

ACT BUDGET SUBMISSION 2021-22

June 2021

Introduction

National Seniors is the leading consumer lobby group for older Australians and the fourth largest organisation of its type in the world.

This submission contains recommendations to the ACT government on issues of concern for ACT seniors. The recommendations were formulated by the ACT Policy Advisory Group, based on consultations with members of National Seniors' ACT branch members.

National Seniors' ACT Policy Advisory Group plays a key role in identifying important topics and emerging issues affecting the over-50s throughout the ACT. It acts on behalf of National Seniors Australia as a conduit between our ACT based members and the ACT government.

Aside from regular contributions to the ACT Budget process, National Seniors has regularly engaged in consultations and has provided feedback to government to inform legislative review processes.

National Seniors wishes to commend the ACT Government for its ongoing commitment to consulting seniors and its subsequent implementation of reforms. We hope that the following recommendations will be carefully considered for the next ACT Budget.

Key Recommendations

Essential Services

1. Make Canberra safe, secure and rubbish free for seniors. Increase suburb maintenance and safety by repairing hazardous foot paths and nature strips, mowing long grass, lopping overhanging trees.
2. Provide paper options for administrative work without cost to seniors who do not have internet access or smart phones.
3. Ensure government agencies respond in person to telephone enquiries in a timely manner.
4. Assist seniors in making Wills and Powers of Attorney documents.

Social inclusion

5. Provide more seating for elderly people in public places such as shopping centres.

Housing

6. Provide more housing support for homeless seniors.
7. Renovate and restore public housing with adequate standards for handicapped and elderly access.
8. Assist seniors to stay in their own homes by making grants to upgrade homes for accessibility and usability.

Aged Care

9. Ensure the building of aged care accommodation in Gunghalin by facilitating the Lend Lease proposal for Gold Creek.

Transport

10. Provide more buses and bus stops to service retirement villages and aged care accommodation.
11. Increase parking near service buildings and shopping centers for elderly and people with a disability.

Health

12. Cut waiting times for elective surgery.
13. Double the size of the Canberra Hospital Emergency Department to reduce waiting times.

Substantive Issues

Essential Services

- 1. Make Canberra safe, secure and rubbish free for seniors. Increase suburb maintenance and safety by repairing hazardous foot paths and nature strips, mowing long grass, lopping overhanging trees (see attached for detail)**

Essential services are the daily services that can have significant impact on an older person's daily life – from the ability to walk confidently along a safe and even foot path to the ability to complete administrative tasks in a progressively online world – these are the simply yet forgotten necessities and rights that seniors in the ACT are calling for.

Older people in the ACT are increasingly concerned about the deteriorating state of the capital. The amount of rubbish lining roads, the unkempt nature of many grassy areas and ovals, the appalling squalor in the city centre, the lack of road, footpath and tree maintenance are just a few of the signs of neglect.

Government must institute a program of cleaning up our city and funding this appropriately or set up a partnership with organisations or citizens to get this done. There needs to be a major effort to resurface and mend pathways that are increasingly being used by seniors on mobility vehicles. In some instances, there are no footpaths at all, posing safety issues for all ages.

- 2. Provide paper options for administrative work without cost to seniors who do not have internet access or smart phones**

Older people in the ACT are also concerned and frustrated with the lack of paper-based options for necessary administrative tasks such as completing forms, paying for bills and sending and receiving communications – all of which increasingly require online access and skills which many seniors do not have for a number of reasons including cost, fear and lack of confidence, difficulties reading small screens and difficulties using small devices with sometimes arthritic fingers, as well as difficulty with keeping track of pins and passwords.

Providing paper-based options doesn't require the introduction of a new process. It is simply continuing an existing process for the many seniors who would otherwise struggle or be unable to complete essential daily tasks, resulting in potentially life-changing circumstances. And, while it may be more cost efficient from an economic perspective to go 'online only' such changes are at the literal and emotional cost of older people who are asking only to be able to do what they have always done.

3. Ensure government agencies respond in person to telephone enquiries in a timely manner.

Alongside paper-based options are telephone options. Older people in the ACT would like to see telephone enquiries responded to in a timely manner, helping to not only reduce wait times but to limit potential anxiety, uncertainty and frustration that comes from having to wait or to be on hold for an extended period of time.

4. Assist seniors in making wills and powers of attorney.

The importance of estate planning including making wills and nominating powers of attorney is well known yet the complexities and legalities around making such arrangements can often be daunting and difficult for older people. The sensitivities around these arrangements also mean some older people may not want to call on the assistance of family members or friends, and are therefore forced to navigate these arrangements on their own resulting in these arrangements being made in a untimely manner, or never at all.

Social inclusion

5. Provide more seating for elderly people in public places such as shopping centre

“Lack of seating is said to prevent older people from shopping more, reduces their ability to exercise, and is bad for older people’s wellbeing.”¹

Insufficient seating in public places around the ACT such as shopping centres, parks and walkways is a growing concern for older Australians in the ACT as it limits accessibility which can in turn have negative consequences on physical and mental wellbeing. Older people in need of more seating can feel apprehensive about simple everyday acts such as shopping or going for a walk. What should be enjoyable outings become outings met with fear and worry that their destination will not be able to accommodate their needs.

The provision of more seating for older people in public places would make a significant difference to the experience and enjoyment of those who struggle to use these venues and areas because of physical impairments that come with older age such as reduced muscle mass, strength and endurance. Good seating may encourage older people to get ‘out and about’ more and to take-up exercise (walking for example) as they know there will be a place to rest. The benefits of physical activity at all stages of life, particularly in the later

¹ Anchor Hanover 2021. *Standing Up 4 Sitting Down* Accessed online 15 June 2021.
<https://www.anchorhanover.org.uk/media/campaigns-and-research/standing-up-4-sitting-down>

years, is well known and any initiative to help encourage older people to become or remain active should be supported.

Good seating also encourages social inclusion and connection. A good place to sit can promote rest, conversation and connection. Again, the benefits of social connections and physical exercise are well known and again, any initiative to help encourage older people to become or remain connected should be supported.

Housing

6. Provide more housing support for homeless seniors

National Seniors is concerned that housing is becoming too expensive for seniors with a limited number of affordable housing options for those unable to meet the costs of the private market. Despite talk of a slowdown in the housing market, housing costs continue to increase in the ACT. According to CPI data, rents increased by 3.2 percent, well above the national increase of 0.4 per cent in the year to June 2019².

The supply of private housing for people on low incomes is limited. An Anglicare Australia report has shown, for example, that for single people on the Aged Pension there was just over one percent of properties that were affordable and suitable from a sample of 67,000 available across Australia³.

National Seniors made a submission to the Housing Choices consultation calling on government to promote housing options that are more suitable to older people⁴. We raised concerns that seniors wanted different housing options available to the ones that were currently provided. Seniors value a wider choice of downsizing options that suit their diverse situations. Not every senior downsizing from a larger detached dwelling wants to live in a high-rise apartment, retirement village or seniors' lifestyle village. The ACT Government should encourage the development of single storey dual occupancy dwellings in low-density residential areas and mandate the use of universal or accessible housing design principles in all new dwellings.

² ABS, Consumer Price Index, Australia, June 2019, cat. no. 6401.0, Table 10, CPI: Group, Subgroup and Expenditure Class, Percentage change from corresponding quarter of previous year by Capital City, Data 5, 6, ABS, Canberra, 2018

³ Anglicare Australia 2018. 'Rental Affordability Snapshot 2018.' Anglicare Australia: Canberra.

⁴ National Seniors Australia 2018. *Submission to the ACT Housing Choices consultation*. National Seniors Australia: Brisbane

Demand for crisis housing for seniors is becoming a real issue for the ACT. Demand will increase as the population ages and living costs rise. Innovative solutions for crises housing are needed to meet this growing demand. Immediate action is required to ensure that older people in Canberra are not living rough on the streets.

7. Renovate and restore public housing with adequate standards for handicapped and elderly access.

The social housing portfolio caters to many tenants over the age of 65 (26%), or households living with disability (29%). Homes with high standards of accessibility and adaptability give individuals the option to age in place and better support people living with a disability and those who care for them. (ACT Housing Strategy Growing and Renewing Public Housing.⁵

While the ACT Government's ten year investment of more than \$1 billion into the public housing sector (including the commitment to build more homes to adaptable building standards) is to be applauded, an investment into accessible design features that provide greater access and safety for existing public housing for people with mobility issues or a disability is also urged. Without accessible design features, these groups can find access more difficult and, in some cases, dangerous.

Renovations to existing houses such as a step free entrance door, wider internal doorways to allow wheelchairs and a toilet at entry level (the new minimum accessibility standards for new homes in the National Construction Code (NCC)) would align with the work of the ACT Housing Strategy which aims to "deliver the right mix of homes across Canberra as part of a diverse portfolio to provide more choice for those in need, regardless of their circumstances or *abilities*."⁶

8. Assist seniors to stay in their own homes by making grants to upgrade homes for accessibility and usability.

When responding to the recommendations in the Royal Commission into Aged Care Quality and Safety in February this year, Prime Minister Scott Morrison declared 'the future of aged care will be provided in homes, not in facilities.'

While much has been made about the importance of adequate home care packages and qualified home care staff to help make this possible, the need for home modification and

⁵ ACT Government 2019. *ACT Housing Strategy Growing and Renewing Public Housing* (<https://www.communityservices.act.gov.au/hcs/act-housing-strategy-growing-and-renewing-public-housing-2019-2024>)

⁶ ACT Government 2019. *ACT Housing Strategy Growing and Renewing Public Housing* (<https://www.communityservices.act.gov.au/hcs/act-housing-strategy-growing-and-renewing-public-housing-2019-2024>)

upgrades to make this a reality has gone almost unspoken. Upgrades that meet basic accessibility standards such as a step free entrance door, wider internal doorways to allow wheelchairs and a toilet at entry level (again, the new minimum accessibility standards for new homes in the National Construction Code (NCC)) would go a long way to help enable the ageing population in the ACT to 'age in place' (at home) rather than in an aged care facility, as they wish and as they deserve. Such upgrades would come at a cost to the homeowner and it is proposed this cost be funded or partly funded through some form of government grants.

Aged Care

9. Ensure the building of aged care accommodation in Gunghalin by facilitating the Lend Lease proposal for Gold Creek.

Following a nationally advertised sale process, the Gold Creek community was pleased to learn of Lendlease's tender win and with it a commitment to transform the homestead into an intergenerational precinct that would provide much needed support to the area's ageing population including independent living retirement homes and an aged care facility while also restoring its heritage. Months after the March announcement, the community is waiting for news on the design of the precinct masterplan which according to news reports will involve progressive community and stakeholder consultation.

Transport

10. Provide more buses and bus stops to service retirement villages and aged care accommodation.

Availability of public transport within the reach of people's homes and destinations, with service times and frequencies meeting their requirements, is essential where older people are dependent on bus travel⁷

⁷ Shrestha, B. P., Millonig, A., Hounsell, N. B. and McDonald, M. 2017. 'Review of Public Transport Needs of Older People in European Context' in *Journal of Population Ageing*. 10, pp. 343–361.
<https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s12062-016-9168-9>

Public transport plays a crucial role in maintaining an active lifestyle when people are unable to drive. Ceasing to drive provides a major challenge for many older people as it is often linked to emotional factors like fear of loss of personal freedom.⁸

For many ACT residents living in retirement villages who cannot drive or prefer not to drive, buses (accessibility and frequency) are an important means of transport. While the purpose of trips varies, they often include essential medical and allied health-related trips. The freedom, independence and flexibility increased bus services would provide to residents living in retirement communities would help to keep older people engaged in their activities and connected to their community.

Increased bus stops and bus services to retirement villages *as well as aged care facilities* would not only benefit residents but also their visitors, many of whom are often partners of residents.

11. Increase parking near service buildings and shopping centers for elderly and people with a disability.

Lack of seniors parking and disabled parking near service centres and in shopping centres are of great concern for a growing number of older people in the ACT. Lack of parking and the need to walk beyond their physical capabilities while navigating traffic (even in a carpark) can be daunting and dangerous and may prevent older people from doing what they need or want to do. Again, limiting social connections and impacting mental wellbeing.

The number of accessible parking spaces required in a shopping centre is determined by the Building Code of Australia (BCA) and other regulations. In the ACT, the ratio of accessible space to total spaces is 3%. No dedicated spaces are required if the car park has 5 spaces or less.⁹

Older people in the ACT would like to see this ratio increased to better accommodate the older patronage of these centres.

⁸ van den Berg, P., Kemperman, A., de Kleijn Boy and Borgers A. 2016. 'Ageing and loneliness: the role of mobility and the built environment' in *Travel Behav. Soc.* 5 pp. 48-56; Musselwhite, C and Haddad, H.. (2010). Exploring older drivers' perceptions of driving. *European Journal of Ageing*. 7. 181-188; and Musselwhite, C. B. A. and Shergold, I. 2012. 'Examining the process of driving cessation in later life' *European Journal of Ageing* 10, 2, June 2012
https://www.researchgate.net/publication/257505394_Examining_the_process_of_driving_cessation_in_late_r_life

⁹ Design for Dignity 2021. Guidance on premises Accessed online 21 June 2021
<https://designfordignity.com.au/retail-guidelines/dfd-06-05-car-parking.html>

Health

12. Cut waiting times for elective surgery

National Seniors members continue to be frustrated by problems within the hospital and health care system, namely waiting times in the public system. The health care system is not meeting increasing needs. There is a clear need to boost funding for both elective surgery and for emergency services to meet long wait times.

Waiting times for elective surgery remain too long. As Figure 1 shows, the percentage of elective surgeries performed within the recommended time in the ACT was lower than for New South Wales (NSW) hospitals in 2017-18. As Figure 2 shows, this translated into significantly longer wait times for elective surgery in the ACT compared to NSW in 2017-18.

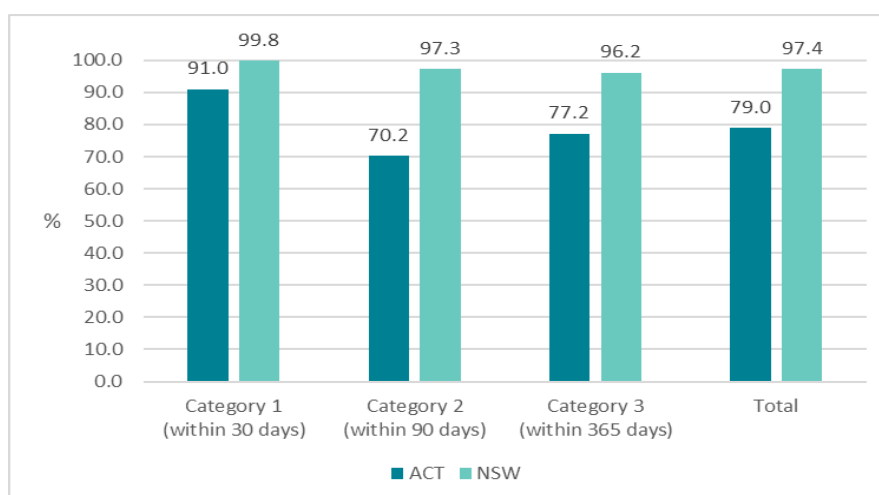


Figure 1: Proportion of patients admitted within the clinically recommended time by clinical urgency category ACT versus NSW 2017-18¹⁰

¹⁰ AIHW 2018 *Elective surgery waiting times 2017-18: Australian hospital statistics*
<https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/hospitals/elective-surgery-waiting-times-2017-18/data>

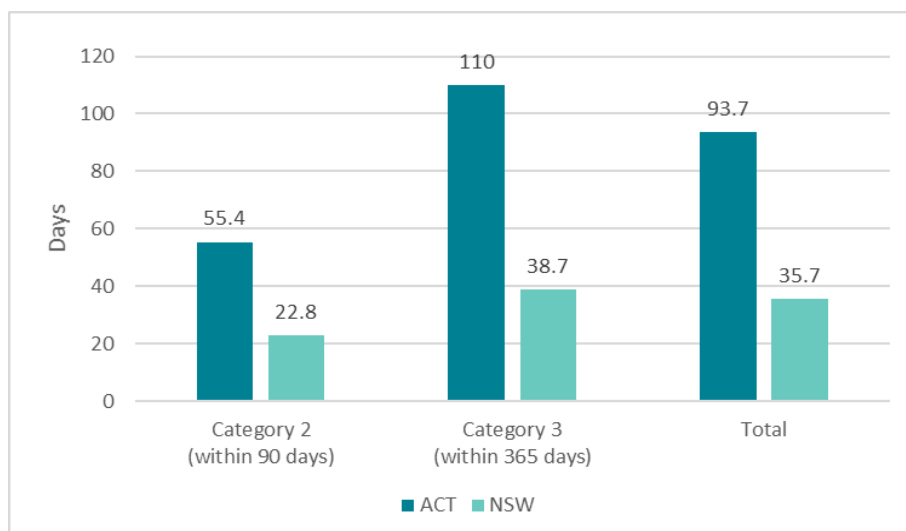


Figure 2: Average overdue elective surgery wait time (days), ACT versus NSW 2017-18¹¹

13. Double the size of the Canberra Hospital Emergency Department to reduce waiting times

The situation with regards to waiting times in emergency also requires urgent attention. Currently, the ACT is one of the poorest performing states or territories with regards to emergency waiting times. As Figure 3 shows, median waiting times in emergency in 2017-18 were 46 minutes in the ACT compared to only 15 minutes in NSW. As the graph shows, NSW has a relatively consistent median waiting time over the past few years compared to the ACT.

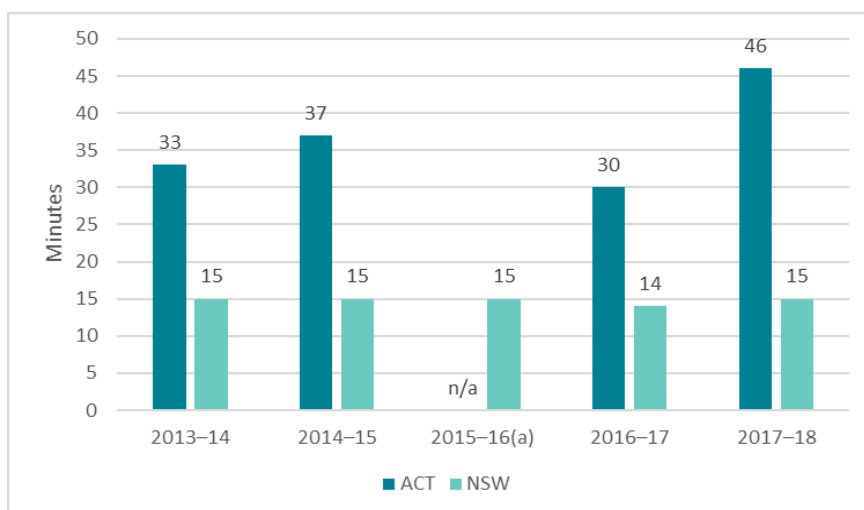


Figure 3: Median waiting time in emergency (minutes), ACT versus NSW 2013-14 to 2017-18¹²

¹¹ AIHW 2018 *Elective surgery waiting times 2017-18: Australian hospital statistics*
<https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/hospitals/elective-surgery-waiting-times-2017-18/data>

As Figure 4 also shows, the proportion of patients being seen on time in emergency in the ACT is much lower compared to NSW. In NSW the proportion seen on time is consistently high at 80 to 81 per cent compared to the ACT, which recorded its worst figures in 2017-18 of only 49 per cent of patients seen on time.

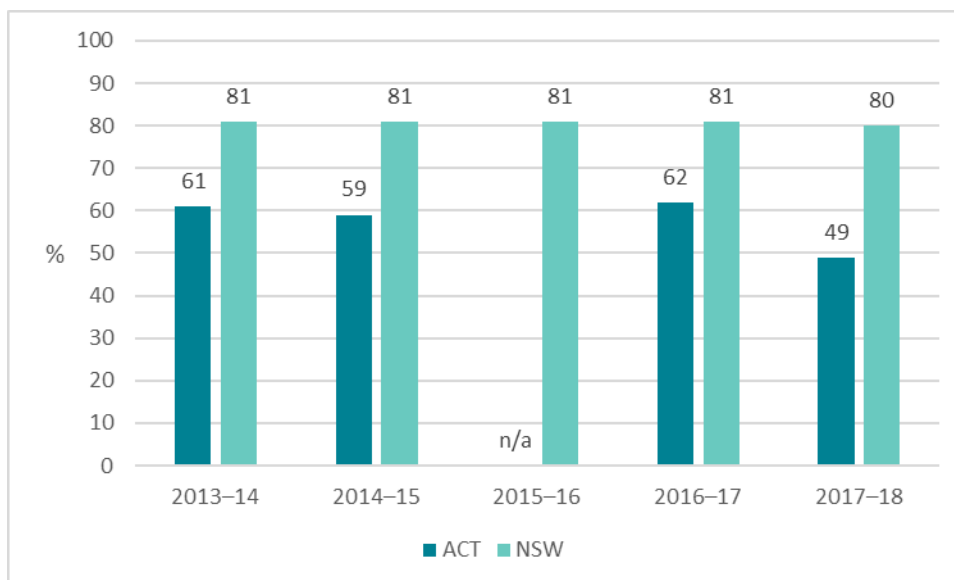


Figure 4: Proportion of emergency patients seen on time (%), ACT versus NSW 2013-14 to 2017-18¹³

¹² AIHW 2018 *Emergency department care 2017-18: Australian hospital statistics*
<https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/hospitals/emergency-department-care-2017-18/data>

¹³ AIHW 2018 *Emergency department care 2017-18: Australian hospital statistics*
<https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/hospitals/emergency-department-care-2017-18/data>

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