

Dr Andrew Southcott MP
Chairman
House of Representatives Standing Committee on Ageing
Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600

Dear Dr Southcott

Thank you for your letter of 19 July 2002 calling for submissions into the "*Inquiry Into Long-Term Strategies To Address The Ageing Of The Australian Population Over The Next 40 Years*".

I note that the Inquiry will investigate a broad range of issues including the current and future adequacy of retirement incomes, workforce participation, aged care, education, housing and health. I also note that you anticipate that the Inquiry will be wide ranging and will consider both economic and social policy.

I agree that it is important that steps are taken now to establish a suitable framework to address ageing issues into the future.

The ACT Government is committed to meeting the needs of older people. We have recognised the changing demographics in the population and have planned for this change in our Plan for Older Canberrans, which provides a wide range of strategies that seek to create an inclusive community where all older people feel safe and valued, and where adequate services are available to meet their needs.

Attachment A provides a summary of the issues identified in the ACT Government's Plan for Older Canberrans, which I would be pleased if you would include as part of the matters for consideration by the Standing Committee.

You might also be interested to know that the ACT Government has recently established an Office for Ageing, which coordinates the whole-of-government policy direction in respect of healthy ageing issues. It has also recently established a Ministerial Advisory Council on Ageing, which will provide advice to the Government about the effectiveness of our policies, programs and services and advise on issues such as positive attitudes towards ageing and older people, housing, accommodation, life-long learning, mature age employment and concessions.

I thank you for this opportunity to make a submission to your Inquiry, and I look forward to the ACT Government having an ongoing involvement in the development of a national framework to address ageing issues into the future.

Yours sincerely

Jon Stanhope MLA
Chief Minister

**House of Representatives Standing Committee on Ageing
Inquiry into Long-term Strategies to Address
The Ageing of the Australian Population Over the Next 40 Years**

ACT Government Submission

Overview

The largest growth in the Canberra population over the next 15 years will be those people aged in their 50s. The percentage of people aged 50 and over is forecast to increase from 76,000 today to over 128,000 in the next 15 years. There is expected to be an increase in the people aged 60 and over from 37,600 today to 75,900 by 2016.

The ACT Government has recognised the need to plan for an ageing population in the Australian Capital Territory and has identified its Plan for Older Canberrans as the strategic framework within which policy development for ageing matters will occur. The Plan outlines the Government's aim to create a community where older people feel safe and valued, and where services are available to meet their needs.

Set out below are the key directions the Government will pursue in implementing its Plan.

Housing and Accommodation

The ACT Government believes that access to affordable housing and accommodation is an essential requirement for all people in our community, and that public housing policies must address the particular needs of older people.

Therefore a range of accommodation options is necessary, especially low cost accommodation for people needing low-level care who do not qualify for residential care. This is especially an issue for those who don't qualify for public housing.

Older people are often "asset rich and cash poor", which can affect their ability to move on to more appropriate accommodation once the family has left home and perhaps one of the partners has died.

Adaptable Housing

Given the rapid ageing of our population, the ACT Government believes that wherever possible new housing should be built using adaptable housing standards.

The increased Commonwealth focus on funding care packages to maintain people in their own homes is welcomed. It is essential that services such as Access/Adapt, the design service, are available to provide information to builders on the construction of adaptable accommodation, whether public or private housing.

The ACT is currently experiencing one of the lowest vacancy rates in the private rental market in recent history, and there is growing evidence that the number of households in housing stress in our community is increasing. In response to this situation, the Government has established an Affordable Housing Task Force with representatives from the community, the business and financial sectors. The Taskforce will give its recommendations to the Minister by 31 October 2002.

Through the Taskforce's recommendations, it is intended that a system will be developed to provide a housing system that allows all residents of the ACT to have sufficient income, after housing costs are met, to participate fully in their daily activities and their community. As such, the Taskforce are developing various strategies and principles to achieve this vision, including the identification of what is needed to ensure there is sufficient affordable housing in the ACT.

Currently the Taskforce is exploring a myriad of possibilities for the development of affordable housing, including changes in land and planning mechanisms, involvement of private sector investment and other financial models. In order to provide the most appropriate advice possible, the Taskforce has researched the experiences of other States within Australia, as well as the work being done in Canada, the United States of America and the United Kingdom. The Taskforce is researching the specific needs of groups within our community, including the aged, in the context of long-term affordability and appropriate housing.

Knowledge Capital

Canberra already has a vibrant and growing knowledge economy based on its national institutions such as the public service, the universities, CSIRO, the National Gallery, National Library and Museum, and our local libraries, museums and art galleries such as the Canberra Museum and Gallery.

The ACT libraries provide further opportunities for life-long learning, recreational reading, social activities and intellectual stimulation for many people. For older people, they are often an important community focal point.

The ACT Government believes that joint use of library facilities is an excellent means of encouraging interaction between younger and older people.

Fairness in the Workplace

Unemployment for those over 50 is common. There are insufficient employment opportunities for older people. Mature age people who lose their jobs are most likely to join the ranks of the long-term unemployed.

Employment is important to people's ability to prepare financially for retirement and for a higher standard of living in the retirement years. Older people who lose their jobs need to receive employment intervention as soon as possible.

The ACT Government believes that a national mature age employment strategy should be developed, which looks at part-time employment opportunities and innovative superannuation strategies.

Health and Community Care

The ACT Government recognises that older people are major users of health services and believes that a reliable and equitable public health system should be available to all people, particularly to meet the needs of older people.

Many older people have medical problems and other problems such as dental and podiatry. Proper access to dental and podiatry services is important as these are "quality of life" issues where a decline through neglect can lead to even more significant problems and higher costs. The ACT Government believes that the Commonwealth Government must do much more in this area.

Another area that the ACT Government sees as a major issue is the care for dementia patients with behavioural problems.

The ACT Government is also undertaking a feasibility study in the 2002/03 financial year to review rehabilitation, older persons mental health, post hospital/transitional care and dementia respite services and support infrastructure. This study will identify the level of unmet need and explore service and physical design options for providing a full range of sub and non-acute care services. Convalescent care will be part of this feasibility study.

The ACT Government has recently funded a number of post hospital initiatives to address the care needs of people following discharge.

Respite Care

The ACT Government sees respite care as a high priority and believes that it is substantially under-funded by the Commonwealth Government.

Elder Abuse

Elder abuse has a broad definition. It refers to all forms of abuse of an older person by another and includes physical, emotional/psychological, sexual and financial.

Older people are some of the more vulnerable in our community and deserve to be treated with respect and given adequate levels of protection.

The ACT Government is currently developing its response to an ACT Assembly Inquiry into elder abuse and is working closely with other State governments and the community in the development of its response.

Transport

Social isolation is often a major problem for older people. If they cannot drive or do not have access to a car they are reliant on partners, family members, friends, volunteers, taxi drivers or public transport for their transportation needs.

With the ageing of our population, more drivers with dementia and in the early stages of dementia will be on our roads. The ACT Government recognises the work done by the Alzheimer's Association ACT in this area.

There must be a balance between the interests of the community and those of the driver. The ACT Government believes that the community must make adequate provisions for transport once drivers licences have been surrendered.

Concessions

Older people have contributed to the building of our community. Through carefully targeted concessions, the Government can repay some of their contribution in an effective manner.

Older people are particularly vulnerable to price increases and the impact this has on their standard of living. While pension payments remain a federal responsibility, concessions can help ease this burden.

The ACT Government is currently conducting a review of concessions in the ACT. This review covers a wide range of matters and will take into account any negotiations with the Commonwealth Government in relation to concessions.

Prior to the last Federal election the Commonwealth Government made a number of commitments in relation to concessions, the extension of concessions to holders of Seniors Health Care Cards being one of these. The initial offer made by the Commonwealth to the ACT Government will only cover about 50 percent of the estimated cost of the Commonwealth's commitment and, with an increasingly ageing population, the cost to the ACT community will increase substantially in the future.

The ACT Government believes that it is not unreasonable in its negotiations with the Commonwealth, it will endeavour to ensure that the ACT community is not subjected to increasing costs through increased charges because of an election promise made by the Commonwealth.

Another issue that we will consider in our negotiations with the Commonwealth is that of equity. As the proposal stands, concessions would be extended to seniors eligible for a Commonwealth Seniors Health Card who earn up to \$50,000 pa for a single person and \$80,000 for a couple. Many Canberrans are on wages far less than this, but they are not eligible for a concession.

It is understood that at this stage the other States and the Northern Territory have also rejected the Commonwealth's initial proposal.

Notwithstanding, the ACT Government has given a commitment that it will continue to participate in discussions with the Commonwealth Government to extend benefits to seniors.