



BEYOND THE SOUND BITE

**REPORT TO THE COMMUNITY FROM THE
ACT COUNCIL OF SOCIAL SERVICE
2013 FEDERAL ELECTION
CANDIDATES FORUM**

SEPTEMBER 2013

About ACTCOSS

ACTCOSS acknowledges Canberra has been built on the land of the Ngunnawal people. We pay respects to their Elders and recognise the strength and resilience of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. We celebrate Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures and ongoing contribution to the ACT community.

The ACT Council of Social Service Inc. (ACTCOSS) is the peak representative body for not-for-profit community organisations, people living with disadvantage and low-income citizens of the Territory.

ACTCOSS is a member of the nationwide COSS network, made up of each of the state and territory Councils and the national body, the Australian Council of Social Service (ACOSS).

ACTCOSS' vision is to live in a fair and equitable community that respects and values diversity and actively encourages collaborations that promote justice, equity and social inclusion.

The membership of the Council includes the majority of community based service providers in the social welfare area, a range of community associations and networks, self-help and consumer groups and interested individuals.

ACTCOSS receives funding from the ACT Government - Community Services Directorate.

ACTCOSS advises that this document may be publicly distributed, including by placing a copy on our website.

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Executive Summary

As we go to the polls on 7 September, the nation faces some hard facts and some big choices. While we have enjoyed over two decades of strong economic growth, fault lines are emerging in our economic and social foundations.

The Australian Council of Social Service (ACOSS) has outlined a plan to restore the Federal Budget to surplus, improve the efficiency of both spending and taxes, and repair gaps in the social safety net such as disability services, adequate income support for unemployed people, schools funding, and affordable housing.

ACOSS has published a comprehensive Election Statement *Bold Action for a Fairer Future*¹ that outlines priorities for the next Federal Government:

- Secure the revenue to meet community needs
- Make essential services available and affordable
- Reduce poverty and increase employment
- Improve our democratic economic, social and environmental public policy processes

ACOSS has also listed key actions that should be taken in the first 100 days of the next Australian Government. A copy of the measures ACOSS have asked the next Federal Government to commit to in its first 100 days is provided at [Attachment A](#).

The ACT Council of Social Service hosted a Candidates Forum on Tuesday 3 September, providing an opportunity for ACTCOSS members to hear from those parties that had fielded candidates in both the House of Representatives Electorates (Canberra and Fraser) and the Australian Senate.

Gai Brodtmann MP from the Australian Labor Party and Simon Sheikh from the Australian Greens participated in the Forum.

The candidates did not speak to the detail of their policy platforms, so material provided in this report needs to be considered alongside the material published in the full policy platforms – links to which are included in this report.

We invited candidates to focus on the following policy issues:

- Secure revenue to meet community needs
- Increase Newstart Allowance

¹ A copy of Bold Action for a Fairer Future is available at http://www.acoss.org.au/images/uploads/ACOSS_2013_election_statement_16pp_FINAL.pdf

- Support to people who have been long term unemployed to get and keep a job
- Reduce Child Poverty
- Increase affordability of Housing and Energy
- The need for an assistance package for Canberra to cope with the impact of significant job losses in the public sector

There was also an opportunity to respond to questions from the audience. These questions focused on:

- Affordable housing and homelessness
- Employment for people living with disability
- Health care affordability and priority placed on population health
- Engaging young people in elections
- Early intervention for families
- The focus on cost of living instead of income inequality
- Better understanding of voting processes and systems
- Increase affordability of Housing and Energy
- Paying better attention to the needs and interests of ACT Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples

The candidates provided respectful, thoughtful, future-focused responses to the questions raised by ACTCOSS members. They both spoke about the important role of the Councils of Social Service locally and nationally in leading public debates about poverty, tax reform and social justice. ACTCOSS was pleased to hear both candidates state that the social change journey that reduces poverty and inequality is both ongoing and vitally important to the future well-being of our community.

ACTCOSS members who attended the forum were from consumer organisations, advocacy services, social services, health services and individual members of ACTCOSS who have led campaigns for social justice in our community. Audience members came from organisations focused on the needs and interests of Aboriginal and Torres Strait islander peoples, people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, children, people with disabilities, families, women and young people.

Introduction

The Challenge

As we go to the polls on 7 September, the nation faces some hard facts and some big choices. While we have enjoyed over two decades of strong economic growth, fault lines are emerging in our economic and social foundations:

- A growing gap between community expectations about the services that governments will provide and the money available.
- Major holes in our social safety net: affordable housing, quality education, disability services, mental and dental health services, and community controlled services for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.
- A growing number of people living in poverty and homelessness and a rise in unemployment.
- A slowing of the economy and rates of productivity.
- A disturbing disconnect between government policy making and community aspirations; undermining the capacity of communities to identify their priorities, develop locally-owned solutions and build a shared vision for their community.

The longer we delay fixing problems the more difficult and costly it will be. In this election, we must be bold with our commitments.

The Priorities

The Councils of Social Service across Australia have identified four priorities on which each of us would advocate for the next Australian Government to address:

- Secure the revenue to meet community needs
- Make essential services available and affordable
- Reduce poverty and increase employment
- Improve our democratic economic, social and environmental public policy processes

Voice of the Community Sector in the Federal Election

Community service providers and advocates are seeking to ensure that our priorities for disadvantaged and vulnerable Australians, and the services that support them and the wider community, are on the Federal Election agenda in 2013.

The Australian Council of Social Service (ACOSS) has published a comprehensive Election Statement *Bold Action for a Fairer Future*² that outlines key concerns in this Federal Election, and lists priorities for action in the first 100 days of the next Australian Government. A copy of the measures ACOSS have asked the next Federal Government to commit to in its first 100 days is provided at [Attachment A](#).

ACOSS has clearly stated that benefits and services for people at risk of poverty should not be reduced throughout the term of the next Government. These include the level and indexation of income support payments for people on low incomes, avoidance of policies that transfer people (such as people with disabilities or sole parents) from higher to lower payments, no time limits on income support, funding for social housing, employment services for disadvantaged jobseekers, and dental health services for low income earners.

ACOSS has also outlined a plan to restore the Federal Budget to surplus, improve the efficiency of both spending and taxes, and repair gaps in the social safety net such as disability services, adequate income support for unemployed people, schools funding, and affordable housing.

The ACT Council of Social Services (ACTCOSS) has been part of community debate and advocacy during the 2013 Federal Election Campaign.

ACTCOSS has prioritised the following issues for advocacy during the Federal Election Campaign:

- Secure revenue to meet community needs
- Increase Newstart Allowance
- Support to people who have been long term unemployed to get and keep a job
- Reduce Child Poverty
- Increase affordability of Housing and Energy
- The need for an assistance package for Canberra to cope with the impact of significant job losses in the public sector

² A copy of Bold Action for a Fairer Future is available at http://www.acoss.org.au/images/uploads/ACOSS_2013_election_statement_16pp_FINAL.pdf

We have provided media commentary on these issues, participated in election forums hosted by member organisations, engaged in discussion and debate on Facebook and Twitter and hosted a Candidates Forum to which all parties that were fielding candidates in both ACT House of Representatives electorates (Fraser and Canberra) and the Australian Senate were invited.

A copy of the media releases distributed by ACTCOSS during the campaign is provided at [Attachment B](#).

Gai Brodtmann MP from the Australian Labor Party and Simon Sheikh from the Australian Greens participated in the ACTCOSS Election Forum, providing a short summary of their policy position on the concerns and priorities outlined in *Bold Action for a Fairer Future* and answering questions from ACTCOSS members.

The candidates did not speak to the detail of their policy platforms, so material provided below needs to be considered alongside the material published in the full policy platforms – links to these are provided below.

The Candidates shared their personal and professional experience in dealing with disadvantage and vulnerability. They provided respectful, thoughtful, future-focused responses to the questions raised by ACTCOSS members. They both spoke about the important role of the Councils of Social Service locally and nationally in leading public debates about poverty, tax reform and social justice. ACTCOSS was pleased to hear both candidates state that the social change journey that reduces poverty and inequality is both ongoing and vitally important to the future well-being of our community.

A diverse cross section of ACTCOSS members attended the forum, including representatives from consumer organisations, advocacy services, social services, health services and individual members of ACTCOSS who have led campaigns for social justice in our community. Organisations focused on the needs and interests of Aboriginal and Torres Strait islander peoples, people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, children, people with disabilities, families, women and young people were part of our audience.

Policy Positions Outlined by the Candidates

A copy of the full policy platforms of the parties fielding candidates in both House of Representatives Electorates and the Australian Senate are available at:

http://greensmps.org.au/sites/default/files/election_platform_screen.pdf

http://www.alp.org.au/what_we_re_for

http://lpa.webcontent.s3.amazonaws.com/realsolutions/LPA%20Policy%20Booklet%20210x210_pages.pdf

<http://bullettrainforaustralia.com.au/campaign-resources/>

Secure revenue meet community needs

Priorities for Action

Commit to restore the Budget to surplus as economic conditions permit. Clear medium term revenue and expenditure targets should be set, with the proviso that they should only apply when economic growth is restored to trend. Arbitrary time limits for the restoration of surplus are economically dangerous and should be avoided.

Expenditure targets should allow for realistic indexation of funding for essential programs and avoid arbitrary rules that cramp the ability of Governments to re-order priorities.

Second, we urge the next Government to pursue structural reform of the tax system to restore public revenues as fairly and efficiently as possible. Federal and State Governments cannot continue to meet the community's expectations for essential services with the third lowest public revenue levels in the OECD.

Tax reform is needed to increase equity and efficiency of our tax system:

- Tax income from different sources in the same way
- Remove tax settings that distort saving and investment decisions, for example over-investment in existing housing which is a major cause of our high housing costs.
- Strengthen potentially sound state and territory tax bases such as Land and Payrolls and reduce reliance on inefficient Stamp Duties.

Government should stop spending on wasteful and poorly targeted programs (such as the Baby Bonus and Schoolkids Bonus), and programs that inflate the cost of essential services (such as the Extended Medicare Safety net) to make room for higher priorities such as an increase in Family Tax Benefits for low income families to reduce child poverty.

Government should also count the cost of income tax concessions and breaks, to determine whether they are delivering good value to the community and are well targeted. For example, many high income earners receive more throughout their lives in tax breaks for superannuation than if they were paid the full rate of the age pension.

Response from the Australian Greens

The Australian Greens

- Believe income inequality drives the need for social services. Income inequality is correlated with poor health and involvement in the criminal justice system.
- Have published both revenue and savings measures that are costed by the Parliamentary Budget Office
- Have outlined a strategy to cease subsidies to big companies (eg diesel fuel rebate for mining companies) and to redistribute these funds to pay for measures such as the increase to Newstart Allowance.

Response from the Australian Labor Party

The Australian Labor Party have:

- Have implemented tax reform during the past two terms of government
- Have managed the economy in a way that has kept interest rates low
- Led establishing the social safety net – DisabilityCare, mental health reform, paid parental leave, superannuation, age pension

Increase Newstart Allowance and support people who have been long term unemployed to get and keep a job

Priorities for action

Increase the maximum single rate of Newstart Allowance and other allowance payments (including Youth Allowance for young people not living in the family home) by \$50 per week

Index payments so they keep up with general living standards. Living in poverty stops people from getting ready for work and accessing the training and education needed to build the skills employers want.

Increase payments to Job Services Australia providers for interviews, work experience, training and support for jobseekers who are long-term unemployed to match the payments made to services supporting people at risk of long term unemployment

Double the number of places in the Wage Connect program for people unemployed long term to at least 20,000 places per year.

Response from the Australian Greens

The Australian Greens have

- A Poverty Reduction Plan
- Committed to increase the Newstart Allowance to \$50/week
- Committed to tighter targeting and increasing Family Tax Benefit.

Response from the Australian Labor Party

The Australian Labor Party

- Believe the best pathway out of poverty is work, and the most important role of government is to increase jobs
- Record in government has been to manage the economy in a way that maximises job security

Reduce Child Poverty

Priorities for action

Set a goal of reducing child poverty, and to monitor and report on child poverty annually.

Restructure Family Tax Benefits (FTB) to simplify the system, remove poorly targeted elements, and restore its focus on preventing poverty.

Make these changes in a revenue neutral way – by redirecting the funding cut as part of the recent abolition of the Baby Bonus and by redirecting resources currently devoted to the Schoolkids Bonus.

Restore indexation of the maximum rates of FTB to wage movements to ensure that payments keep pace with living standards.

Introduce a career counselling program, with access to an investment fund for vocational training, for parents and carers returning to paid workforce after a lengthy period outside it.

Increase investment in Job Services Australia assistance for long term unemployed people generally.

Response from the Australian Greens

The Australian Greens have

- A Poverty Reduction Plan
- Committed to increase the Newstart Allowance to \$50/week
- Committed to tighter targeting and increasing Family Tax Benefit.

Response from the Australian Labor Party

The Australian Labor Party have:

- Assisted families by maintaining a low level of unemployment and low interest rates
- Implemented paid parental leave
- Invested heavily in education, as the key measure to reduce the transfer of poverty from parents to children. This includes investing in school building, Information technology, Trade Training Centres and school funding reform via negotiation with states and territories to implement the Gonski recommendations

Affordable housing

Priorities for Action

Funding for a further four years for the National Partnership Agreement on Homelessness.

Making the National Rental Affordability Scheme permanent and immediately provide 50,000 new incentives.

Committing to an affordable housing growth fund.

Lifting the level of Commonwealth Rent Assistance and reviewing its effectiveness.

Increasing funding for homelessness services to match need.

Response from the Australian Greens

The Australian Greens have:

- Supported the National Rental Affordability Scheme (NRAS), and committed to an additional 50,000 places in the scheme over the coming years

- Conducted research and consultation over past six years that has informed development of a comprehensive plan to increase supply of more affordable housing
- Support development of more targeted measures to meet the needs of specific groups, eg the 1million students who need affordable housing options
- Recognise that women's needs around housing need specific consideration

Response from the Australian Labor Party

The Australian Labor Party:

- Have provided the biggest ever investment in social housing (\$6billion) as part of the Global Financial Crisis Stimulus Package
- Is considering expansion of the NRAS scheme and more closely targeting this scheme – students, people living with mental health and/or alcohol and other drug issues
- Recognises the gender dimension to housing – older women with limited retirement income at risk of homelessness, women with children, couch surfing

Affordable energy

Priorities for Action

Landlord tax incentives and minimum energy efficiency standards for rental properties to improve the thermal performance of low income homes and fixed appliances.

Significant increase in funding to microfinance schemes to cover broader energy efficiency upgrades and embedded generation

Increase in funding to extend in-home energy efficiency assistance programs

Carbon abatement funding for targeted energy efficiency retrofits of the worst performing, and highest risk social housing stock. Upgrades could include insulation, shading, draft proofing, solar PV, more efficient hot water systems, and should be targeted at areas:

- of highest temperature variation, including extreme heat and cold exposure.
- where risk factors are found to coincide, for example elderly people, or people with health issues, who are living alone.
- dwellings with high running costs.

Negotiating with the states and territories a national framework for consistency and fairness in energy concessions and emergency assistance.

Introduce portability of entitlements when switching retailers to ensure the benefits of competition are shared with people on social security payments.

Response from the Australian Greens

The Australian Greens support:

- Increased action to reduce and adapt to climate change
- Compensation and support to low income households to assist with adaption
- Increased revenue generation out of dirty energy industries to maximise cost reductions in cleaner energy

Response from the Australian Labor Party

The Australian Labor Party

- Has put a price on carbon pollution
- Has provided compensation and support to low income households to assist with adaption

Assist the Canberra community to cope economically and socially with the impact of 5-12,000 job losses

Priorities for Action

High quality, comprehensive life transition counselling – including financial advice about investing redundancy payments, post retirement financial planning, advocacy with creditors, support to maintain social and emotional well-being through significant change in financial circumstances and role.

Increased assistance to Financial Counselling and Emergency Relief services—who will see increased demand during at least the next three years.

Increased resources for family and relationship support services to provide the support that will reduce risk of family breakdowns through potentially several years of financial difficulty.

Response from the Australian Greens

The Australian Greens support legislating for the investment of savings from public sector cuts into a Canberra jobs fund. This measure aims to diversify the

Canberra economy while providing a disincentive for the elected government to save money through job cuts.

Response from the Australian Labor Party

Gai Brodtmann has been advocating for public sector savings that focus on non-staff cost savings, such as increased teleconferencing and reduced travel.

Responses to Questions at the Forum

Would the Candidates support removal of negative gearing tax concessions for residential investment properties?

Response from the Australian Greens

Removing negative gearing tax concessions would help to reduce housing prices, but Mr Sheikh does not expect the next Australian Government would implement this measure because the interests of the 1 million people who own residential investment properties are being given priority.

Response from the Australian Labor Party

The previous experience of removing this tax concession was a dramatic reduction in supply of housing, which also will increase housing costs. NRAS is considered a better strategy for increasing supply of housing at affordable price.

Will there be any room to improve the National Rental Affordability Scheme so it delivers genuinely affordable housing in the CT market, where 80% of market rent is still unaffordable for many?

Response from the Australian Labor Party

Any measures that increase supply are important to continue, including state and territory regulatory changes that ensure steady release of new land. NRAS should be more targeted to students, older women and people living with mental health and alcohol and other drug issues. Investment in improving and increasing public housing stock complements NRAS.

Response from the Australian Greens

Have published a costed plan and support development of more targeted measures to meet the needs of specific groups, eg the 1 million students who need affordable housing options. Recognise that women's needs around housing need specific consideration.

People with disabilities value DisabilityCare, but they also want opportunities to work. What will your party do to increase employment opportunities for people with disabilities?

Response from the Australian Labor Party

There is plenty of good will and interest in employing people with disabilities, so employers and colleagues need support and guidance to turn this good will into actual jobs. Targets can be a good motivator for action.

Response from the Australian Greens

Access to work is a fundamental right that needs to be enacted for people living with disability. Beyond DisabilityCare people need the infrastructure that supports access to work – transport, employer capability and culture change in workplaces.

What measures are included in the candidates policy platforms that address the health risks associated with climate change, and will there be a focus on population health issues in the coming term?

Response from the Australian Greens

A key component of mitigation of and adaption to climate change is dealing with the increased health risks eg spread of tropical diseases to the southern parts of Australia.

Measures that prevent ill-health are critical to reducing growth of poverty and exclusion.

Response from the Australian Labor Party

The focus on preventative health measures will be very important in responding to growing health risks and reducing prevalence of chronic disease. The Labor government has a good record on responding to increased obesity, smoking cessation (eg plain packaging) and supporting school sports. Medicare Local in Canberra is assisting with building access to holistic primary care and preventing increase in chronic disease.

What can be done to reduce the growth of out of pocket expenses for health care, and to improve equity of access to services?

Response from the Australian Greens

The Australian Greens have committed to establishing a Senate Inquiry into the drivers of increased out of pocket expenses for health care, because current evidence is not sufficient to inform policy reform. It is critical to get the right data and to prioritise reducing the expenses most linked with improved health status.

Response from the Australian Labor Party

Need to continue measures that increase access to bulk billing, because Canberra has such a low rate of bulk billing compared to other parts of Australia. Also need to address workforce shortages, in both primary care and specialist services.

Young People are engaged on issues (education, jobs, housing, asylum seekers and climate change) but do not engage as much in formal political processes. What is your answer to this?

Response from the Australian Labor Party

Public discourse and nasty politics have led people to disengage and feel disenfranchised. Parties need to change to provide opportunities for members to focus on the issues that motivate them to get involved in politics and focus less on process and positions. Need to modernise party processes to encourage young people to take on leadership positions. Labor Government has delivered low interest rates and low unemployment, both of which are good for young people.

Response from the Australian Greens

Need to mobilise people around the issues they care about and enable them to move from expressing concerns to taking action. Community organising continues to be an effective strategy, but also need to be prepared for “continuous campaigning”. Leaders need to articulate the theory of change – these actions will deliver this outcome – and how individual contributions can be part of social change. Young people have engaged well in some campaigns, including as volunteers for both the ACT Greens and for Adam Bandt in Melbourne. Can make better use of the internet to communicate and mobilise people.

How will the candidates increase the focus on early intervention when funding family support services, instead of prioritising crisis interventions?

Response from the Australian Greens

The community needs to make visible to evidence that supports early intervention and actively campaign on this priority. The cost:benefit analysis has been done, but can always use more evidence.

Response from the Australian Labor Party

Need better information to inform local planning, such as the work being done by Medicare Locals to map services, service gaps and changing community needs.

Income inequality has been invisible in the public debate during the Election Campaign. Why is that?

Response from the Australian Labor Party

The focus of much of the campaign has been on costs of living increases, but in fact costs of living are not going up faster real growth in household income.

Response from the Australian Greens

The focus on costs of living is a reflection of the way we measure economic progress – using Gross Domestic Product (GDP) measures is less accurate than measuring growth in Wellbeing. Australia needs a Wellbeing Index that is reported on as regularly as changes in GDP. A Wellbeing Index would more accurately identify which households are doing OK and those that are falling behind. Also need to campaign more effectively on income inequality and the impacts of that.

There is a lack of understanding of voting systems and processes. How can that be fixed?

Response from the Australian Labor Party

There is extensive civics education programs in schools and these are very important.

Response from the Australian Greens

Civics education needs to build in improving familiarity with preferential voting systems and use of different ballot forms for voting for candidates in the House of Representatives and the Australian Senate.

The Federal Government needs to pay more attention to the needs of the ACT Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community, and other urban and metropolitan Aboriginal and Torres Strait islander communities.

Response from the Australian Greens

A key strategy to address the lack of focus on ACT Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community issues is to improve the dialogue and co-operation between ACT Government Ministers and Federal Representatives and Senators. Simon Sheikh has developed an agreement with Minister Rattenbury to ensure that if he is elected there is good communication between them on local issues (eg how to reduce over-representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in the justice system and in prison) and opportunities to align Federal Government and ACT Government priorities and actions. Also need to debunk the stereotype about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples mostly living in regional and remote locations.

Response from the Australian Labor Party

A cross jurisdiction strategy is needed. If elected for a second term, Gai will implement more formal structures through which she can be informed of cross jurisdictional problems or ACT issues that need both a Territory and Commonwealth response. A real priority for addressing local community needs is to improve support to the Winnunga Nimmityjah Aboriginal Health Service. Also critical to increase the number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in the ACT who are enrolled to vote.

Questions on notice that candidates were invited to provide a response to following the forum:

Responses from the Australian Greens:

The Aboriginal Legal Service for ACT residents is currently offered via a NSW based service, that is not able to fully meet the needs of ACT community. What can be done to establish an independent Aboriginal Legal Service in the ACT?

The ACT Greens ensured the Parliamentary Agreement included increased funding for the Aboriginal Legal service, and were disappointed this was not included in the recent ACT budget, however, we will continue to advocate for this Item.

This federal election the Australian Greens are committing to increase funding to indigenous legal assistance services by 50% by 2014-15, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Legal Services, to double funding to Indigenous family violence prevention legal services. Increased funding will ensure better provision of services which we envisage would help current service provision to better meet local needs. We recognise that many in the local community think the ACT should have its own service, although there are also concerns this will lead to issues with funding arrangements. The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community in ACT is also strongly connected with surrounding areas in NSW which the current arrangement takes account of. This is a matter for ongoing consideration, but the most important thing is to increase funding, which will give better service to better meet local needs.

The Ngunnawal Bush Healing Farm model has been significantly reduced from the original 16 beds to 8 beds. What additional commitments will the Commonwealth make to fund the facility to the full 16 bed capacity?

The ACT Greens have championed this project and want it to be as successful as possible. We recognise community concerns about how drawn out the process has been, and recognise the frustration with the delays. It is our understanding that there have been some legitimate concerns regarding the original design application of the Farm, and that these issues are being progressed. While it is disappointing that the size of the facility has been reduced in the immediate design plans, Minister Rattenbury was pleased to hear at the recent Elected Body Annual Report Hearings that ACT Health, as

the lead agent, do intend for the Farm to be expanded to the original proposal for 16 beds in time.

The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Elected body has profound issues with the Indigenous Expenditure report which claims \$231m is allocated in the ACT, yet only \$18m is spent on frontline service delivery. Can you explain where the remaining funds are being utilised?

We are aware the Elected Body has raised concerns about funding allocation and expenditure reports, which Minister Rattenbury and the ACT Government has noted and agreed to improve. Collaborative work with the Elected Body is currently under way to improve both transparency and accountability of Government expenditure, and highlight the combined ACT and Commonwealth contributions. The recent publication of the 'ACT Closing the Gap Report - 2013' does provide a greater breakdown of programs expenditure, and the Elected Body has also been offered opportunities to further engage with the Budget process and with Treasury as a result of their effective engagement and strong representations on this issue.

The ACT greens are committed to ongoing consultation with the Elected Body and other community members to ensure the needs of the community are better understood by ACT Government and inform Government provision of front line services.

Justice reinvestment is gaining momentum in the ACT and it is thought that the ACT would be a good trial site given the size of the jurisdiction. What are your thoughts on this and if elected would you commit to progressing this area of work?

The Greens have long called for new, innovative ways to address the massive over-representation of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community in our justice system, which is also an unnecessary drain on public resources that are better spent on addressing the causes of the social problems that lead to offending. Greens Senator Penny Wright has been a strong supporter for the Justice Reinvestment approach in the Senate.

That's why Australian Greens have committed \$10 million to establish a National Centre for Justice Reinvestment, which would administer \$50m of grants over four years.

As a relatively small and highly progressive jurisdiction, the ACT has a long history of trialing national programs. I support the opportunity for the ACT to undertake a trial for a justice reinvestment program, and I acknowledge the great work to date on progressing this of the 2012 Australian Capital Territory's Australian of the year, Dr Tom Calma, in collaboration with many others.

Closing the Gap targets - given that the ACT is performing above national benchmarks on many of the building blocks and there are also many that are not relevant (so not measured) to the ACT, how can the Closing the Gap targets be developed to be more effective for the ACT, as this will commit the ACT Government to improving services for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples?

It is important to have national benchmarks to allow us to see how all areas are progressing and where there is greatest need. That is why the Australian Greens have pushed for national standards. As you say, needs are different across rural, regional and urban areas, but a rigorous set of national standards is necessary to allow us to track progress across the country, and ties government to marking any progress or failures. While the ACT does perform well against some targets, that shouldn't mean we put weaken our efforts for Closing the Gap or ignore the areas of existing disadvantage. The Greens are committed to doing more to work with local communities to identify areas of the greatest need, and to work with and beyond the Closing the Gap targets, and have also successfully called for Justice Outcomes to be included in future reports.

Excerpt from ACOSS *Bold Action for a Fair Future*

Commitments the next Federal Government should make in its first 100 days

Commence a Green Paper and White Paper process for tax reform using the Henry Tax Review as blueprint

Commence the development of an anti-poverty plan. Set a specific target - a national development goal - and report annually on progress to the Australian parliament.

Promise to increase the single rate of Allowances, including Youth Allowance and Newstart, by \$50 per week and index them to wage movements

Review family payments, including the Schools Kids Bonus, to target the payments to child poverty prevention, improving the income support for the poorest families.

Bring together business, union and community groups to make a compact about growing job opportunities particularly for people who are long term unemployed.

Commit to the National Rental Affordability Scheme as a long term government priority

Commence negotiations with the states and territories to fund a long term plan of action to expand affordable housing options and reduce homelessness.

Commit to investing in effective community based health care that creates healthy lives while reducing the pressure on hospitals and health budgets.

Make a long-term investment to improve Australia's mental and oral health so that neither condition predicts poverty, disadvantage or isolation.

Outline the policies that will ensure people with disability can get the job and income they need to live with dignity

Reaffirm commitment to the findings and recommendations of the Gonski review.

Agree on a timetable to hold a referendum on recognising Australia's First Peoples in the Constitution.

Commit to developing justice targets in relation to the Safe Communities Building Block under 'Closing the Gap' and to achieving such through the implementation of a National Partnership Agreement.

Abolish compulsory income management and redirect the savings to community development initiatives based on strong partnerships with local community leaders to improve economic and social outcomes at the local level.

Commit to strengthening engagement with civil society (for example through the COAG Reform Council) and ensure mechanisms for civil society to contribute to the broad agenda for structural reform.

Include the community sector in national economic reform agendas to ensure everyone shares the benefits of lifting productivity, jobs growth, structural shifts in our industries and developing a strong economic future.

ACTCOSS Media Releases during 2013 Federal Election Campaign

Tax Reform Key to Balancing Federal Budget (3 September)

The ACT Council of Social Service supports the tax and spending reform commitments sought in the open letter to the Prime Minister published today by the Australian Council of Social Services.

Cassandra Goldie, CEO of ACOSS said in the letter “We need a national conversation about what can reasonably be expected to be raised through taxes and who should receive which benefits and services.”

Director of the ACT Council of Social Service Susan Helyar said today “The ACT economy and community bear the brunt of a rush to return to surplus in two ways. People in the ACT affected by poverty and exclusion are stuck on inadequate income support and can’t access the services they need. And job cuts shrink public sector employment opportunities and private sector growth.

“ACOSS has outlined a plan to get the Federal Budget back in the black whilst maintaining essential spending on income support and social services:

1. Set medium term expenditure and revenue targets and restore the Budget to surplus when economic growth is restored to trend.
2. Reform the tax system to restore public revenues to a level that meets the community’s reasonable expectations of services and support as fairly and efficiently as possible.
3. Increase the equity and efficiency of our tax system by taxing income from different sources in the same way, removing tax benefits that distort saving and investment decisions (for example over-investment in existing housing which is a major cause of our high housing costs) and strengthen potentially sound state and territory tax bases such as Land and Payrolls and reduce reliance on inefficient Stamp Duties.
4. Stop spending on wasteful and poorly targeted programs (such as such as the Baby Bonus and Schoolkids Bonus), and programs that inflate the cost of essential services (such as the Extended Medicare Safety net) to make room for higher priorities such as an increase in Family Tax Benefits for low income families and the Newstart Allowance.
5. Stop income tax concessions that are not delivering good value to the community and are not well targeted. For example, many high income earners receive more throughout their lives in tax breaks for superannuation than if they were paid the full rate of the age pension.

“The ACT Government has already begun implementing tax reforms at territory level that will make our local tax system more equitable and efficient.

“People of the ACT need the Federal Government to take on tax reform as part of balancing the Federal Budget. We need the Federal Government to lead a national conversation about what is an equitable and efficient revenue and expenditure policy,

using an inclusive approach where all voices are heard and the hard issues are discussed.”

Copy of open letter to the next Prime Minister

Dear Prime Minister,

This open letter is about one of the key issues in this election - how the next Government will close the growing gap between the community’s reasonable expectations of Government and the revenue available. This problem will not be ‘solved’ in a single Budget. Without structural reform of tax and expenditure, it will burden the next Government for as long as it remains in office.

It will not be easy for the next Government to restore the Budget to surplus while making room for investment in the essential services and supports the community expects. You will hear many voices urging you to preserve or improve subsidies and tax breaks that benefit influential constituencies. It is our role to speak up for those whose voices are rarely heard.

We seek your assurance that, should you be elected, benefits and services for people at risk of poverty will not be reduced throughout the term of the next Government. These include the level and indexation of income support payments for people on low incomes, avoidance of policies that transfer people (such as people with disabilities or sole parents) from higher to lower payments, no time limits on income support, funding for social housing, employment services for disadvantaged jobseekers, and dental health services for low income earners. People who are already struggling to house themselves, feed their families, or find a job should not be expected to carry extra burdens as a result of Budget decisions.

It is possible to restore the Budget, improve the efficiency of both spending and taxes, and repair gaps in the social safety net such as disability services, adequate income support for unemployed people, schools funding, and affordable housing. We suggest that if you win Government, you take three steps.

First, we suggest a commitment be made to restore the Budget to surplus as economic conditions permit. Clear medium-term revenue and expenditure targets should be set, with the proviso that they should only apply when economic growth is restored to trend. Arbitrary time limits for the restoration of surplus are economically dangerous and should be avoided. The next Government should also avoid arbitrary limits on tax revenues. This is like fighting with one hand tied behind your back. The expenditure targets should allow for realistic indexation of funding for essential programs and avoid arbitrary rules that cramp the ability of Governments to re-order priorities.

Second, we urge the next Government to pursue structural reform of the tax system to restore public revenues as fairly and efficiently as possible. As the Treasury warns, Federal tax revenue is in structural decline. This is largely due to decisions made as the mining boom gathered pace in the mid to late 2000s, including eight successive income tax cuts and tax breaks for retirees. Now the revenue tide is running out. Compared with its average level over the decade prior to the GFC, Federal Government revenue has fallen by almost 3% of GDP which is equivalent to \$40 billion a year.

Federal and State Governments cannot continue to meet the community’s expectations for essential services with the third lowest public revenue levels in the OECD. Structural

reform is needed – not just an increase of taxes off the existing narrow income tax base. As long as income from different sources is taxed inconsistently, the well-advised can avoid their obligations leaving the rest to pay more. Inconsistent tax treatment also distorts saving and investment decisions, for example over-investment in existing housing which is a major cause of our high housing costs. State taxes also need reform, to strengthen potentially sound tax bases such as Land and Payrolls and reduce reliance on inefficient Stamp Duties.

This week ACOSS released a set of principles for tax reform. We proposed that the next Government announce its intention to undertake major reform of the tax system to improve its equity and efficiency, followed by a well-structured and transparent community consultation. We suggest that this start with a Green Paper early in the next term of Government, followed by a White Paper after extensive consultation. We are ready to play our part in this community dialogue on tax reform.

Our third suggestion is that the next Government restructure its spending to remove wasteful and poorly targeted programs and make room for higher priorities including those mentioned above. This should start with a thorough public review of the goals, targeting and cost effectiveness of major expenditure programs, and emerging pressures on spending such as population ageing.

Governments need to start a conversation with the community about what can reasonably be expected from them, and who should receive which benefits and services. The past decade witnessed an accumulation of poorly targeted programs that lack a clear purpose such as the Baby Bonus and Schoolkids Bonus, and programs that promote inflation in the cost of essential services such as the Extended Medicare Safety Net. These could be replaced with better-designed schemes. Last week we released a report modelling the effects of replacing the Baby and Schoolkids Bonuses with an increase in Family Tax Benefits for low income families to reduce child poverty.

Tax expenditures that have similar effects to direct spending should be included in this review, and aligned with structural reform of the tax system. For example, many high income earners receive more throughout their lives in tax breaks for superannuation than if they were paid the full rate of age pension.

The next Government can meet the community's reasonable expectations without leaving the Budget in the red, or the most vulnerable in the community to bear the cost. The key is inclusive policy development where all voices are heard and the hard issues are discussed.

Yours sincerely,
Dr Cassandra Goldie
Chief Executive Officer, ACOSS

Canberra Community Needs Support to Cope with Significant Job Losses (30 August)

The ACT Council of Social Service called today for candidates from the major parties to state whether the Canberra community will receive assistance to cope with projected job losses of between 5,000-12,000 workers over the coming three years.

Director of the ACT Council of Social Service Susan Helyar said today “Federal Governments have provided transition assistance in many communities over the past two decades to minimise the economic and social fall-out from significant job losses. It is only fair that the people of Canberra are treated with the same concern for their livelihoods and well-being.

“The Canberra community is anticipating significant job cuts over the coming years, as public sector spending contracts, households become more cautious in their spending and the private sector responds to a slowing economy. There is a real risk of increased housing stress, family breakdown and long term unemployment.

“Earlier this year, the Geelong and Broadmeadows communities faced the loss of 1,200 manufacturing jobs, in a population of around 185,000 people. The Federal Government provided \$67m in assistance. In 2002, the North Queensland sugar industry went through a major shake-up, and the Federal Government provided \$60m to support regional restructuring.

“But when it comes to the people of Canberra, all I’ve heard is a debate about how many jobs will go. Nothing about how the community will be supported to cope, nor how our economy will be supported to cope with the financial impacts of constrained investment and lower consumer confidence.

“The ACT Government Budget for 2013-14 included measures to buffer our community from the impact of reduced Federal Government employment and spending on goods and services in other industries. But they can’t carry the whole burden of protecting and supporting our community.

“At our forum with Candidates from the three major parties on 3 September, I will be seeking a response to ACTCOSS’s very reasonable call for:

1. High quality, comprehensive life transition counselling – including financial advice about investing redundancy payments, post retirement financial planning, advocacy with creditors, support to maintain social and emotional well-being through significant change in financial circumstances and role
2. Increased assistance to Financial Counselling and Emergency Relief services – who will see increased demand during at least the next three years
3. Increased resources for family and relationship support services to provide the support that will reduce risk of family breakdowns through potentially several years of financial difficulty”.

Need combination of measures to get people off welfare and into work (27 August)

The ACT Council of Social Service called today for the Coalition to commit to increasing Newstart by \$50/week and doubling wage subsidies (to a total of 20,000 places a year) in addition to implementing their policy of providing cash bonuses to people who move off welfare and into work.

“I note the measure announced today by the Coalition to provide cash bonuses to people who move off welfare and into work. Many people who have been unemployed find work in relatively low wage industries, so any additional income would be welcomed by them and their families,” said Susan Helyar, Director of the ACT Council of Social Service.

“But cash bonuses once people get a job will only be useful if they are implemented in combination with effective support during the time when people are unemployed.

“Evidence from service providers, employers and people who have been unemployed is that a combination of measures are needed to increase peoples’ capability and opportunity to get and keep a job:

1. Increase the maximum single rate of Newstart Allowance and other allowance payments (including Youth Allowance for young people not living in the family home) by \$50 per week
2. Index payments so they keep up with general living standards. Living in poverty stops people from getting ready for work and accessing the training and education needed to build the skills employers want.
3. Increase payments to Job Services Australia providers for interviews, work experience, training and support for jobseekers who are long-term unemployed to match the payments made to services supporting people at risk of long term unemployment
4. Double the number of places in the Wage Connect program for people unemployed long term to at least 20,000 places per year

“The Canberra community is anticipating significant job cuts over the coming years, as public sector spending contracts, households become more cautious in their spending and the private sector responds to a slowing economy. There is a real risk of increased long term unemployment.

Ms Helyar concluded “ACTCOSS calls on all candidates in the Federal Election to commit to implementing the measures employers, economists, services and people who have been unemployed agree will be effective in moving people out of welfare and into work.”