

2025

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

ELEVENTH ASSEMBLY

2025 Youth Assembly Report: Our Voice, Our Impact

**Presented by
Michael Pettersson MLA
Minister for Children, Youth and Families
December 2025**

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YOUTH ADVISORY COUNCIL



2025 ACT YOUTH ASSEMBLY REPORT OUR VOICE, OUR IMPACT



CABINET

Acknowledgement of Country

The ACT Youth Advisory Council acknowledges the Traditional Custodians of the lands on which we meet, hold the ACT Youth Assembly and prepare this report. We pay our respects to the Traditional Custodians, Caretakers and Elders of Ngunnawal Country and Ngambri Country, both past and present and honour their strength, resilience and teachings. We acknowledge and respect the enduring connections that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have with the lands of the ACT and surrounding regions. We express our sincere gratitude for their continued commitment to caring for Country, which has sustained these lands from time immemorial and recognise the profound significance of this ongoing connection to Country and the deep spiritual and cultural connection that it represents. We extend our respects to the continuation of all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural, spiritual, healing and educational practices. As the ACT Youth Advisory Council, we acknowledge that this always was and always will be, Aboriginal land.

The ACT Youth Advisory Council deeply values the significance of continuous learning from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples about their histories, knowledge, perspectives and practices. Moreover, we recognise this is essential for a more just and equitable future. Therefore, the ACT Youth Advisory Council reaffirms its commitment to actively pursue reconciliation, truth-telling and structural reform, address the ongoing impacts of colonisation in the ACT and surrounding regions and contribute to the healing process.

Acknowledgements

The ACT Youth Advisory Council also wishes to acknowledge the following guests at the ACT Youth Assembly: Uncle Warren Daley, Ngunnawal Elder; Minister for Children, Youth and Families, Mr Michael Pettersson MLA; Ms Jodie Griffiths-Cook, Public Advocate and Children and Young People Commissioner; Ms Hannah Watts, CEO of ACT Youth Coalition; Murray McKay, A/g Executive Branch Manager, Engagement & Wellbeing Support Services; Brenton McKewin, A/g Clinical Director, Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services; Jason Borton, Executive Branch Manager, Education Programs and Services; representatives from the Health, Education and Community Services directorates, attending as expert observers and panel members and all other expert observers whose knowledge and experience supported the event. We also acknowledge the young people who attended the Assembly and generously shared their insights, stories and solutions. The ACT Youth Advisory Council would like to extend our sincere gratitude to the Office for Youth Engagement and Community Services Directorate for their support and assistance in organising the 2025 ACT Youth Assembly. Additionally, the ACT Youth Advisory Council thanks former members whose terms expired in the months leading up to the ACT Youth Assembly for their contributions to planning the event.

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Foreword



Photo: Mr Michael Pettersson MLA, Minister for Children, Youth and Families, presenting at the 2025 Youth Assembly

Young people are often called the ‘future leaders’ of our community, but I believe the ACT Youth Assembly more than demonstrates that young people are already leaders in their own right.

Deliberative democracy processes like the Assembly help young people develop their leadership capabilities by giving them a seat at the table to have their say on the decisions that directly impact their lives. This in turn allows young people to drive policy and structural reform grounded in lived experience, diverse perspectives and community consultation.

This report was developed by the Youth Advisory Council for the consideration of ACT Government decision-makers and the Minister for Children, Youth and Families. Based on our findings from the 2025 ACT Youth Assembly, young Canberrans want better access to quality education, healthcare and housing and they are asking the ACT Government to improve its delivery of services to meet their diverse and unique needs. They are passionate, engaged and informed about the issues affecting their communities and they care deeply about working towards a better future for all Canberrans.

This Assembly enabled us to make recommendations that will support the ACT Government to create positive and meaningful outcomes for young people in the ACT. It has been an incredible experience to lead the Council in delivering the Assembly and this report. I am privileged and honoured to have gained the insights and perspectives of so many like-minded young people who are passionate about youth issues. Thank you for entrusting the Council with amplifying your voice to create impact through this report and our broader, ongoing advocacy.” – Jemma, Co-Chair of the ACT Youth Advisory Council.



“As a Year 12 student, education has been a major part of my life. Facilitating the Education forum at this year’s Youth Assembly was a powerful experience. I listened to young people share honest, often deeply personal stories about school, identity and the support they did - or didn’t - receive. These conversations highlighted both the strengths and gaps in our system. I hope this report helps make the ACT education system more accessible, supportive and empowering for all young people.”

- Amelia, ACT Youth Advisory Council member



“Leading the Housing forum at the Youth Assembly reminded me that young people, though often overlooked, can drive meaningful change. It was inspiring to see participants clearly express their ideas and solutions. The recommendations in this report reflect their voices. The youth of the ACT have spoken - now it’s time to listen and act.”

- Charles, ACT Youth Advisory Council member



Summary of Recommendations

Education

Recommendation 1: The ACT Government to invest in teaching resources that deliver consistent education in civics, financial literacy and career pathways, to build a resilient future for young people, with the delivery of these resources being a mandatory requirement delivered into the school curriculum.

Recommendation 2: The ACT Education Directorate to maintain and enhance mandatory Diversity and Inclusion training for all educators, focussing this training on supporting neurodivergent students and young people of colour and for fostering inclusive, cohesive classrooms. It should be regularly updated, co-designed with diverse communities and include practical, ongoing support for teachers.

Recommendation 3: The ACT Education Directorate to increase funding for all ACT high schools to employ at least one dedicated career adviser to enhance support for students' career development and facilitate a smoother transition into college, vocational training or employment.

Health

Recommendation 1: The ACT Government to expand the scope of MindMap ACT to include physical and sexual healthcare with education and directory functions.

Recommendation 2: The ACT Government to increase the availability of on-site mental health professionals, provide compulsory mental health training to all school staff and students and create sensory-friendly spaces for students to raise the standard of mental health in ACT schools.

Recommendation 3: The ACT Government to replicate and expand The Junction's Health Service model of care across multiple locations, with a particular focus on underserved regions. Furthermore, a harm minimisation approach to drug use should be adopted within these services, offering non-judgmental support including access to pill testing, education and safe, evidence-based care.

Housing

Recommendation 1: The ACT Government to develop a centralised, user-friendly website that provides young people with up-to-date housing information, tenant rights education and a safe platform to find suitable roommates for shared housing. The website should be promoted toward young people through a targeted digital and traditional campaign.

Recommendation 2: The ACT Education Directorate to implement robust initiatives to incorporate housing education within the curriculum for post-primary school students and establish initiatives that connect young people to local services dedicated to providing housing support and guidance.

Recommendation 3: The ACT Government to update zoning laws to allow for increased housing supply, improve protections for renters and involve young people when making changes to legislation.



About the ACT Youth Advisory Council

The ACT Youth Advisory Council (the Council) is an ACT Government ministerial council which gives young people aged 12 to 25 the opportunity to take a leading role in:

- providing advice on youth issues to the Minister for Children, Youth and Families, Michael Pettersson MLA
- contributing to committees, working parties and task forces across ACT Government, to make sure that the youth perspective is being represented
- consulting with young people and the wider community through the ACT Youth Assembly, meetings, face-to-face consultation and youth surveys
- raising awareness in the community about the concerns of young people.

Through these activities, Council gives young people a voice in the ACT Government.

Council comprises up to 15 members aged 12 to 25 at the time of their appointment and is representative of the lived experiences and diverse views of approximately 80,000 young people living in the ACT, including:

- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people
- young people across the gender spectrum and within the LGBTQIASB+ community
- disabled young people and young people with disability
- young people from culturally and racially marginalised backgrounds
- young people with varying levels of education and employment status.

Council recognises many young people have identities which intersect across a number of these areas and may identify with communities and experiences outside of those listed here.

At the time of writing, the 2025 Council members are: Jemma Rule (Co-Chair), Amelia Condon-Cernovs, Charles Marpaung, Zach Zhao, Nairwng Tripura, Price Magero, Johan Jacob and Princess Kisakye.

Overview: ACT Youth Assembly & Report

The ACT Youth Assembly (the Assembly) brings together young Canberrans aged 12 to 25 years to share ideas on how to advance youth issues and is hosted by the ACT Youth Advisory Council. This free event has been held biennially since 2018 and will be held annually from 2025. Participants discuss issues and contribute to an ACT Youth Assembly Report, which the ACT Youth Advisory Council presents to the Minister responsible for youth affairs. The ACT Youth Assembly is organised by Council in partnership with the ACT Government.

The 2025 ACT Youth Assembly took place on Tuesday 27 May 2025 at the Australian National University Marie Reay Teaching Centre, with more than 50 diverse young people in attendance. The 2025 Assembly built upon the success of previous Assemblies by taking a youth-led approach to address the diverse needs and concerns of young Canberrans. Participants shared lived experiences, identified key challenges and co-designed practical recommendations to ACT Government. These were presented to a panel of ACT Government and community experts, followed by a session for feedback and further dialogue.

The themes of the 2025 ACT Youth Assembly were:

- Education: This forum explored how the curriculum is delivered within schools, vocational training and higher education, the intersection of education and employment pathways and addressing gaps in education, life-skills and employment outcomes for young people.
- Health: This forum explored issues surrounding young peoples' physical, mental and sexual health and considered solutions to improve access, awareness and cost and quality of health services.
- Housing: This forum explored housing education – whether housing related topics are being talked about at school – and housing for young people from minority backgrounds.

The 2025 ACT Youth Assembly Report (the Report) has been prepared by the Youth Advisory Council for the ACT Government to reflect the views of young people in the ACT and draws together research and information from the 2025 Assembly. It represents the collective voices and advocacy efforts of young people who attended and participated in the 2025 Assembly. With the consent of participants, data from the Assembly was gathered through methods including the transcription of forum discussions, surveys, presentations and various problem-solving activities. Data gathered from the Assembly are robustly supported in this report through the incorporation of thorough background research and the Council's existing knowledge. Further, the analysis of data from the Assembly is enriched by the diverse perspectives and lived experiences of Council members, all young people who are actively engaged in the Canberra community.

The findings of the Report, informed by the views and lived experiences of young people, have been carefully developed by Council members. They are presented clearly and categorised under headings for each forum topic. Additionally, they are organised based on the main themes from each interactive forum, the specific issues within those themes and the corresponding recommendations. To begin the Report, we provide a summary of all recommendations in the section immediately preceding this overview, before providing a more in-depth discussion of recommendations under the relevant forum topic. We advise that each recommendation should be read together with the context explained in the individual sections dedicated to each forum topic.

Education Forum

Young people are the primary stakeholders in education systems, yet their voices are often underrepresented in policy development, curriculum design and reform discussions. In the ACT, where ongoing challenges relating to academic performance, access to support services and alignment between education and employment pathways persist, young peoples' input is critical to understanding the root causes and shaping meaningful solutions.

This forum was led by Amelia Condon-Cernovs, Nairwng Tripura, and Price Magero.

Background: Education

Education serves as a foundation for individual empowerment and societal progress. For young Australians, it plays a pivotal role in shaping future prospects, influencing employment opportunities, and fostering social cohesion. As of February 2024, there were 82,654 students enrolled across public and non-government schools in the ACT (ACT Government, 2024). Despite this broad engagement, the education landscape remains complex, with systemic challenges that continue to impede equitable outcomes for many young people. Council is concerned that some ACT public schools face persistent challenges in literacy and numeracy achievement, even after adjusting for socio-economic factors. Council acknowledges that the ACT education system is undergoing a significant shift with the introduction of the *Strong Foundations* initiative in 2025. Prompted by the 2024 Expert Panel report, *Achieving equity and excellence through evidence-informed consistency*, this reform marks a move away from fragmented practices toward a unified, evidence-based approach to literacy and numeracy. Strong Foundations aims to ensure every student receives high-quality, consistent instruction—regardless of background or school—in which Council applaud these changes.

Vocational Education and Training (VET) and higher education are integral to providing young people with pathways to employment. However, in the ACT, Council feel that these pathways often fail to align with labour market needs (University of Canberra, Faculty of Business, Government & Law, 2022). The lack of coordination between educational institutions and industries results in qualifications that do not translate into employment opportunities, leaving graduates underemployed or unemployed. Moreover, the emphasis on academic achievement over vocational skills perpetuates a narrow view of success, marginalising students who may excel in practical, hands-on learning environments. This bias towards traditional academic pathways contributes to a misalignment between education outputs and employment market demands.

The transition from education to employment remains a critical challenge for young people in Australia. Despite high levels of educational attainment, youth unemployment rates in the ACT remain elevated at 9%, more than double the national rate (Jobs and Skills Australia, 2025), indicating a disconnect between educational outputs and labour market requirements. This gap is exacerbated by a lack of practical experience and insufficient career guidance, leaving many young individuals ill-prepared for the workforce. Furthermore, the emphasis on academic success over vocational training contributes to a devaluation of alternative pathways, reinforcing societal biases and limiting opportunities for students with diverse talents and aspirations.

Furthermore, the Council believes that The ACT public education system does not always address the holistic needs of students. Life skills education, encompassing financial literacy, emotional intelligence and problem-solving, is often not prioritised in the curriculum, despite its importance in preparing students for adult life. Moreover, systemic inequities persist, with students from Indigenous, low socio-economic and rural backgrounds facing barriers to educational success. These groups often experience lower attendance rates, higher dropout rates and diminished academic achievement (National Indigenous Australians Agency, 2023), perpetuating cycles of disadvantage.

While the ACT public education system has formally committed to principles of inclusion, safety and accessibility, reforming systems takes time. Students with disability, neurodivergent learners and those from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds often encounter structural barriers within mainstream schools. Reports from advocacy groups and parents indicate persistent challenges such as inadequate support staff, inconsistent application of Individual Learning Plans (ILPs) and a lack of trauma-informed practices. Furthermore, school-based bullying and discrimination, particularly against LGBTQIA+ students and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander youth, remain pressing concerns, undermining students' sense of safety and belonging (Youth Coalition of the ACT and ACTCOSS, 2015). Accessibility is not only a physical issue but also a pedagogical one: when teaching materials, communication methods, or digital platforms are not inclusive, students are effectively excluded from meaningful participation. Addressing these shortcomings requires a systemic commitment to equity, not just through policy, but in everyday classroom practices, resource allocation and accountability mechanisms.

Education is a powerful tool that shapes the future of young individuals and, by extension, the broader society. In the ACT, ongoing efforts to refine curriculum delivery, integrate vocational and higher education pathways and address environmental influences are commendable. However, it is imperative to continue addressing the gaps that hinder equitable access and outcomes. By fostering inclusive, supportive and adaptive educational environments, the ACT can ensure that all young people have the opportunity to realise their full potential.

This Forum examined the ACT education system, identifying opportunities to strengthen curriculum delivery, vocational education, higher education pathways, and the broader social and physical environments that shape educational experiences. Central to this examination was the recognition that young people's voices and lived experiences are critical to achieving stronger educational outcomes and enhancing both school-based and community-based programs.

The Education Forum explored the diverse role of education in the lives of young people in the ACT, focusing on two key areas: school-based education and community-based (external) education.

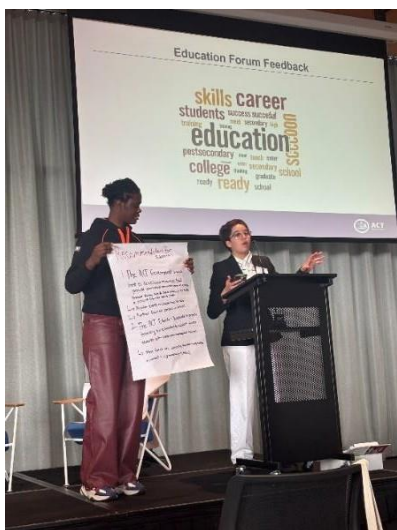
- The Education Forum explored how the curriculum is delivered across schools, vocational training, and higher education institutions in the ACT. The discussion included how career development programs are implemented in schools and the extent to which they support students in exploring future career pathways and engaging in civic participation. The Forum also examined school-based programs that influence the social and physical learning environments, particularly in relation to student safety, inclusion, and a sense of belonging.
- Furthermore, within the context of external educational programs, the forum explored programs offered to young people that provide experiential learning opportunities and support the

intersection of education with employment pathways and civic engagement. This part of the forum aimed to address gaps in academic learning, life skills development, and employment outcomes.

"We are the nation's capital, everyone in my school should know how to vote for our future leaders. But I don't think many have ever seen a ballot paper."

- 2025 ACT Youth Assembly participant

Key Findings



Key finding 1: FUTURE CITIZENS

Assembly participants highlighted that young people in the ACT feel their education is not preparing them to be future citizens. Firstly, participants cited that, civics education is not sufficiently covered within ACT schools, as the fundamentals of voting, government processes and democratic engagement is taught differently across ACT schools to varying depth, impacting students' understanding. Secondly, essential life skills such as financial literacy and work experience are inconsistent and underdeveloped, with young people reporting they feel ill-equipped to navigate practical responsibilities such as paying tax, managing rent or applying for loans. Furthermore, sexual education is often viewed as limited in scope and lacking relevance to real-life situations, with students calling for more inclusive content that addresses consent, healthy relationships and gender identity.

Key finding 2: ACCESSIBILITY IN THE CLASSROOM

Canberra is home to a wide range of diverse communities with young people who have varied needs, identities and lived experiences. However, Assembly participants raised concerns that current standardised teaching practices and the overall school system do not adequately support students that often get left behind with a 'one-size fits all approach' to education and classroom management. Students from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds, students with disability, neurodivergent students and those with varying social and emotional needs highlighted that the absence of this support has led to environments where students feel misunderstood, marginalised or unsupported. This has resulted in the impact of their wellbeing, sense of belonging and academic success. The discussions ended in strong calls

for schools to adopt more tailored, flexible and compassionate approaches to learning and wellbeing, ones that empower teachers to create safe and inclusive environments where all young people can thrive.

Key finding 3: ACCESS TO RESOURCES

Assembly participants highlighted a notable disparity in access to resources between public and private schools in the ACT, with students in public education often facing limitations. Participants cited a lack of up-to-date classroom materials, access to technology and subject-specific resources, particularly in areas like science, the arts and vocational training.

In the ACT, students' access to career guidance varies significantly depending on the school they attend. While some private schools offer well-resourced career programs, extensive extracurricular opportunities and modern facilities, many public-school students face challenges in accessing even basic information about university applications, apprenticeships or alternative post-school pathways. This imbalance in resources contributes to unequal educational experiences and outcomes, limiting opportunities for many young people to fully explore their potential.

Within the ACT public school system, access to career advisers is particularly limited and inconsistent. Currently, the ACT Government funds career adviser positions in only 9 colleges, with each college having just one funded adviser. Council is not aware of any ACT high schools receiving direct funding for career adviser roles, further widening the gap in support available to students. This model creates significant disparities in career guidance and planning, reinforcing systemic inequities and leaving many students without the support they need to make informed decisions about their futures. As a result, students across the territory experience unequal opportunities for career planning, post-school transitions and vocational exploration. To address these inequities and improve student outcomes, the ACT Government should consider standardising the presence of career advisers across all secondary schools. Doing so would ensure that every student receives consistent, high-quality support, regardless of their school or background.

“We need access to more career related resources and support; it should be embedded into our day-to-day learning” -2025 ACT Youth Assembly participant

Recommendations

Recommendation 1: The ACT Government to invest in teaching resources that deliver consistent education in civics, financial literacy and career pathways, to build a resilient future for young people, with the delivery of these resources being a mandatory requirement delivered into the school curriculum.

Recommendation 2: The ACT Education Directorate to maintain and enhance mandatory Diversity and Inclusion training for all educators, focussing this training on supporting neurodivergent students and young people of colour and for fostering inclusive, cohesive classrooms. It should be regularly updated, co-designed with diverse communities and include practical, ongoing support for teachers.

Recommendation 3: The ACT Education Directorate to increase funding for all ACT high schools to employ at least one dedicated career adviser to enhance support for students' career development and facilitate a smoother transition into college, vocational training or employment.

Health Forum

This forum was led by Council members Zach Zhao and Johan Jacob, with support from Co-Chair Jemma Rule.

Background: Youth Mental, Physical and Sexual Health

Sexual Health

Sexual health is defined as a state of wellbeing in relation to sexuality (World Health Organisation, 2024). In the ACT, it encompasses access to services, the ability to enjoy consensual relationships and an understanding of gender, identity and communication. Organisations like Sexual Health and Family Planning ACT (SHFPACT) and initiatives like Safe And Inclusive Schools ACT (SAIS) support these goals, but barriers such as stigma, inaccessibility and lack of inclusivity persist, particularly for marginalised groups (Meridian ACT, 2024). A comprehensive understanding of sexual health includes not only the biological aspect but also emotional and social dimensions that impact young peoples' experiences. These dimensions are increasingly important as youth navigate complex social landscapes shaped by digital media, peers and evolving norms around gender and sexuality.

Key Issues Impacting Young People

Young people face high rates of STIs, especially chlamydia (Kirby Institute, 2023). Barriers such as cost, confidentiality concerns and lack of culturally sensitive information limit access to contraception and services (SHFPACT, 2024). LGBTQIA+ youth experience compounded mental health and identity pressures (Headspace, 2024) and CALD youth face cultural stigma and language barriers. These factors collectively reduce the likelihood of early intervention, increasing long-term health risks. Furthermore, young people from regional or rural areas of the ACT face additional challenges due to limited-service availability, distance to care facilities and fewer opportunities for health education.

Importance of Sexual Health

Sexual health influences wellbeing, autonomy and life outcomes. ACT's progressive curriculum, including the Respectful Relationships program, supports early education on boundaries and consent (Our Watch, 2024). Equitable access to services empowers informed choices and reduces health disparities (Meridian ACT, 2024). Ensuring young people understand and can confidently navigate their sexual health contributes to their overall empowerment and reduces vulnerability to exploitation or coercion. As young people transition into adulthood, sexual health also intersects with broader issues of identity formation, relationship dynamics and reproductive decision-making, making early education and support all the more essential.

Sexual Health Services

Services include the Canberra Sexual Health Centre (CSHC), SHFPACT, Headspace and Meridian ACT. These offer STI testing, PrEP, reproductive health, counselling and LGBTQIA+ support (ACT Health, 2024). SHFPACT also delivers cervical screening and medical abortion services in a youth-friendly environment. While many services are free or low-cost, access is limited by transport, Medicare eligibility and cultural safety concerns. Outreach initiatives and peer-led programs have been identified as effective ways to bridge the gap. Collaboration between schools, community centres and health providers has shown promise in improving service awareness and uptake among young people.

Quality and Accessibility of Services

While providers like SHFPACT and the Junction offer high-quality, youth-focused care, access is inconsistent across services. Some GPs lack current training on working with children and young people and services often don't include youth in decision-making. Peer navigation and trauma-informed care improve outcomes (Meridian ACT, 2024) however, systemic issues like funding shortfalls and lack of service integration undermine consistency and responsiveness across the sector. Young people from diverse backgrounds may require culturally competent care and translated resources to engage with services effectively. Incorporating ongoing feedback mechanisms and youth advisory roles can help ensure services remain responsive and trusted.

Sexual Health Education

Comprehensive education is provided from Years 3 to 10 in ACT public schools (ACT Education Directorate, 2024), with additional support from SAIS and community workshops delivered by SHFPACT and YWCA. These programs aim to address consent, puberty, STI prevention, contraception, and gender diversity. However, gaps in delivery may exist within independent and private schools, where access to these external programs can be inconsistent and curriculum content may vary significantly depending on the school's ethos, values, or religious affiliation. This can lead to reduced coverage of critical topics such as LGBTQIA+ inclusion, comprehensive sexual health, and evidence-based approaches to relationships and consent education. This variability can particularly impact Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) youth, who may already face barriers such as language, cultural stigma around discussing sexual health, or limited access to inclusive and culturally sensitive resources outside the school environment. Inconsistent delivery of comprehensive, inclusive education in these settings may further marginalize CALD students, limiting their access to critical information about their health, rights, and relationships.

“Sex education can vary from school to school, going to a religious school can really limit your access to good, clear information on sexual health” ACT Youth Assembly participant

Quality of Education

Progressive sexual health curriculums do exist; however, inconsistency remains across different schools, sectors (such as public and private), and other educational settings. Participants felt that some educators had limited knowledge or lacked the ability to deliver up-to-date, inclusive, and relevant sexual health information effectively. While programs like SAIS are designed to support educators, their uptake varies significantly between schools. Both educator training and student feedback consistently favour real-life, inclusive approaches to sexual health education over outdated, risk-based models. When delivered well, sexual health education has been shown to significantly increase knowledge retention and reduce risky

behaviours among youth. Schools that embed inclusive and interactive teaching strategies tend to see stronger student engagement and improved long-term health outcomes.

Physical & Mental Health

Young people face intertwined physical and mental health challenges, compounded by financial, social and logistical barriers. Issues include limited access to bulk-billed primary care, growing mental health concerns and lack of coordinated support across services (AIHW, 2024). These barriers are more pronounced for young people facing unstable housing, substance use or family breakdowns.

The developmental phase of adolescence also brings unique vulnerabilities, as physical changes, academic pressures and emotional wellbeing intersect.

Core Health Needs

A. Primary Healthcare: Young people often delay care due to cost or transport issues. Bulk-billed, youth-friendly services are essential for preventative care, vaccinations and treatment of common illnesses. Increasing community awareness of these services can help reduce stigma and increase engagement.

B. Mental Health: Anxiety, depression and identity struggles are common, with stigma and long wait times acting as major barriers. There is a critical need for early intervention and culturally competent counselling. Services must also be flexible and approachable to cater to youth who are hesitant to engage in formal care settings.

C. Sexual Health: Confidential, accessible sexual and reproductive health services are crucial, especially for those experiencing discrimination or lacking trusted adults to turn to.

D. Health Education: Topics like nutrition, exercise, substance abuse and mental wellbeing should be promoted through school and community programs (Hahn & Truman, 2015). Early education can prevent the escalation of chronic conditions and foster resilience. Integrating wellbeing education into extracurricular activities can further normalise positive health behaviours.

Available Services in the ACT

A. The Junction Youth Health Service: Provides holistic, bulk-billed care to at-risk youth but requires more outreach. It plays a crucial role for homeless or housing-insecure youth. Expansion of services across multiple sites could better meet demand.

B. Headspace Canberra: Offers mental and physical health services with long wait times being a concern. Despite resource limitations, it remains a central hub for youth support. Increasing funding and workforce capacity would alleviate bottlenecks.

C. YWCA Canberra: Delivers empowerment programs but lacks integration with formal health services. Strengthening referral pathways could enhance outcomes.

D. Marymead Catholic Care: Supports housing and mental health needs but would benefit from better service coordination and trauma-informed training. Services tailored to complex family dynamics can be especially beneficial.

E. Mobile Clinics: Improve outreach but have limited capacity. Expansion could support vulnerable youth in rural or under-resourced areas. These clinics can also serve as valuable first points of contact for youth new to the health system.

F. Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS): ACT Government services supporting high-needs youth but suffer from long delays, lack of evaluation and poor transition planning (ACT Auditor-General, 2024). Bridging care for those ageing out of services is critical. Investment in aftercare and follow-up mechanisms can prevent gaps in support.

Key approaches for enhancing youth services

Improving youth services is essential to supporting the wellbeing, development and future opportunities of young people. As demand for youth support continues to grow, current systems often struggle with limited resources, fragmented service delivery and barriers to access. To address these challenges, a multi-faceted approach is needed - one that not only expands capacity but also ensures services are inclusive, coordinated and responsive to the real needs of young people. Key approaches for enhancing youth services include:

A. Increase Funding: Expand youth-specific programs and support for growing demand, including recruiting trained professionals and expanding outreach. Fund peer-led and culturally tailored services.

B. Improve Integration: Encourage coordination between mental, physical and social services to create a seamless support network. Develop shared databases or referral pathways to reduce duplication and service fragmentation.

C. Enhance Accessibility: Focus on mobile clinics, community-based care and cultural safety. Establish youth-friendly spaces in schools and public facilities. Offer after-hours services to meet the needs of working or studying youth.

D. Expand Preventative Education: Promote lifelong health through curriculum and digital platforms, ensuring materials are culturally inclusive and accessible. Include parents and carers in education initiatives to reinforce messages at home.

E. Youth Engagement: Involve young people in service design and evaluation. Embed feedback loops and youth advisory panels into service planning. Recognise young people as experts in their own experiences.

F. Transition Pathways: Ensure ongoing care post-18 through coordinated handovers and continuity planning. Provide tailored support for those navigating adult services. Formalise transition protocols to avoid service drop-offs.

Key Findings



Key finding 1: Access to healthcare

Findings from the Health Forum indicate that young people face unique and complex barriers to accessing healthcare in the ACT. Across the forum discussion, cost was a major issue for young people attempting to access health services, with participants expressing that both the high cost of services and the cost of transportation to in-person services (e.g. a GP) prevented them from getting the healthcare they need. This is complicated by a lack of financial assistance available to young people struggling to access health services.

The availability of adequate health services was also a major issue throughout the forum discussion, with young people sharing that even if they could afford healthcare services, they faced long wait times for services or received treatment and care that did not sufficiently meet their needs. Access to free youth health services is also uneven across the ACT, with areas such as Tuggeranong, West Belconnen and Gungahlin particularly affected.

Participants identified wait times as an especially pressing issue for young people attempting to access mental healthcare through their schools, with many facing prohibitively long waiting times to see an on-site mental health professional. Lack of service availability contributed toward broader access concerns, with participants responding to the issue by either forgoing much-needed healthcare or seeking services interstate.

Participants expressed that age requirements for consent and the need for parental or guardian permissions for healthcare inhibited their access to services. This was highlighted in relation to situations where parents or guardians do not believe the young person requires healthcare despite their need for it, and where young people cannot safely request parental or guardian permission to access the healthcare they need.

Participants expressed concerns that existing pill testing services, while a step in the right direction, are still too limited in scope and accessibility. Many noted that these initiatives are often underfunded, inconsistently available, or only offered at select events or locations, making them inaccessible to the broader population of young people who may be using substances. Participants also raised concerns about the lack of public awareness and education surrounding how to access these services, as well as the potential stigma attached to their use. They emphasised the need for broader implementation, greater

visibility, and more comprehensive drug education to accompany pill testing services, ensuring young people are equipped with accurate, harm-reduction-focused information.

Participants expressed strong support for the establishment of medically supervised injecting spaces targeted at young people who use substances. These spaces were identified as crucial harm reduction measures capable of preventing overdose deaths, reducing the transmission of infectious diseases, and facilitating access to broader health and social services. Participants also noted that young people face significant stigma and barriers to support, and that medically supervised environments could foster trust and improve engagement with treatment and education. Without such supports, vulnerable youth are at increased risk of engaging in unsafe, high-risk behaviours.

“When I need to access a mental health service or health service, I need it now, not in 3 months time” ACT Youth Assembly participant.

Key finding 2: Inadequate health education

Findings from this forum demonstrate that young people are impacted by inadequate health education in schools and in the ACT community. Participants shared that a lack of quality health education – as well as a lack of health standardised education across public, private and independent schools – contributed to their difficulties in accessing healthcare. Participants noted that they faced insufficient information about health education about menstruation, sexual health, financial assistance to access healthcare and available services. Additionally, participants expressed that community education about health and healthcare is vital to reducing stigma and raising awareness, especially for young people who do not access healthcare due to external or internalised shame and young people whose schools do not provide sufficient health education.

Recommendations

Recommendation 1: The ACT Government to expand the scope of MindMap ACT to include physical and sexual healthcare with education and directory functions.

Recommendation 2: The ACT Government to increase the availability of on-site mental health professionals, provide compulsory mental health training to all school staff and students and create sensory-friendly spaces for students to raise the standard of mental health in ACT schools.

Recommendation 3: The ACT Government to replicate and expand The Junction’s Health Service model of care across multiple locations, with a particular focus on underserved regions. Furthermore, a harm minimisation approach to drug use should be adopted within these services, offering non-judgmental support including access to pill testing, education and safe, evidence-based care.



Panel right to left: Murray McKay, A/g Executive Branch Manager, Engagement & Wellbeing Support Services, Brenton McKewin, A/g Clinical Director, Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services, Jason Borton, Executive Branch Manager, Education Programs and Services, Jodie Griffiths-Cook is the ACT Public Advocate and Children and Young People Commissioner, Jemma Rule, Co- Chair, ACT Youth Advisory Council.

Housing

Young people are the future buyers and renters in the always changing housing market. However, they can feel that they are not informed with the relevant rules and their rights as renters and future home buyers. With the ACT having one of the most expensive housing prices in Australia, this demonstrates the necessity for young people to be equipped with their rights and the knowledge to rent or buy a home. This also demonstrates the significance for young people to contribute and join the conversation, allowing for them to shape their future as home buyers and renters.

This forum was led by Council members Charles Marpaung and Princess Kisakye, with support from Co-Chair Jemma Rule.

Background: Housing (Education and Minorities) Access to safe, secure and affordable housing is a fundamental right, yet many young people in the ACT face significant challenges acquiring accommodation that meets their needs. Affected most by the barriers to housing access are vulnerable young people and young people from minority groups, including young people transitioning out of out-of-home care, escaping violence or experiencing systemic issues such as poverty, homelessness, or discrimination based on race, gender or disability. Many young people feel they are not adequately educated about housing and rentals, which can leave them unprepared for the challenges of finding and maintaining a place to live.

Housing education for young people in Australia is crucial as it helps them develop the skills and knowledge needed to secure and maintain stable, affordable housing. This education covers essential topics like budgeting, understanding rental agreements and knowing tenant rights and responsibilities. Young people often face challenges such as high rental costs, discrimination and limited financial literacy, making it harder to find and keep a home. Support is available through government programs like the National Rental Affordability Scheme (NRAS) can provide advocacy, education and practical assistance (Department of Social Services, 2025). Effective housing education not only improves young peoples' chances of finding stable accommodation but also supports their overall well-being, education and employment outcomes.

While some may be aware of government support programs like the ACT Bond Loan Scheme, others might miss out simply due to a lack of awareness. This gap in knowledge extends to critical financial aspects, like budgeting for rent, understanding bond payments and the long-term costs associated with renting. Additionally, more complex pathways to home ownership, like rent-to-buy schemes, often fail to deliver the promised outcomes, creating further confusion and mistrust. To ensure young peoples' safety, dignity and participation in social, economic and educational opportunities throughout their lives, it is vital that the ACT Government addresses the housing needs of young people, particularly vulnerable and minority youth. Policy to improve youth access to housing must embed youth-centred approaches that recognise young peoples' diverse experiences, meet their unique and complex needs and provide pathways to stability and independence.

Canberra is known for its high quality of life and liveability, however there are significant issues and gaps in the housing system in relation to housing access for vulnerable and minority youth. In the ACT, young people are vulnerable to homelessness and housing insecurity, with research finding almost 900 young people under the age of 18 presented themselves to homelessness services in the ACT between 2022 and 2023 (Homelessness Australia, 2024). While less than 4 per cent of children and young people under 25 in the ACT are Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people under 18 made up a quarter of this total (Homelessness Australia, 2024) (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2021 [1]) (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2021 [2]). Further research shows that youth homelessness and housing insecurity is driven by issues including insufficient public, social and affordable housing supply, high rental costs, inadequate income support for renters, limited availability of youth-specific services and accommodation and systemic barriers such as poverty, violence and discrimination including racism, sexism, LGBTQIA+ discrimination, ableism and Indigenous discrimination (Parliament of Australia, 2021) (Homelessness Australia, 2024) (ACT Government, 2018). Contributing factors also include gaps in support for young people transitioning between or to and from institutions (out-of-home care, prison, hospitals, rehabilitation, etc.), escaping family, domestic or sexual violence, using alcohol and other drugs, experiencing unemployment or job insecurity and young people with low educational attainment or previous experience of homelessness (Parliament of Australia, 2021).

While ACT Government-funded initiatives—such as the Youth Housing Support Service, Ruby's Place, and other programs targeting youth homelessness—provide outreach and transitional support to young people aged 15 to 25 who are homeless or at risk of homelessness in the ACT, young people reported that demand for these services often exceeds supply. As a result, many young people are left without timely access to support or stable accommodation (Marymead CatholicCare, n.d.; ACT Youth Coalition, 2018). Services like OneLink also act as central referral points, yet bottlenecks and limited capacity across the sector persist.

Council is concerned that there may be a lack of any funded crisis accommodation—such as immediate or refuge-style housing—for young people aged 12 to 15 who are homeless or at risk. Outside of statutory services operated by the Office for Children, Youth and Family Support (OCYFS) or child protection services, Council is not aware of any age-appropriate, dedicated emergency housing options available for this younger cohort in the ACT. This creates a significant service gap for vulnerable early adolescents in critical need of safe, immediate, short-term accommodation and support. Leaving a highly vulnerable cohort of young people unsafe, insecure and unable to escape a culture and lifestyle that can adversely impact their lives (ACT Youth Coalition, 2018).

Moreover, despite efforts by the ACT Government to increase housing diversity through reforms like the 'Missing Middle' Housing Reforms, Council believes that there remains a distinct gap in housing options that specifically meet the needs of youth, including emergency crisis housing for young people experiencing or at risk of homelessness (especially those aged 12 - 15), young people transitioning to independence and

youth from minority backgrounds such as young people with disability who require accessible housing. Addressing these issues requires a holistic and coordinated approach that combines policy reform, increased investment in youth-specific support and accommodation and homelessness early intervention and prevention to ensure that all young people in the ACT have access to safe, secure and affordable housing.

Without comprehensive education in these areas, young people especially from minority communities can struggle to make informed housing decisions, potentially facing financial stress or unstable living situations. And with limited income, they are unable to seek support from professionals thus feeling trapped in the situations they might be in. This is exacerbated by lack of policy or guidelines holding support and housing organisations accountable leaving young people very vulnerable.

“There is a lack of exposure and understating of housing issues faced by young people” ACT Youth Assembly Participant



“Young people need to be more educated on housing topics, like rental agreements, your rights as a tenant and things like that” ACT Youth Assembly Participant

Lack of Housing Knowledge and Skills: Many young people lack the necessary knowledge about budgeting, rental agreements and tenant rights, making it harder for them to secure and maintain housing.

High Rental Costs: Expensive rental prices in Australia are a major barrier for young people trying to access stable and affordable housing.

Discrimination in the Housing Market: Young renters often face discrimination based on age, income or lack of rental history, which limits their housing options. The Refugee Council highlights that this can be worse if they have communication barriers like not being able to speak English well. Situations can also escalate if they are manipulated to sign illegal or unfair leasing agreements severely affecting tenants.

Limited Financial Literacy: Poor financial literacy among young people can lead to difficulties in managing money and meeting housing costs.

Insufficient Access to Support Services: Although programs like the National Rental Affordability Scheme (NRAS) exist, many young people are unaware of or unable to access available housing support and advocacy services.

Lack of Adequate Housing and Housing Policies: Though affordable housing is a human right under Article 25 of the United Nations Declaration of Human rights, it is a common trend among lower income suburbs to see tenants enter and leave housing frequently. This is due to the fact housing in these areas is not always up to standard with regulations. Many of these young tenants are not making enough to rent at a higher cost, thus settling for these lower income households. This is why when they start earning more, a lot of young people will migrate to better suburbs. With a lack of strong policy holding landlords accountable, this cycle continues. After a while we have more people without housing as they are constantly looking for something better.

Key Findings

Key finding 1 - COMMUNICATION:

Communication is an important area in housing, especially how young people can learn/know/understand their rights and relevant information. During the forum session, it was found that young people had problems with the way certain means of communications were or were not reaching young people regarding housing. This included the stigmatisation of people in social housing and low-income brackets, the lack of communication between schools, services and young people on housing issues, difficulties in understanding how to find appropriate share housing options and the prevalence of the international community and corporations in media, disallowing for young people to get a clear picture on issues in Australia. Communication is a very important aspect of housing for young people.

Key finding 2 - EDUCATION:

Education is another important aspect of housing for young people. During the forum session, it was found that young people were not satisfied with the amount of housing education and housing themed topics available for them to learn about in schools. This included a lack of education on social housing and multiculturalism, particularly in relation to the 'not in my backyard' (NIMBYism) movement, as well as limited discussion of financial and housing literacy and access to legal aid. Participants also noted a lack of engagement, education and exposure to housing issues in youth spaces after primary school. This demonstrates the importance of housing education for young people and their desire for these topics to be discussed more widely in youth spaces.

Key finding 3 - LEGISLATION:

Legislation is a critical aspect of housing for young people. This aspect was widely discussed during the forum, as young people highlighted its importance in understanding their rights as tenants and future homeowners. Key issues raised included concerns that landlords may act unethically - taking advantage of young peoples' limited legal knowledge - and that current legislation does not adequately protect tenant rights. Young people also identified gaps in access to the court system, noting that legal processes are often complex and costly.

Zoning laws were a particular concern. Participants felt that existing zoning restrictions prevent full use of land for multiple dwellings, limiting available housing options. Increased housing supply, they emphasised, should include more accessible, affordable and long-term housing, along with more diverse housing density to reflect the needs of young people. Overall, young people see legislative reform as essential to achieving fairer, more inclusive housing outcomes and have clearly identified areas that require change.

Mega density social housing entrances inequality, creating ghettos and stigma, so we should avoid this” ACT Youth Assembly Participant

Recommendations

Recommendation 1: The ACT Government to develop a centralised, user-friendly website that provides young people with up-to-date housing information, tenant rights education and a safe platform to find suitable roommates for shared housing. The website should be promoted toward young people through a targeted digital and traditional campaign.

Recommendation 2: The ACT Education Directorate to implement robust initiatives to incorporate housing education within the curriculum for post-primary school students and establish initiatives that connect young people to local services dedicated to providing housing support and guidance.

Recommendation 3: The ACT Government to update zoning laws to allow for increased housing supply, improve protections for renters and involve young people when making changes to legislation. Increased housing supply should include more accessible, affordable and long-term housing and more diverse housing density.

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