



ACT Budget Submission 2017-18

December 2016

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 is a key representative voice for the over-50s across Australia. The over-50s are diverse group that contributes both socially and economically to communities throughout the ACT.

As of June 2015, it was estimated that 29 percent of the population of the ACT was aged 50 and over¹. Approximately 25,000 ACT residents are receiving the Age Pension², whilst an expected 44,900 residents were retired³.

This submission has been developed with input from the National Seniors ACT Policy Advisory Group. The National Seniors ACT Policy Advisory Group contributes to public education, debate and community consultation on issues of direct relevance to older people in the ACT. The National Seniors ACT Policy Advisory Group plays a key role in identifying topics and emerging issues affecting the over-50s throughout the Territory through direct consultation with National Seniors members in the ACT.

National Seniors wishes to congratulate the ACT government for initiatives that support seniors. However, we believe that there is scope to improve the wellbeing among the over-50s residing in the ACT.

Primarily, National Seniors want improvements in health care services, including shorter waiting times for elective surgery and outpatient services, adequate hospital beds to avoid treating patients in corridors and targeted mental health services for older people.

National Seniors recommends that there be no further cuts to concessions for seniors and that the new combined Utilities Concession should be indexed in line with cost increases.

National Seniors believes that public transport services be reviewed to ensure they are providing accessibility, frequency and affordability. Furthermore, public transport concessions should be extended to Commonwealth Seniors Health Card holders, access to disability parking should be reviewed, the Age Friendly Suburbs project should be extended throughout the ACT and mobility scooter legislation should be improved.

National Seniors also recommends that the ACT Government investigate and implement models to increase the supply of appropriate and affordable housing for older ACT residents and work to promote age-friendly practices within both the public and private sectors.

Lastly, National Seniors recommends that initiatives be undertaken to improve the appearance of the ACT. Government should roll out the Green Bin Pilot throughout the ACT and review the mowing frequency of all publicly owned nature strips, median strips and edges.

¹ Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) 2016. Australian Demographic Statistics, Mar 2016. Cat. No. 3101.58

² Department of Social Services (DSS) 2016. DSS Demographics June 2016. <http://data.gov.au/dataset/social-security-health-and-related-information/resource/a894412a-fc3b-44b2-935d-5312b29fd2b6>

³ ABS 2015. Retirement and Retirement Intentions, Australia, July 2014 to June 2015. Cat. No. 6238.0 <http://www.abs.gov.au/AUSSTATS/abs@.nsf/DetailsPage/6238.0July%202014%20to%20June%202015?OpenDocument>

Health

- 1. Improve waiting times for elective surgery and outpatient services, by implementing achievable targets and appropriate funding.**
- 2. Review hospital resources to ensure there is adequate hospital bed capacity to respond to peak demands.**
- 3. Provide funding for mental health services focused on issues facing older Canberrans.**

Access to adequate health care services is a major priority for seniors in the ACT. Ensuring good health is important for older Canberrans as life expectancy increases. The maintenance of good health facilitates mobility, social inclusion, mental and physical wellbeing and lessens the need for costly acute care interventions.

Delays in receiving care increases pressure on the public health system and causes unnecessary distress for older people. Older Canberrans should not have to wait unacceptably long periods of time because they rely on the public health system. National Seniors believes that the ACT Government should set realistic targets for reducing waiting lists that are backed by appropriate funding.

National Seniors believes that it is unacceptable and inappropriate for older people to receive treatment in corridors as a result of a lack of hospital beds. Hospital bed capacity should be adequately managed to ensure that beds are being used efficiently but also that there is adequate spare capacity when this is required. It has been suggested, for example, that average hospital occupancy should not exceed 85 per cent in order to ensure sufficient capacity to meet demand for beds at peak times⁴. National Seniors recommend that the ACT Government review hospital resources to ensure that adequate capacity is available to avoid treating seniors in corridors.

Mental health issues are a serious concern among older Australians, yet little has been done to provide focused care within the ACT. National Seniors believes that there is a need for mental health programs that are focused on the specific needs of older people. National Seniors also recommends funding initiatives that attract more professionals with specific expertise in working with older people in the ACT.

Concessions

- 4. Ensure that there are no further cuts to concessions for ACT seniors.**
- 5. Ensure that the new combined Utilities Concession is indexed in line with increases in the cost of utilities.**

Concessions exist to assist low-income residents to meet every day living costs. Older Canberrans rely on concessions and rebates to maintain adequate living standards.

⁴ Australasian College for Emergency Medicine 2004. *Access block and Overcrowding in Emergency Departments*. April 2004. <https://www.acem.org.au/getattachment/56688d18-4f4c-467a-bba3-704d994d9f2d/Access-Block-2004-literature-review.aspx>

Existing eligibility for concessions and rebates for rates, utilities, car registration and public transport should be maintained in order to ensure older Canberrans maintain an adequate standard of living.

Many older ACT residents will be impacted by the changes to concessions for utilities. Under the new combined utilities concession, renters will experience an increase in the rate of concession, while home owners will experience a decline in the rate of the concession.

National Seniors believes that the combined utilities concession be maintained at levels that ensure it does not reduce in relative value over time. In this regard, National Seniors recommends that indexation be applied to the new combined utilities concession so that it increases in line with changes in the cost of utilities to ensure that the value of this concession is not further eroded.

Transport

- 6. Conduct a review of public transport operations, focusing on accessibility to health care services, frequency and affordability.**
- 7. Extend public transport concessions to Commonwealth Seniors Health Card holders.**
- 8. Extend the Age Friendly Suburbs project throughout the ACT.**
- 9. Increase regulation of mobility scooters.**
- 10. Review the provision and monitoring of disabled parking spaces.**

Limited access to public transport negatively impacts on older Canberrans, increasing their risk of social isolation. Public transport services offer viable alternatives for all seniors, especially those that may not be able to drive any more.

It is vital that public transport services are frequent and affordable. National Seniors believes that the ACT Government review public transport operations to ensure that public transport is operating effectively for public transport users. The review should examine how best to link older residents, especially those in outer urban and rural regions of the ACT, with essential health care services and whether existing community transport options⁵ are effective.

National Seniors believes that public transport concessions should be extended to Commonwealth Seniors Health Card (CSHC) holders. The CSHC is a means tested concessions card, with eligibility set in relation to income. Eligibility for public transport concessions would encourage self-funded retirees on low-incomes to use public transport to access essential goods and services.

National Seniors commends the ACT government on the Age Friendly Suburb project⁶, which has been proactively improving infrastructure for the ease of movement of older residents in several suburbs. Given the importance of remaining active throughout life, National Seniors

⁵ ACT Government 2016. 'ACT Regional Bus Service' Accessed online 27 September 2016.

http://www.assistance.act.gov.au/senior/transport_and_registration/act_regional_community_bus_service

⁶ ACT Government 2016. 'Age Friendly Suburbs Project' Accessed online 27 September 2016.

<http://www.tccs.act.gov.au/roads-paths/cycling/age-friendly-suburbs-project>

believe that the project should be extended throughout Canberra in order to facilitate the development of an age-friendly city.

National Seniors believes that clearer guidance should be provided to users of mobility scooters. While current legislation stipulates that motorised wheelchairs (or other types for disabled persons) are exempt from registration and must comply with the same road rules as pedestrians, National Seniors is concerned about the lack of regulation of motorised mobility vehicles.

National Seniors also has concerns about the accessibility of disabled parking spaces for older people in the ACT. To ensure that those who are entitled are able to do so, a review should be conducted into the number of spaces provided and the frequency in which they are monitored.

Housing

11. Investigate and implement models that increase the supply of appropriate and affordable housing for older ACT residents.

National Seniors acknowledges the previous work that has been undertaken by the Affordable Housing Action Plan, however there is still an inadequate supply of appropriate and affordable housing for older Canberrans. Ensuring that older Canberrans have the ability to age-in-place should be a high priority of the ACT Government. The ability to age-in-place will have positive impacts on the public health, housing and aged care systems in the ACT.

Many older Canberrans would prefer to reside in affordable alternatives to retirement villages, such as small developments of independent units linked to a common centre. Such living arrangements allow older residents to foster group identities and combat isolation whilst maintaining their independence. In addition, the provision of age-friendly residences will reduce the number of older people reliant on the health system and aged care facilities.

Social Inclusion

12. Promote age-friendly practices among public and private services.

Whilst the *Age Discrimination Act 2004* stipulates that aged-based discrimination is illegal, many older Canberrans feel they are being disadvantaged because of the inability of public and private services to deliver age-friendly business practices.

The increasing reliance on information technologies to perform transactions, combined with the poor customer service is impacting on older customers negatively. Business and government should not throw the baby (boomer) out with the bathwater but should instead be promoting age-friendly business practices. Improving and promoting age-friendly communication, cultural awareness and customer service skills among staff will ensure that older people feel included and respected. This is especially important for frontline staff, whether they are employed in the public or private sector.

Other topics

13. Roll out the Green Bin Pilot throughout the ACT and offer the service free to seniors with concession cards

14. Review the mowing frequency of all publicly owned nature strips, median strips and edges.

The ACT government is currently trialing a pilot green bin program to allow residents to divert garden waste from landfill from 2017. The program is currently offered in Weston Creek, Kambah and Tuggeranong⁷.

An important goal of the program is to make it easier for residents to keep their yards and streets beautiful. Older Canberrans, especially those who might otherwise struggle to maintain their yards, would benefit from this service.

While concession card holders will be exempt from the one off cost-recovery fee of around \$50, National Seniors would recommend that Commonwealth Seniors Health Card holders also be considered for the exemption. National Seniors believes that the program should be rolled out to all ACT residents as soon as possible so that all people can benefit from this.

While mowing of public nature strips, median strips and edges is mandated to occur every four weeks, there are times when the frequency of mowing lapses or the time period between mowing is not sufficient. National Seniors believes that the frequency of mowing be reviewed to ensure that the appearance of Canberra streetscapes suitably reflect its importance as the nation's capital.

⁷ ACT Government 2016. Green bin pilot project. Accessed online 27 September 2016.
<http://www.tccs.act.gov.au/recycling-and-waste/green-bin-pilot-program>