



Legislative Assembly for the
Australian Capital Territory

Standing Committee on Transport
and City Services

Submission Cover Sheet

Inquiry into the provision of municipal services in Canberra

Submission number: 020

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Standing Committee on Transport and City Services
ACT Legislative Assembly
Email to: LACommitteeTransport@parliament.act.gov.au

12 December 2025

Dear Committee,

Inquiry into the provision of municipal services in Canberra

The ACT Human Rights Commission (**the Commission**) welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to this Inquiry into the provision of municipal services in Canberra.

1. About the ACT Human Rights Commission

The Commission is an independent agency established by the *Human Rights Commission Act (ACT) 2005*. Its main object is to promote the human rights and welfare of people in the ACT. The current composition of the Commission includes four Commissioners, who are each independent and who each hold multiple jurisdictional mandates. This submission comes from the Human Rights Commissioner, Dr Penelope Mathew, to bring to the Committee's attention the relevance of the newly protected right to a clean, healthy and sustainable environment in the *Human Rights Act 2004* (the Human Rights Act), which took effect from 17 March 2025.

Relevantly, the Human Rights Commissioner is undertaking a series of reviews on the effect of ACT laws, policy and practices of relevant ACT public authorities on the human right to a clean, healthy and sustainable environment. These reviews will be aimed at engaging and educating public authorities and the community about the new right to a healthy environment and how to fully realise the right. More information on this series of reviews, including the Terms of Reference for the first review may be found here: <https://www.hrc.act.gov.au/humanrights/review-right-to-a-healthy-environment>

2. The right to a clean, healthy and sustainable environment

The provision of municipal services is integral to realising the right to a clean, healthy, and sustainable environment as recognised in section 27C of the Human Rights Act, which states:

- (1) Everyone has the right to a clean, healthy and sustainable environment.
- (2) Everyone is entitled to enjoy this right without discrimination.

Section 27C is based on the United Nations General Assembly's 2022 recognition of the right to a clean, healthy and sustainable environment (resolution 76/300). There have since been authoritative rulings by the Inter-American Court of Human rights, in May 2025, and the International Court of Justice, in July 2025, confirming the right is an integral part of international human rights law and fundamental for the enjoyment of other rights, including the rights to life and health. Clarifying the specific scope and content of the right is ongoing, as in the case for all human rights. More detailed information about the right and its scope may be found here: <https://www.hrc.act.gov.au/humanrights/rights-protected-in-the-act/right-to-a-healthy-environment>

3. Provision of municipal services in Canberra

Municipal services directly influence air quality, public health, and equitable access to green spaces, all of which are relevant to the right to a clean, healthy and sustainable environment.

(a) Public spaces and active travel infrastructure: Well-maintained public spaces and accessible active travel infrastructure are essential for community health and environmental sustainability. Parks, playgrounds, and walking or cycling paths encourage physical activity and foster social inclusion and adequate active travel infrastructure reduces reliance on motor vehicles. Unequal distribution of these amenities can exacerbate health disparities and limit opportunities for low-emission transport. We invite the inquiry to carefully consider the relevant planning benchmarks to ensure there is equity across all suburbs for the consideration, planning and development of safe, green, and connected spaces with effective active travel infrastructure.

(b) Waste management and pollution control: Effective waste removal services are critical to preventing pollution and safeguarding public health. Overflowing bins, illegal dumping, and inadequate recycling infrastructure can lead to soil and water contamination, attract pests, and diminish community amenity. We invite this inquiry to consider:

- the current monitoring and enforcement mechanisms for the regulation of pollution;
- the potential for the expansion of organic waste collection, and
- how government can invest in further opportunities in circular economy initiatives to reduce landfill dependency.

These matters align with the obligation to minimise environmental harm and promote sustainable resource use.

(c) Benchmarking and accountability: Benchmarking against comparable jurisdictions is vital for continuous improvement. Indicators should include KPIs for service efficiency but also environmental outcomes, e.g. reductions in unlawful graffiti, uptake of active travel opportunities, etc. Ensuring there is public reporting on these metrics will contribute to transparency, promote accountability and empowers residents to engage in evidence-based dialogue about municipal priorities. Access to information and public participation in government decision making are crucial aspects to protecting and fulfilling human rights.

Municipal services are more than operational necessities; they are foundational to the enjoyment of a healthy environment. By embedding human rights principles into service delivery, the ACT can lead nationally in creating cities that are clean, green, and inclusive. The Human Rights Commissioner urges the Committee to recommend policies that explicitly link municipal service standards to environmental health outcomes and human rights obligations.

Yours sincerely

Dr Penelope Mathew
President and Human Rights Commissioner