

2024

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

2024-25 Budget Estimates

OPENING STATEMENT

**Rebecca Vassarotti MLA
Minister for Heritage**

I wish to acknowledge the Ngunnawal people as Traditional Custodians of the land we are meeting on and recognise any other people or families with connection to the lands of the ACT and region. I acknowledge and respect their continuing culture and the contribution they make to the life of this city and this region. I would also like to acknowledge and welcome other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who may be with us today.

As Canberra continues to change and thrive as a modern city home to a diverse community, it is important we reflect on the past and trace the path to the present. Our heritage connects us and helps us understand what is important to us as a community.

Over the past decade, the demand for heritage advice and approvals due to growth in urban infill projects, greenfield development, and residential works has increased (by 122% from 2014-2021). This growth has resulted in a growing number of requests awaiting decision. This number is approximately 230 and has resulted in extended timeframes of between 3-6 months for advice.

In the 2022-23 financial year, 72 per cent of advice was issued within the statutory referral period and in 2023-24 this improved to 76 per cent issued within the statutory timeframe. This is below the target but an improvement on previous years and showing a positive trend. The government is continuing to identify and implement strategies to reduce the processing timeframes.

In 2023-24 the ACT Government provided additional resourcing to ACT Heritage to help address the workloads including additional initiative funding of \$1.172m including funding to assist planning for a new heritage database and further resources to address the approvals and advice backlog. This has had an impact, but more is needed.

Ensuring our heritage has sustainable and culturally appropriate systems in place to protect, conserve and register our heritage places and objects has been at the heart of important work delivered over the last financial year.

Foremost was the extensive review of the heritage system and arrangements through the independent ACT Heritage Jurisdictional Review, which provides us with a blueprint to address systemic challenges and develop stronger heritage arrangements in the ACT. The Government's response to the concurrent Assembly Committee Inquiry on ACT Heritage Arrangements noted its strong alignment with the reforms identified in the review.

Public consultation with the ACT community, industry and Aboriginal community members on the Jurisdictional Review revealed overwhelming support of the direction of reform. Extensive consultation took place from 25 August to 13 October 2023 and resulted in more than 1100 separate pieces of feedback.

The Government is progressing work in a prioritised manner to implement the outcomes of the review and the supported recommendations from the Committee inquiry. Together they will set the foundation for stronger heritage arrangements in the ACT by:

- Building capacity and capability for Traditional Custodians to be decision makers on their cultural heritage; and,
- Strengthening the governance and administration of the ACT's heritage arrangements.

The reforms are being actively supported by a reinvigorated Heritage Council. Following amendments to the Heritage Act that were debated and passed through the ACT Legislative Assembly on 25 June 2024, the Council will have improved capacity to assess applications to the Heritage Register, as well as increased Aboriginal community representation. These legislative reforms

facilitate greater efficiency, clarity and effectiveness in key areas of the ACT's heritage system.

The community can also look forward to easier, more accessible information about heritage places and objects in the ACT. Over the past year, work continued on the scoping, design and market testing to upgrade the heritage database and website. This has been a key reform under the Government's Parliamentary and Governing Agreement since 2021. In FY 2023-24, the Government committed \$609,000 to a digital transformation which will modernise and deliver a more accurate and accessible database with a searchable public user interface. The upgraded system will help address current backlogs and delays in responding to development application and registration applications.

And it's not only in the reform space that the public has enthusiastically engaged with our heritage. This year saw us celebrate the 41st annual ACT Heritage Festival that ran from 13 – 28 April and was attended by more than 7,000 people across Canberra and our region.

With a theme of 'Connections', this year's program featured 130 events coordinated by 75 groups from the community, government, commercial, professional and arts sectors. I am delighted to say that 20% of events featured First Nations culture and that 22 of the events were enabled by the ACT Heritage Grants.

The Heritage Grants program continues to be an important part of our heritage system. The 2023-24 round resulted in 15 community-led projects and 3 community partnership projects sharing more than \$344,000 to preserve and celebrate the unique stories of the ACT's history and heritage.

From interpretive signage, to oral history workshops, to publications, and conservation management plans, these projects continue to celebrate First

Nations heritage and facilitate grassroots community participation. Work is currently underway to finalise the 2024-25 Grants projects and I look forward to announcing the recipients in August.

The 2024-25 Budget reflects a Government recognition of the community's strong interest in our heritage. This included an additional \$1.9 million in expenses and \$8.8 million in capital over 4 years from 2024-25. This capital funding will fund the provision of a new heritage database.

Heritage reform in the ACT is heading in a promising direction. Among the work we can look forward to is: improving public accessibility of heritage information through an accurate and reliable and upgraded database, increasing public engagement and guidance, greater alignment of development priorities with heritage conservation, streamlining heritage management and conservation in line with other key government priorities such as climate action and planning , as well as fostering greater community awareness and appreciation of the social and economic value of protecting the Territory's important heritage places.