COMMUNITY WEALTH BUILDING

How to reshape Canberra's economy and community spaces for the benefit of the 99%

MESSAGE FROM JO CLAY

LEADER OF THE ACT GREENS

Canberra's economy performs well by the usual measures – but for whom? We're in a cost-of-living crisis. Wealth and opportunity are not evenly distributed. Some in our community can access assets and opportunities while others are locked out entirely.

This isn't just something that happens to an economy – it's something a government chooses, or fails to choose, to change. Too often, governments have treated economic outcomes as weather to be endured rather than a system to be steered. Since 2021 ACT Government local procurement has dropped from over half to just a third of all procurements. Local businesses, community groups and environment groups miss out on the ACT Government's $3 billion procurement spend. Operation Kingfisher found serious corrupt conduct where a local business pitched a project with a better design and lower cost – but an international company won the tender.

The ACT also faces structural fiscal challenges. According to independent economic adviser Saul Eslake, the ACT Government's operating expenses consistently exceed operating revenue. What Government is doing is not sustainable – and patching the budget year to year won't fix an economy that isn't built to share its own wealth.

Governments shouldn't just step in when markets fail. They should use every lever they have – whether it's procurement, land ownership or other support for local business and social enterprises – to actively build the kind of economy where wealth is grown locally and shared widely.

Community Wealth Building addresses these challenges. Governments can deliberately design an economy to retain wealth locally. When we support local businesses and the non-profit sector, we build an economy resilient enough to weather the next shock.

Earlier this year, the Scottish Government adopted Community Wealth Building as a core pillar of its national economic strategy. Canberra can do the same. We can build the infrastructure and deliver the services we need, while deliberately growing our local operators who deliver them – spreading opportunity through the community by design. This keeps public services for people, not profit – rather than handing our shared resources to big businesses.

Jo Clay
Leader of the ACT Greens

We acknowledge the Ngunnawal people as Traditional Custodians of the ACT and recognise any other people or families with connection to the lands of the ACT and region. We acknowledge and respect their continuing culture and the contribution they make to the life of this city and this region. The Greens respect the right to self-determination and continue to advocate for decision-making led by local First Nations peoples.

WHAT IS THE PROBLEM WE ARE TRYING TO SOLVE?

Government contracts aren't delivering what we need

The ACT procurement framework is supposed to provide fairness for tenderers and value for money for Canberrans. But too often, it falls short of delivering on this promise. I regularly hear from members of our community concerned that new government contracts go to big operators who deliver worse results. Meanwhile, Canberra businesses and enterprises miss out, even though they bring a wealth of innovative ideas, volunteers, deep experience and community goodwill. The ACT Government's local procurement spend dropped from 54% to just 34% over the past six years, and Government does not even centrally track how much of its $3B budget goes to local and First Nations providers. You cannot steer what you don't measure.

Operation Kingfisher[1] found that in one procurement, serious corrupt conduct led to a local business missing out in favour of an international company. That contract gave the community a construction project that cost more and had an inferior design.

It is still too early to tell if this is a one-off anomaly or a pattern, but here are a few other examples where it seems that Government spending decisions are not delivering the best outcomes for Canberrans. I make no criticism of those who tendered fairly and are working hard to deliver services. These are simply my observations of a government system that has produced an outcome out of step with community expectations – and that could be actively designed to produce better ones.

'Green Shed-ed': when local expertise gets tendered away

The ACT has had a reuse facility or 'tip shop' in operation since 1988. Its primary purpose was to recycle material instead of sending it to landfill. The ACT Government contracted out the salvage and operation rights for the facility in 2010 to the Green Shed, who recovered over 9,000 tonnes of material each year from waste – 94% of what they received. They also donated goods to local organisations and individuals and over a million dollars to charity.

In 2024, the salvage contract was put out to tender and awarded to a different provider, St Vincent de Paul (Vinnies). Vinnies provide many valuable services in our community, but two years into the new contract, they recover less – under 2,200 tonnes each year and only 84% of what they receive.[2] Whatever criteria decided this tender, they didn't capture what 14 years of specialisation was worth. When procurement processes are built around generic capability rather than demonstrated outcomes, the community loses expertise that take years to build.

1. ACT Integrity Commission 2026, *Operation Kingfisher*, ACT Integrity Commission, accessed 20 August 2026, https://www.integrity.act.gov.au/investigations/operation-kingfisher.
2. Cheyne, T 2026, *Question on notice 067 — answer: waste recovery rates (CEDD)*, ACT Legislative Assembly, accessed 20 August 2026, https://www.parliament.act.gov.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0017/3111083/QON-067-Answer-CED-Waste-recovery-rates-CLAY.pdf.

See also: FOGO: A WASTED OPPORTUNITY on p14-15

Decades of land care experience lost to a tender (again)

For decades, three river catchment groups have operated in the ACT, looking after 113 local landcare groups with thousands of volunteers who provide essential land care and weed management. The Commissioner for Sustainability and the Environment has valued volunteer landcare work in the ACT as worth over $21.5M.[3] The three catchment groups received around $150K each in government funding to provide these services.

In 2025, the ACT Government undertook an internal desktop review of environment organisation funding, including the catchment groups, which justified a funding increase. The Minister noted that project budgets should increase, but Government did not raise funding. Instead, the existing funds were put out to tender, and the ACT Government has advised the catchment groups were unsuccessful.[4]

At the time of writing, the future of the catchment groups and the role and value of their volunteers in caring for the land remains uncertain. Decades of local knowledge and volunteer goodwill isn't something that can be rebuilt by simply running another tender – it's an asset that has to be protected and grown.

Community Options: when community value is overlooked

Community Options operated for 37 years as a not-for-profit community-based organisation providing coordination and case management for in-home services, palliative care, disability support services and advocacy. In this year's Territory Budget, they lost their ACT Government funding and, as a result, are now winding down and will close at the end of 2026.[5]

This represents the loss of local expertise as well as trusted relationships and community infrastructure, leaving a significant service gap for our most vulnerable Canberrans.

There are success stories where local operators deliver excellent results for our community with ACT Government support. The nature of procurement also means some miss out while others get an opportunity – that's not the problem.

The problem is a concerning pattern of established providers working well in our community, often assisted by volunteer labour and hard-earned local knowledge, who try to explain to the ACT Government how their sector actually works, and the system isn't built to listen.

If government saw procurement as a tool for building the economy the community needs, it would treat local knowledge as an asset to invest in, not a nice-to-have to route around.

3. ACT Environment Volunteers 2025, *The value of volunteering in the ACT*, ACT Environment Volunteers, accessed 20 August 2026, https://actenvirovolunteers.com.au/the-report/values-of-volunteering-in-the-act/.
4. City Services Directorate 2025, *Freedom of information disclosure log CED-2025 (FOI 25-105)*, ACT Government, accessed 20 August 2026, https://www.cityservices.act.gov.au/about-us/freedom_of_information/disclosure-log/CED-2025/ced/foi-disclosure-log-25-105.
5. Sams, C 2026, 'Key Canberra support service to shut doors due to lack of funding, warns of service gap', *Region Canberra*, 12 August, accessed 20 August 2026, https://region.com.au/key-canberra-support-service-to-shut-doors-due-to-lack-of-funding-warns-of-service-gap/988569/.

The Canberra Times

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'We don't track it': the admission behind the ACT's $2.9b procurement spend

By Ray Athwal
Updated May 25 2026 - 10:11am, first published 5:30am

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The ACT government's local procurement spend plummeted from 54 per cent to just 34 per cent over the past six years, while the territory confirmed it does not centrally track how much of its multibillion-dollar budget is actually reaching local small businesses or Indigenous enterprises.

The Canberra Times

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ACT government's decision to can Green Shed is misguided

By Letters to the Editor
March 15 2024 - 5:30am

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The ACT government's decision to defund the Green Shed and to replace it with a contract to St Vincent de Paul on the grounds that the latter can provide "value" to the ACT Community is a bad decision.

Region Locally Grown. | Canberra

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'Red tape not driving better outcomes': MBA slams ACT's Secure Local Jobs Code

25 April 2026 | By Claire Fenwicke

Join the conversation 5

The MBA says the code has no requirement to support either local employers or local employees – it's just red tape, and it's not driving better outcomes. Photo: Michelle Kroll.

How volunteers got 'Green Shed-ed' in Dairy Road tender battle

Canberra City Farm members Mark Spain and Jenni Savigny in the feijoa orchard on the volunteer-run farm on Dairy Road. Picture by Keegan Carroll

The Canberra Times

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'Everyone cried': The Green Shed's contract not renewed, popular business to close

By Megan Doherty
Updated March 13 2024 - 5:49pm, first published 1:14pm

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The Green Shed will be no more in Canberra after its ACT government contract to re-sell items otherwise destined for landfill was not renewed.

Region Locally Grown. | Canberra

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Shock as Green Shed contract goes to Vinnies

13 March 2024 | By Ian Bushnell

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Public spaces and facilities are being redeveloped for profit, not community benefit

Canberra's planning and land use system is one of government's most powerful tools for shaping the city we live in – it should deliver ongoing benefits to our community. Community facility and urban-zoned land and concessional leases exist precisely so that community organisations and government agencies can meet needs of our community.

But there are many cases like Big Splash[6] and Phillip Pool, where Canberrans have no say in the future of the facilities they rely on. ACT Government just cut library hours and removed weekend services altogether for some regions, despite public and parliamentary outcry. Land use should prioritise community benefit now and into the future, but that's not happening in practice.

And sometimes ACT Government picks 'winners' outside of any stated principles. For instance, Government gave over $40 million to the horseracing industry under a special deal without any grant or tender process – more funding than the Canberra Raiders, ACT Brumbies, Canberra United and all community sports programs combined. At the time of writing, the ACT Government was also considering a zoning change to allow the horseracing industry to make even more profit by redeveloping their recreational site for luxury apartments. The public has no certainty about whether this redevelopment would come with public housing, schools, parks, playgrounds or community facilities.

This is what happens when land use decisions are made case-by-case, behind closed doors – instead of steered by clear, open commitment to public benefit.

6. See Big Splash case study, p 18.

Big Splash, Canberra

Where is our economy headed?

The ACT's economic model is based on the conventional economic playbook: attract external investment, rely on public sector growth, and hope the benefits trickle their way back to the community. They rarely do. Expecting benefits or wealth to be shared or retained locally without changing the model is fruitless.

Recent global events have exposed the limits of that model. COVID-19 and the increasing frequency of climate disasters like bushfires, smoke and hailstorms have shown how much economic resilience matters. But resilience has to be built, deliberately, through stronger local supply chains, locally embedded businesses, and communities with the capacity to withstand and recover from disruption.

The ACT also has a structural fiscal challenge. As identified in the Eslake review[7], the ACT Government's budget has become fiscally unsustainable – Government has spent more on ongoing expenses than it has raised. And Federal Government spending growth on the Territory has slowed by more than 30%. This is the predictable result of an economy that was never structured to generate and keep its own wealth. That pressure will only keep building and limit Canberra's capacity to respond to whatever challenge comes next.

The ACT Government's response so far has been to defer infrastructure projects and reduce public sector growth. They are acknowledging past over-commitments and lack of prioritisation without making any clear decisions about what comes instead. This reactionary approach is short-term thinking and shows the Government has failed to build a strong local economy.

Incremental policy adjustments will not fix this. We need to reconsider how the ACT economy operates at a structural level – how wealth is created, who benefits from it, what Canberra needs and how resilient we are to future shocks – with government treating itself as the architect of that outcome, not a spectator to it.

7. Eslake, S 2026, *The fiscal sustainability of the ACT: final report to the ACT Legislative Assembly Select Committee on the Fiscal Sustainability of the ACT*, 4 May, ACT Legislative Assembly, accessed 20 August 2026, https://www.parliament.act.gov.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0010/3068515/824c6bd9606c9e3ca7d692f1b8ae6018309986f3.pdf.

WHAT IS THE SOLUTION?

Community Wealth Building is a progressive approach to economic development that shifts the model from one that extracts wealth from people to one that generates, retains and recirculates wealth within the community. Instead of big multinational corporations pulling wealth and asset ownership out of the local community, wealth is used to benefit the workers and communities who create it, through community ownership and control of assets.

THE FIVE PILLARS OF COMMUNITY WEALTH BUILDING

01. Fair employment and just labour markets

Promotes secure, well-paid work, strong labour standards, and opportunities for local communities to participate meaningfully in the economy.

02. Progressive procurement

Governments and other major local institutions (“anchor institutions”) use their purchasing power to support local businesses, social enterprises and community organisations wherever possible.

03. Socially productive use of land and assets

Uses land, housing and public assets to maximise long-term community benefit, including through planning and development decisions.

04. Making financial power work for local places

Strengthens access to local finance and investment, and creates opportunities to invest capital in local enterprises and projects (for example through community banking or local investment vehicles).

05. Plural ownership of the economy

Supports diverse models of ownership – such as employee-owned businesses, social enterprises and co-operatives – so that more wealth is retained by workers and communities.

What could this look like in practice in the ACT?

Applying Community Wealth Building in the ACT would involve using policy levers and institutional strengths government already has in a more coordinated and intentional way. It would be an action agenda to meaningfully implement the ACT Wellbeing Framework.[8] And it would mean real changes to our legislation and procurement framework.

This discussion paper is intended to be a starting point to prompt a conversation about how the five pillars could be applied within Canberra: what already exists, what could be improved, and what is missing.

After this community conversation, I intend to develop legislation based on the *Scottish Community Wealth Building Act*, tailored to the ACT context.

Earlier this year, Scotland became the first country in the world to legislate for Community Wealth Building, making it a central pillar of its economic development. The legislation passed unanimously with support from across the political spectrum, bringing together the Greens, Labour, the Scottish National Party, the Liberal Democrats, Conservatives, independent members, and even Reform.

All local authorities are developing tailored action plans aligned with the five pillars. Legislation now requires Ministers to demonstrate how they are using policy levers, such as procurement, land, and investment, to support local economies.

When implemented in a coordinated way, the Community Wealth Building model can help retain wealth locally, support progressive economic development, and strengthen long-term resilience.

The *Community Wealth Building (Scotland) Act 2026* seeks to ensure consistent implementation of the Community Wealth Building model of economic development across Scotland.[9]

Scotland

8. ACT Government 2026, *ACT Wellbeing Framework*, ACT Government, accessed 20 August 2026, https://www.act.gov.au/wellbeing.
9. Scottish Parliament 2026, *Community Wealth Building (Scotland) Act 2026*, asp 7, accessed 20 August 2026, https://www.legislation.gov.uk/asp/2026/7.

01. FAIR EMPLOYMENT AND JUST LABOUR MARKETS

The ACT already has strong foundations in fair employment. We have established policies and practices that show government can shape labour market outcomes when it chooses to.

While public sector employment in the ACT (both Commonwealth and Territory) offers relatively strong and secure wages and conditions, this is not always the case for all Canberrans. Many other sectors, including the arts, community services, and environmental organisations, face ongoing financial pressures and workforce insecurity. In some cases, workers in these sectors are employed in roles that fall below a living wage or rely on short-term, project-based funding that provides little to no long-term job security. This leads to high workloads and stress for workers in these sectors and is a significant contributing factor to high rates of burnout in these industries.

The ACTCOSS State of the ACT Community Sector Report 2025 states: "Burnout is widespread – 76% of respondents reported staff exhaustion and burnout, and 59% of workers said they felt emotionally drained. Many staff are working unpaid hours just to keep services afloat.

Persistent pay gaps compound these pressures, with ACT community sector workers earning on average $423 less per week (over $22,000 less annually) than ACT public sector counterparts, making it harder to attract and retain skilled staff even as demand grows.

At the same time, short-term contracts and last-minute changes to funding create cycles of uncertainty that undermine service continuity and workforce stability."

The result is an uneven labour market, where good employment conditions are concentrated in government roles, while other parts of the economy struggle to offer stable and adequately paid work. The ACT Government has tried to address this in some areas, such as by introducing the Remuneration Principles and Practices for Artists and Arts Workers. But without providing adequate funding and the progressive economic model to support those principles, they will fail in practice.

While there is a strong base in this pillar, there is much room for improvement.

02. PROGRESSIVE PROCUREMENT

Operation Kingfisher found that, as a result of serious corrupt conduct, the ACT Government awarded a multimillion-dollar construction contract to a large multinational company instead of the local ACT company that offered a ‘superior’ design at a lower cost. The Secure Local Jobs Code (see page 13) was misused by officials to do this. It is too early to tell if Operation Kingfisher identified the only instance of corrupt interference in government procurement, or if this is part of a pattern, but it is clear that many government procurement decisions are not delivering the results our community expects, and are not awarding secure work to local operators who have proven they can deliver.

A Community Wealth Building approach could simplify procurement processes, remove barriers to tendering, break large contracts into more accessible components, and help local businesses build capability. It could also improve the Secure Local Jobs Code to make sure it creates opportunities for local businesses and community and environment groups. There is significant opportunity in this pillar to actively shape the labour market and local economy, and a clear need to review our procurement practices. Government could also consider partnering with anchor institutions like universities to improve their procurement practices with the same approach.

The ACT Government already has some policies that align with progressive procurement principles. These include requirements to consider local suppliers and small and medium enterprises (SMEs) and to embed employment outcomes for disadvantaged groups within some contracts. But these requirements only apply to contracts under $25K.

Large contracts continue to be awarded to major providers, often based outside of Canberra, with limited requirements for local economic benefit. The ACT Government appears to favour fewer large contracts over multiple local ones, which means fewer opportunities for smaller local businesses and suppliers.

This may be done to reduce administration costs — although the ACT Government procurement spend has increased significantly since 2021.[10] Regardless of the reason, it is not delivering better outcomes for our environment or Canberrans.

Local companies with local knowledge can deliver outstanding services and outcomes. From composting, land management and stewardship, to cost-effective recycled goods, and strong community services, Canberra has the expertise and capacity to meet local needs. By establishing strong administrative processes, Government can streamline how it buys goods and services, deliver value for money, and treat every contract as a deliberate investment in our local economy and communities.

10. *Canberra Times 2026*, 'ACT Government's local procurement spend plummets in six years', *Canberra Times,* accessed 20 August 2026, https://www.canberratimes.com.au/story/9240123/act-governments-local-procurement-spend-drops-plummets-in-six-years/.

OVERLAP BETWEEN PILLARS

01. FAIR WORK & 02. PROGRESSIVE PROCUREMENT

The Secure Local Jobs Code is intended to promote fair and secure employment practices through government procurement. However, the Code does not apply to a range of excluded services, including consultancy, ICT, financial and health services, which together account for a significant share of public spending.

Additionally, a Legislative Assembly Committee recently recommended an independent review of the Code after hearing evidence that it was not delivering value for money, supporting economic growth, or creating jobs for people in the ACT.

The complexity of compliance requirements often means that some smaller local providers are excluded. Some small businesses and community organisations report that compliance and certification processes are excessively complex and resource-intensive, creating major barriers to tendering, even where organisations are locally-owned and operated.

For organisations with limited administrative capacity, this can mean participating in government procurement is particularly challenging. As a result, procurement outcomes can favour larger firms that are better resourced to navigate the system or can afford specialist tender-writing support.

Large firms can also comply with the Secure Local Jobs Code without necessarily employing Canberran workers or generating broader economic benefits for the ACT.

An independent review that considered a Community Wealth Building approach could build on the good principles of the Secure Local Jobs Code while addressing shortcomings.

A LOCAL EXAMPLE

FOGO: A HISTORY OF WASTED OPPORTUNITY

This is an example of how changing procurement settings through a Community Wealth Building lens could have drastically changed the outcome and delivered better results for Canberrans and our environment.

In the 1990s, the ACT Government worked with two small composting businesses to establish a council service for composting green waste. Government also helped them secure land and develop a viable business model that enabled them to sell the composted product.

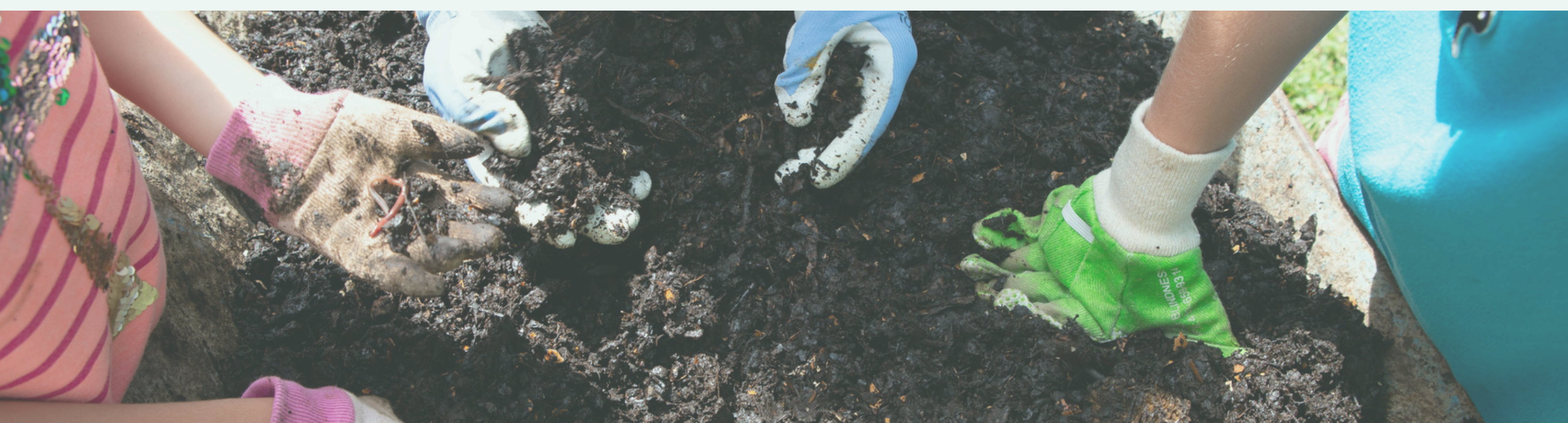
This partnership was really successful and, thanks to this investment, Canberra ended up with two businesses, CSG and Corkhill Bros, which provide the cheapest green waste recycling service any council can access and save around 250,000 tonnes of green waste from landfill each year.

The ACT Government has promised a Food Organics Garden Organics (FOGO) recycling facility for years. It was committed for delivery by 2023, then 2026, then 2028, and now 2030. To date, the ACT Government has awarded $850,000 to two interstate and international companies for preliminary work on the proposed facility,[11,12] but has not yet signed a contract for delivery. That facility is not expected to be operational until 2030 at the earliest.

Food waste sent to landfill generates climate emissions for 20 years. Every year of delay locks in additional emissions and prolongs the environmental impact well into the future. Even if the facility is operational in 2030, that means more emissions until 2050.

The ACT Government also promised to require businesses to recycle food waste by 2023.[13] but has now delayed that commitment too.

11. ACT Government 2026, *Tenders ACT: contract 229177*, ACT Government, accessed 20 August 2026, https://www.tenders.act.gov.au/contract/view?id=229177.
12. ACT Government 2026, *Tenders ACT: contract 229317*, ACT Government, accessed 20 August 2026, https://www.tenders.act.gov.au/contract/view?id=229317.
13. ACT Greens and ACT Labor 2020, *Parliamentary Agreement for the 10th Legislative Assembly for the Australian Capital Territory*, Appendix 2, ACT Government, accessed 20 August 2026, https://www.cmtedd.act.gov.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0003/1654077/Parliamentary-Agreement-for-the-10th-Legislative-Assembly.pdf.



Meanwhile, the local sector has collapsed. In 2023 the ACT had at least six established local composting and food waste processing businesses operating under different models, including Corkhill Bros, CSG, Global Worming, Capital Scraps, GoTerra and Food2Soil, as well as many food rescue organisations.[14]

The ACT could have provided certainty by delivering the FOGO facility when originally promised. Or they could have pulled together a city-wide FOGO processing network that partnered with local operators. Or they could have supported local FOGO providers to service the commercial or government sectors by requiring businesses generating large amounts of food waste to recycle it. Or they could have worked with FOGO operators to find suitable sites and provide clarity about how regulations would apply.

This is how the ACT Government grew the small green waste recycling businesses of the 1990s into large successful ones today. Instead, the ACT Government has created an environment of uncertainty. They have announced and then delayed regulatory reform. They are proceeding with one big composting facility, but they have delayed it three times and it will not be ready until 2030 at the earliest.

Meanwhile, many in the local sector have collapsed. Food2Soil has now relocated outside the ACT. GoTerra was going to provide council recycling services to the City of Sydney and was working in the business segment but is now winding up. Capital Scraps wound up in 2024. Corkhill Bros was bought by SOILCO in 2024. Global Worming is still operating but has lost one of its sites as a result of Canberra City Farm losing their licence to operate on the Dairy Rd site.

14. Clay, J 2022, *ACT Greens vision for our circular economy*, ACT Greens, accessed 20 August 2026, https://greens.org.au/sites/default/files/2022-08/Jo%20Clay%20-%20ACT%20Greens%20Vision%20for%20Our%20Circular%20Economy_v7_1.7MB.pdf.

waste MANAGEMENT REVIEW

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FOGO trial in ACT

by Waste Management Review — October 4, 2021

Reading Time: 4 mins read

The ACT Government will pilot Food Organics and Garden Organics (FOGO) collection services for selected Belconnen suburbs later this year to help reduce waste going to landfill and turn household scraps into compost.

Belconnen, Bruce, Cook and Macquarie were selected as pilot suburbs because of their mix of single residential dwellings and multi-unit properties.

ACT Chief Minister Andrew Barr said the FOGO pilot would allow Canberrans to make better choices to stop waste going to landfill and take everyday action on climate change.

ABC NEWS

ACT partners with federal government to build new composting and recycling facilities

By Penny Travers | Recycling and Waste Manag

Posted 8 Aug 2022 at 11:18am, updated 9 Aug 2022 at 11:02am

The new FOGO facility will process 50,000 tonnes — equivalent to the weight of 30,000 cars — of organic waste each year. *(Supplied: maerzkind, iStock Photos)*

ABC NEWS

ACT food scraps collection program expanding but Canberra-wide rollout facing delays

By Charlie Gore | Recycling and Waste Manage

Posted 31 Aug 2024 at 8:04am, updated 31 Aug 2024 at 2:55pm

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ACT not so fantastic on plastic and new facility may not help, says Clay

10 August 2026 | By Ian Bushnell

But Greens Leader Jo Clay said the government was falling behind on waste, saying the new facility would not recover soft plastics and the promised FOGO facility had been delayed again.

ABC NEWS

Canberra food and garden organics collection scheme expansion delayed for third time

By Caitlin Maloney | Recycling and Waste Mana

Posted 1 Aug 2026 at 3:31pm

The Food Organics and Garden Organics (FOGO) pilot has been in place for more than 5,000 households in some Canberra suburbs since 2021. *(ABC News: Kate Stephens)*

insidewaste

ACT pushes back FOGO rollout as delays continue

MIKE.WHEELER

August 4, 2026, 10:03 am

Image: larisikstefania/stock.adobe.com

03. SOCIALLY PRODUCTIVE USE OF LAND AND ASSETS

As the planners and administrators of Territory land, the ACT Government can prioritise and deliver community and social infrastructure that responds to the needs of the people of Canberra. Too often, it isn't used that way, and Canberrans are concerned that planning decisions are not delivering for local neighbourhoods.

There are at least seven sites in the ACT where lease conditions are not being complied with. This non-compliance or 'lease squatting' is when a Crown leaseholder does not use the land for what its intended purpose.

The Standing Committee on Environment and Planning is currently conducting an inquiry into the use of controlled activity orders and government enforcement of lease conditions. Public submissions are open until 28 August 2026.[15]

Access Canberra is responsible for ensuring compliance with the use of Territory land but lack transparency about how they enforce compliance. The community cannot get basic information about whether lease conditions are being enforced. The community often feels compelled to take action themselves by lodging controlled activity order complaints. And when Government adds uses to a Crown lease or decides to rezone a site, community interest does not seem to be taken into account.

Government receives revenue from lease variation charges, fees paid to change the conditions of a Crown lease. But this is paid into consolidated revenue and distributed across the Territory. The local benefits of doing this are minimal. Greater alignment with community-focused outcomes, such as more public housing, would deliver far better results. More on this approach is outlined in my paper *Zoning for Inclusion*.

The ACT Government does have a policy to make community facility land available to community groups. But we are not seeing this impact on the ground. It relies on community groups to raise funds and compete commercially to pay market rates for sites. It also requires community groups to have the skills to undertake land development.

This is where government could play a genuinely active role, by funding programs that encourage the development and upskilling of small grassroots community groups so they can connect and grow at the local level, and develop the land development skills and financial viability to purchase and develop community facility land themselves.

Planning and development decision-making can often seem isolated from community concerns. Local facilities like the Phillip Swimming and Ice Skating Centre and Big Splash (in Macquarie) have sparked huge public campaigns when it looked like they would be lost for community use to for-profit redevelopment.

15. ACT Legislative Assembly, Standing Committee on Economy and Gender and Economic Equality 2026, *Inquiry into the use of controlled activity orders*, ACT Legislative Assembly, accessed 20 August 2026, https://www.parliament.act.gov.au/parliamentary-business/in-committees/committees-11th-assembly/EPC/inquiry-into-the-use-of-controlled-activity-orders#tab3087958-1id.

A LOCAL EXAMPLE: BIG SPLASH

Big Splash started life as a public pool in 1969 but subsequently became a private waterpark with iconic slides. In 2021, the lease to the park was bought by the latest private leaseholder.

While the leaseholder operated the park for several years, in late 2024 they announced that the park would not open that summer (but committed to opening the following summer). The pool remained close throughout that summer.

In 2025 I sponsored a community petition and then got the Legislative Assembly to vote – with unanimous support – to prevent Government from rezoning the site. This means the site remains a parks and recreational zone and cannot be used for residential purposes.

In the 2025/26 summer, the pool again failed to open. The site appeared abandoned and was vandalised extensively. By January 2026, a notice of repossession by the mortgagees appeared on the fence of the site.

A sustained community campaign called for the Government to enforce the conditions of the lease – including by issuing fines or terminating the lease. The Government announced in April 2026 that they would take some action, but stopped well short of either: no fines were issued, and the lease was not terminated, because the lessee had installed fencing to prevent unauthorised access, cleaned up the area, and again indicated their intention to open the pool (not the slides) by 1 November.

Government said this would satisfy the lease conditions, since there were no lease requirements to operate the slides at all. The lessee then indicated they intended to demolish the slides, again to public outcry.

In June 2026, the mortgagees in possession listed the site for sale, with water slides as is, with the conditions of the existing lease attached. This process has failed to deliver a result. The pool will not reopen on 1 November. Canberra does not know if or when its only waterpark will reopen.

This is what happens when government treats lease compliance as a box-ticking exercise rather than a tool for protecting community benefit.

A Community Wealth Building approach doesn't wait for a facility to fall into this state before acting – it places community ownership, long-term stewardship and social value at the centre of how land is managed from the outset. It also takes a proactive approach to lease squatting and commercial operators who allow facilities to run down in the hopes of rezoning and redeveloping for profit.

Big Splash, Canberra

04. MAKING FINANCIAL POWER WORK FOR LOCAL PLACES

In many economies, including the ACT, savings, superannuation and public funds are often channeled through national or global systems, with little connection back to local needs.

There is a multi-billion dollar fund paying for the ACT's superannuation liability, investing in big, often unethical corporations and companies. This money could be invested back into the community via local projects but isn't, because no one has built the pathway to do it. There are also very few structured pathways for Canberrans to invest directly in local enterprises, infrastructure or community projects.

A Community Wealth Building approach seeks to rebalance this by developing locally focused finance and investment mechanisms. These include community banks, local investment funds, or partnerships with existing institutions that can be used to support small businesses, social enterprises and community infrastructure.

An example from Chicago: Community Investment Vehicles

One structure that has been created in Chicago is a Community Investment Vehicle (CIV). CIVs are a legal structure that allows residents to pool their financial resources to buy and control neighbourhood real estate assets, such as shopping centres or multi-family housing – essentially a form of community crowdfunding.

CIVs are an alternative to traditional real estate development and financing, which is often initiated by 'outsider' developers that may not be familiar with neighbourhood goals – but have access to capital from large financial institutions and investors. In short, CIVs have the potential to advance neighbourhood-driven development goals through alternative sources of funding and financing.

By aligning capital with place, this pillar helps strengthen local economies, improve access to finance, and ensure that the benefits of investment are retained within the community over the long term.

Chicago, USA

https://civ-southshore.com/

AN AUSTRALIAN EXAMPLE:
CASTLEMAINE COMMUNITY INVESTMENT CO-OPERATIVE

Castlemaine Community Investment Co-operative in Victoria is a group of residents who created a co-op to purchase and manage local properties, taking them out of the speculative real estate market to make them permanently community owned.

Co-operatives are member-owned organisations, run for mutual benefit. Members share decision-making and responsibility for how the co-op operates, typically running a business or operating an asset. Unlike shareholders in a listed company, members have direct ownership, and any profits or benefits return to them rather than external investors.

The co-op has 560 members out of a town of 8,000. The members collectively pooled $2m to buy a commercial building in the town, known as the Hub. The Hub had long been used as a community facility, and when it was put up for sale, the community was concerned that it would be bought by a private developer and the community facility would be lost. As one member said:

"Billionaires are buying up all our stuff and we need to take it back!"

The mechanism for this was via "debentures". Debentures are a type of loan where an organisation (in this case the co-op) borrows money directly from the investors (the members) at a set interest rate. In a Community Wealth Building framework, debentures can be used as a way for local people to invest in local projects or organisations, allowing capital to stay and circulate within the community rather than coming from external investors.

The Hub is wholly community-owned and the rules of the co-operative say that it can't be sold back into the speculative market. It has commercial tenants who pay rent, allowing the co-op to pay interest back to the members who loaned the debentures, and also pay off the loan principal.

Castlemaine, Victoria

https://castlemaine.coop/

ANOTHER AUSTRALIAN EXAMPLE:
SEA LAKE HOTEL CO-OPERATIVE LTD

At the end of June 2017, the last operating pub in Sea Lake, Victoria closed its doors. Sea Lake had no pub! A magnificent building was left idly boarded up in the middle of the main street of town.

Then, word spread in October 2018 that the hotel was going to be auctioned. A group of locals started talking about what could be done to resurrect the old pub and bring it back to life.

At auction time, the group put their hands in their own pockets to buy back the pub for the community. In the end, the group of about 20 purchased the hotel at the auction, and the Sea Lake Hotel Pty Ltd was formed.

As soon as the ink was dry on the purchase contract, within a week, the call went out to the Sea Lake community to join the investors for a working bee to clean the old pub up.

Over 80 people turned up with trucks, trailers, tools, brooms and brushes to clear the rubbish that had built up while the building was left to sit idle. It was truly an amazing effort. Over the course of a few months, more investors came onboard, and the company transferred to a co-operative to accommodate the growing interest.

The Sea Lake Hotel Co-Operative Ltd was then created. From purchase it took only six months to transform the neglected old building into what is there today.

Sea Lake, Victoria

https://www.royalhotelsealake.com.au/Services

05. SHARED OWNERSHIP OF THE ECONOMY

Employee-owned businesses and co-operatives are central to Community Wealth Building because they change who benefits from economic activity.

Instead of profits flowing to distant shareholders, these models ensure that workers and members have a direct stake in an enterprise's success.

In an employee-owned business, staff share in ownership and often participate in decision-making, while in co-operatives, members collectively own and govern the organisation for mutual benefit.

This not only helps retain wealth locally, it builds greater economic stability, as these enterprises tend to be more rooted in place and less likely to relocate or extract profits elsewhere.

Within a Community Wealth Building model, deliberately supporting the growth of these ownership models strengthens local economies by distributing wealth more evenly, increasing worker agency, and embedding economic value within communities for the long term.

A local example: the ANU Food Co-op

The **ANU Food Co-op** began in 1976 and provides low-waste, affordable, locally-sourced, fair trade, organic and sustainable products to the community.

The Food Co-op members own the Co-op, contributing in their chosen capacity towards its daily functioning and longevity. The Food Co-op is managed with consensus-based decision-making and all members are invited to participate.

ANOTHER AUSTRALIAN EXAMPLE:
COMMUNITY ENERGY FOR GOULBURN

The Goulburn Community Solar farm was set up by a group frustrated with decades of successive Federal Government inaction on climate change, who decided to take bold action themselves and create a community-owned renewable energy farm.

This epic decade-long project used a co-operative governance structure to retain community ownership, while leveraging local member investment and a government grant to build a solar farm in Goulburn.

The group understood the benefit of clean energy for the environment, but also for the local economy.

"This story celebrates the know-how, grit and community co-operation in this piece of Australia... that small group became a 300-strong group of investors with ever widening circles of support from business, community and environment groups, media and Government. Bringing a solar power plant under the control of ordinary people in a regional community is a story worth being told."

- *From Kitchen Table to Solar Farm: A Love Story* by the people at Community Energy for Goulburn.

ANOTHER LOCAL EXAMPLE: BAROSSA CO-OP

The Barossa Co-op is South Australia's largest and longest standing retail co-operative.

It began in 1944 as a general store selling an array of goods and services from a single store in the main street of Nuriootpa.

Barossa Co-op has now evolved into an agglomeration of nine retail businesses built in and around an exceptional regional shopping centre.

In 1945, there were 771 members. Today they have over 21,000.

For every dollar spent at Barossa Co-op, an additional 76 cents of value is created for the community, including members and suppliers.

The Barossa Co-op refers to this recirculation of wealth as 'sticky money': wealth that circulates locally instead of leaking out.

MAJOR BRANDS THAT ARE BAROSSA CO-OP BUSINESSES

Barossa Fresh
Barossa Mitre 10 Mighty Helpful
Barossa Betta
fresh cafe
Intersport Barossa
Barossa Workwear
barossa lifestyle
The Design Studio
Toyworld where the best toys come from

Barossa, SA

OVERSEAS EXAMPLES

Community Wealth Building has been successfully implemented in several international places over the last decade.

One of the most widely cited examples is Preston in the United Kingdom, where the local council worked with anchor institutions such as hospitals and universities to redirect procurement spending towards local businesses and social enterprises.

Over several years, this approach significantly increased the proportion of public spending retained in the local economy, supported local job creation, and contributed to a broader revitalisation of the city.

Preston City Council

Preston, UK

In the United States, Cleveland has implemented Community Wealth Building through the development of worker-owned businesses linked to the procurement needs of large local institutions.

Known as the “Evergreen Cooperatives,” these enterprises have created stable employment and enabled workers to build ownership stakes in local businesses.

evergreen COOPERATIVES

Cleveland, USA

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

What are your thoughts? Here are some ideas to get started...

- How could Community Wealth Building benefit your community?
- What changes to policy, procurement or economic settings would help the Government move towards a Community Wealth Building model?
- How can we create better connections between Government and community when it comes to planning decisions, procurement and economic settings?
- Do you think Government contracts should, where possible, be awarded to local companies over interstate and international companies?
- What settings could we change — both for Government and business — to make this happen?
- Could Government policy or settings be changed to encourage more worker-owned companies, collectives or co-operatives?
- How could the Secure Local Jobs Code be improved to better support local jobs and the local economy?
- How could lease variation charges be redirected to benefit local communities, rather than going into consolidated revenue?
- Should there be a fixed percentage of ACT Government investment legislatively required to be invested locally?
- Do you have relevant experience as a community member, public servant, business owner, or any other area that you would like to share?

I'd love to hear your thoughts and feedback on these questions, as well as any other insights you might have. Please email: CLAY@parliament.act.gov.au

WHAT NEXT?

Community Wealth Building only works when all five pillars are in place as they work together and reinforce each other. The ACT already has good foundations to build on but some clear need for reform. With the right legislation and co-ordination, the ACT is well placed to realise the full benefits from the Community Wealth Building framework.

I want to hear your thoughts and ideas!

Following this community discussion, I intend to develop legislation based on Scotland's example, tailored to the ACT.

I'll also be sharing content on social media to continue the conversation — jump across and give me a follow at @jo_clay_mla on Instagram or Jo Clay MLA on Facebook.

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Authorised by Jo Clay for the ACT Greens