twitter, fb, LinkedIn)
- Information/brochures distributed to stakeholders and partners (Canberra Community Law, ACT Disability Aged and Carers' Advocacy Service (ADACS), ACT Legal Aid, Libraries ACT)
- Paid advertisements and advertorials in Canberra Times features. These regular features target sectors of our client/consumer base including older people, children and young people, and people with a disability and their carers
- The 'Humanity' Newsletter providing short updates on Commission services and events generally quarterly
- Website information - The HRC website provides information on:
 - News, new projects, information for clients, contact information and an online complaints form.
 - The role of the President and Human Rights Commissioner, including scrutiny of human rights compliance and intervention in cases involving human rights
 - The role of the Discrimination, Health Services, Disability and Community Services Commissioner, including complaints and systemic advocacy functions
 - The role of the Public Advocate and Children and Young People Commissioner including individual and systemic advocacy, and children's right to have their views heard and taken seriously about matters impacting their lives
 - The role of the Victims of Crime Commissioner, including financial assistance and other support for victims, systemic advocacy and oversight of the Witness Intermediary Scheme

For internal audiences, direct, personal contact is most effective. This may include the following

- Regular whole of commission emails
- Emails/phone calls/meetings with important ACT stakeholders such as minister's offices, JACS, and MLAs

9. Public comment on behalf of the Commission

Individual Commissioners may make public comment, via media interviews or pieces authored by them. As per agreed protocols, the media officers will inform JACS media, CSD media and/or the offices of the Minister for Justice, Minister for Children, Youth and Families and the Attorney General of upcoming public comment.

Social media

The Commission is currently active on facebook, twitter and LinkedIn. The PACYPC also tweets from her @PACYPC account; and the Commission President posts from her LinkedIn page.

Commissioners can tweet/post or request the media officer to tweet/post. The media officer also suggests tweets/posts/resposts to the executive manager or to the relevant Commissioner for approval.

Guidance on content, style & retweets

- Commissioners should use their title or an abbreviation of their title – e.g.: CYPC; Discrim Commissioner; Disability Commissioner etc.) in tweets – rather than their name
- Tweets/posts/shares must not endorse anything which could be construed as political or controversial, or something that another Commissioner may object to
- No content will make reference to a complaint being considered by the Commission or identify a person involved with the Commission without their consent in accordance with the Commission's Privacy Policy
- Retweets and shares will aim to position the Commission as a promoter of service improvement and human rights.

11. Monitoring and evaluation

The following will be monitored to gauge effectiveness of media and outreach:

- web and social media analytics
- media logs recording media appearances
- attendance at virtual events and meetings.

12. Action plan

Description	Timing	Channels
- Proactive media (media releases, pitching stories to journalists, opinion pieces) responding to timely issues with the remit of the	As required	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Mainstream media and social media channels. - Specific journalists/outlets targeted if they have

Commission/individual Commissioners		demonstrated an interest in the issue.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - International days including i-day, IDAHOBIT, IWD, Reconciliation Day, National Day of Remembrance for Domestic Violence Victims - The Commission maintains an internal community engagement calendar which lists other international days and live events traditionally celebrated (some of these events are on hold due to COVID restrictions). This plan is available on request. 	Across the year	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Social media - Mainstream media via media release, comment, pitching of a story or Commission-authored content (opinion piece)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Multicultural Festival 	Late February	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - If live event: discussion and distribution of information materials and merchandise to members of the community - If event is scaled down or becomes an online forum, Commission will take part, targeting its messaging to both recent arrivals and members of the Culturally and Linguistically Diverse community; as well as celebrating diversity within the broader community
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Children's Week (PACYPC) 	October	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Community events, stalls and awards
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - UNDRIP (President) 	September	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Commission hosted community event
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - NAIDOC week (President) 	November	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Commission participation in community hosted events
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - International HR day (President) 	10 December	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Events listings, local media - Media release on the day - Opinion piece in the Canberra Times - Online or live forum

13. Internal communications support

In addition to the mostly external media outreach described above, the media officer supports Commission staff in the:

- Production of brochures/information materials
- Advice about media outreach and media at events
- Crafting either one-off media messages (responses to inquiries from journalists) or media releases and more significant comment
- Support with copy-editing of internal documents and reports.