



Submission to the ACT Budget 2018-19

October 2017

About National Seniors Australia

National Seniors Australia is a not-for-profit organisation that gives voice to issues that affect Australians aged 50 years and over. It is the largest membership organisation of its type in Australia with around 200,000 members and is the fourth largest in the world.

We give our members a voice – we listen and represent our members' views to governments, business and the community on the issues of concern to the over 50s.

We keep our members informed – by providing news and information to our members through our Australia-wide branch network, comprehensive website, forums and meetings, bi-monthly lifestyle magazine and weekly e-newsletter.

We provide a world of opportunity – we offer members the chance to use their expertise, skills and life experience to make a difference by volunteering and making a difference to the lives of others.

We help our members save – we offer member rewards with discounts from thousands of businesses across Australia. We also offer exclusive travel discounts and more tours designed for the over 50s and provide our members with affordable, quality insurance to suit their needs.

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Introduction

National Seniors' ACT Australian Policy Advisory Group plays a key role in identifying important topics and emerging issues affecting the over-50s throughout the State/Territory. It acts as a conduit between National Seniors members within the State/Territory, relevant community organisations and the ACT government.

These budget priorities were formulated based on consultations with members of National Seniors' branches and with individual members in the ACT.

Essential Services

- 1. The ACT Government should work collaboratively with the Commonwealth Government to put downward pressure on gas and electricity prices.**
- 2. The ACT Government should provide concessions for gas, electricity and water which reflect changes in the cost of these services.**

Seniors are suffering because of ongoing increases in the price of electricity, gas and water. Electricity prices have risen by almost 20 per cent in the ACT at the start of the financial year.

Bill shock is a real concern for seniors. Large increases in everyday living costs put great stress on seniors' budgets, particularly those who rely solely on the full Age Pension.

The rapidly increasing cost of energy is exacerbated by significant increases in rates. National Seniors members have expressed a concern about the large increase in rates for units for example.

It is imperative the ACT Government finds ways to reduce the cost of essential services. The ACT Government should work with the Commonwealth to do this where there is overlapping responsibility, such as with electricity.

Where there are concessions or rebates provided for essential services, National Seniors believes that the value of these concessions should change to reflect changes in their cost. Not only does this ensure that concessions are adequate but this also ensures that government maintains an active role in placing downward pressure on prices because it has a financial interest in doing so.

Housing

- 3. The ACT Government should strengthen regulations governing retirement villages by passing revisions to the Retirement Villages Act 2012. This should include a requirement that owners to provide detailed budgets to residents. The ACT Government should also:**
 - a. enforce penalties for breaches of regulations;**
 - b. set up procedures to combat elder abuse in retirement villages;**
 - c. fund an appropriate agency to carry out the above.**
- 4. The ACT Government should provide financial incentives to seniors who wish to downsize, such as exemptions or discounts on stamp duty.**
- 5. The ACT Government should mandate the use of universal design principles in any new seniors housing and ensure that seniors housing is in areas with appropriate services.**

National Seniors supports the full implementation of recommendations from the recent review of the Retirement Villages Act 2012. National Seniors would like to see the regulations strengthened by the inclusion of requirements for owners to provide detailed budgets to residents.

We would also like to see the enforcement of penalties where there has been a breach of the regulations as well as the introduction of procedures to combat elder abuse in retirement villages.

As argued in our submission to the review of the retirement village legislation, National Seniors believes that an agency with sufficient powers is required to better protect the interests of retirement village residents.

Ultimately, National Seniors believes that retirement village legislation across Australia should be harmonised to ensure that protections for seniors are consistent.

National Seniors is also concerned about the lack of opportunities or incentives to downsize in the ACT. It is imperative that there is an adequate supply of housing for seniors wishing to downsize into more age-appropriate accommodation.

This may require the use of incentives to encourage seniors to downsize, such as offering stamp duty concessions to those moving to a more appropriate dwelling.

Furthermore, it is vital that land for seniors housing be released in areas close to shops, medical facilities and public transport so that it is suitable for resident's needs.

Public services

- 6. The ACT Government should provide professional development opportunities to train front line staff to deal appropriately with older citizens.**
- 7. The ACT Government should continue to offer offline access when services are moved online and assist seniors to make use of online services.**

Seniors must be treated respectfully and should not be subjected to behavior that demeans or discriminates against them as citizens. National Seniors members have shared with us experiences where they feel that public servants have acted in ways that reflect poorly on the government. In some instances, for example, our members have felt that they have been talked down to in a manner that is unacceptable.

The ACT Government has a responsibility to ensure that all staff deal with seniors in a professional manner. It should put in place training and protocols that ensure that older citizens are treated the same as any other citizen.

Seniors should also not be disadvantaged by changes to service delivery methods as more and more services are moved online to realise cost savings. The movement of transactions online, severely disadvantages seniors who do not own computers and/or do not have the digital literacy skills to meet often complex departmental requirements.

According to recent surveys, some 21 per cent of people aged 65 and over have never accessed the internet. Among those 80 and over, the proportion who have never accessed the internet was 42 per cent¹.

Paper based options should continue to be available in the foreseeable future to ensure that seniors with poor digital literacy skills and limited access to appropriate internet friendly technology are not disadvantaged.

¹ ACMA 2017. 'Digital lives of older Australians' 4 August 2016 <https://www.acma.gov.au/theACMA/engage-blogs/engage-blogs/Research-snapshots/Digital-lives-of-older-Australians>

Environment

8. The ACT Government should ensure that the appearance of Canberra streetscapes suitably reflect its importance as the nation's capital

9. ACT Government should roll out the Green Bin Pilot throughout the ACT

National Seniors is very supportive of efforts to enhance the aesthetic quality of the ACT. As the nation's capital, it is vital that the features of the built and natural environment showcase Australia to the world.

National Seniors would also like to see greater resources directed towards activities that enhance the quality of Canberra's streetscapes. This should include such activities as repairs to footpaths and improved footpath lighting, among others.

National Seniors also supports the full roll out of the green bin pilot as a means of assisting residents to help keep yards and streets neat and beautiful.

Not only will this make it easier for seniors to keep their yards and streets beautiful it also provides a means of generating mulch for garden use which contributes to important environmental outcomes, such as water conservation.