

# ACT BUDGET SUBMISSION 2022-23

June 2022

## 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 subsequent 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 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 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 people with a disability and the elderly.
8. Assist seniors to stay in their own homes by making grants to upgrade homes for accessibility and usability.

### Aged Care

9. Ensure the completion of retirement living and residential aged care accommodation in Gunghalin.

### Transport

10. Introduce free public transport for seniors and lower the qualifying age to 65.
11. Provide more buses and bus stops to service retirement villages and aged care accommodation.
12. Increase parking near service buildings and shopping centers for elderly and people with a disability.

### Health

13. Cut waiting times for elective surgery.
14. Double Canberra Hospital Emergency Department capacity 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)**

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 have been increasingly 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: walking and cycling for a liveable city](#) 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 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 help 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 are 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. All increasingly require online access and skills, which many seniors do not have for a number of reasons including:

- cost of technology
- lack of confidence or skills in using new 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 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.

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.

### **3. Ensure government agencies respond 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 be on hold for an extended 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 an untimely manner, or never at all.

## **Social inclusion**

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

"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."<sup>1</sup>

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

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<sup>1</sup> 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>

going for a walk. What should be enjoyable outings become outings met with worry 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 will 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 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 4.7 percent, well above the national increase of one per cent in the year to March 2022<sup>2</sup>.

The supply of private housing for people on low incomes is limited. A 2022 Anglicare Australia report, which noted that Canberra is currently the most expensive city to rent in Australia, found that rental affordability across Australia has crashed to an all-time low.

For example, out of 46,000 properties available for rent nationally, less than 0.3% are affordable and suitable for retirees on the age pension. Many are rooms in share houses that may not be suitable for an older person<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> ABS, Consumer Price Index, Australia, Mar 2022, 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, 2022

<sup>3</sup> Anglicare Rental Affordability Snapshot Regional Reports April 2022. <https://www.anglicare.asn.au/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/Rental-Affordability-Snapshot-Regional-reports.pdf>

National Seniors made a submission to the Housing Choices consultation calling on government to promote housing options that are more suitable to older people<sup>4</sup>. 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.

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 crises housing are needed to meet this growing demand. Immediate action is required to ensure that older people in Canberra live in safe and suitable accommodation.

#### **7. Renovate and restore public housing with adequate standards for people with a disability and the elderly.**

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).<sup>5</sup>

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 provides 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

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

<sup>5</sup> 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>)

diverse portfolio to provide more choice for those in need, regardless of their circumstances or *abilities*.”<sup>6</sup>

**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 last year, 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 some form of government grants.

## Aged Care

**9. Ensure the completion of retirement living and residential aged care accommodation in Gungahlin.**

There has been strong community support for the *GoldCreek Homestead Precinct* in Gungahlin that includes retirement living and residential aged care to provide much needed support to the area’s ageing population.

Following the announcement of Lendlease as the preferred tenderer in March 2021 for the Precinct, National Seniors is encouraged by the release of Lendlease’s revised plans for the Precinct in response to community feedback.

We urge the government to ensure this project is delivered by the expected completion date in 2024 to boost housing options for older people in the region.

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<sup>6</sup> 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>)



## Transport

### **10. Introduce free public transport for seniors and lower the qualifying age**

National Seniors members commend the ACT Government for trialling free off-peak travel for seniors and concession card holders over 70. 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 as seniors emerge from two years of COVID imposed restrictions.

To further improve on the ACT Government’s initiative, National Seniors calls on the ACT Government to

- a) Extend the trial of free off-peak travel for seniors and concession card holders to include both off-peak and peak times, and
- b) Lower the qualifying age from 70 years-of-age to 65 to improve access for more older Canberrans enabling them to fully participate in society.

This would demonstrate ACT Government’s commitment to improving transport options for seniors and would match the South Australian Government’s free public transport for seniors policy (which comes into effect from 1 July 2022 at a cost of only \$1.26m per year).

### **11. 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<sup>7</sup>.

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.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> 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>

<sup>8</sup> 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

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.

### **12. 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 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.<sup>9</sup>

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

## **Health**

### **13. 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.

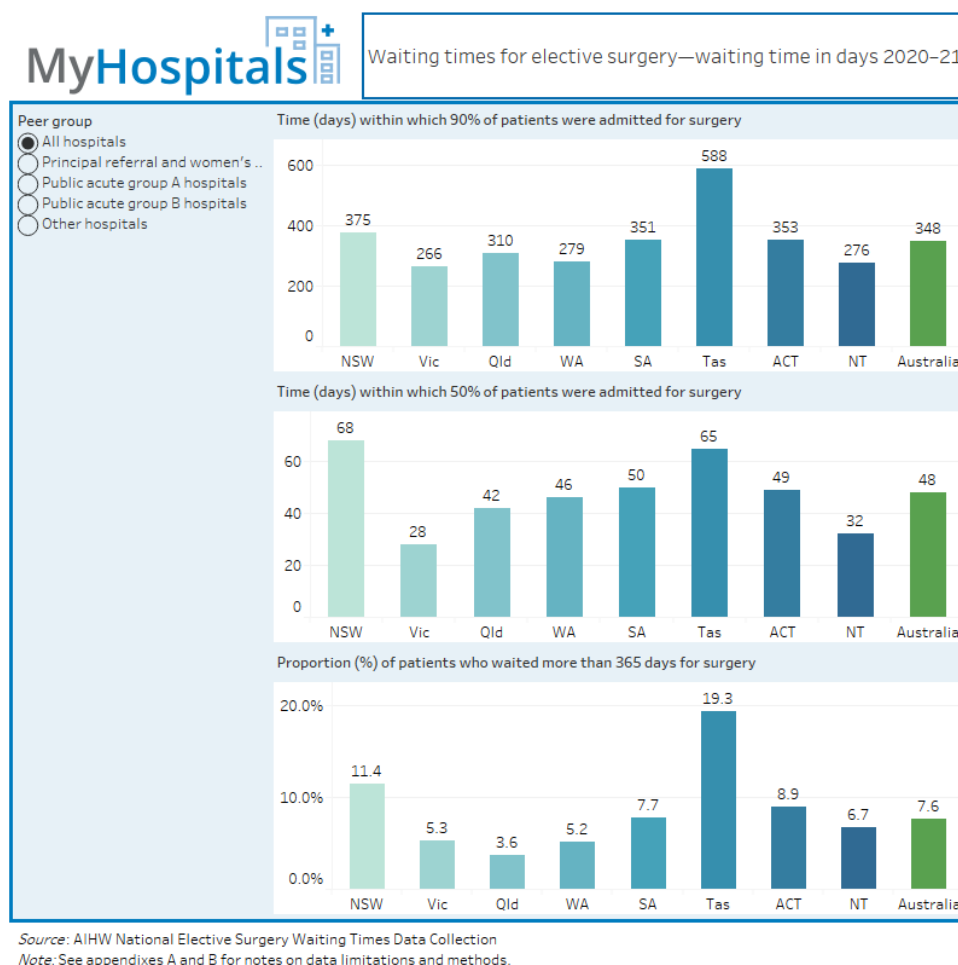
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[https://www.researchgate.net/publication/257505394\\_Examining\\_the\\_process\\_of\\_driving\\_cessation\\_in\\_late\\_r\\_life](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/257505394_Examining_the_process_of_driving_cessation_in_late_r_life)

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

Waiting times for elective surgery in the ACT remain too long. As Figure 1 below shows, in 2020-21, 90% of patients were admitted for elective surgery within 353 days. This is the third longest wait time in the country behind Tasmania (588 days) and New South Wales (375 days).

An unacceptable 8.9% of patients in the ACT waited *more than 365 days* for elective surgery. This places ACT third worst performer behind Tasmania where 19.3% of patients waited more than 365 days and NSW where 11.4% of patients waited more than 365 days.



**Figure 1: Waiting times for elective surgery – waiting times in days, Australian states and territories 2020-21<sup>10</sup>**

#### 14. Double Canberra Hospital Emergency Department capacity to reduce waiting times

<sup>10</sup> AIHW *Elective surgery waiting times 2020-21: Elective Surgery Access*  
[Elective surgery access - Australian Institute of Health and Welfare \(aihw.gov.au\)](https://www.aihw.gov.au/elective-surgery-access)

Waiting times in emergency also requires urgent attention. Currently, the ACT is the poorest performing state or territory with regards to emergency waiting times. As Figure 2 shows (please note ACT is represented by the colour purple) only 48% of ACT patients in emergency were seen on time in 2020-21. WA was the second worst performer with 58% of patients seen on time and NSW was the best with 79% of patients seen on time.

Again, a distressing 90% of patients in emergency were seen within 181 minutes in the ACT. This is compared to SA where 90% of patients were seen within 140 minutes and in QLD where 90% of patients were seen within 80 minutes.

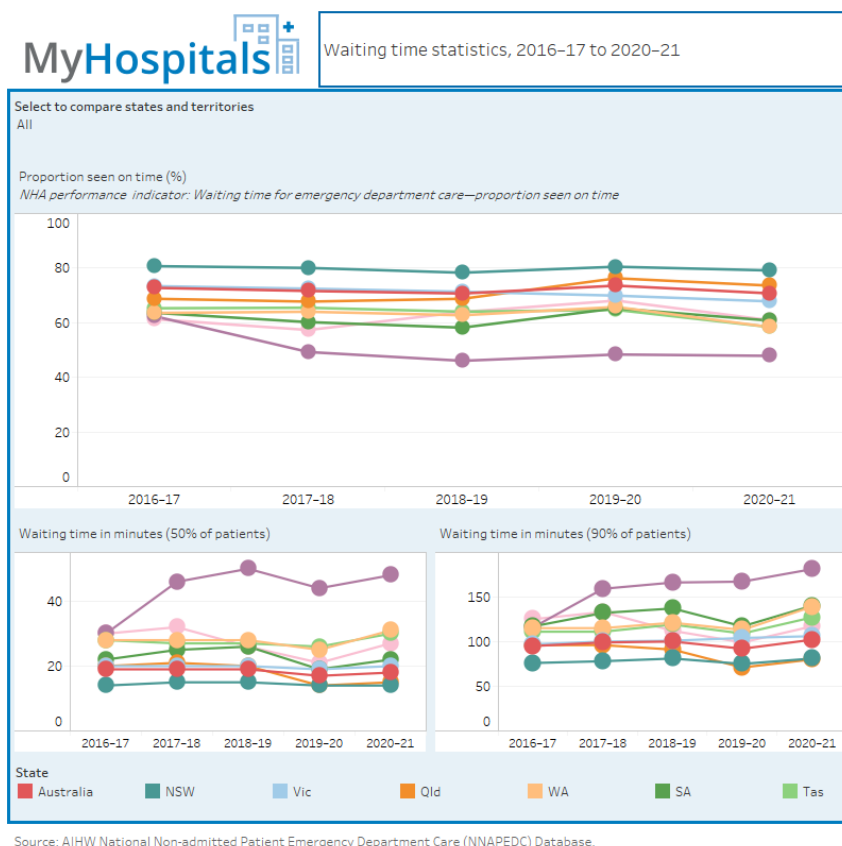


Figure 2: Median waiting time in emergency (minutes), Australian state and territories, 2016-17 to 2020-21 **NOTE: ACT is represented in purple** <sup>11</sup>

11

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