Asthma Australia Australian Capital Territory (ACT) Pre-Budget Submission 2025-26

February 2025

Budget Proposals

Asthma Australia's submission focuses on the following funding proposals for consideration in the Australian Capital Territory (ACT) 2025-26 Budget:

Proposal	Investment
1. Wood heaters - Bring forward phasing out wood heaters to 2030 and review and continue the ACT Wood Heater Removal Program	The ACT Government bring forward the date for phasing out wood heaters to 2030 and regularly review the ACT Wood Heater Removal Program to ensure replacement costs do not prevent people from installing more efficient and healthy forms of heating.
2. Air quality - Increase access to local air quality information	The ACT Government fund a low-cost air quality sensor pilot program to ensure the ACT community has access to air quality information. Air quality sensors can cost around $200 and the pilot could engage the community to collect air quality information.

About Asthma Australia

Asthma is a respiratory condition that affects 2.8 million people in Australia, with children being the most impacted. Asthma is responsible for at least one Australian death every day, making it a serious health concern. Despite the prevalence of asthma, it is often misunderstood, causing fear and anxiety for those living with the condition. Asthma Australia has been the leading charity for people with asthma and their communities for over 60 years.

The challenges of climate change, unhealthy air, and health inequity make it more important than ever for people with asthma to have a voice. We search for new and progressive approaches to challenge the status quo. Our work is grounded in evidence and centred on the experiences of people affected by asthma. We believe by listening to those living with asthma, designing solutions with them, and influencing change, people with asthma can live freely, unrestricted by their asthma.

Asthma in the ACT

Impact on the health system and the community

Asthma affects about 11.5% of the population in the ACT, an estimated 51,500 people.[1] Asthma is the leading cause of total burden of disease in Australian children aged 1–9 years.[2] The ACT has one of the highest rates of allergic rhinitis (hay fever) in Australia.[3]

Asthma places a significant burden on the hospital system. Nationally in 2023-24 there were approximately 92,000 presentations to the emergency department (ED) of public hospitals with asthma. About 44,000 (48%) were admitted, including admission in the ED or admission to a hospital ward, and 48% were triaged as urgent.[4] ED presentation for asthma costs $443 on average,[5] and repeated asthma-related presentations to EDs increase the risk of hospitalisation.[6]In 2021-22, the ACT had 296 potentially preventable asthma hospitalisations.[7]

In 2024, asthma was the 8th leading contributor to the overall burden of disease in Australia, having risen from 10th place in 2003.[8] Asthma can be caused and exacerbated by environmental conditions related to the warming climate, which means asthma outcomes will likely worsen as climate change impacts increase.

ACT Budget Priority Areas

The ACT has been a leader in addressing air quality and climate change through its policies and programs. It has committed to phasing out wood heaters and gas and provided support for home electrification, including incentives for households to transition to efficient heating, cooling and cooking. These policies, which Asthma Australia has supported, will improve the air people breathe in their homes and outdoors, and benefit people living with asthma in the ACT.

Addressing air pollution is a strategic priority for Asthma Australia as even low levels of air pollution are associated with asthma exacerbations and hospitalisations. Some air pollutants can also increase the risk of developing asthma. Wood heaters are typically the greatest contributor to air pollution in Canberra,[9] despite being relied on as a primary heating source by less than 5% of Canberra households.[10] A 2024 health impact assessment focusing on the ACT found wood heaters are the main source of air pollution in the ACT and the smoke produced caused up to 63 premature deaths annually, with equivalent costs of up to $333 million.[11]

In comparison to other significant contributors to air pollution in the ACT such as bushfires, hazard reduction burns, and dust storms,[12] wood heaters are an easily avoidable source of air pollution. Not only does reverse-cycle air conditioning provide a cost-effective and energy efficient alternative to wood heating,[13] the disproportionate contribution to the ACT's air pollution from the small number of households relying on wood heaters means targeted policies can deliver significant improvements in air quality.

Asthma Australia commends the ACT Government for its commitment to phasing out wood heaters.[14] However, the current target of 2045 will continue to subject people with asthma – and others – to harmful wood heater pollution for too long. We are calling for the transition to be brought forward to 2030, in line with the ACT Government's announcement to stop gas installation.

Asthma Australia's 2025-26 Budget proposals work to deliver savings for the health system by addressing improving the environment in which people with asthma live. This means people living with asthma in the ACT can avoid unnecessary hospital visits, stay healthy, and lead active and productive lives.

Priority 1: Bring forward phasing out wood heaters to 2030 and review and continue the ACT Wood Heater Removal Program

There is no 'safe' level of air pollution, meaning health impacts can occur even at low levels of air pollution.[15] In a 2023 report, the ACT's Commissioner for Sustainability and the Environment found wood heaters have the greatest impact on air quality in the ACT and recommended phasing out wood heaters from ACT suburbs.[16] Wood heaters are not an efficient or healthy form of heating. While heating a home is vital in the ACT during the colder months, it should not expose entire neighbourhoods to toxic air pollution.

In 2020, Asthma Australia conducted a representative survey of 25,039 people which found that people exposed to wood heater smoke are largely unable to protect themselves against exposure to its impacts.[17] The survey found the majority of people support regulations to reduce the impact of wood heaters, with even stronger support among people with asthma.

Asthma Australia commends the ACT Government's commitment to phasing out wood heaters and its in-principal agreement to ban the installation of new wood heaters in all ACT suburbs, in response to the report from the Commissioner for Sustainability and the Environment. Asthma Australia's 2023-24 ACT Pre-Budget Submission called for all new housing developments and individual houses in the ACT to be wood heater free.

However, to address the well-known health impacts of wood heaters and prevent their installation in the lead up to the phase-out, the ACT Government should bring forward the transition date from 2045 to 2030, in line with the ACT Government's announcement to stop gas installation. New wood heater installation and the ongoing use of wood heaters hampers the effectiveness and intent of the Wood Heater Removal Program. Decisive action is required to ensure the ACT community is not being exposed to the ongoing impacts of pollution from wood heaters and that ACT Government action on emissions is not undermined.

Asthma Australia acknowledges increased financial support under the ACT's Wood Heater Removal Program, including higher rebates for low income households, which we called for in our 2023-24 ACT Pre-Budget Submission. Currently, the Program provides a $500 rebate to help with the costs of removing a wood heater for homeowners, and $1,250 for people with a concession card.[18] We recommend regular review of the costs of replacing wood heaters to ensure these costs do not prevent people from installing more efficient and healthy forms of heating.

INVESTMENT REQUESTED: The ACT Government bring forward the date for phasing out wood heaters to 2030 and regularly review the ACT Wood Heater Removal Program to ensure replacement costs do not prevent people from installing more efficient and healthy forms of heating.

Priority 2: Increase access to local air quality information

A key finding from the national State of the Environment Report in 2021 was that better information could reduce the impacts of poor air quality.[19] The report recognised that communities need real-time, local air quality information during periods of air pollution.

The ACT Government's *Bushfire Smoke and Air Quality Strategy 2021–2025* recognises the need to expand air quality monitoring in the ACT, with a specific objective to enhance air quality monitoring and forecasting. This included meeting this objective by investigating the use of low-cost air quality sensors to determine its utility and reliability.[20]

Local air quality information is essential for people to be able to understand when wood heater emissions reach harmful levels in their neighbourhood. However, because air pollution from wood heaters is highly localised to streets or neighbourhoods, the true extent of wood heater pollution is unlikely to be detected by the three air quality monitoring stations in the ACT.[21]

Air quality monitoring stations provide highly accurate information but require suitable locations and can be expensive to establish and run. In contrast, low-cost air quality sensors provide air quality data at a good level of accuracy. Additionally, there is more flexibility in placement as the sensors can be affixed to premises such as schools or council buildings. Some sensors require a data connection while others have built in communications.

A trial of low-cost air quality sensor pilot program is an important step towards ensuring ACT residents have access to local air quality information, and in meeting the objectives of the *Bushfire Smoke and Air Quality Strategy 2021–2025*. The proposed trial of low-cost sensors would also increase understanding of how these sensors can be integrated into the existing monitoring networks and how information from the sensors can be shared with the public.

Involving the community in a pilot, including where the sensors can be located, increases the understanding of air quality and health impacts. An example of this is the Breathe Melbourne, a citizen science study involving primary school students to measure exposure to air pollution as they commute to school. The study's location of inner west Melbourne has poor air quality and high asthma prevalence among children. Around 300 primary school children would collect air pollution data with backpacks that act as a portable air sensor and analysis of the data would inform behavioural interventions to reduce air pollution exposure.[22]

Air quality sensors cost as little as $200. They provide valuable air quality information to local communities, increasing community knowledge about the risks of poor air quality and involving community in solutions to address air quality. This information is critical to ensure that people vulnerable to the health impact of air pollution exposure can protect themselves and their families.

INVESTMENT REQUESTED: The ACT Government fund a low-cost air quality sensor pilot program to ensure the ACT community has access to air quality information. Air quality sensors can cost around $200 and the pilot could engage the community to collect air quality information.

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