



**ACT**  
Government

Chief Minister, Treasury and  
Economic Development

## Freedom of Information Publication Coversheet

The following information is provided pursuant to section 28 of the *Freedom of Information Act 2016*.

FOI Reference: CMTEDDFOI 2020-134

Information to be published	Status
1. Access application	N/A
2. Decision notice	Published
3. Documents	Published
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8. Additional information identified by Ombudsman	N/A
9. Decision made by ACAT	N/A
10. Additional information identified by ACAT	N/A

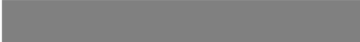


**ACT**  
Government

Chief Minister, Treasury and  
Economic Development

Our ref: CMTEDDFOI2020-134 (Stage 2)



via email: 

Dear 

### **FREEDOM OF INFORMATION REQUEST**

I refer to your application under section 30 of the *Freedom of Information Act 2016* (the Act), received by the Chief Minister, Treasury and Economic Development Directorate (CMTEDD) on 8 July 2020, in which you sought access to the final results for all surveys and polls commissioned or received by the ACT Government since your last request.

Specifically, you are seeking:

*“...the final results for all surveys and polls commissioned or received by the ACT Government since my last request. Surveys and polls may include, but are not limited to, research performed by Orima Research Pty Ltd, Q&A Market Research, or received as part of a YourSay Community Panel or consultation.*

*These documents may include but are not limited to reports issued by the consultants or contractors and include questions, results, conclusions, analysis and/or recommendations”.*

Your request has been interpreted to be a request for all information in the possession of CMTEDD in relation to the results of any Surveys and Polls conducted for or within CMTEDD from 8 August 2019 to 8 July 2020.

On 17 July 2020 you agreed to a staged release of the documents as seven documents were subject to third party consultation.

This decision is part two of your request and relates only to the release of the *Motivating ACT Youth Engagement: a pilot project* produced by the University of Canberra News and Media Research Centre (N&MRC). The decision in relation to the other surveys identified by CMTEDD as being within the scope of your request were provided to you on 29 July 2020.

### **Authority**

I am an Information Officer appointed by the Director-General under section 18 of the Act to deal with access applications made under Part 5 of the Act.

### **Third party consultation**

In making this decision, third party consultation was completed in accordance with section 38 of the Act. The third party views have been considered in making this decision.

## **Timeframes**

In accordance with section 40 of the Act, CMTEDD was required to provide a decision on your access application by 5 August 2020. However, due to third party consultation, this timeframe has been extended by 15 working days pursuant to section 38(5) of the Act. The due date for this request is therefore 26 August 2020.

## **Decision on access**

I have decided to grant partial access to the relevant document. The document released to you is provided as **Attachment A** to this letter.

In accordance with section 54(2) of the Act a statement of reasons outlining my decisions is below.

## **Statement of Reasons**

In reaching my access decisions, I have taken the following into account:

- the Act;
- the content of the document that falls within the scope of your request;
- the views of the relevant third party; and
- the *Human Rights Act 2004*.

## **Exemption claimed**

My reasons for deciding not to grant full access to the identified documents are as follows:

### Public Interest

The Act has a presumption in favour of disclosure. As a decision maker I am required to decide where, on balance, public interest lies. As part of this process I must consider factors favouring disclosure and factors favouring non-disclosure.

In *Hogan v Hinch* (2011) 243 CLR 506, [31] French CJ stated that when 'used in a statute, the term [public interest] derives its content from "the subject matter and the scope and purpose" of the enactment in which it appears'. Section 17(1) of the Act sets out the test, to be applied to determine whether disclosure of information would be contrary to the public interest. These factors are found in subsection 17(2) and Schedule 2 of the Act.

### Factors favouring disclosure (Schedule 2 section 2.1)

Taking into consideration the information contained in the documents found to be within the scope of your request, I have identified that the following public interest factor in favour of disclosure is relevant to determine if release of the information contained within these documents is within the 'public interest':

- (a) *disclosure of the information could reasonably be expected to do any of the following:*
- (i) *promote open discussion of public affairs and enhance the government's accountability.*

Having considered the factor identified as relevant in this matter, I consider that release of the information within the scope of the request may contribute to open discussion of public affairs and enhance the government's accountability. I consider there is a public interest in the results of surveys conducted by the ACT Government. I am satisfied that there is a significant public interest in releasing this information.

*Factors favouring non-disclosure (Schedule 2 section 2.2)*

As required in the public interest test set out in section 17 of the Act, I have also identified the following public interest factor in favour of non-disclosure that I believe is relevant to determine if release of the information contained within these documents is within the 'public interest':

- (a) *disclosure of the information could reasonably be expected to do any of the following:*
- (ii) prejudice the protection of an individual's right to privacy or any other right under the *Human Rights Act 2004*;

When considering the documents and factors in favour of non-disclosure, I have considered the information contained in the *Motivating ACT Youth Engagement – a pilot project* survey particularly the identification of those who participated in the focus groups and completed the survey. I consider that it is unreasonable to release the identifying features of those who were part of this project as the information may identify members of the focus groups to other members that took part in the survey.

Noting the pro-disclosure intent of the Act, I am satisfied that redacting only the information that is not in the public interest to release, while releasing the rest of the information will ensure that the intent of the Act is met and will provide you with access to the majority of information held by CMTEDD within the scope of your request.

### **Charges**

Processing charges are not applicable for this request because the number of pages being released to you is below the charging threshold of 50 pages.

### **Online publishing – Disclosure Log**

Under section 28 of the Act, CMTEDD maintains an online record of access applications called a disclosure log. Your original access application, my decision and documents released to you in response to your access application will be published in the CMTEDD disclosure log 3 days after the date of this decision. Your personal contact details will not be published.

You may view CMTEDD disclosure log at

<https://www.cmtedd.act.gov.au/functions/foi/disclosure-log-2020>.

### **Ombudsman Review**

My decision on your access request is a reviewable decision as identified in Schedule 3 of the Act. You have the right to seek Ombudsman review of this outcome under section 73 of the Act within 20 working days from the day that my decision is published in CMTEDD disclosure log, or a longer period allowed by the Ombudsman.

We recommend using this form [Applying for an Ombudsman Review](#) to ensure you provide all of the required information. Alternatively, you may write to the Ombudsman at:

The ACT Ombudsman  
GPO Box 442  
CANBERRA ACT 2601  
Via email: [actfoi@ombudsman.gov.au](mailto:actfoi@ombudsman.gov.au)

**ACT Civil and Administrative Tribunal (ACAT) Review**

Under section 84 of the Act, if a decision is made by the Ombudsman under section 82(1), you may apply to the ACAT for a review of the Ombudsman decision. Further information may be obtained from the ACAT at:

ACT Civil and Administrative Tribunal  
Level 4, 1 Moore St  
GPO Box 370  
Canberra City ACT 2601  
Telephone: (02) 6207 1740  
<http://www.acat.act.gov.au/>

Should you have any queries in relation to your request please contact me by telephone on 6207 7754 or by email at [CMTEDDFOI@act.gov.au](mailto:CMTEDDFOI@act.gov.au).

Yours sincerely,



Philip Dachs  
Information Officer  
Information Access Team  
Chief Minister, Treasury and Economic Development Directorate

12 August 2020

# Motivating ACT Youth Engagement: a pilot project

Prue Robson, Kerry McCallum, Minh Thu Pham Tran, Jiayi Wang & Barbara Walsh

Report to the ACT Government Communication and Engagement Division

14 April 2020

## Contributors

**Kerry McCallum** is Professor of Communication and Media Studies and Director of the News & Media Research Centre, University of Canberra. Her research in Political Communication specialises in the relationships between changing media, public opinion and Australian social policy. She is currently lead researcher on the Australian Research Council Discovery Project *Breaking Silence: Media and the Child Abuse Royal Commission*. As an experienced academic leader Kerry has implemented complex change management processes at the faculty, university and national levels. This trajectory is supported and grounded by nearly a decade of previous professional experience working in federal parliament in political and government communication roles.

**Prue Robson** is a Lecturer in Communication and Media and the Discipline Lead for the Corporate and Public Communication degree at the University of Canberra. Prue has a professional background in public relations working with a range of regional and national clients, and she has been teaching public relations and strategic communication to undergraduates since 2009. Prue holds a Bachelor of Communication (Hons)/Bachelor of Business and is a PhD Candidate at the University of Canberra. Her research interests include public relations, place branding, measurement and evaluation and social media.

**Barbara Walsh** is a strategic communications practitioner and academic. Prior to joining the University of Canberra as a Lecturer in Communication in 2009, she worked in the communication industry in Sydney, London and Canberra for 25 years. At UC Barbara has lectured in strategic and organisational communication and convened public relations degrees in Canberra and Hong Kong; developed curricula for Communication and Media as Program Director. In 2016 she acted in the role of UC's Deputy Director of Student Success. She has developed work integrated learning curricula for the faculty which saw her named as UC's Educator of the Year in 2019. Barbara works closely with the communication industry in Canberra in both the private and public sectors, generating student projects and placements and developing new ways of integrating real-world issues and needs into the curricula, for the benefit of the industry, the students and the university.

**Minh Thu Pham Tran** is undertaking a Master of Communication at the University of Canberra. She holds a Bachelor of Commerce/Bachelor of Languages from the Australian National University.

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## **Executive Summary**

In August 2019 the Australian Capital Territory (ACT) Government contracted the University of Canberra News and Media Research Centre (N&MRC) to undertake a pilot project to investigate how young people in the ACT are accessing information, engaging with government, and exercising their civic rights.

The Motivating ACT Youth Engagement Pilot Project (MAYEPP) was undertaken as part of a supervised student internship in the University of Canberra Master of Communication program. The aim of the study was to investigate young people's knowledge of and attitudes towards local government and civic engagement, specifically in the ACT. The researchers conducted three focus groups with ACT young people aged 18-24 in November-December 2019. These groups represented youth who were highly politically engaged, moderately engaged and the 'excluded middle'. Eight major findings from this study are summarised below:

1. Government was relevant to young ACT people's lives, but they had little understanding of the Australian system of government, and low knowledge of ACT Government services and responsibilities.
2. There was considerable scepticism and distrust around politics, government and the consultative process. Participants did not feel that young people's interests were adequately represented at all levels of government.
3. Participants felt the government (and society more generally) was uninterested in young people's opinions and current efforts at youth engagement were tokenistic.
4. Many participants felt that the government needed to recognise that young people understand young people best, make efforts to meet young people in community settings, and appoint more young people into government roles.
5. Social media was the main channel for accessing government information, but participants also found traditional communication channels useful to gain information.

6. Most participants wanted government information to be creatively communicated, short and simple, and personalised to their preferred communication channel.
7. The major barrier to young people engaging with the ACT Government was a lack of knowledge about political processes which left them feeling unprepared for civic participation. Other constraining factors were a perceived climate of condescension towards young people, accessibility, their own confidence around authority and government processes, and the perceived level of time and effort it took to get involved.
8. Participants were more likely to become involved when they were personally interested in or affected by an issue, or when they had a personal connection or prior experience with government or community organisations.

The MAYEPP project raises three issues for consideration by the ACT Government.

1. **Recognising the gap between civic knowledge and civic engagement.** Participants in this study recognised that the ACT Government and its responsibilities were relevant to their life as a young person, but felt they lacked foundational knowledge about the workings of the Australian system of government. The ACT government, with responsibility for secondary education, shares responsibility with other parts of the ACT community for ensuring that young people gain a basic civics education.
2. **Moving from symbolic participation to shared decision-making.** Participants in this study called for more sincere, deep and genuine government engagement. They recommended co-designed engagement and feedback exercises that centre young people in deliberative decision-making.
3. ACT Government should **engage young people in developing and designing tailored communications**, activities and programs.

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## Introduction

This study seeks to explore young people's knowledge of and attitudes towards local government and civic engagement in the ACT. In the context of this research, 'civic engagement' focusses specifically on the activation of political and civic identity through engagement and influence in the public and political sphere (Shaw et al. 2014).

The ACT Government wants to better understand the ways young people can engage with government and influence the decision-making process. The purpose of this study was to gain baseline data about how young people aged 18-24 understand and engage with government and political processes in the ACT, where they access information and how they share knowledge and participate in their local community. This pilot research project employed qualitative focus groups, comprising young people aged 18-24 who resided in the ACT.

Young Canberrans are a particularly difficult cohort for the ACT Government to access and engage. Low levels of democratic participation of young people is a nationally recognised issue (MOAD, 2019). However, there is less research about youth engagement with local government (Freeman & McCallum, 2013). Existing research shows that youth participation is limited in local government contexts; while young people's participation is considered important and desirable, there is a lack of information on how to successfully engage young people in local government and community decisions (Augsberger et al., 2017).

Further, recent research conducted by the N&MRC found that young people are among the most likely to avoid accessing information about current affairs and are hard to engage through news (Fisher et al., 2019; Galan, 2019). While nearly all young people use social media (Sensis, 2018), the effectiveness of digital civic engagement, especially in engaging youth at the local government level, has been mixed (Augsberger et al., 2018; Freeman, 2016). This raises significant questions about how governments and other institutions can engage with this key cohort of citizens. Research is needed to better understand how young people in 2020 are accessing information, engaging with government, and exercising their civic rights. This research, while limited in scope, contributes to a better understanding of the

current youth engagement landscape and provides foundational research and recommendations for future ACT Government youth engagement initiatives.

To shed more light on the issue of youth civic engagement, the ACT Government employed the University of Canberra's News and Media Research Centre to undertake a pilot research project. The MAYEP project was undertaken as part of a supervised student internship in the University of Canberra Master of Communication program.

The research addressed the following research questions:

1. What is young people's (aged 18-24) understanding of the role of the local government, specifically the ACT Government, and its relevance to issues facing young people?
2. What are young people's attitudes towards local government and civic engagement?
3. How do young people engage with, and access information about, what's happening in their local community?
4. What motivates (or would motivate) young people to become involved in, and share knowledge about, local government and their community?

# Review of the Literature

## *Young people and civic engagement*

Youth participation literature highlights that a decline in youth civic engagement is housed in the context of a decline in civic engagement in society more broadly, and that the drop in youth participation in particular may have dire consequences for the future of democracy (Shaw et al., 2014). Today's young adults are less likely than children of the 1970s to exhibit nine out of the ten 'characteristics of citizenship' (e.g. Flanagan & Levine, 2010). However, a resurgence of research focusing on the rights of the child in the digital era (Livingstone & Third, 2017; Third et al., 2020; MoAD, 2019; Head, 2011) has deepened understanding of youth engagement and modes of participation. Research by the Canadian Samara Centre for Democracy found that despite claiming to be uninterested in politics, young people engage in political discussions with their friends through daily conversations, emails or social media channels (Ryan & Mordern, 2019). Governments at federal, state and local levels have a responsibility to engage with young adults and empower them as citizens. More can be done to facilitate and encourage youth to voice their opinions and ideas, especially when it comes to the problems that relate to their daily lives (DHHS, 2016; Head, 2010).

The Victorian Government has recognised that young people are keen to become involved in the decision-making process, but are often unaware of the ways to do so (DHHS, 2016). The *Youth Policy: Building Strong Youth Engagement in Victoria* report found youth are willing to engage with the community and local government to address and solve the issues that affect them (DHHS, 2016). The Victorian Government's *Youth Policy* was designed to amplify the voice of youth in government settings, as well as increasing youth civic engagement. The policy provides young people with many resources and networks, including annual surveys, youth summits and conferences and design labs as a tool kit to help them become more actively engaged (DHHS, 2016). Such initiatives involve young people in the decision-making process by facilitating civic engagement activities targeted at the youth population. Not only will this allow young people to express their own experiences, ideas and thoughts, but will also further generate their contributions towards the projects, programs and decisions made by government. There is a growing body of literature in Organisational Communication studies that recognises

the need for organisations to develop an ‘architecture of listening’ that ensures stakeholders are engaged in every element of organisational structure and practice (see Macnamara, 2016). A ‘listening’ perspective shifts the onus to engage from the citizen to powerful institutions. This accords with Hart’s (1992) Ladder of Participation which theorised that at the lowest levels, civic participation amounted to little more than tokenism, whereas the higher rungs represented deep political engagement and co-design of policy outcomes.

### *Young people, news consumption and information-seeking behaviours*

Young people from 18 to 25, also known as Generation Z (Dimock, 2019), are ‘digital natives’ who spend much of their time online. The *Digital News Report*, Australia’s leading survey of news consumption, found the information-seeking behaviour and involvement in activities of young people differs significantly from their parents’ generation. Young Australians have embraced mobile technologies and utilise them as the main tool to consume news and information (Fisher et al., 2019, p. 96). Social media, online news feeds, search engines, mobile news alerts and mobile applications were identified as the main channels through which young people access news and receive information (Fisher et al., 2019; Galan et al., 2019). This research also shows that Australians are the lightest news consumers and less interested in news and politics compared to other countries (Fisher et al., 2019), suggesting that our young people are likely to be less engaged with news and current affairs. They tend to find the news to be negative (Fisher et al., 2019) and feel worn out by it (Galan et al., 2019). Additionally, although young people today are concerned about disinformation and fake news, and more likely than other generations to fact-check, they are still sharing unverified news on social media platforms (Fisher, et al., 2019). On the other hand, in line with the finding of the Victorian government’s Youth Policy report (DHHS, 2016), Fisher, et al., (2019) found that the majority of the youth population perceive that the media is helping them to keep up with what is happening around the world.

Young people in the digital era are more likely to practice civic engagement through informal networks and online communities (Sherrod et al., 2010). According to Harris, Wyn and Younes (2010), the use of social networking sites is considered a form of engagement for many young people who feel that they do not have alternative public spaces to engage with others. Governments have used these online

spaces as a way to reach out to young people with mixed success. It is essential that governments adapt to dynamic digital environments when communicating with young people. At the same time, young people have expressed that engaging with the proliferation of online news can feel like a chore. Galan et al. (2019) found that young people find news exhausting, overwhelming and hard to discern the essential messages. As a consequence, young people perceive those engagements as unappealing and insincere. Furthermore, when it comes to getting involved in the decision-making process, young adults mention that they prefer face-to-face interactions online interactions (Fisher et al., 2019, p. 97). There is little research about youth news and information consumption and engagement in the ACT context. However, a recent report based on interviews with members of the Tuggeranong Community Council found that young participants appreciated face-to-face meetings as they offered them opportunities to exchange opinions with their peers and understand the problems from multiple perspectives (Tuggeranong Community Council, 2019).

#### *Young people and connection with the community*

Foundational relationships are essential to establishing a meaningful network between local governments and the youth population. It is argued that a person with a well-connected social network is likely to have access to more resources and opportunities that are beneficial to them and society (Bourdieu, 1984; Portes, 1998; Putnam, 2000). Research also shows that community is essential to young people's wellbeing since it can broaden their networks and provide them with the opportunities to interact with others through local groups and activities (Shaw et al. 2014). Not only will this improve their life quality individually, but it also will establish their trust in society and government.

Shaw et al. (2014) further highlight that the building and maintenance of channels of communication is the key component in the relationships forming process. It is suggested that governments need to create a culturally sensitive and flexible environment for young people. Research from the South Australian Youth Advisory Council found that inclusivity was key to bridging young people's diverse cultural, social and economic backgrounds (YACSA, 2016). Through these relationships, individuals can interact and form grounds for mutual understanding (Shaw et al., 2014). This in turn leads to community agency, which can allow its members to



manage, utilise and enhance their resources in addressing local issues (Brennan, Luloff & Ricketts, 2007; Hart, 1992). Hence, in the context of this project, the government should be responsible for facilitating these civic engagements and making them open and accessible. Civic engagement exercises targeted to young people also need to be tailored to the wants and needs of the youth population, since young people pay more attention to issues that are relevant to them (Galan et al., 2019).

Building confidence, forming connections and establishing contributions are regarded as key elements that help motivate civic engagement among youth populations (Eccles & Gootman, 2002; Lerner et al., 2005; Sherrod et al., 2010). Shaw et al. (2014) recognise that together with locally formed communities, young people are presented with opportunities to become active contributors towards community development. These 'active youth' are deemed as future leaders and activists that will help shape local life and wellbeing in the long-term future (Shaw et al., 2014). It is believed that young role models can motivate other members of the youth population and model engagement behaviours (ACT Government et al., 2018), promote civic engagement (Shaw et al., 2014) and further shape the direction of public opinion amongst youth (ACT Government et al., 2018). Thus, having an inclusive community space and active young role models will help to generate more civic engagement among the youth population.

#### *Diversity in youth civic engagement*

On the other hand, when young people do engage in civic life, there tends to be a lack of diversity among the participants who decide to become involved. Augsberger et al. (2018) criticise the unbalanced representation of young people participating in youth councils. Specifically, the recruitment and selection of highly engaged youth in formal consultation processes can create a misrepresentation of diversity within the community. Since high performing students are often provided with more opportunities to engage, youth councils can reproduce inequality and misrepresent the voices of marginalised youth, leading to many of the key population of youth being left out. According to Nairn et al. (2006), either "troublemakers" or "high achievers" are mostly targeted for youth engagement, leaving out many other members in the "excluded middle" group. Thus, the excluded group become uninterested or tend to consider involvement with local government as "unattractive

or inconvenient” (Nairn et al., 2006). As a result, this group turns to the online “intimate, social and unregulated youth space” where they can express themselves and voice their opinions (Harris et al., 2010). This has led to an unfavourable portrait of young people today as being “disaffected, angry and untrusting” (Ryan & Mordern, 2019). However, this assumption can be challenged since young people today actually tend to hold positive attitudes towards the government (Ryan & Mordern, 2019). It is crucial to have a diverse representation of the youth population in civic engagement. Hence, this project seeks to investigate the factors that motivate or limit the “excluded middle” group of youth to become more involved with civic life.

### *Civic knowledge, engagement and local government*

This research acknowledges that youth in the ACT belong to a unique geographic, cultural and political system. Unlike Australia’s six states, the ACT has only two levels of government, and is the seat of federal parliament. A knowledge of its unique political system cannot be assumed. When investigating civic participation in municipalities in Azerbaijan, Hasanov (2009) recognised that due to the lack of legal and political education and knowledge, many citizens do not understand the difference between the authorities of the executive body and the municipality. As a result, many people do not completely understand that they have the right to influence and negotiate with officials and authorities. These factors must be acknowledged when dealing with youth civic engagement in the context of the ACT, where people can feel confused between the responsibilities of the Federal Government and those of the ACT. This in turn impacts their capacity to voice opinions or attempt to influence the decision-making process.

In order for municipalities to work effectively with the population, it is important to inform people on a regular basis about their work, provide mechanisms for feedback, and to respond actively to appeals for transparency (Hasanov, 2009). Research shows that messages which are inspirational and contain a mix of both positive and negative sides of the issue are viewed to be more effective and influential (Ryan & Mordern, 2019). Arguably, similar findings would apply in the context of the ACT Government in its ongoing development of its relationships with constituents.

The generation of meaningful engagements amongst young adults in the ACT requires the formation and delivery of creatively formed, shaped and delivered

messages. In the preparation of its digital message, governments must respond to young people's digital habits (Fisher et al., 2019) without abandoning traditional mediums of radio and newspaper that have proven to be an effective way to promote community groups and forums. Moreover, the diversity and inclusivity in youth civic engagement should be emphasised, so as to attract more young people. More resources and opportunities for government participation should be made to be more relevant, open and accessible; hence, young people will become more interested and more likely to get involved. The ACT Government should provide frequent feedback in order to establish and maintain a long-term meaningful relationship with its young citizens. Consequently, interactions between the government and its youth populations will become habitualised amongst young people.

This review of academic literature and recent government reports concludes that more research is needed to address the current state of youth engagement in the ACT. Particularly in light of the rapidly changing media environment and changing nature of digital political engagement, attention should be given to the 'disengaged middle' group of youth whose preferences for engagement and media habits may have been ignored. The following research project addresses the ACT's unique system of representation and the types of engagement exercises and messaging that are likely to be effective in engaging the youth of the ACT.

## Research Design

The aim of this pilot project was to investigate young people's knowledge of and attitudes towards local government and civic engagement, specifically in the ACT. The project was a small-scale qualitative research project involving three focus groups with young people and a literature review of relevant published reports and academic literature. Ethics approval for the project was received from the University of Canberra (HREC-20192213) before the data collection process began.

Focus group participants were aged between 18-24 and resided in the ACT. As an incentive to participate in the study and as per the ACT Government procedure for focus groups, all participants received a \$100 gift voucher for their involvement. Focus groups ranged between 5-10 people and were approximately 90 minutes in duration. Drawing on insights from the review of academic literature, three cohorts of young people were recruited.

- Focus group 1 consisted of members of the ACT Youth Advisory Council and were considered to be politically aware with high levels of civic engagement.
- Focus group 2 consisted of members of the ACT Government's YourSay Community Panel. These participants were considered to have moderate civic engagement due to their decision to sign up and participate in the Panel.
- Focus group 3 was made up of young people recruited through the University of Canberra (posters, mailing list, word of mouth). This group was considered to have lower civic engagement and represented the 'excluded middle' (Nairn, 2006).

Focus groups were held between November 2019 and December 2019 and were conducted by the Chief Investigators, with the support and involvement of the student researchers. The focus groups addressed a range of topics regarding civic knowledge and participation and invited participants to recommend ways in which they might better engage with the ACT Government.

With the consent of the participants, focus groups were recorded and transcribed. Observational notes were also taken as part of the focus groups. The transcriptions were analysed using thematic analysis to identify themes relevant to the research aims and academic literature. As participation was anonymous, all identifying details have been removed from quotations included in this report.

## Findings

The purpose of this qualitative pilot study was to explore young people's knowledge of and attitudes towards local government and civic engagement, specifically in the ACT. A better understanding of young people's perceptions around these issues will allow the ACT Government to have a more informed perspective when designing and facilitating consultation, communication campaigns and policy development. This section presents the key findings obtained from 3 focus groups with a total of 23 participants across the groups. Eight major findings emerged from this study:

1. Many participants felt they had little understanding of the Australian system of government. In particular, their understanding of the ACT Government and its services and responsibilities was very low. Despite this, participants indicated that ACT Government responsibilities were relevant to and affected their life as a young person living in Canberra.
2. While a few participants felt the ACT Government was progressive, there was still considerable scepticism and distrust around politics, government and the consultative process. Participants did not feel that young people's interests were adequately represented at all levels of government.
3. Participants felt the Government (and society more generally) was uninterested in young people's opinions and current efforts at youth engagement were often tokenistic.
4. Many participants felt the Government needed to recognise that young people understand young people best. Both political and administrative arms of government should make efforts to meet young people in their local communities and appoint more young people to government and advisory roles.
5. The majority of participants were exposed to government information via social media, but also found more traditional communication channels useful to gain information.
6. Most participants wanted government information to be creatively communicated, in short and simple formats, and personalised to their preferred communication channel.

7. Participants across all three cohorts felt a lack of knowledge about government in general was a major barrier to young people engaging with government programs or processes, leaving them feeling unprepared for civic participation. Other constraining factors were a climate of condescension towards young people, accessibility, their own confidence around authority and government processes and the perceived level of time and effort it took to get involved.
8. Participants were more likely to become involved when they were personally interested in or affected by an issue, or when they had a personal connection or prior experience with government or community organisations.

Following is a discussion of each of the findings supported by exemplary quotations taken from the focus groups transcripts. The quotations have been chosen to portray multiple participant perspectives and capture some of the richness and complexity of this research problem.

**Finding 1:** Many participants felt they had little understanding of the Australian system of government. In particular, their understanding of the ACT Government and its services and responsibilities was very low. Despite this, participants indicated that ACT Government responsibilities were relevant to and affected their life as a young person living in Canberra.

Many participants said they had a limited understanding of the Australian system of government in general. They felt they didn't really understand the different tiers of government and their respective responsibilities. In particular, participants said their understanding of the role of the ACT Government and its elected representatives was very low. They felt the focus in Canberra was much more on the Federal Government, whereas state governments played a much more prominent role in people's lives. Participants expressed their lack of understanding in the following ways:

I know a little bit about federal politics, but I pretty much know nothing about our local government. I don't know who's running. (2.2(a)(ii) participant)

I didn't learn about the difference between territory government and state

government until three weeks ago. I'm being serious. Three weeks ago, is when my parents had to fully try and explain it to me. 2.2(a)(ii) participant)

I'm originally from Sydney, so I came to the ACT Government through the graduate programme, and I didn't know an ACT Government actually existed prior to applying for it, because the focus in Canberra really is the Commonwealth government and the federal government and the work that they do for Australia. 2.2(a)(ii) participant)

Participants felt this lack of knowledge of the political and administrative system was one of the main barriers to their getting involved in civic participation (see Finding 7 for further discussion).

Participants felt their awareness of ACT Government services and responsibilities was poor. This was especially among those with lower engagement – the 'excluded middle', or when reflecting on before they became more engaged:

I actually feel, ACT, we offer a lot, but knowing about what we offer is quite small. I didn't know half of the things that ACT Government does. (2.2(a)(ii) participant)

It's that strange feeling. You know [the ACT Government]'s there in the background. Our mum works for ACT Government. I can probably say I have no idea what she does. (2.2(a)(ii) participant)

Participants often attributed their unfamiliarity with government services to the government's communication efforts. However, they also acknowledged it was likely related to their level of personal interest and how affected they personally were by services (explored further in Finding 8). Participants were more likely to be aware of, and acknowledge the relevance of, areas of responsibility or service provision that specifically affected or interested young people. These included: transport (particularly licensing, road rules and public transport); education (including international student issues); environmental issues (particularly green spaces, recycling and climate change), and renter's rights. Two participants conveyed this idea of personal impact when they said:

Yes, I think, like, make decisions about transport, which does very much affect young people who don't have as many transport options. (2.2(a)(ii) participant)

I was going to say renters' rights as well, because...I think, like, the rental vacancy rate when I moved here was like 0.01%, which is very low....But, like, I know so many people that have had issues where the landlord won't fix things in their house, even after multiple requests...So there's no, like, body that protects renters' rights, which is very important for young people, because we can't buy our own homes. (2.2(a)(ii) participant)

Other participants felt the ACT Legislative Assembly was also relevant to their life as a young person living in Canberra. These comments from participants in the YourSay panel reflected awareness of the impacts of political decision-making:

Yes, they make a lot of decisions that have a huge amount of impact on day-to-day living. It's not so much a, oh, it's just politics. It's like my life is going to change, based on the decisions that these people make. (2.2(a)(ii) participant)

I mean, I live in Canberra, so it's relevant to me because it helps to control Canberra, and also it does a lot of things that affect young people and will affect young people into the future. (2.2(a)(ii) participant)

**Finding 2: While a few participants felt the ACT Government was progressive, there was still considerable skepticism and distrust around politics, government and the consultative process. Participants did not feel that young people's interests were adequately represented at all levels of government.**

While a few participants commended the ACT government as "progressive" (2.2(a)(ii) participant), "open-minded" (2.2(a)(ii) participant), and "forward-thinking" (2.2(a)(ii) participant), there was still considerable scepticism and distrust around politics, governance and the consultative process.

Specifically, participants expressed they weren't sure who to trust when it came to politics and voting, and they felt party politics, in-fighting and self-interest had overtaken informing the constituents and making changes to benefit the community:

People are saying Labor's bad, people are saying Liberal's bad. You're like, woah. (2.2(a)(ii) participant)...And there's biases on half of them anyway. I don't know what to trust... (2.2(a)(ii) participant)



...one of the things that confuses me and annoys me the most is around election times; you get all these ads on TV but they're not actually saying what they're going to do. They're just attacking their opponents instead. They're like, this guy's this, this, this, and this. I'm like, cool, but... What are you...? Why should I vote for you instead of him? I don't know. (2.2(a)(ii) participant)

It's like governance for politics' sake, rather than governance for actual, like, governance sake. (2.2(a)(ii) participant)

When discussing formal engagement exercises, some (2.2(a)(i) members also expressed suspicion that government consultation often has pre-determined outcomes and was designed in a way to get to that outcome, rather than a genuine consultation:

Yes, but just in terms of the way the survey was designed, it was an interesting one because it appeared as though they had a set agenda as to where they wanted the legislation to end up, and they were, sort of, just ticking a box by doing that engagement. (2.2(a)(i) participant)

But yes, sometimes I think that particular one, the engagement didn't seem particularly genuine. They were like, we have to engage, we're going to tick this box, but we're going to engage in a way where we, sort of, we get the response that we need, no matter what. (2.2(a)(i) participant)

I tend to get the impression when I'm filling out that sort of survey that they've already decided exactly what they want to implement as a solution to this problem that they've decided that everybody has. And so now they need to prove that everybody has that problem, and that's just what they're doing, but they're just implementing a solution that they've already pre-decided. (2.2(a)(ii) participant)

Many also felt young people were not represented in politics and the government at all levels, and therefore were sceptical about how well young people's interests could be represented:

I think the demographics of politics as well. We're seeing almost 150 middle-aged white men...You could literally count on no hands, the amount of people under 25...People our age look at politicians and they think they don't represent us...Yes, why should we vote for them? They don't represent us or if they do then we still don't think they do because they can't understand us because they're not us. (2.2(a)(ii) participant)

[In] working for government, you see the services that government provides, and a lot of the time a lot of the people I work with are a fair bit older. So you know, I think it really is important for people from a younger demographic to be involved, because there are a number of policies that do affect young people. (2.2(a)(ii) participant)

It's supposed to be a representative government, but you aren't really representing us. (2.2(a)(ii) participant)

### **Finding 3: Participants felt the government (and society more generally) was uninterested in young people's opinions and current efforts at youth engagement were often tokenistic.**

Participants in the (2.2(a)(ii)) and (2.2(a)(ii)) focus groups expressed strongly that the government was uninterested in young people, their opinions and their needs:

It was just frustrating. It was like, come on, you want us to be involved. You want to us to talk to you and things. But they think you're just kids, I don't think they really want to talk to you. And it's like, I thought you wanted youth involved? And now, when you're trying to be involved, and you're like, no. No, you're a child. (2.2(a)(ii) participant)

I think I find that also in terms of involvement, they want you to be involved until you start getting involved. (2.2(a)(ii) participant)

I think, at the end of the day, it comes from the top. The members of parliament, on both sides of the house, only care about young people, if they're going to help them campaign or they're going to vote for them. (2.2(a)(ii) participant)

Some participants went further, saying they felt the rest of the voting population also thought young people were irrelevant and unformed when it came to government issues:

I think we're definitely not as respected. People don't take our votes as seriously. I think, especially with the Greens, that's predominantly voted for by young people and people are like, oh, the young people don't know what they're voting for. (2.2(a)(ii) participant)

It's very much that attitude, isn't it? If you don't know, don't speak about it. Like,

don't ask questions. We're not going to teach you. But if you don't already know, we don't want you speaking about it. We don't want to teach you, but we don't want to hear from you either. (2.2(a)(i) participant)

Building on this opinion, the majority of participants across all focus groups expressed that the government's efforts at youth engagement and consultation were tokenistic and inauthentic. For example:

I remember that survey about the P-platers...But I also remember feeling quite patronised. It was sort of, like, it gave me these options, just like, ah, hello, young person...Would you prefer to be very safe on the roads all the time, or would you prefer to die in a ditch because you're dumb?...I think that particular one, the engagement didn't seem particularly genuine (2.2(a)(i) participant).

They felt that rather than taking onboard young people's opinions and concerns the government paid 'lip service' to young people by involving them in "design competitions" (2.2(a)(ii)) or the light rail announcements. Often consultation activities seemed to be designed to actively discourage young people from getting involved by making them inaccessible. One (2.2(a)(ii)) participant said: "A lot of the time we see events being held at 11 o'clock on a Wednesday". Another (2.2(a)(ii)) participant responded: "I'm sitting in the middle of my maths class [then]".

Additionally, when participants did participate in engagement or consultation activities, they largely felt it "went nowhere" and the government was "box ticking" (2.2(a)(i) participant). In particular, (2.2(a)(ii)) members felt that they were frequently engaged after decisions had already been made:

Don't engage young people when you're at the end of the action plan. The action plan's already done...You want to just check a box. That's not useful and I come out of that saying, well that was a waste of two hours of my life. It wasn't worth it because we didn't actually get to have a say on anything. They were just making sure that they could say, we engaged with young people. (2.2(a)(ii) participant)

Yes, it's the ticking boxes thing. A lot of the time, we suggested all these things. We see the final plan and none of them were reflected because the plan was already written. (2.2(a)(ii) participant)

Another issue that arose in all three focus groups was that young people did not want a one-and-done approach to engagement and consultation. Rather, they wanted ongoing consultation that kept them ‘in the loop’, and they wanted the government to provide feedback and updates on the results of their engagement, even if the results were not their desired outcome. The majority of participants felt the government did a poor job of this. Somewhat surprisingly, these opinions were expressed across the three groups, regardless of their level of formal participation in consultative processes:

If I voice an opinion, at least let me know how it’s going. (2.2(a)(ii) participant)

And actually, getting back to us. Is it actually going to work or is it not going to work? How we gonna make it work? Even if they say, sorry, look, it’s not going to be practical with the budget we’ve got. Here’s the way different you can do it. Here’s a different avenue you can approach. Maybe you can talk to these people. Or just say, look, that’s not going to work. Even just some kind of... I don’t know. Just feedback. (2.2(a)(ii) participant)

If you’ve had a consultation with young people. Following up and telling them what you’ve been doing. Letting them know what’s going on, is a really great way to make sure they have an overall, net positive experience with government, I think. If you’re not able to do what the young people wanted you to do, give them a reason. (2.2(a)(ii) participant)

...if maybe we saw an instance where the government has considered what people were saying and they’re like, yes, okay, we’re going to act on it. This is your solution. I think if people saw ACT is one example of that, you’re going to get a lot more people being like, okay, they listen. (2.2(a)(ii) participant)

Even when the 2.2(a)(ii) has been involved in formal consultation processes, they felt there was minimal reporting back on project outcomes, and they usually had to go to the effort to find out further information themselves:

We saw it in the Canberra Times and I’m reading this Canberra Times article, going, oh, that’s the recommendation that we put forward. (2.2(a)(ii) participant)...That was us. (2.2(a)(ii) participant)...That’s the funding that we secured. Cool. That’s great. (2.2(a)(ii) participant)...But you just have to put two and two together, and realise, that was me, that was us. No one contacts us to say, hey, this is what we’ve done (2.2(a)(ii) participant)

participant<sup>2.2(a)</sup>...With your feedback (2.2(a)(ii) participant<sup>2.2(a)</sup>)

This finding accords with a growing body of literature in Communication Studies that emphasizes the responsibilities of organisations to develop an ‘architecture of listening’, that goes well beyond standard consultation and feedback process (Macnamara, 2016).

Finding 4: Many participants felt the Government needed to recognise that young people understand young people best. Both political and administrative arms of government should make efforts to meet young people in their local communities and appoint more young people to government and advisory roles.

Many participants felt strongly that young people know what it is like for a young person better than anyone else can and this needs to be recognised more in government communication and consultation efforts:

People who are younger are more likely to be able to engage more effectively with other young people because they’ll know what’s current. They’ll know what’s happening more and what we’ll find funny and that sort of thing. (2.2(a)(ii) participant)

I think it’s far easier to actually be a young person, than to try to imagine what it’s like for a young person. (2.2(a)(ii) participant)

The point of engagement is that you can have 16-year-olds who have far more experience than 40-year-olds, in what you’re trying to consult them on...Just because you’re older, doesn’t mean you’re the expert. (2.2(a)(ii) participant)

I think there are areas of law and areas of decision making within government that young people are especially qualified to talk about and to have opinions about, and to help to mitigate potential problems... (2.2(a)(ii) participant)

In line with a ‘listening’ orientation, governments should prioritise policy, programs and communication by, with and for young people. That said, the participants interviewed for this study were aware of the inherent power balances between government and young people. Many participants felt that if the government wanted to engage young people, it needed to meet young people in their local contexts, and not expect them to come to the government. This involved making consultation and engagement activities at times when young people were available and at places

frequented by young people such as schools and universities. Participants expressed this in the following ways:

Make it as easy as it can be for young people. Go to where they are. Find out when they have free time, which is often not on weekends, believe it or not. Find the spaces where they want to be. (2.2(a)(ii) participant)

I think what we're really touching on, as a group right now, is the idea going to young people. Not expecting young people to come to you. (2.2(a)(ii) participant)

It instantly makes it far more uncomfortable to rock up to the legislative assembly to do a consultation, than if someone from the legislative assembly rocked up to school and was like, do this if you want. I think that would be a far easier way to get people engaged. (2.2(a)(ii) participant)

When it's like, come and have a coffee with your MP, I just imagine, if I get that invite, I'm just like, I feel like it's just going to be a bunch of, no offence, middle aged people having coffee...And talking about stuff that I don't care or know about. (2.2(a)(ii) participant) ...How about in UC? Maybe there would be less...Actually targeted it towards younger people. (2.2(a)(ii) participant) ...Then I would be there because I know other people would be relatively engaged. (2.2(a)(ii) participant)

Further, some participants felt that a key way that the ACT Government could improve on communication and engagement with young people would be to appoint more young people (or dedicated youth advocates) to be involved/lead these processes across the government and its directorates:

I feel like they need more liaison between the actual politicians and the youth. (2.2(a)(ii) participant)

Maybe changing the regulations for starting a project or putting forward legislation, have it move up the consultations specifically for young people...get more of that in Phase 0, rather than waiting for it at the end (2.2(a)(ii) participant)

That would be my ideal world. It would have 40 staff underneath that all are either young people or really passionate and care about the voices of young people. (2.2(a)(ii) participant)

More young people...in the consultations, and in the teams that are making the policy. (2.2(a)(ii) participant)

**Finding 5: The majority of participants came across government information via social media, but also found other communication channels useful to gain information.**

Participants mentioned a diverse range of communication channels when talking about where they accessed local government and community information. Unsurprisingly, social media and particularly Facebook was mentioned frequently. Other social media sites mentioned were Instagram and YouTube. However, it should be noted that not all participants liked to or preferred to receive information this way.

Other types of communication channels that participants accessed to gain information about their local community were direct mail (including e-DM), particularly the Our Canberra newsletter, out-of-home-advertising (posters, signage on side of road), and online news sites (e.g. RiotACT, HerCanberra, Out in Canberra – mostly for events and what’s on information). Perhaps surprisingly given the stereotypes about younger generations, some participants also found face-to-face contact at physical locations valuable, but they specified they preferred it to be initiated by them, for example, visiting Access Canberra vs being approached by a representative at a shopping centre. 2.2(a)(ii) participants expressed this idea by saying:

Yes, Access Canberra could be a really great point of contact for that, because it’s also, it’s like not obtrusive. You can choose to go there. (2.2(a)(ii) participant)

There’ll be someone walking towards me with a clipboard, going, hey. I’m like, aargh, no. (2.2(a)(ii) participant)

**Finding 6: Most participants wanted government information to be creatively communicated, in short and simple formats, and personalised to their preferred communication channel.**

When it came to how participants thought the government should communicate with young people, the focus group participants were very precise about how the type and tone of the communication they preferred.

Participants enjoyed communication that had a creative or humorous execution, with a number of participants mentioning the NSW Police as a good example of a government agency that succeeds in educating people via humour. The use of memes was mentioned frequently as something they found engaging. Participants wanted their information to be both informative and entertaining:

If you put it in a boring ad, I just literally just skip over it. But if it's a meme, I'm like, oh, this is hilarious, and what's in there and then get to receive a lot of more information. (2.2(a)(ii) participant)

I have nothing to do with the New South Wales police force, but I always see stuff being reposted because it's just hilarious. And you're like, that's funny but also very informative. (2.2(a)(ii) participant)

Participants also mentioned other methods of creatively communicating government messages: 'speed dating' style events with MPs; BuzzFeed-style surveys about the ACT Government e.g. What directorate would you represent?, and using interactive technology in consultations, for example, games and simulations. However, the nature of government communication was one area where the views of highly engaged participants (2.2(a)(ii)) differed from the other groups. These participants also warned it was easy to get this approach wrong and seem "cringey" and "trying so hard to be a young person" (2.2(a)(ii) participant).

Along similar lines, less engaged participants preferred storytelling style information with MPs vlogging their daily schedule, sharing pictures of their everyday life and day-in-the-life-of type stories mentioned as potential areas of interest. However, more highly engaged participants were sceptical of this approach, seeing it as personality politics and MPs not doing their actual job:

I think that a politician should be, at the end of the day, someone who we hold in a high regard and someone who we don't necessarily want to see into their personal lives all the time. (2.2(a)(ii) participant 25)...I actually really agree with [that]. (2.2(a)(ii) participant 26)...I think we live in a day and age where too much of the politician is



sharing with the world, hey, I'm just another person. I know you're a person but being a politician is your job. It's not your life. (2.2(a)(ii) participant 22)...Personality politics is just, mmm. (2.2(a)(ii) participant 22)...Yes, they're becoming rock stars. They're not rock stars. They've got a job to do. They're not famous because they're famous. They're famous because they're politicians. (2.2(a)(ii) participant 22)

Participants also preferred their communication to be very short and simple, and this applied across communication channels. Two participants across two focus groups went as far to say that a five second YouTube ad was acceptable but any longer and they were skipping it. Also, their lack of knowledge around the government and its processes meant that participants preferred information that met the KISS (Keep it simple stupid) principle:

I think, for me, it would be really helpful of the government were to really simplify it down for people like me, who don't know much about politics, don't know much about the bigger picture of what they're actually trying to do. (2.2(a)(ii) participant)

Have that information on a website which is easy to access, no matter where you're located on, no matter what age demographic you're from. And yes, just making the process very clear and stipulating who are the best contacts and that sort of thing. So when people do choose to engage, the process can be as user-friendly as possible. (2.2(a)(ii) participant)

Members of the YourSay Panel also expressed a preference for short surveys as a method of consultation, mentioning their low barrier to entry. This group in particular preferred 'one-stop-shop' communication and consultation by the ACT Government, and did not like having to go to different locations (whether online or physical) for different interactions with the government:

So if you want to have a say on the building development that's going down the road, you've got to put in a written submission, you can't just do it through the thing that you've signed up for [YourSay Panel], that's also the ACT government. So why aren't those two things linked, you know? Is there not one platform where all the ACT Government functions you can have a say on, even if they're not directly related? (2.2(a)(ii) participant)

I agree that consolidation into one place where you can express your opinion would be great. (2.2(a)(ii) participant)

Participants also wanted government communication to be tailored to the social media platform they most commonly used, and in the way they were using it. One participant in particular spoke about being able to tell when information made for one platform is simply copied and pasted on another:

It's like Andrew Barr posts on his Instagram story all the time. ACT Government videos because obviously, Instagram videos like this [portrait] and ACT Government videos like this [landscape]. There's a little centre bit of the video and you think either, you've got a really bad media advisor, or you know...? <sup>2.2(a)(ii)</sup> participant)

Many participants, especially those in the more engaged groups (<sup>2.2(a)(ii)</sup>), mentioned the desirability of personalised communication efforts. Participants wanted government communication to be tailored to their preferred communication channel(s). As <sup>2.2(a)(ii)</sup> participants put it:

Yes, I think personalisation is pretty key. That's something that the government is definitely picking up on and giving you more options on how you can choose to engage with government. And that extends to being consulted as well as being told stuff. <sup>2.2(a)(ii)</sup> participant)

We're all different people, and we all have different experiences, and we have to, kind of, like, try and engage with every different person in a different way and connect. <sup>2.2(a)(ii)</sup> participant)

Examples were diverse and included: not wanting direct mail as they were trying to cut down on waste, "it's just more rubbish that I have to deal with. And that's one of the things that I'm really personally trying to cut back on is the amount of rubbish that I produce and it's just impossible because I keep getting all of these political flyers and things" <sup>2.2(a)(ii)</sup> participant); not using Facebook and preferring direct mail, "Well, I don't check Facebook, so I'm very old school, I actually like that they mail [their] glossy...one-page little brochure" <sup>2.2(a)(ii)</sup> participant), seeing Facebook as for organisations and issues (and therefore advertising being acceptable) and Instagram and Snapchat for friends (advertising not acceptable).

I can't believe you guys follow them on Instagram, though? I don't have any politicians on my Instagram. That's for another world <sup>2.2(a)(ii)</sup> participant <sup>2.2(a)(ii)</sup>...That's for Facebook. That's where my Facebook world is. <sup>2.2(a)(ii)</sup> participant <sup>2.2(a)(ii)</sup>

**Finding 7: Participants across all three cohorts felt a lack of knowledge about government in general was a major barrier to young people engaging with government programs or processes, leaving them feeling unprepared for civic participation. Other constraining factors were a climate of condescension towards young people, accessibility, their own confidence around authority and government processes and the perceived level of time and effort it took to get involved.**

More so than discussing benefits, most participants identified barriers to engaging with government. By far, the most frequently discussed barrier to their participation was a lack of knowledge about government at all levels and the opportunities to engage. In the <sup>2.2(a)(i)</sup> focus group with those who had low civic engagement, participants regularly used phrases such as “I have no idea”, “no clue”, “I just don’t know how”, “don’t even know where to start”, “I pretty much know nothing”. Even those who were engaged in some way in the <sup>2.2(a)(ii)</sup> groups said prior to becoming involved they “didn’t know much about it all” <sup>2.2(a)(ii)</sup> participant) and “were in the dark” <sup>2.2(a)(ii)</sup> participant) and that their friends who weren’t engaged were also “clueless” <sup>2.2(a)(ii)</sup> participant). Even those who want to get involved often don’t have the foundational knowledge to do so:

They want to help out and they want to do things or they want to get involved in the community, but they just don’t know what’s out there. <sup>2.2(a)(ii)</sup> participant)

Frequently their formal schooling was blamed for this lack of knowledge and participants thought this could be improved. Participants ranged from experiencing no civics or political education in school, to feeling the education they did receive in school was inadequate or inappropriate. Their reasoning for this included civics or politics subjects being: 1) an elective so only some students gained this knowledge, 2) too focused on the historical rather than practical, 3) focused exclusively on the Federal Government, 4) covered once only in their entire schooling, or 5) given at too young an age where the relevance of politics to their life was not yet clear or understood (commonly late primary school or early high school):

Going through the Australian education system, I did not learn about politics at all in any subjects in school. <sup>2.2(a)(ii)</sup> participant)

I think it's more federal focused as well. Lots of the education... Not local. [redacted] participant)

I'm sure that I probably learned a bit about it at the time, but it was never followed up or not covered again so I just forgot about it. [redacted] participant)

And at that age, you don't care. Yes, exactly. It's like, oh, I'm in Year 10. I don't care about politics. And then you get older and you're like, damn it, I really should have paid more attention. [redacted] participant)

I think if my friends and I had gone through a class every so often, or something where we understood how our government functioned. We would actually understand how we can influence it and how we can help our community more. [redacted] participant)

This lack of knowledge left them feeling unprepared when it came to civic participation. Some participants even felt unprepared for compulsory voting, let alone engagement on volunteer-basis or that they had to initiate:

So then, when I got to voting age and went to vote, I literally stood there and was like, I have heard all of these names in the media. Labor, Liberal. But I don't know what any of them mean. And so, it's really just me trying to make a considered decision but at the same time, I was like, wow, the only thing I can tell from these parties is what's in the name. And so, it's like, maybe they're great for the labour force or very liberal people or very sustainable. And then I got to uni and I realised, wow, [what a] very uneducated vote I made when I was younger. ([redacted] participant)

Yes, well we went to Elections ACT and did the whole mock voting thing in Year 7, and I voted in the last election and I was like, oh my gosh, I actually don't remember any of this. Not because I didn't care in Year 7, just because it was so long ago and it's such a complex process that it's so easy to get there and be like, there's too many options, there's too many different ways that I can vote. I'm just going to not worry about it. [redacted] participant)

Participants in the [redacted] groups felt there was a 'climate of condescension' towards young people in society at the moment, particularly around the idea that young people "have it so good" [redacted] participant), "have it really easy" [redacted] participant) and "don't have any reason to complain" [redacted] participant). One

participant even named it “a war on young people, especially by politicians” (2.2(a)(ii) participant).

This feeling contributed to their confidence around civic participation and their desire to voice their opinions. One story that resonated with the (2.2(a)(ii) focus group illustrates this:

People are like, oh, the young people don't know what they're voting for. And it's like, yes, well, obviously. Because you didn't teach us. We're doing our best. I even have a lady at my work. She like, oh, so do you vote for the first time? I said yes. She went, that's great, sweetie, but I'm sure you voted for the wrong people. I was like okay. Because she's like, I'm sure you voted for Labor or the Greens, but you just don't know. They're going to steal all your money. Well, thank you for that that. (2.2(a)(ii) participant)

The (2.2(a)(ii) focus group echoed similar experiences:

Yes, I went to a consultation the other day where someone said, you'd understand if you had more life experience. (2.2(a)(ii) participant)...I get that all the time. (2.2(a)(ii) participant)...Those exact words. I was like, okay. Thank you. (2.2(a)(ii) participant)

As mentioned previously, participants also felt accessibility was a barrier to young people engaging civically. This was related to both the timing and location of events and engagement opportunities, but also the information provided for constituents and government processes more generally:

I think the main thing they need to consider is just make it accessible. Don't just put an event on, at same weird time, at some weird place, so that young people don't come. Not that they do but actively make an effort to make sure that young people can come. Make it accessible for them because at the moment, it's in school hours or it's at some weird place that their parents can't drop them off or whatever? Engagement is very inaccessible at the moment. (2.2(a)(ii) participant)

And just going on your point about accessibility, technically all the information is already there. It's just in documents which are 300 pages long. And I feel it's only university students who have research work to do who actually go through them. No one else is going through 300 pages. (2.2(a)(ii) participant)

Dealing with government seems pretty inaccessible. When you think about it, if you

have to write a letter, you were pretty confident at letter writing, at 14 but I know for me, do I address them as Miss? I'd be so confused. I actually don't know how to do this? This is really inaccessible for me, so I'm actually not going to do it. I think that's a big thing and a big barrier that stops people from doing it. (2.2(a)(ii) participant)

Building on this, participants in the (2.2(a)(ii) groups suggested that young people often found dealing with authority “intimidating” (2.2(a)(ii) participant) and participants seemed concerned about getting the process ‘right’. This is expressed in the quote directly above, but was also echoed by other participants:

Government seems so distant and so difficult to reach. It's scary and big. I think that's what stops people quite a bit... (2.2(a)(ii) participant)

Is there an official way you need to go about it? Can you just message them on Facebook? Is there a Facebook page for the whole thing? I have no idea. Do you write them a letter? (2.2(a)(ii) participant)

Similarly, some of the lower engagement participants were also concerned about making sure their complaints were valid and not “complaining unnecessarily” (2.2(a)(ii) participant). This seemed to relate both to their lack of knowledge and the condescension expressed about young people mentioned above. Two participants conveyed this view when they said:

I don't know what to complain about. I don't know what I've been denied. (2.2(a)(ii) participant)

I don't want to complain about things that they have a legitimate reason for doing them. If they cut the budget to a certain area to try and do something else with it, then I'm not going to be like, no, you're taking away my money. They'll be like, yes, for a good cause. And I'll be like, oh. (2.2(a)(ii) participant)

Finally, the level of time and effort it took to get involved was perceived as a barrier to young people becoming more civically engaged. Participants expressed that young people were often busy with formal education, friendships, working and often prioritised opportunities that would help them succeed in their chosen career path. They saw politics as an academic field of study, rather than an everyday practice:

But by the time I got to the period in my life where I was able to elect my own subjects, I was already preparing for what I wanted to do at university. So, I was

picking specific things that would help me get into the course and politics was not one of them ...And so it's just not something I had time for because I had all these other things that I needed to do instead. Even though I would've liked to do politics because I'd like to know about it. (2.2(a)(ii) participant)

It's hard to convince a young person that that's a better use of their time than hanging out with their friends or doing something else. Writing an assignment or working. (2.2(a)(ii) participant)

And there are people who I'm friends with who just don't have that level of commitment to be able to dedicate; they're working three jobs and also studying, and they just don't have the time to be engaged civilly like that. (2.2(a)(ii) participant)

Additionally, participants felt becoming civically engaged was an ongoing effort and that required a certain level of dedication and resilience:

I feel like when you're participating in this sort of thing, you have to do it for a long time, saying things a lot and contacting a lot of people, and it's a commitment that you need to make again and again. (2.2(a)(ii) participant)

Or I tried once and nothing happened, or it took a really, really, really, really long time to happen because, government. But was it really worth it? All that time that I spent for an outcome three years later. Is it really worth it? (2.2(a)(ii) participant)

Some participants suggested this affected young people's likelihood of getting involved civically as they felt a sense of helplessness or that they couldn't make a difference:

On a broader level, politics and government in general, I think that defeatist view, that I can't do anything is probably a big barrier for young people. Especially, if you don't know about certain avenues. You can just be like, oh, I can't do anything about it, so what's the point in me even trying? (2.2(a)(ii) participant)

Often it just, sort of, seems like it's pointless, honestly, like no matter what you say, you're not really heard on a broad level or in any way that's going to make a real difference. (2.2(a)(ii) participant)

**Finding 8: Participants were more likely to become involved when they were personally interested in or affected by an issue, or when they had a personal connection or prior experience with government or community organisations.**

Two main factors that emerged in the research that appeared to motivate (or would motivate) young people to become more involved in local government and their community. The first was being interested in or impacted by an issue, and the second was having either a personal connection to or prior experience with local government or community organisations.

Firstly, participants continually made reference to engaging only if an issue interested them or affected them or their loved ones personally:

If it was something I was interested in. That actually impacted me. It'd be cool to have a say in it. (2.2(a)(ii) participant)

I probably, to be honest, wouldn't read about it unless it actually seemed interesting or would affect me... (2.2(a)(ii) participant)

Until I see how it affects me personally or my family or a close friend, I won't be involved in that and I'm like, I don't care. I don't see how it speaks to me. (2.2(a)(ii) participant)

There has to be something they're concerned with or want to see changing that they're not seeing changed and so they want to be that change. (2.2(a)(ii) participant 27)...And it can be really specific, like a footpath or a road, or something like that. Or it could be broader, we want to see young people's voices heard and that's the reason that we got into it. It can be on that broader scale, more holistic kind of view or it can be something really specific, like the footpath near my house is broken but maybe that gets them in? (2.2(a)(ii) participant 27)

Yes, and I think usually with myself I have a vested interest in, I suppose, things that really affect the space in which I live or the areas that I frequent. (2.2(a)(ii) participant)

So, I think when, yes, as I said before, it does impact your life in some way, you're more likely to engage in government. (2.2(a)(ii) participant)



Those who become more involved also said it was a personal interest or issue that started the ball rolling and then they became more interested and engaged in issues and politics more generally:

Yes, absolutely. I think I was sort of like that. I wanted to see change but only once I was in here and working with government, that I became interested in politics. (2.2(a)(ii) participant)

Basically, I first got involved with the government when I was 14. [I was affected by a personal issue] and I wrote to the chief minister and said, well here's the problem, it needs to be fixed and the problem got fixed and so I was like, wow, that was easy...Whether I still would have gotten involved, probably later but not at that stage. (2.2(a)(ii) participant)

The emphasis on personal interest and impact also related to the types of issues that participants commonly mentioned when discussing government services: licensing, public transport, education, climate change, renter's rights. These issues directly impact young people and were brought up as examples frequently in the focus groups, compared to other government responsibilities. This finding suggests that the onus is on government to ensure that issues are presented in a way that young people can recognise the impact of a policy or program on their lives.

Secondly, a major motivator for becoming involved seemed to be a personal connection to or prior experience with civic engagement. Having a personal connection via a friend or family member on a board or working in the public service seemed to increase their awareness about government activities and opportunities to get involved across the three focus groups:

Well, me personally, whenever I've had issues, because I always have a friend on council as well, whenever I've raised it with him, he will actually action it and bring it forward and then come back to me (2.2(a)(ii) participant)

I think, for a long time when you're growing up, you think you just roll with the blows. It is, what it is...but then having someone who can engage in that way and sort of being linked to them. They start to feel that they might have a little bit of power and that they can make changes that they want to see. (2.2(a)(ii) participant)

A lot of the people that I know, like my family work in the public service, so it's just

like that, you know, dropped-down knowledge through your family. I think you're just exposed to it. (2.2(a)(ii) participant)

And often for those who became more involved with civic engagement, it started with a personal recommendation from family, friends or organisations they were already involved in:

My school flagged the opportunity with me (2.2(a)(ii) participant)

My older brother was on the council for a little bit and then I did a lot of work in community and stuff. He was like, no, you should apply to be on the council as well. (2.2(a)(ii) participant)

My local member suggested I should apply for it because I would be a good fit and she was right, I guess. (2.2(a)(ii) participant)

So, I actually found out about [the YourSay Panel] from a friend. (2.2(a)(ii) participant)

I think I just heard [about consultation opportunity] through word of mouth, from, like, people I work with (2.2(a)(ii) participant)

As mentioned above, those who were more engaged often began their political engagement with one issue or type of involvement, and then their engagement and interest snowballed. Participants mentioned organising protests, belonging to other community organisations (e.g. Scouts), activities through school or university or other youth events (Youth Congress, Model UN, debating, Student Representative Council), volunteering, working in or with the public service (ACT or Federal), campaigning for political parties, and making submissions to Parliament, letter writing, signing petitions as activities they had been involved in. Having some prior community and government involvement seemed to be a stepping stone into more civic engagement suggesting that all it takes is one point of engagement to lead to another and so on.

## Key issues for Consideration

The purpose of this section is to provide some interpretative insights into the findings from the analysis of the focus groups. Rather than simply promoting the benefits of civic engagement, the ACT Government needs to address the barriers to involvement if they wish to engage the ACT's young people. This section explains and discusses three key issues the ACT government should consider in light of improving young people's civic engagement in the Territory.

1. Recognising the gap between civic knowledge and civic engagement
2. Moving from symbolic participation to shared decision-making
3. Developing tailored communications, activities and programs to engage young people (preferably designed by young people)

### **Issue 1: Recognising the gap between civic knowledge and civic engagement**

While the participants in this study recognised that the ACT Government and its responsibilities were relevant to their life as a young person, overall they felt they lacked foundational knowledge about the workings of all levels of the Australian system of government. They felt what little knowledge they had related to the Federal Government, with only the <sup>2.2(a)(ii)</sup> participants feeling they had an understanding of how the ACT Government works. This knowledge resulted from their <sup>2.2(a)(ii)</sup> membership and through having practical and regular dealings with government.

The perception of the majority of participants in this study, that they had little knowledge of how government worked, may explain why youth civic engagement levels are lower than the ACT Government would like them to be. The findings in this study reveal that most participants felt the need to acquire a) knowledge about how the Australian system of government worked at the federal, state/territory and local level and the responsibilities of each level of government and b) an understanding of how they might go about the process of becoming civically engaged and the opportunities available to them.

This is a key issue that the ACT Government should address in order to improve civic engagement amongst young people aged 18–24. In addressing the knowledge factor, it is also likely to improve young people’s confidence around participating in civic life, becoming active on issues that concern them and engaging with authority in undertaking these processes.

## **Issue 2: Moving from symbolic participation to shared decision-making**

Many participants in the study felt that current government efforts to engage youth people were insincere, cursory, an afterthought and not specifically tailored for young people. This led participants to primarily view youth engagement as a box-ticking exercise rather than a government wanting to genuinely engage young people in policy decisions. Participants seemed to feel that current efforts sat at the level of tokenism on Hart’s (1992) Ladder of Participation, where young people are given a say on community issues and policy-making but are given little or no choice as to how they contribute, and little or no background to formulate an informed opinion of their own (Hart, 1992). Additionally, participants felt that when they did participate in consultation or engagement activities, there was no to little reporting back on the consultation process and project outcomes. Again, this signalled to participants that their contributions weren’t valued and not really desired by the government.

If the ACT Government wants to improve youth participation and engagement, there is a drastic need to move their efforts towards a shared decision-making approach (Hart, 1992), where young people feel valued, included, informed and a necessary part of the civic process. A number of issues should be addressed to make this happen:

- Require government projects to consult with young people early and often.
- Make youth engagement activities truly accessible (and inviting) to young people.
- Create affirmative action or special measures to prioritise youth involvement in government decision-making, processes, programs and projects.
- Develop policy to support reporting back to participants and the wider community on the results and next steps of any consultative process.

### **Issue 3: Developing tailored communications, activities and programs to engage young people (preferably designed by young people)**

Many participants emphasised that government communications, activities and programs aimed at young people need to be specifically tailored to young people and their preferences.

When looking at government communications, participants were open to information being delivered through a wide variety of channels, both online and offline; however, participants had more specific preferences around the type and tone of communications as opposed to the channel of delivery. Participants frequently emphasised that information that had a short and simple message and was creatively executed was most appealing to them. Communication that did not meet these parameters was often ignored. This suggests that communication aimed at young people may need to be developed in addition to other communication collateral when the ACT Government is communicating with young people. However, participants warnings about the risk of such communication being ‘cringey’ and ‘trying too hard’ suggests communication materials should be authentic and ideally developed in conjunction with young people.

Perhaps most importantly, participants expected the content and channel of government communications to be personalised to their preferences. The ACT Government needs to make use of the systems and data available to ensure communication preferences can be selected where possible. Additionally, this suggests it benefits the ACT Government to offer a wide variety of communication channels to constituents so people can pick and choose the channels that suits their preferred type of communication.

Similar caveats applied to government consultations and other activities aimed at young people. Participants wanted these activities personalised and tailored to them. They want the government to come to them, not the other way around. Scheduling activities at a location, time, and delivering them in a way that fits in with the day-to-day life of a young people would likely increase their engagement. This not only makes these activities more accessible but also makes young people know they are valued because the activity is tailored to their specific cohort. Participants also favoured novel and creative approaches to, and in, consultations. The use of technology such as games and simulations could be of benefit here.

Finally, participants emphasised that ‘young people know young people’ and more needs to be done in government to recognise this. There is an opportunity to use young people as influencers, informants and advocates for other young people. Government communications and activities are more likely to appeal to young people if they are designed and/or led by young people themselves. Additionally, highlighting the relevance of certain consultations or processes to young people’s lives may also be useful to ensure some better cut-through of communication and messaging. This can be achieved most authentically by involving young people in the development and dissemination of communication.

There is a clear opportunity for the ACT Government to appoint young people (or dedicated youth advocates) in specific roles that aim to advise on communication and foster youth civic participation and engagement across the whole of government.

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