



Submission to the Inquiry into the Provision of Municipal Services in Canberra

December 2025

Executive Summary

Carers ACT and Advocacy for Inclusion (AFI) welcome the opportunity to provide a joint submission on the provision of municipal services in Canberra. AFI is an active Disabled Peoples Organisation with similar approaches on municipal issues that represents and advocates for people with disability.

In this submission, carers are defined in accordance with the ACT *Carers Recognition Act 2021* as people who provide ongoing, unpaid support to someone with disability, chronic illness, mental health issues, or other care needs.

Both organisations consistently hear from carers and people with disability that municipal infrastructure has a strong influence on health, wellbeing, safety, and the ability to participate in everyday community life. Our organisations are often responding to the same systemic problems at a time where demand is high and community sector resourcing is not.

Carers and people with disability describe how unsafe footpaths, inaccessible playgrounds and facilities, long or difficult transport journeys and waste services that do not reflect their needs, all create barriers that compound over time. These issues affect confidence, limit opportunities to connect with others and place added strain on households already working hard to manage complex demands.

Improving the way municipal services are planned and delivered would have a meaningful impact on the daily lives of carers and people with disability. The recommendations in this submission reflect what they tell us would make their communities easier to navigate, safer and more welcoming. Both Carers ACT and AFI welcome any opportunity to work collaboratively with the ACT Government to strengthen accessibility and connection across Canberra.

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Summary of Recommendations

Scope of Reference	Recommendations
<p>The maintenance and upkeep of public spaces such as playgrounds, sportsgrounds, local shops, verges and waterways</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Implement a proactive, scheduled footpath maintenance program to ensure routes connecting homes to public transport, schools, shops and key community facilities are safe and accessible. 2. Schedule and implement a full audit of all ACT playgrounds to assess disability access and safety (as recommended in the Raising Children Inquiry Committee Report). This audit should be expanded to include all ACT community sport fields and facilities, evaluating pathways, equipment, toilets, lighting, parking and other infrastructure that supports participation for people with disability and carers. 3. Commence a rolling program of issue identification, audit and upgrade of suburbs and group centres focussed on access to local group centres, local commerce and community facilities through a seamless path of travel. This should be informed by human intelligence through strengthened community council focus and representation and resourced structured partnerships with DPO's.
<p>The appropriateness of the geographic spread of active travel infrastructure, parks and playgrounds</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 4. Improve public transport infrastructure for accessibility and safety by increasing the number of bus shelters, improving lighting at stops and along connecting paths, and maintaining footpaths to ensure safe, accessible travel for carers and people with disability. 5. Promote sensory and cognitive accessibility on public transport by delivering community education campaigns and staff training to raise awareness of hidden disabilities and support the respectful use of reserved seating.

	<p>6. Expand accessible community spaces, community sporting facilities and playgrounds by retrofitting more of these spaces in suburbs and group centres and increasing the number of facilities built to inclusive standards with features like toilets, sensory-accessible equipment, and safe design. Ensure new spaces are distributed across suburbs to reduce travel time, financial strain, and isolation for carers and children with disability.</p> <p>7. Increase the number of public swimming pools across Canberra and ensure all new and existing facilities are accessible and inclusive, supporting carers, people with disability, and the broader community.</p>
<p>The effectiveness of services related to waste removal</p>	<p>8. Introduce a waste support program that allows households where people with disability, an ongoing medical condition or carers reside to apply for an additional general waste bin at no cost, alongside multiple free bulky waste collections each year for this cohort.</p> <p>9. Apply a just transition approach to ensure that people with disability and carers are not unduly impacted by both climate change and mitigation measures.</p>

Maintenance and upkeep of public spaces

A proactive approach for improved accessibility

Recommendations

1. Implement a proactive, scheduled footpath maintenance program to ensure routes connecting homes to public transport, schools, shops and key community facilities are safe and accessible.
2. Schedule and implement a full audit of all ACT playgrounds to assess disability access and safety (as recommended in the Raising Children Inquiry Committee Report). This audit should be expanded to include all ACT community sport fields and facilities, evaluating pathways, equipment, toilets, lighting, parking and other infrastructure that supports participation for people with disability and carers.
3. Commence a rolling program of issue identification, audit and upgrade of suburbs and group centres focussed on access to local group centres, local commerce and community facilities through a seamless path of travel. This should be informed by human intelligence through strengthened community council focus and representation and resourced structured partnerships with DPO's.

Carers and people with disability frequently describe the poor state of local footpaths as one of the largest barriers to participation. Many report that the prioritisation of areas such as city centres and footpaths around Canberra's lakes leaves suburban paths uneven, cracked and obstructed.

Unsafe local paths prevent people from reaching public transport, shops, playgrounds and the well-maintained paths in priority areas. Several carers have described feeling "trapped" in their suburbs because the footpaths to their local bus stop are overgrown, uneven and unsafe. People with disability share similar experiences, with some reporting injuries where uneven paths caused their mobility aid to tip or get stuck.

Carers, people with disability and other Canberrans with conditions affecting vision or balance note that the condition of footpaths can determine whether they can attend work, appointments, social activities or even get to the grocery store.

A proactive, scheduled footpath maintenance program is consistent with the expectations set out in the *ACT Carers Recognition Act 2021* and supports the rights of people with disability under the *Human Rights Act 2004* (ACT).

The recent *Inquiry into Raising Children in the ACT* highlighted that carers of children with disability are further isolated by playgrounds that are unsafe or inaccessible, even when promoted as accessible.ⁱ Committee recommendations 17 and 28 of that inquiry suggest a full audit of ACT playgrounds to assess disability access, alongside better, more frequent and affordable public transport supported by safer and more accessible footpaths.ⁱⁱ While these recommendations were agreed to in principle, little progress has been made.

Similarly, the 2025 *Inquiry into Barriers and Opportunities for Participation in Community Sports* highlighted ongoing accessibility issues across public spaces faced by the Canberra community. The [Carers ACT submission](#) emphasised the challenges faced by carers and recommended that the playground accessibility audit be expanded to include all ACT community sport fields and facilities, a recommendation we continue to make. [AFI's submission](#) to this inquiry details how Canberra's community sport facilities often present significant barriers for people with disability and those who support them. These include inadequate parking and pathways for mobility equipment, unsuitable bathroom facilities, and insufficient lighting and safety features within sporting precincts.

We encourage the committee to read the aforementioned inquiry submissions by Carers ACT and AFI, as well as the [Carers ACT submission to Raising Children](#) to better understand the impacts that these barriers to community have on carers and people with disability.

Active travel, parks and playgrounds

Reducing barriers to participation

Recommendations

4. Improve public transport infrastructure for accessibility and safety by increasing the number of bus shelters, improving lighting at stops and along connecting paths, and maintaining footpaths to ensure safe, accessible travel for carers and people with disability.
5. Promote sensory and cognitive accessibility on public transport by delivering community education campaigns and staff training to raise awareness of hidden disabilities and support the respectful use of reserved seating.
6. Expand accessible community spaces, community sporting grounds and playgrounds by increasing the number of facilities built to inclusive standards and retrofitting existing ones to accessibility standards. This should prioritise accessibility within suburb and group centre play areas open to all Canberrans. We also need more play spaces with features like toilets, sensory-accessible equipment, and safe design. Ensure new spaces are distributed across suburbs to reduce travel time, financial strain, and isolation for carers and children with disability.
7. Increase the number of public swimming pools across Canberra and ensure all new and existing facilities are accessible and inclusive, supporting carers, people with disability, and the broader community.

Both Carers ACT and AFI represent Canberrans who often rely on public transport. Whether due to a reduced capacity to work or high costs associated with medical care and equipment, carers and people with disability are statistically more likely to have lower incomes.ⁱⁱⁱ This often makes reliance on public transport a necessity rather than a choice.

At a recent carer focus group, several carers described how they had been trying to line up all their errands and appointments on a Friday to take advantage of free bus travel, which they could not otherwise afford. Friday free bus travel is scheduled to end on December 12th, the same day submissions to this inquiry close.^{iv}

The *2024 Inquiry into Loneliness and Social Isolation in the ACT* highlighted many ongoing barriers to active travel, with the final committee report recommending the ACT Government

prioritise improving access to public travel. Both the [Carers ACT submission](#) and [AFI submission](#) gave evidence of accessibility issues that were preventing carers and people with disability to participate in community life. Long and mismatched journeys, including the need to bus to the tram and then catch another bus from the city to their destination, are not reasonable for carers or people with disability. Our submissions highlighted how barriers to active travel left carers and people with disability cut off and isolated.

Our communities consistently raise the need for more bus shelters, better lighting around stops and paths, and broader improvements to travel infrastructure. In Canberra's extreme weather, shelters are essential to provide relief from summer heat for those more vulnerable to environmental conditions, including people with disability, older residents, and others with health sensitivities. Bus shelters also offer protection from our strong wind, while adequate lighting around stops and paths ensures safety during dark winter evenings.

Sensory and cognitive accessibility is also a concern. Many people with hidden disabilities face stigma, particularly when using reserved bus seating. One carer described teaching their young adult son with a neurodevelopmental condition to travel independently on the bus. This increased the young person's autonomy and allowed the carer to work more paid hours. The young person finds eye contact distressing and sits directly behind the driver so they can avoid walking past large groups of people and reduce overwhelming sensory demands. During one of these trips a community member confronted the young person about sitting at the front and claimed they were inconsiderate of people with disability. The experience was frightening and has left the young person too afraid to use the bus again, reducing their autonomy and increasing their reliance on the carer. This experience highlights the importance of promoting sensory and cognitive accessibility in Canberra.

Transport and infrastructure barriers also limit access to other community facilities. Carers and people with disability often need to travel across suburbs to find playgrounds that meet diverse access needs or include basic facilities such as toilets, which can be essential to support safe and dignified community participation. This reduces opportunities for spontaneous social connection and creates additional financial and time strain.

Playgrounds with accessible designs mean children with disability can participate fully and carers can connect socially in environments where they feel respected and included. Increasing the number of spaces built to this standard would reduce isolation, support wellbeing and strengthen community connection.

Public swimming pools are another critical but often overlooked municipal service, where access remains limited for carers and people with disability.

Recent media coverage has highlighted growing community concern about the decline and uncertain future of the city's public pools, with ageing facilities, closures, and accessibility issues making headlines even this week.^v Pools provide essential opportunities for physical activity, therapy, and rehabilitation in a low-impact environment, supporting both health and mobility. Accessible pools foster skill development and independence through swimming lessons and water safety programs, while also providing carers with safe spaces for social connection and respite.

Without accessible design features such as ramps, lifts, and suitable change rooms, these essential facilities remain out of reach for many, adding financial and logistical burdens for carers and restricting the independence of people with disability.

Expanding and upgrading public pools across Canberra, ensuring they meet inclusive design standards, would directly address these barriers, strengthen community connection, and uphold the rights and recognition owed to carers and people with disability.

Effectiveness of waste removal services

Addressing waste challenges in care relationships

Recommendations

8. Introduce a waste support program that allows households where people with disability, an ongoing medical condition or carers reside to apply for an additional general waste bin at no cost, alongside multiple free bulky waste collections each year for this cohort.
9. Apply a just transition approach to ensure that people with disability and carers are not unduly impacted by both climate change and mitigation measures.

Carers, people with disability, and households with ongoing medical needs often generate larger volumes of waste than other households due to the ongoing cycle of care. Equipment such as mobility aids, hoists, pressure-relief cushions, bedding, and other medical items require frequent upgrading or replacement as needs change. Many of these items cannot be safely sold or donated, and mobility aids or personal care equipment are often customised to an individual's needs, meaning used items may not meet safety or hygiene standards for resale.

Likewise, day-to-day personal care items such as continence pads, feeding tubes, dressings, and similar consumables contribute to a substantial volume of the household's waste, placing ongoing pressure on standard bin services. Carers also frequently support people who hoard, further increasing the volume of waste that must be safely managed.

The average 140L general waste bin and once-a-year bulky waste collection are often insufficient for these households. As mentioned, carers and people with disability are significantly more likely to live in low-income households, meaning the costs associated with ordering an additional general waste bin or a skip bin are prohibitive. Carers ACT regularly receives multiple calls per week from carers seeking support to cover the cost of skip bin collections to manage essential waste safely.

We are also mindful of unintended consequences for some vulnerable people including people with disability within the ACT's food waste and recycling (FOGO) trial.

Within our individual advocacy work, Advocacy for Inclusion have seen some people with disability who are unable to manage the sorting and sifting required in the trial escalate into situations involving neighbourhood disputes, loss of disability service and precarious housing arrangements.

We also advocate for a just transition approach to waste reduction responses which would reduce access to disposable continence products as well as other items, like straws, which people need to maintain hydration. People with disabilities bear the brunt of climate change events and should not also bear a disproportionate impact from waste reduction meant to mitigate them – these must be shared responsibilities borne across the community.

To be clear, these households are not generating excess waste recklessly; rather, their circumstances make it unavoidable. This needs to be taken into consideration when designing waste policies for Canberra.

Benchmarking ACT Performance

Learning from other jurisdictions

Across Australia, several local governments have established structured municipal service programs that could be adapted to improve accessibility and participation in the ACT.

Many jurisdictions operate proactive footpath maintenance programs that ensure suburban paths remain safe and navigable throughout the year for all community members. Weddin Shire Council (NSW) provides a strong example of proactive footpath management with their Footpath Inspection, Evaluation and Maintenance Policy.^{vi} The council uses a risk-based inspection system, with scheduled inspections for all footpaths. Hazards are assessed for severity and risk: high-risk issues are made safe immediately or scheduled for repair within 24 hours, while medium-risk issues are included in planned maintenance within 30 days. The system prioritises resources according to risk rather than responding only to complaints, demonstrating a structured, equitable maintenance model.

Other councils, such as Yarra Ranges (VIC), apply defined risk thresholds for ‘reactive repairs’ to guide timely responses. When a footpath lip or surface misalignment exceeds thirty millimetres, the Council requires repairs take place within 2 weeks.^{vii} Many other jurisdictions have similar threshold interventions, with some like Federation Council (NSW) as low as twenty mm in lip misalignment or a ten mm wide crack.^{viii}

These models support the argument for a proactive, structured footpath maintenance program in the ACT with an accompanying priority response system.

Other jurisdictions have also implemented targeted waste services that respond to the needs of people with disability or medical conditions, providing free additional waste services for these households. Wagga Wagga City Council (NSW) offers an additional 140 L general waste bins for households with greater waste output due to medical conditions, at no cost.^{ix}

Murrindindi Shire Council's (VIC) kerbside service includes a provision for households with chronic illness or disability, who can apply for an extra standard rubbish or recycling bin at no cost.^x Logan City Council (QLD) also provides a no cost "medical assistance" bin service for households with a medical condition to receive an extra waste or recycling bin.^{xi} These examples show that several jurisdictions already recognise the connection between medical and disability-related needs and waste generation or service accessibility.

Across Australia, most comparable urban councils also offer more than one annual bulky waste collection. Across NSW, which surrounds our region, a significant number of councils offer 4 or more bulky waste collections per year as part of their standard waste service.^{xii}

Blacktown City Council for example, offers up to twelve free bulky waste collections each year,^{xiii} to give households choice, reduce costs and support safer living environments. While these are not specific to carers or people with disability, these models demonstrate that higher frequency bulky waste services are feasible and can ease financial pressure for people who often have lower incomes and greater waste management needs.

Learning from other regions highlights the value of strong local governance structures. In Canberra, community councils also provide an important, though often underused, link between residents and government decision making on municipal infrastructure. In many other jurisdictions there is active community-based activity to assess, capture, stocktake and address local access barriers through access committees attached to local councils.

In the ACT greater use could be made of community councils. In a shared submission on planning prior to the last election and to the inquiry on the [Fix My Street App](#),^{xiv} Advocacy for Inclusion recommends making a funding stream available to community councils and DPOs to enable improved engagement by the Councils with people with disability to support identification of access issues in Canberra regions, followed by a program of targeted rectification work.

Strengthening these councils through consistent disability and carer representation would give people who rely on accessible environments a more direct way to raise concerns and influence priorities. This approach would also help close the gap between high-level strategies and day-to-day implementation, ensuring accessibility issues are addressed promptly rather than remaining unresolved despite existing policy commitments.

Advocacy for Inclusion also supports calls from ACTCOSS for a social planning unit to be embedded in Transport and City Services and given the task of ensuring Canberra's upgrades and planning for urban growth prioritises and plans for the needs of vulnerable and marginalised Canberrans within suburb and city development. Work is needed to map and improve community facilities, to ensure regional and district planning caters for people with disability, older people and carers and to encourage a responsive curatorial approach to development by the large developers – especially in respect of Canberra's growing amount of medium to high density housing and new suburbs.

Together, these examples reinforce the value of predictable maintenance systems, flexible service options and strong local governance. Adopting similar approaches in the ACT would reduce preventable barriers to participation, strengthen connections within communities and uphold the rights and recognition owed to carers and people with disability.

Conclusion




Carers and people with disability face ongoing challenges in accessing public spaces, transport, and municipal services, but there are clear opportunities to make Canberra more inclusive. Improvements such as proactive footpath maintenance, accessible playgrounds, safer transport infrastructure, more accessible public pools and flexible waste services can meaningfully reduce barriers and enhance participation. By working closely with carers, people with disability, and the broader community, and improving the capture of accessibility issues within municipal governance we can create practical solutions that strengthen connection, independence, and wellbeing for everyone across the city.

Both Carers ACT and AFI welcome the opportunity to work together with the ACT Government to implement these solutions and build a more accessible, connected, and inclusive Canberra.

References

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