

ACT BUDGET SUBMISSION 2023-24

April 2023

Introduction

National Seniors is the leading consumer lobby group for older Australians.

This submission contains recommendations to the ACT government on issues of concern for ACT seniors. The recommendations were developed 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 implementation of reforms. We hope the following recommendations will be carefully considered for the next ACT Budget.

Key Recommendations

Essential Services

1. Make Canberra safe, secure and rubbish free. 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.

Housing

3. Provide more housing support for homeless seniors.
4. Create better housing options suitable for older people downsizing, including single story dual occupancy dwellings or townhouses.
5. Assist seniors to stay in their own homes with grants to improve accessibility.
6. Strengthen retirement village legislation, appoint a retirement village ombudsman, and work with federal and state governments to enact nationally consistent legislation.

Transport

7. Extend free public transport for seniors and lower the qualifying age to 65.
8. Provide more buses and bus stops to service retirement villages and aged care accommodation.
9. Increase parking near service buildings and shopping centers for elderly and people with disabilities.

Health

10. Cut waiting times for elective surgery.
11. Double Canberra Hospital Emergency Department capacity to reduce waiting times.
12. Support GP clinics so patients can make more timely appointments.

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.**

Urban infrastructure can have significant impact on an older person's daily life – giving older people the confidence to safely get out and about in their community.

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

National Seniors Australia welcomes the ACT Transport Strategy 2020 that includes plans for high quality footpaths, seating to allow rest stops for older people, safe opportunities to cross roads and clear walking priorities at intersections.

We again request the ACT Government to be mindful of the specific needs of seniors when completing these upgrades, such as resurfacing and mending footpaths to ensure the footpaths are suitable and safe for people with mobility impairments and those using mobility scooters.

We expect the ACT Government will follow through with these and other commitments to truly “meet the diverse needs of all Canberrans with high-quality customer experience and accessible design”¹ and develop high quality and safer urban environments for the benefit of all community members, including seniors.

- 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 continue to be concerned and frustrated with the lack of paper-based options for necessary administrative tasks, such as completing forms, paying bills and sending and receiving communications. These increasingly require online access and skills, which many seniors do not have for a number of reasons including:

- cost of technology,

¹ [Vision and principles - ACT Transport Strategy](#) [Vision and principles - ACT Transport Strategy](#)

- lack of confidence or skills using technology,
- digital safety,
- difficulties reading small screens,
- difficulties using small devices (with sometimes arthritic fingers) and
- difficulty keeping track of pins and passwords.

Providing paper-based options does not 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.

While it may be more cost efficient from an economic perspective to go 'online only', such changes pose difficulties for older people who need access to paper options.

Housing

3. Provide more housing support for homeless seniors.

The housing crisis Australia wide is dire with lack of social and affordable housing impacting an ever-increasing number of older Australians who rely on rental properties for accommodation. Many have been forced to move into unsuitable or undesirable accommodation, such as residential aged care homes due to financial challenges in the rental market.

A recent report by Anglicare Australia, *The Ageing in Place Report*, revealed 72% of respondents said cost was the biggest barrier to finding or keeping accommodation. The report found nearly half of older renters live in poverty. The typical homeowner aged over 65 spends only five per cent of their income on housing, compared to nearly 30% for renters.²

Anglicare's [2022: Rental Affordability Snapshot](#) also found less than one per cent of the available homes in the private rental market are affordable for people on the Age Pension with . The report found a person on the Age Pension can afford only 0.3% of rentals, many of these are in share houses that may not actually be suitable for an older person. It is

² Anglicare Australia, [Australia-Fair-Ageing-in-Place.pdf \(anglicare.asn.au\)](#)

unacceptable that a growing number of older Australians are forced to live in unaffordable or insecure housing (see Figure 1).³

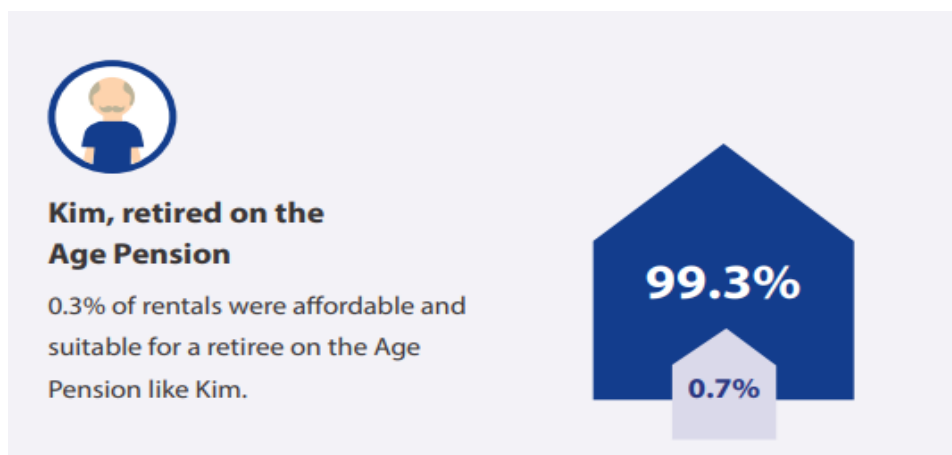


Figure 1: Affordable rental listings

4. Create better housing options suitable for older people downsizing, including single story dual occupancy dwellings or townhouses.

National Seniors made a submission to the Housing Choices consultation calling on government to promote housing options that are more suitable to older people.⁴ 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 could better promote downsizing by encouraging the development of single storey dual occupancy dwellings or town houses in low-density residential areas and mandate the use of universal or accessible housing design principles in all new dwellings.

Older people are one of the fastest growing populations in the ACT and demand for crisis housing will only increase as the population ages and living costs rise. Innovative solutions for crisis housing, for example one level 'motel' style developments are needed to meet this

³ Anglicare Australia, [Rental-Affordability-Snapshot-National-report.pdf \(anglicare.asn.au\)](https://www.anglicare.asn.au/rental-affordability-snapshot-national-report.pdf)

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

growing demand. Immediate action is required to ensure that older people in Canberra live in safe and suitable accommodation.

5. Assist seniors to stay in their own homes with grants to improve accessibility.

When responding to the recommendations in the Royal Commission into Aged Care Quality and Safety, former 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 upgrades to make this a reality has gone almost unspoken. Upgrades that meet basic accessibility standards would go a long way to help enable the ageing population in the ACT to ‘age in place’. Modifications include: a step free entrance door, wider internal doorways for wheelchairs and a toilet at entry level (as is enshrined in the new minimum accessibility standards for new homes under the National Construction Code).

Such upgrades would come at a cost to the homeowner, and it is proposed this cost be partly funded through government grants for those who cannot afford to undertake them.

6. Strengthen retirement village legislation, appoint a retirement village ombudsman, and work with federal and state governments to enact nationally consistent legislation.

While retirement village legislation is a state and territory responsibility, there are common issues across jurisdictions leading to several consistent changes to retirement village laws over time.

Retirement villages have the potential to give older Australians a comfortable lifestyle option, which is more suitable as people age, but this promise has fallen short because the legislation has enabled practices that are detrimental to the financial wellbeing of seniors. It has led National Seniors to promote a strong “buyer beware” approach, which is disappointing given retirement housing could play a stronger role in addressing some factors fuelling the housing crisis.

A large part of our wariness of retirement villages is the lack of transparency regarding contracts, especially with regards to management fees, deferred management fees, entry/exit fees and refurbishment fees. We are especially disappointed with delays in the resale of retirement village properties, resulting in ongoing costs to former residents or residents’ family. This is particularly problematic when a resident is required to enter a residential aged care facility.

We are concerned those who do become residents, may not have fully understood the financial implications of this move. Many jurisdictions have recently introduced time limits for the resale of retirement village units, which National Seniors strongly supports.

- In Queensland, retirement villages legislation was amended to require the payment of exist entitlements within 18 months (it has recently been proposed this is reduced to 12 months).
- In New South Wales, retirement villages must provide a former resident with an exit entitlement within 6 months in metropolitan areas; 12 months in other areas from 1 January 2021.
- In Western Australia, changes to retirement villages legislation will occur, requiring exit entitlements be paid within 12 months. The variance in legislation, affecting all aspects of the retirement village experience, creates unnecessary complexity and inefficiency for both seniors and operators.

We would also like to see the appointment of a Retirement Villages Ombudsman. This would be particularly beneficial for residents when attempts to resolve issues with operators directly have failed and a further avenue of support is required.

The Ombudsman could assist residents with dispute resolutions by explaining why the issue occurred and providing advice on how to respond to the operator. An Ombudsman could also put residents in touch with operators directly to resolve issues when it may have been too difficult or not possible for those conversations to take place without the intervention of an Ombudsman. Again, this position / function would provide a much-needed layer of protection for residents in an industry that is seriously lacking in this regard.

In addition to this, now is the right time for the ACT government to work with state, territory and the federal governments to enact nationally consistent and strengthened retirement village legislation.

The retirement village sector would support such a move as it would reduce the compliance costs and allow operators to deliver projects more easily across state and territory borders.

Transport

7. Extend free public transport for seniors and lower the qualifying age.

National Seniors commends the ACT Government for trialling free off-peak travel for seniors and concession card holders. This not only makes transport more accessible for seniors but also improves access to health and social activities – essential for quality of life and especially important since COVID restrictions have been lifted.

To further improve the ACT Government's initiative, National Seniors calls on the ACT Government to introduce free public transport for seniors at *all* times, *permanently*.

Internationally there is evidence that free public transport results in increased patronage on public transport services (see Figure 2).

Place implementing full free public transport	Impacts	Source
Tallinn, Estonia	Public transport use increased by 14% one year after fare change. There was a 5 percentage point decrease in car use. Average distance travelled by cars increased.	Cats et al (2017, p. 1101) and Grzelec and Jagiello (2020, pp. 5-6)
Hasselt, Belgium	Public transport use increased 10-fold (from a very low base). Most new users had previously travelled by foot or bike or public transport. 16% of new users were from car users (which was probably affected by complementary improvements in services). Free fares were removed in 2013 due to budget pressures. Car ownership was unaffected.	Cats et al (2017, p. 1089); (van Goeverden et al. 2006, pp. 10-11); Grzelec and Jagiello (2020, p. 6); and Fearnley (2013, p. 80)
Dunkirk, France	Bus trips increased by 85% in 2 years (65% during the week and 120% on weekends). Half of new users had moved from cars to bus, and the modal shift from car to bus was 24% (a large effect), but no data on peak hour congestion effects. Impacts were probably increased due to complementary improvements in services.	Figg (2021)
Taichung, Taiwan	The comprehensive shift to free fares from July 2011 led to a about a 20-fold increase in ridership on the 8 km free bus, but service provision was also enhanced so the effects will be conflated. The modal share of cars for transport fell by 0.6 percentage points — though the causal link was not established.	Yeh and Lee (2019, pp. 10, 12)
Templin, Germany	Public transport use increased by more than 10-fold in 3 years. 80% to 90% of new use was from non-car use, mainly walking/cycling. Of the induced demand, 10-20% was from car users. (This is not a 10-20% reduction in total car use.) Templin is also a small town of 14 000 at the time of the scheme's inception — so the results may not generalise well	Cats et al (2017, p. 1090); Storchmann (2003)
Stavanger, Norway	Large increase in public transport use, but substitution was mainly from foot/bike not from cars. 11% took buses only for fun. There was no evidence of reduced car usage (and therefore congestion reductions).	Cats et al. (2017, p. 1087); Fearnley (2013)
Leiden, Netherlands	Bus use on the free routes increased threefold. Of additional users, 45% were from car users. No measurable impact on congestion.	(van Goeverden et al. 2006, pp. 8-9)
Frydek-Mistek (Czechia)	Public transport increased by 81% from 2010 to 2017, but some of this growth would have occurred anyway. 8% of car drivers (in a survey) said they shifted to at least partly to public transport use. But the study found no decrease in traffic flows or congestion. Only some residents were eligible for the free transport passes	Straub (2020, pp. 7-8)

Figure 2: Impacts of Free Fares on Public Transport and Car Use (Source: Productivity Commission)⁵

All states and territories provide public transport concessions to seniors; however, some jurisdictions have moved to offer free travel.

The South Australian Government began offering free public transport for all seniors from 1 July 2022. This came at an estimated cost of only \$1.26 million per year for a city with a population of 1.3 million people – more than four times that of Canberra. It has been

⁵ Productivity Commission 2021. Public Transport Pricing: Research Paper
<https://www.pc.gov.au/research/completed/public-transport/public-transport.pdf>⁵

reported there has been a 40% increase in public transport patronage among seniors in South Australia since the policy has been implemented.⁶

Tasmania implemented a period of free bus travel for all commuters between 28 March and 31 April to alleviate the cost of high fuel prices. The five-week trial of free bus travel was very popular and successful in increasing patronage. It eased cost-of-living pressures and bus patronage increased by 15% (in urban services alone), helping to reduce congestion and emissions.⁷

The primary goals for free public transport for seniors are to reduce cost of living pressures and improve the mobility of older people. This is especially important for people with mobility impairments, who might otherwise find it difficult to access essential services. Encouraging more seniors to use public transport is good policy on these grounds because it will be easier for older people to get where they need to go. If the policy helps to ease congestion and reduce transport emissions at the same time, then this will be an added benefit of the scheme.

Lowering the qualifying age from 70 years-of-age to 65 will improve access for more older Canberrans enabling them to fully participate in society.

8. 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 travel.⁸

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.⁹

⁶ Australian Bus and Coach 2022. "South Australian Seniors Enjoy Free Bus Transport" 1 Sept 2022
<https://www.busnews.com.au/industry-news/2209/south-australian-seniors-enjoy-free-bus-transport>

⁷ Tasmanian Transport [Free public bus travel has ended – Transport Services](#)

⁸ 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>

⁹ 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_later_life

For many ACT residents living in retirement villages who cannot drive or prefer not to drive, accessible and frequent bus services 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.

9. Increase parking near service buildings and shopping centers for elderly and people with disabilities.

Lack of seniors parking and disability 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 carparks) 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.¹⁰

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

Health

10. Cut waiting times for elective surgery.

National Seniors commends the ACT on improved wait times for elective surgery. ACT data for elective surgery waiting times in 2021-22 compared to data for 2020-21 shows an improvement with 5.8% of patients waiting *more than 365* days for elective surgery in 2021-22 compared to 8.9% of patients waiting in 2020-21.

This change has seen the ACT move from the third worst performer in the country to the fourth best with Queensland (at 3.3% of patients waiting more than 365 days) at number

¹⁰ Design for Dignity 2021. Guidance on premises Accessed online 21 June 2021
<https://designfordignity.com.au/retail-guidelines/dfd-06-05-car-parking.html>

one and Tasmania (at 12% of patients waiting more than 365 days) at number eight. (See Figure 3).

National Seniors would like to see waiting times for surgery further improve so the health care system can meet increasing demand. There is still a need to boost funding for both elective surgery and for emergency services to meet wait times.

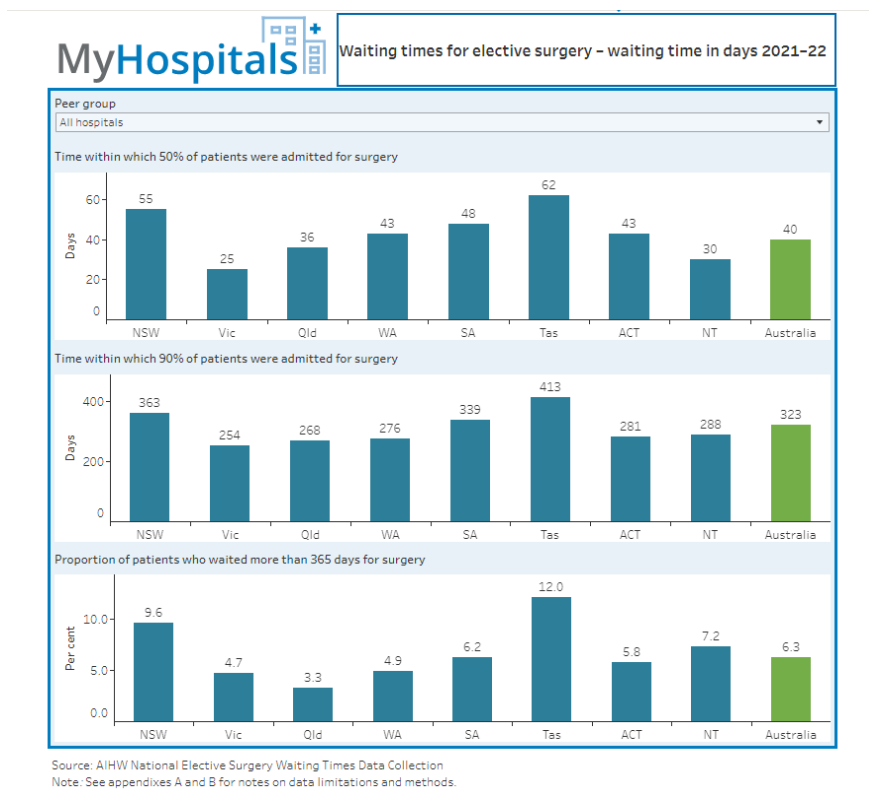


Figure 3: Waiting times for elective surgery – waiting times in days, Australian states and territories 2021-22¹¹

11. Double Canberra Hospital Emergency Department capacity to reduce waiting times.

Waiting times in emergency departments continues to require urgent attention.

The ACT remains the poorest performing state or territory with regards to emergency waiting times. As Figure 4 shows (ACT is represented by the colour purple), only 48% of ACT patients in emergency were seen on time in 2021-22. This is the same result as 2020-21 which means a distressing 52% of patients were again forced to wait.

¹¹ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (aihw.gov.au) 2023. ‘Elective surgery access’ Accessed online 20 April 2023 <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports-data/myhospitals/intersection/access/eswt>

Comparatively, the best performing state was NSW where 77% of patients were seen on time followed by Queensland where 68% of patients seen on time.

National Seniors again calls on the ACT Government to double Canberra Hospital Emergency Department capacity to reduce emergency department waiting times.

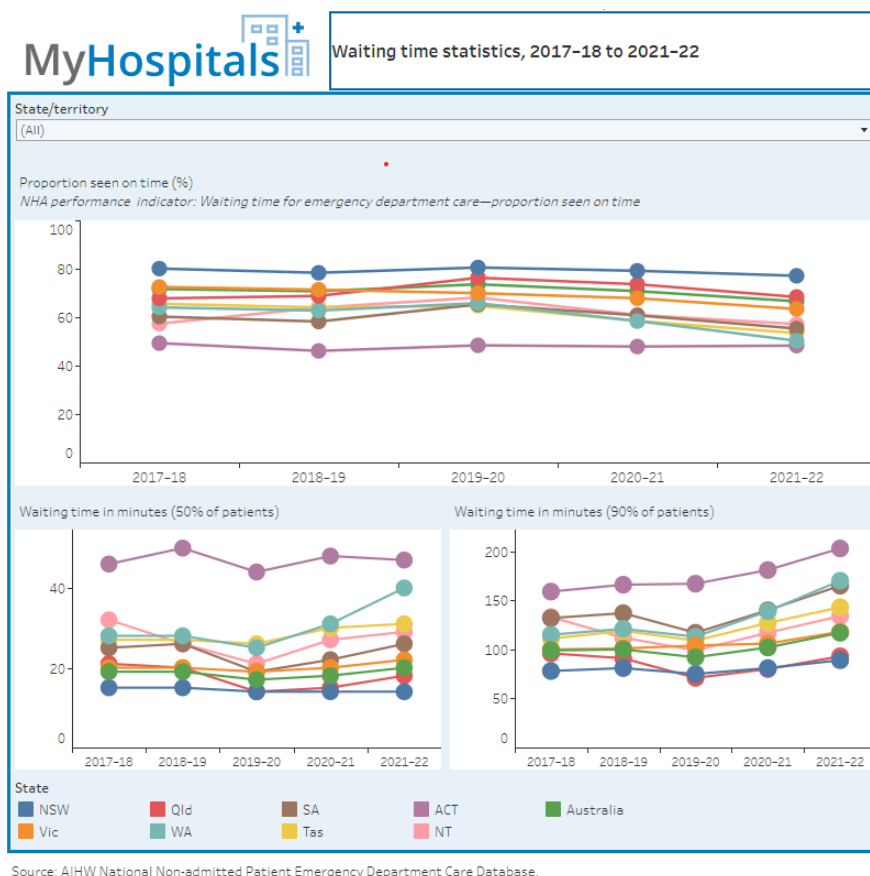


Figure 4: Emergency Department Waiting times 2017-18 to 2021-22¹²

12. Support GP clinics so patients can make more timely appointments.

The wait times for GP appointments are fast becoming a big issue for seniors in the ACT, especially those who need to see a GP regularly. Data from Australia's largest healthcare booking platform, Healthengine, shows people are waiting longer on average to see a GP. According to the data, the average wait time to see a GP in the ACT went from 2.91 days in 2019 to 3.16 in 2022 (see Figure 5).

¹² Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (aihw.gov.au) 2023. 'Emergency department care access' Accessed online 20 April 2023 <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports-data/myhospitals/intersection/access/ed>

This is relatively ‘better’ than most other states with people in New South Wales waiting up to 4.17 days, however it is still an unacceptable wait time for someone needing medical treatment and care, and worryingly these delays are only increasing.

According to the ABC, a report by Deloitte released last year shows demand for GPs will increase by nearly 40% in the next decade — nearly 50% in the cities. But a GP shortfall will mean more than 11,000 doctors desperately needed by Australia’s health system won’t be in the workforce.¹³

Prolonged wait times are not only detrimental to patients waiting, but they also add pressure to an already stretched workforce and increase stress on already overburdened hospital system.

While telehealth services enable patients to consult with doctors remotely, 14% of Australians do not own a smartphone which exclude these people from accessing this service.¹⁴ This percentage would be remarkably higher for older Australians who are more likely to need the service. National Seniors would like to see better support for GP clinics so patients can make appointments in a timelier manner.

Average GP wait times

Healthengine data shows average wait times between going online and seeing a doctor have increased.

	2019	2020	2021	2022
ACT	2.91	2.62	3.16	3.16
NSW	2.55	2.63	3.31	4.17
QLD	2.33	2.56	3.39	3.86
SA	2.54	2.65	3.53	3.94
VIC	1.98	2.0	2.62	3.33
WA	2.27	2.49	3.33	4.0

Northern Territory and Tasmania not included due to insufficient sample size. Data up to May 2022.
Source: Healthengine • [Get the data](#)

Figure 5: Average GP wait times 2019 to 2020

¹³ [Australia's COVID-19 and flu cases are on the rise — this is what's driving them - ABC News](#)

¹⁴ [Australia: smartphone penetration rate 2026 | Statista](#)

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