

# **Phone call charges at the Alexander Maconochie Centre: what does it really cost?**

**An investigation into ACT Corrective Services'  
administration of telephone call charges**

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# Executive summary

We received a complaint about the cost of phone calls for people in detention at the Alexander Maconochie Centre (AMC), Canberra's only adult prison. The complaint alleged that new call charges introduced on 5 December 2024, following a 6-month period of no charges, were 'extortionate'.

Having access to phone calls is an important lifeline for people in detention to maintain connections with families, friends and other services. This importance is recognised in legislation that mandates people in detention have access to facilities to make and receive telephone calls. If call charges are prohibitive, this affects the rehabilitative outcomes for people in detention, increasing the risks of them being less well-supported, and may lead to self-harm or to further offending or risks to the community after release.

We decided to investigate and uncovered more than we anticipated. We found that not only had ACT Corrective Services (ACTCS) not properly considered the appropriateness of the new charges introduced in December 2024, but it had been over-charging people in detention for their phone calls for over 2 years. We also found that, when ACTCS identified the over-charging issue, it did not advise any oversight agencies, failed to apologise to the people affected and did not take reasonable steps to contact people it needed to reimburse. As a result, there are still 486 people previously detained at the AMC who are collectively owed more than \$46,000.

Our investigation also identified other opportunities for ACTCS to improve access to communications for people in detention to help strengthen positive and pro-social relationships with their friends, families and services. To this end, we make 5 recommendations. ACTCS was provided an opportunity to review a final draft of this report and has accepted 5 recommendations, 2 of them in principle. A copy of the ACTCS Commissioner's response is available at **Appendix A**.

I would like to thank the complainant for taking the time to raise their concerns with my Office, and I acknowledge ACTCS for its assistance in providing information and addressing our questions during this investigation.

**Iain Anderson**  
**ACT Ombudsman**



# Our findings



## Finding 1

In making the [Corrections Management \(Detainee Communications\) Policy 2024](#) and [Corrections Management \(Detainee Communications\) Operating Procedure 2024](#) under s 47(4) of the [Corrections Management Act 2007](#), ACTCS did not properly assess nor set out reasonable grounds for the appropriateness of charging the call rates introduced on 5 December 2024 to all people in detention at the AMC.



## Finding 2

New call charges introduced on 5 December 2024 are not commensurate with what is paid in the community and are prohibitively high for many people in detention at the AMC.



## Finding 3

For more than 2 years, ACTCS over-charged people in detention at the AMC for their telephone calls.



## Finding 4

ACTCS failed to take reasonable steps to return over-charged funds to previously detained people and failed to apologise to those affected.



## Finding 5

ACTCS is not complying with legislated obligations to ensure it provides telephone facilities for people in detention to receive telephone calls.





### **Finding 6**

ACTCS has plans to implement a Digital Services solution that offers the potential to significantly enhance access to communications and education for people in detention but the timeframes for delivery remain uncertain.

# Recommendations



## Recommendation 1: Review call costs

ACTCS review the call charges and processes set out in the [Corrections Management \(Detainee Communications\) Policy 2024](#) and [Corrections Management \(Detainee Communications\) Operating Procedure 2024](#).

In conducting its review, ACTCS should:

- weigh the ability of people in detention to pay for calls against the pro-social benefits of supporting strong ties between a person in detention and their family and community
- consider re-introducing a subsidy for phone calls to ensure adequate opportunities are provided for people in detention to be able to remain in contact with family members, friends, associates and others by telephone, in accordance with s 46(1) of the *Corrections Management Act 2007*
- clearly document its decision-making and reasons under s 47(4) of the *Corrections Management Act 2007*, as to why, and in which circumstances, the Director-General believes on reasonable grounds, that it is appropriate for a person in detention to pay for a call.



## Recommendation 2: Reimburse impacted people

ACTCS make all reasonable efforts to locate and reimburse the 486 individuals to whom it has not yet returned over-charged funds.

This should include, as a minimum, reaching out through last known contact details (or other known appropriate contacts) and increasing public awareness of the issue to encourage affected individuals to contact ACTCS for reimbursement.





### **Recommendation 3: Apologise**

ACTCS publicly apologise to all people in detention between April 2022 and 24 May 2024 for its failure to remove charges for calls to Australian mobiles and landlines, contrary to ACTCS policy, and for the impacts this may have had on maintaining their connections with family and community.



### **Recommendation 4: Facilitate receiving calls**

ACTCS establish facilities for people in detention to receive calls, in accordance with s 47(1) of the [Corrections Management Act 2007](#).



### **Recommendation 5: Implement digital services solution**

ACTCS prioritise, and if possible expedite, its procurement and implementation of an effective, accessible digital services solution to improve access to communications for people in detention.



# Part 1. Telephone charges at the AMC

## Telephone access

Research<sup>1</sup> suggests that maintaining connections with family and community helps people in detention to maintain a more positive outlook during detention, supporting their rehabilitation, reducing anti-social behaviours, improving their prospects for positive supports on release, ultimately reducing the risk of reoffending.

This importance of maintaining relationships during detention is recognised by the [Corrections Management Act 2007](#). Unlike other Australian jurisdictions,<sup>2</sup> in the ACT, access to telephone facilities is a legislated 'entitlement'<sup>3</sup>, rather than a 'privilege', meaning access cannot be taken away as part of disciplinary action against a person in detention that removes/reduces privileges. ACTCS is required to ensure, as far as practicable, that adequate opportunities are provided for people in detention to be able to remain in contact with family members, friends, associates and others by telephone calls, mail and visits.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2023) [The health of people in Australia's prisons 2022](#). Catalogue number PHE 334, AIHW, Australian Government. DOI: 10.25816/1md4-5g46; Barrick K, Lattimore PK, Visser CA (2014) [Reentering Women: The Impact of Social Ties on Long-Term Recidivism](#). The Prison Journal 1–26, SAGE Publications. DOI: 10.1177/0032885514537596; Folk JB, Stuewig J, Mashek D, Tangney JP, Grossmann J (2019) [Behind bars but connected to family: Evidence for the benefits of family contact during incarceration](#). J Fam Psychol. 2019 Jun;33(4):453–464. DOI: 10.1037/fam0000520. Epub 2019 Apr 11. PMID: 30973255; PMCID: PMC6625803; Troy V, McPherson KE, Emslie C, Gilchrist E (2018) [The Feasibility, Appropriateness, Meaningfulness, and Effectiveness of Parenting and Family Support Programs Delivered in the Criminal Justice System: A Systematic Review](#). J Child Fam Stud. 2018;27(6):1732–1747. DOI: 10.1007/s10826-018-1034-3. Epub 2018 Mar 1. PMID: 29755249; PMCID: PMC5932092; Wang, L (2021) [Research roundup: The positive impacts of family contact for incarcerated people and their families](#). Prison Policy Initiative

<sup>2</sup> Western Australia is the only jurisdiction to describe access to phone calls as an 'entitlement' but it is not legislated (see [Commissioner's Operating Policy and Procedures 7.1 Prisoner Communications](#) )

<sup>3</sup> s 46(5) *Corrections Management Act*

<sup>4</sup> s 46(1) *Corrections Management Act*



The [Explanatory Statement](#) explains that this approach was a deliberate policy choice:

Clause 46 places an obligation upon the chief executive to be proactive in providing opportunities for detainees to maintain contact with the community. ... [M]ost prisoners will return to the community. Positive changes in behaviour will be greatly influenced by relationships with family and close associates. Maintaining these relationships during detention is an important factor in successful rehabilitation and release of prisoners.

In particular, the [Corrections Management Act 2007](#) requires the overall treatment of a person in detention must not deprive the person generally of all communication with any of the following:

- the courts
- accredited people
- a doctor of the detainee's choice for health services
- family members
- other people with whom the detainee may communicate under this Act.<sup>5</sup>

Further, ACTCS must provide telephone facilities for people in detention to make and receive telephone calls.<sup>6</sup>

A person in detention must pay for the call if the director-general believes on reasonable grounds that is appropriate (for example, if the person in detention can afford to pay for the call).<sup>7</sup> A person in detention may make at least:

- one telephone call on admission to a correctional centre; and
- one telephone call each week to a family member.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> s 46(4) *Corrections Management Act*

<sup>6</sup> s 47(1) *Corrections Management Act*

<sup>7</sup> s 47(4) *Corrections Management Act*

<sup>8</sup> s 47(2) *Corrections Management Act*



They may also make and receive further telephone calls for necessary contact with a family member, friend or someone else.<sup>9</sup>

To support the operationalisation of the legislative framework, ACTCS has a [Corrections Management \(Detainee Communications\) Policy 2024](#) (Policy) and a [Corrections Management \(Detainee Communications\) Operating Procedure 2024](#) (Operating Procedure) that govern how people in detention at the AMC can maintain contact with family, friends and legal and professional services while in custody.

Section 12.10 of the Policy and s 4.2 of the Operating Procedure state:

Detainees are required to pay for telephone calls at the current service provider rate by purchasing phone credits in accordance with the [Detainee Banking Policy](#) (Phone Credits Purchase Form). Changes to the charge rate are determined by the service provider and the ACCO [Assistant Commissioner, Custodial Operations] will ensure that detainees are informed in advance of any increased cost.

Under s 12.2(c) of the Policy, ACTCS will ensure people in detention have:

access to emergency or welfare calls to an approved contact on the detainee's telephone contact list subject to the approval of the accommodation Area Manager on a case-by-case basis.

## Detainee Telephone System upgrade

The Detainee Telephone System (DTS) is the capability ACTCS uses to meet its obligations to provide people in detention with access to telephone facilities at the AMC under the [Corrections Management Act 2007](#).

In 2022, recognising its existing DTS, implemented in 2007, had reached its end of life in December 2018, ACTCS established a DTS upgrade project. The aim was to replace the previous DTS. The upgrade was expected to be finalised in late 2022/early 2023. However, the project experienced significant delays and the new DTS was not implemented until December 2024.

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<sup>9</sup> s 47(3) *Corrections Management Act*



The DTS enables ACTCS to manage the calls of the people in detention, by setting call charges,<sup>10</sup> managing approved contacts, setting call limits, and monitoring and recording eligible calls to detect misuse. People in detention using the provided phones can make calls to common call numbers and to their approved contacts, provided their account is active and has a sufficient cash balance.

## Call charges

While the DTS was being upgraded, there have been several changes to the call costs for people in detention.<sup>11</sup>

Before 24 May 2024, people in detention were charged a connection fee and different rate per minute charges (between 10c and 44c) depending on if the call was to a mobile or landline, during the week or on a weekend. (Table 1)

Table 1 Telephone call charges at the AMC **before** 24 May 2024

Type of phone being called	Day	Connection fee	Minute Charge
Australian mobile phone	weekday	28 cents inc GST	44 cents inc GST
	weekend	28 cents inc GST	28 cents inc GST
Local landline	All	Nil	35 cents inc GST
Interstate landline	weekday	28 cents inc GST	18 cents inc GST
	weekend	28 cents inc GST	10 cents inc GST
13, 1300, 1800 numbers and international numbers	All	40 cents inc GST	Variable - as set by service provider

From 24 May 2024, as part of the preparation of the DTS upgrade, for 6 months people in detention could make calls to Australian mobiles and landlines for free. (Table 2)

<sup>10</sup> ACTCS does not charge people in detention for calls made to 99 numbers listed on its 'common call list', which generally consists of numbers for oversight agencies, support agencies, etc.

<sup>11</sup> ACTCS does not charge people in detention for calls made to 99 numbers listed on its 'common call list', which generally consists of numbers for oversight agencies, support agencies, etc.



Table 2 Telephone call charges at the AMC 24 May 2024 to 4 December 2024

Type of phone being called	Day	Connection fee	Minute Charge
Australian mobile phone, local and interstate landline	All	Nil	Nil
13, 1300, 1800 numbers and international numbers	All	40 cents inc GST	Variable - as set by service provider

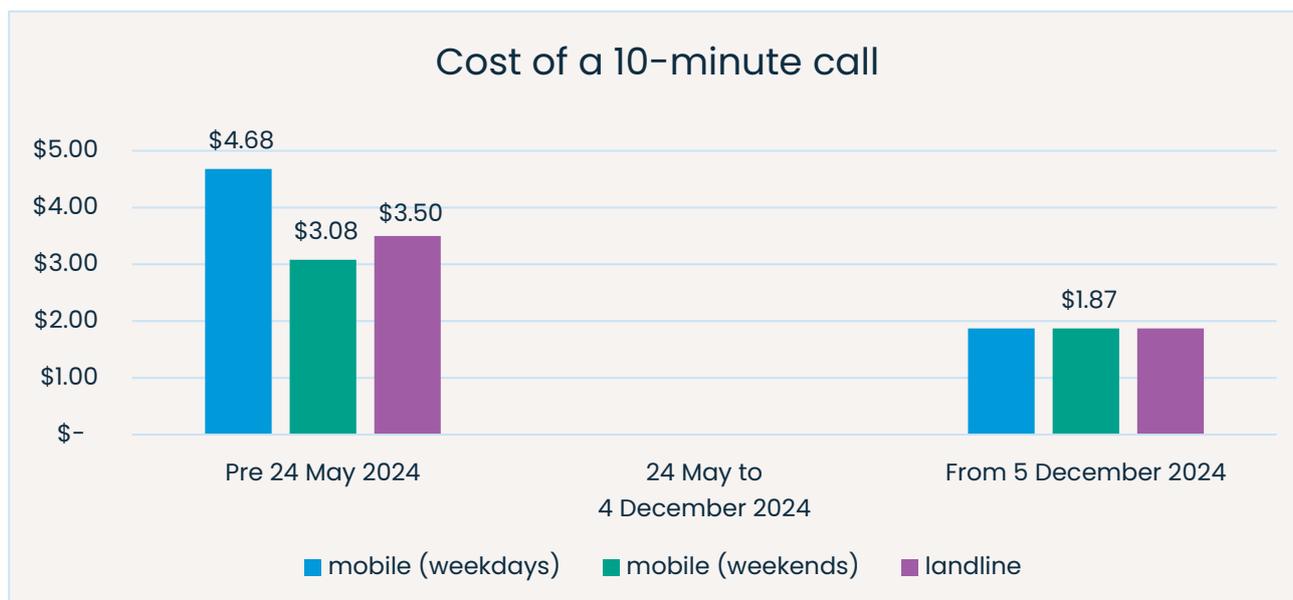
On 5 December 2024, ACTCS recommenced charging people in detention for outgoing telephone calls made through its upgraded DTS. These costs did not include a connection fee and were set at 18.7 cent per minute regardless of the day. (Table 3)

Table 3 Telephone call charges at the AMC **after** 4 December 2024

Type of phone being called	Day	Connection fee	Minute Charge
Australian mobile phone, local and interstate landline	All	Nil	18.7 cents inc GST
13, 1300, 1800 numbers and international numbers	All	Nil	Variable - as set by service provider

Calls are now cheaper under the new DTS charges than before 24 May 2024. (Figure 1)

Figure 1 Call rate changes over time



It was the reintroduction of charges in December 2024 that prompted the complaint to our Office. Apart from the window between 24 May and 4 December 2024, call costs for people in detention at the AMC have remained far higher than call costs in the community, where it is possible to make free calls to mobile phones from Telstra phone



boxes, and most people can access low-cost plans through mobile service providers that include unlimited calls and texts.

## COVID-19 credits

Also relevant to the context of call costs in AMC was the introduction in 2020 of 'COVID credits'.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, physical visits to the AMC were ceased. Recognising the impact this would have on people in detention, and to support people in detention to maintain contact with family and community, ACTCS introduced, from late March 2020, a \$20 per week phone credit for all people in detention. Any unspent COVID credit accumulated in a detained person's call account.

ACTCS ended up continuing the COVID credits even after health restrictions on visits had been lifted. This followed, the Inspector of Custodial Services' recommendation in her Healthy Prison Review<sup>12</sup> that:

[...] if ACT Corrective Services cannot negotiate a cheaper cost-per-call rate with a telephone provider, the cost of calls [be] subsidised to a level broadly commensurate with the cost of landline calls in the community

The credits stopped being issued on 24 May 2024, at the same time ACTCS stopped charging people in detention for calls, ahead of implementation of the new DTS.

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<sup>12</sup> [Healthy Prison Review of the Alexander Maconochie Centre 2022](#), p 200



# Part 2. Issues arising from our investigation

Our investigation sought to understand ACTCS' actions and decisions in re-introducing call charges on 5 December 2024, and to consider if they were consistent with obligations under the [Corrections Management Act 2007](#), and with relevant policies and procedures.

In reviewing information provided by ACTCS in response to our requests, we identified a number of issues with how ACTCS had administered the call charging arrangements at the AMC, including flawed decision-making in setting call costs, over charging people in detention and not putting in place arrangements for people to receive calls.

## Setting call costs

### Requiring people in detention to pay

Under s 47(4) of the [Corrections Management Act 2007](#):

A detainee who makes a telephone call mentioned in subsection (2) or (3) must pay for the call if the director-general believes, on reasonable grounds, that is appropriate.

#### Example

if the detainee can afford to pay for the call.

We asked ACTCS about how the Director-General (or relevant delegate) determined the reasonable grounds and appropriateness of imposing the call charges implemented on 5 December 2024. Their response was:

ACTCS considers that charging detainees for phone calls and charging at the rate set by the telecommunications provider ... **is appropriate because it is permitted** [*emphasis added*] under the [*Corrections Management Act 2007*] and [ACTCS'] Communications Policy and Procedure. ACTCS also notes the



current charges are overall, significantly less than the amount charged before May 2024.

In its procedural fairness response, ACTCS also noted:

The Explanatory Statement to the *Corrections Management Act 2007*, Clause 47(4) outlines that detainees must pay for any phone call they make unless there are good reasons why they cannot pay for the call. This clause further details that detainees may earn nominal amounts for tasks completed in detention which will be used to pay for calls and mail.”

ACTCS did not demonstrate it had weighed any considerations that might inform the appropriateness of charging people in detention for calls. The only consideration appears to have been whether the new charges were cheaper than previous charges. It also did not consider whether it should continue to subsidise the cost of the calls.

ACTCS also advised:

Consideration was not given to how call charges compared to call costs in the wider ACT community. However, consideration was given to significantly reducing the call costs that were previously charged to detainees at the AMC...

...the call costs were provided by the vendor through their response to the procurement process. Given that there was a significant reduction in charges from previous call costs to detainees in the AMC, no consideration was given to the proportionality of call costs to the average detained person’s salary.

While it was not apparent in the information provided to our office that ACTCS considered the costs charged in other jurisdictions when deciding to pass on the service provider charges without subsidy in December 2024, ACTCS did provide us with a link to the March 2025 issue of [Australia's National Prison Newspaper](#), which reported that ACTCS' new call charges at the AMC are among the cheapest of Australian jurisdictions.

While we acknowledge ACTCS’ Policy provides for access to emergency or welfare calls, where a person in detention does not have funds on their DTS account, the Alexander Maconochie Centre Detainee Handbook advises:

A request for a welfare call is generally only approved for emergency situations and will be assessed on a case-by-case basis.



That calls can only be made for free when a custodial officer determines it is an emergency means there is no avenue for welfare calls unless the person in detention can persuade a custodial officer there is, in fact, an emergency. A call will not be available if a person in detention cannot afford to pay for calls but is feeling down and needs to call someone for support.

ACTCS advised our Office that:

Detainees in the AMC can obtain employment or participate in select rehabilitation programs to earn a salary. If they are unemployed, they receive \$15.30 per week in unemployment benefits. Detainees at the AMC are provided with all essential living requirements, including meals, bedding, clothing and toiletries. Income earned by detainees through work opportunities at the AMC may be used to purchase additional items, including telephone calls and snacks as part of their weekly buy-up. This income is not required for detainees to manage their daily living requirements and is discretionary in nature.

At the new call rates of \$1.87, making one 10-minute call per day will cost \$13.09 per week, all but exhausting the income of a person receiving only the unemployment benefits of \$15.30 a week. While call costs may be somewhat more affordable for those with employment, we understand jobs at the AMC “offer very low pay (from \$36–\$72 per week) which may not even support needs in prison (such as paying for phone calls or purchasing items on activities or food buy up)”<sup>13</sup> and some detained people may still face ongoing costs in the community such as rent, utilities etc while in detention.<sup>14</sup>

Further, we understand that many basic essentials, such as pens, paper, educational materials, fans, kettles, footwear, recreational items, and preferred personal toiletries need to be purchased by people in detention at the AMC. Meanwhile, many people in detention are also attempting to save money for when they are released.

ACTCS was unable to provide any documentation to demonstrate what was considered by the delegate authorising on 2 December 2024 the updated Policy and

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<sup>13</sup> [Healthy Prison Review of the Alexander Maconochie Centre 2025](#), ACT Inspector of Correctional Services, 18 December 2025, p 31

<sup>14</sup> [Healthy Prison Review of the Alexander Maconochie Centre 2025](#), ACT Inspector of Correctional Services, 18 December 2025, p 224



Operating Procedure (with effect from 5 December 2024) that retained the requirement that all people in detention must pay for calls at the rate set by the service provider.

The same delegate also approved (on 28 October 2024) the reintroduction of call charges for people in detention at the AMC. The signed Executive Minute presents the details of the new call rates, notes that ACTCS charges people in detention for phone calls made on the DTS at the rate at which the provider charges ACTCS, and that it had been discussed and agreed at an Executive Operations Team meeting on 21 October 2024 that call charges will be reinstated when the upgraded DTS is live.

ACTCS advised that no minutes were taken during the Executive Operations Team meeting on 21 October 2024.

The policy of charging all people in detention at the AMC does not allow for consideration of whether the individuals can afford to pay for calls. Nor does it allow for consideration of any other individual needs or circumstances that may be relevant.

It does not appear decision-makers have properly weighed the benefits of facilitating connections between people in detention and their family and community, or ACTCS' obligations under s 46 of the [Corrections Management Act 2007](#) to "ensure, as far as practicable, that adequate opportunities are provided for detainees to be able to remain in contact with family members, friends, associates and others by telephone calls, mail and visits". There was also no documented consideration given to community expectations that may exist about the reasonableness of people in detention paying some contribution towards the cost of phone calls.



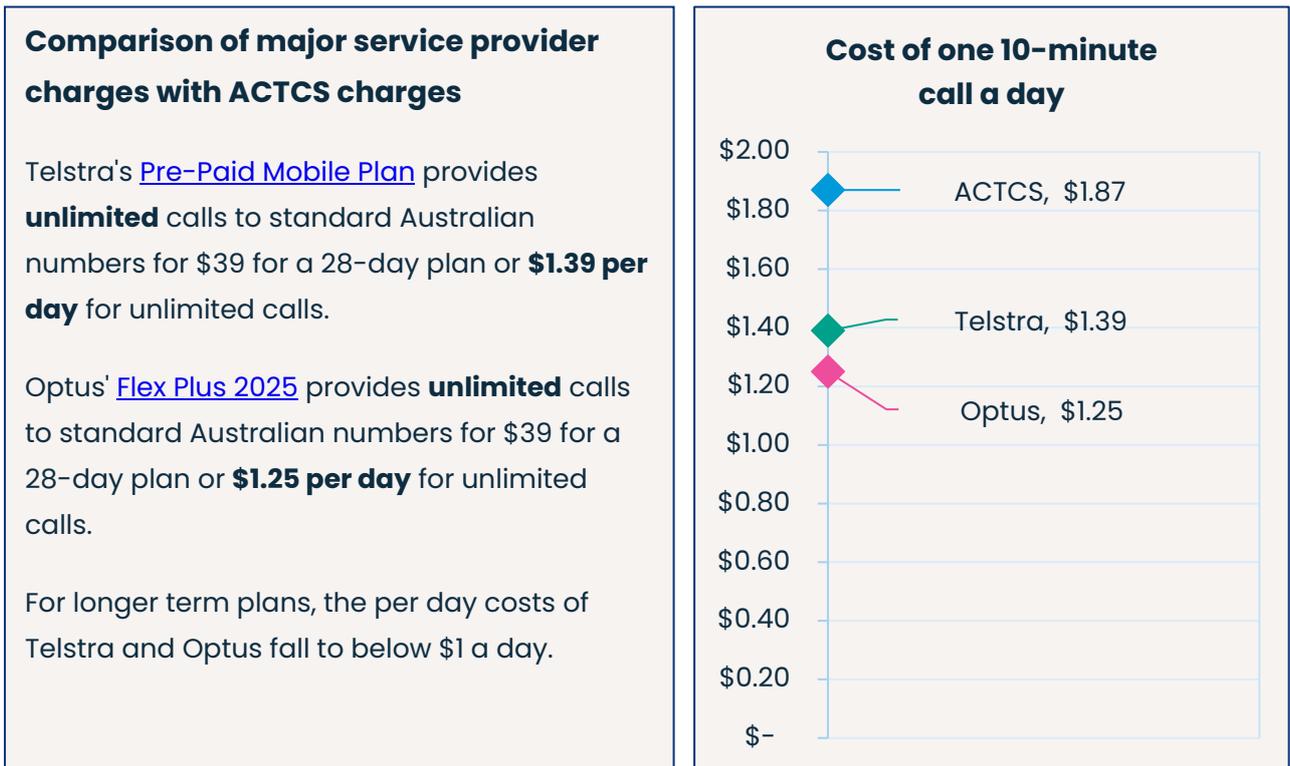
### **Finding 1**

In making the [Corrections Management \(Detainee Communications\) Policy 2024](#) and [Corrections Management \(Detainee Communications\) Operating Procedure 2024](#) under s 47(4) of the [Corrections Management Act 2007](#), ACTCS did not properly assess nor set out reasonable grounds for the appropriateness of charging the call rates introduced on 5 December 2024 to all people in detention at the AMC.

# Subsidising call charges

While we acknowledge the call charges introduced on 5 December 2024 are lower for calls to mobiles than pre-24 May 2024, our analysis suggests these costs are still markedly higher than what would be paid in the community on standard mobile plans. (Figure 2)

Figure 2 Call costs at AMC compared to in the community as at September 2025



It is of course hard to make a direct comparison given the Telstra and Optus plans provide for unlimited calls. However, at best ACTCS' charge of \$1.87 represents a charge of 35% more than the daily cost for unlimited calls with Telstra, and 50% more than the daily cost for unlimited calls with Optus. Should a person in detention make 5 calls in a day, it will cost them \$9.35, compared to the \$1.39 with Telstra and \$1.25 with Optus. The call charges for people in detention at the AMC are well above what is paid in the community, while lacking the flexibility of access and being subject to duration constraints.

ACTCS indicated in its response that a "quick review of plans offered by different telecommunications providers in the community" could have been used to determine whether costs were comparable with costs in the community. Yet this straightforward



step appears not to have occurred. The information therefore did not inform the decisions about the call charges introduced on 5 December 2024. When considered in the context of the limited incomes available to people in detention, these costs continue to be prohibitively high and risk limiting the ability of many people in detention to maintain contact with family, community and other services.

In its procedural fairness response, ACTCS stated that:

ACTCS acknowledges the Ombudsman’s view that call costs for detainees should be commensurate with call costs in the community, however, notes that there is no requirement to this effect in the *Corrections Management Act 2007*. ACTCS further notes that the telephone system in a correctional setting is not comparable to community systems. It requires additional security, monitoring, and compliance features (e.g., call recording and approved contact lists). These requirements inherently increase costs compared to standard consumer telecommunications services available to those in the community.



## Finding 2

New call charges introduced on 5 December 2024 are not commensurate with what is paid in the community and are prohibitively high for many people in detention at the AMC.

The \$20 [COVID-19 credits](#) were in place from late March 2020 until May 2024. While no subsidy was required when ACTCS decided to stop charging for calls from 24 May 2024, ACTCS does not appear to have considered re-introducing the subsidy when call costs were re-introduced on 5 December 2024.

Noting the discrepancy with community costs and the restricted incomes available to people in detention at the AMC, we consider ACTCS should have given serious consideration to re-establishing some form of subsidy when re-introducing call costs on 5 December 2024. This might be similar to the COVID-19 credits arrangement or take some other form.





### **Recommendation 1: Review call costs**

ACTCS review the call charges and processes set out in the [Corrections Management \(Detainee Communications\) Policy 2024](#) and [Corrections Management \(Detainee Communications\) Operating Procedure 2024](#).

In conducting its review, ACTCS should:

- weigh the ability of people in detention to pay for calls against the pro-social benefits of supporting strong ties between a person in detention and their family and community
- consider re-introducing a subsidy for phone calls to ensure adequate opportunities are provided for people in detention to be able to remain in contact with family members, friends, associates and others by telephone, in accordance with s 46(1) of the *Corrections Management Act 2007*
- clearly document its decision-making and reasons under s 47(4) of the *Corrections Management Act 2007*, as to why, and in which circumstances, the Director-General believes on reasonable grounds, that it is appropriate for a person in detention to pay for a call.

## **Over-charging of people in detention from April 2022 through to May 2024**

As discussed above, it has been the long-standing policy of ACTCS to charge people in detention for calls at the rate ACTCS is charged. Previous versions of the [Corrections Management \(Detainee Communications\) Policy 2024](#)<sup>15</sup> used the same wording for how people in detention would be charged for phone calls.

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<sup>15</sup> [Corrections Management \(Detainee Communications\) Policy 2024](#), s 12.10



In response to our requests for information, ACTCS provided us documentation showing that from April 2022, the service provider had stopped charging ACTCS for all calls from the AMC to Australian landlines and mobiles, excepting '13' numbers and international calls. Despite its published policy, ACTCS continued to charge people in detention the same amount (see [Table 1](#)). This overcharging continued until May 2024.

We asked ACTCS for records relating to the decision to continue charging people in detention, even though the service provider was no longer charging ACTCS for most calls. ACTCS advised:

As the [DTS upgrade] project was already on foot, the new DTS was expected to be finalised in late 2022/early 2023 and call rates would change with the new DTS, call rates were not changed in the existing DTS when [the service provider] reduced their rates for calls to Australian landlines and mobiles in 2022. This is because it was expected that all work to manage detainee telephone balances would be untaken [sic] when the new DTS was implemented. However, ...the DTS upgrade experienced significant delays.

ACTCS is currently unable to locate specific documentation related to the decision not to adjust DTS call rates at this time.

That ACTCS has no records to indicate that a delegate considered and determined the appropriateness of the decision not to adjust the call charges to people in detention is a significant concern. Even in a best-case scenario of the new DTS being operational in late 2022, ACTCS would have been over-charging for phone calls for 7 or more months. As it turned out, the over-charging did not end until 24 May 2024, 25 months after ACTCS stopped being charged, and a full month after the Acting Commissioner approved (on 23 April 2024) the immediate reduction of call charges to reflect the actual charges set by the service provider.

We consider ACTCS should have taken action in April 2022 to adjust its charges to people in detention to reflect the true charges to ACTCS. We consider it potentially unlawful, and certainly unfair, for ACTCS to have charged any higher charge rate than was incurred by ACTCS, given that it was ACTCS policy made under the *Corrections Management Act 2007* to only charge people in detention the rate ACTCS is itself charged.





### Finding 3

For more than 2 years, ACTCS over-charged people in detention at the AMC for their telephone calls.

ACTCS did eventually identify the issue of overcharging and sought to put in place some remediation. An April 2024 Executive Minute to the acting Commissioner recommended:

All detainees should be reimbursed for the additional costs they have incurred as a result of paying the higher amount. This would be in the form of a payment to the detainee's trust account. For detainees who have left custody, these funds will sit in their unclaimed funds should they come back into custody. In addition, it is recommended that efforts be made to contact these ex-detainees at their last known address and request bank details so that a refund can be processed.

On 23 April 2024, the acting Commissioner agreed to the recommendation to "commence the process of notifying any detainees that have since left custody and seeking to obtain current bank details for refund purposes."

On 19 June 2024, ACTCS reported the overcharging to the Minister for Corrections. It did not report the overcharging to any of the oversight agencies (Inspector of Custodial Services, the ACT Human Rights Commission or the ACT Ombudsman).

ACTCS advised our Office that the amount to be returned to people who were in detention at the time had been calculated as any amount a person in detention had deposited themselves into their DTS account during the affected period. ACTCS identified 980 people in detention had been impacted as at 24 May 2024.

ACTCS has advised that of the 980 people in detention who were overcharged:

[o]n 17 July 2024, 323 detainees in the AMC were credited their reimbursement to their AMC Trust Account. This totalled \$54,811.32. Additionally, 657 people who were no longer in custody on this date had their reimbursement transferred to their unclaimed funds account totalling \$68,423.80. As of 22 May 2025, there are 486 impacted former detainees who have not returned to the AMC and have unclaimed funds totalling \$46,810.44.



We asked ACTCS about the information it provided to people still in detention. They were provided with a copy of a Notice to Detainees dated 9 June 2024, which was almost identical to the information posted on the website (see below).

To contact individuals who it had not yet reimbursed, ACTCS advised:

On 10 July 2024, a notice advising the public of the overpayment and reimbursement process was placed on the ACTCS' website.

The notice was placed on the ACTCS website under 'Latest news' with the title 'Detainee Telephone System'. It read in full:

ACT Corrective Services (ACTCS) is currently in the process of upgrading the Detainee Telephone System (DTS).

ACTCS started the project in 2022 which included a change in call rates from the service provider. ACTCS has identified that this call rate change was not passed on to detainees, resulting in detainees being overcharged for some time.

As such, every detainee who has been overcharged will receive a full refund into their trust account. For detainees who have left custody, every effort will be made to contact them and arrange a transfer into their bank account. To assist our efforts, ex-detainees who were in custody between April 2022 and May 2024 may also contact [AMCExecSupport@act.gov.au](mailto:AMCExecSupport@act.gov.au) to arrange a refund.

Please be aware it may take up to a month for each overpayment to be calculated and processed. We appreciate your patience whilst we work to rectify this issue.

We understand this notice promising that 'every effort would be made to contact them' was, in fact, the sole attempt to contact people who had left AMC.

We consider this a wholly inadequate effort to contact individuals. The acting Commissioner approved a recommendation that efforts be made to contact people formerly in detention to request bank details so a refund could be processed.

This did not occur. While the notice suggested people who have left custody may email ACTCS to arrange a refund, any who happened to see that notice might reasonably have taken the view they did not need to take any action themselves to receive their rightful refund, as they would hear soon enough from ACTCS.



In our view, it was ACTCS' responsibility to raise awareness of the issue and enable impacted individuals to reach out. Appropriate awareness raising could include a dedicated page on the ACTCS website with an FAQ, making social media posts, providing information in online newsletters, raising awareness with reintegration services or other places where formerly people in detention may be in contact, and disseminating hard copy information.



#### **Finding 4**

ACTCS failed to take reasonable steps to return over-charged funds to previously detained people and failed to apologise to those affected.



#### **Recommendation 2: Reimburse impacted people**

ACTCS make all reasonable efforts to locate and reimburse the 486 individuals to whom it has not yet returned over-charged funds.

This should include, as a minimum, reaching out through last known contact details (or other known appropriate contacts) and increasing public awareness of the issue to encourage affected individuals to contact ACTCS for reimbursement.

Further, in our view, the notices obfuscated the extent of the over-charging issue by describing it as 'a call rate change' that 'was not passed on', 'for some time'. It did not clearly state that, for 25 months, people in detention were charged for calls when there should have been no charge at all. Neither the notice to people still in detention, nor the notice on the website, included an apology.

The overcharging had an impact beyond a purely financial one. People in detention were left to make decisions about whether or not to make calls to family, friends and other services based on an understanding that calls would be charged at the rates ACTCS was charging them. Had they not been charged for calls to Australian mobiles and landlines, almost certainly more would have chosen to take advantage of the free call option and may therefore have been better connected with their family and community, and more supported on release.



While the COVID credits may have softened the impact for some, it remains likely that for others the overcharging directly limited their ability to maintain the necessary level of connection with family, community and services to successfully rehabilitate and reintegrate on release. That 980 people in detention had added their own funds to their telephone account over and above the COVID credits each week suggests that more connection was desired beyond what the subsidy afforded. For those with the most limited resources, spending their own funds on phone calls may not have been an option.



### **Recommendation 3: Apologise**

ACTCS publicly apologise to all people in detention between April 2022 and 24 May 2024 for its failure to remove charges for calls to Australian mobiles and landlines, contrary to ACTCS policy, and for the impacts this may have had on maintaining their connections with family and community.

## **Receiving calls**

Section 47(1) of the [Corrections Management Act 2007](#) requires the Director-General to ensure that each correctional centre has telephone facilities for people in detention to make *and receive* telephone calls. ACTCS advised:

Detainees at the AMC cannot receive calls directly. However, if a detainee is required to receive a telephone call from a professional visitor, they may book a time in order for the detainee to receive the call.

Further, section 12.12 to 12.15 of the ACTCS' Policy outlines the process for 'incoming calls for detainees' within AMC, as follows:

- a) Staff will answer incoming telephone calls to a correctional centre and assess the purpose of the call.
- b) Where the telephone call relates to an emergency or welfare issue, staff will notify the relevant Correctional Officer Grade 2 (CO2) who is responsible for informing the detainee.



c) The CO2 must case note the information provided to a detainee on the detainee's electronic record system and inform the detainee's Case Management Officer, the Chaplain or Intelligence Unit where relevant.

d) All other messages will not be accepted or communicated to a detainee.

While ACTCS' approach to receiving calls is consistent with other Australian jurisdictions, other jurisdictions do not have legislative provisions that explicitly require telephone facilities for people in detention 'to make *and receive* telephone calls'.

The inability to receive phone calls adds to the burden of call charges on people in detention as their capacity to make calls to family and friends relies on being able to afford to make calls.

We understand that ACTCS does not currently have the infrastructure and systems in place to facilitate people in detention to receive calls, and that it has not to date sought to provide such facilities through its contracts with telecommunications service providers. However, as a requirement under legislation, we consider ACTCS should be taking reasonable steps to establish facilities for people in detention to receive calls.



### **Finding 5**

ACTCS is not complying with legislated obligations to ensure it provides telephone facilities for people in detention to receive telephone calls.



### **Recommendation 4: Facilitate receiving calls**

ACTCS establish facilities for people in detention to receive calls, in accordance with s 47(1) of the [Corrections Management Act 2007](#).

## **Digital Services solution**

ACTCS has a long-standing, albeit arbitrary, 10-minute limit on phone calls, which we understand is because of the limited number of phones that need to be shared between people in detention. Other Australian jurisdictions also apply a 10-minute call



limit, except Victoria which has a 12-minute limit. The lack of phone access places greater demand on access to emails and visits for people to keep connected.

Yet access to computers is inconsistent and limited for many people in detention at the AMC. This lack of access is exacerbated by regular vandalising of PrisonPC computers and ACTCS' limited budget to replace computers that are damaged beyond repair.<sup>16</sup>

In its response to our queries, ACTCS advised it is in the planning stage of a procurement for a "Detainee Telephone System – Offender Digital Services" (DTS-ODS) solution, with functional capabilities being sought from the market to improve access to communications and education for people in detention.<sup>17</sup> It is expected people in detention will be able to make voice and video calls through a portable device (i.e. a tablet or similar), increasing availability to communications and alleviating wait times for physical wall phones within accommodation areas.

ACTCS indicated it expected to go to market for a DTS-ODS solution in the third quarter of 2025, with procurement finalised in the first quarter of 2026. No information was provided about how soon following procurement finalisation ACTCS expects the solution itself to be available to people in detention at the AMC.

We note that the rollout of the DTS was itself impacted by an 18-month delay. Further, ACTCS has been pursuing the procurement of tablets for people in detention for some time now, with timeframes advised to oversight agencies having been repeatedly pushed out.



### **Finding 6**

ACTCS has plans to implement a Digital Services solution that offers the potential to significantly enhance access to communications and education for people in detention but the timeframes for delivery remain uncertain.

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<sup>16</sup> [Healthy Prison Review 2025](#), ACT Inspector of Correctional Services, 18 December 2025, p 248 refers to a "chronic shortage in many areas of the jail."

<sup>17</sup> It is expected the DTS-ODS will also provide efficiencies for Integrated Offender Management allowing for detainee services and self-service functions, including forms, booking management, ordering, etc.



We consider moving to an in-cell digital solution a positive, overdue step to improving connections between people in detention and their families and communities, as well as access to education and services.

We note the implementation of such a solution in some NSW corrections facilities<sup>18</sup> has not delivered the potential benefits it might have due to the retention of high call charges and call duration limits. We therefore strongly encourage ACTCS in its implementation of a DTS-ODS to maximise the potential to strengthen the ability of people in detention to maintain positive and prosocial relationships with their friends, families and communities in support of effective rehabilitation and positive release outcomes.

It is also our view this Digital Services solution presents an opportunity to address the requirement that ACTCS provide facilities for people in detention to receive calls, although we note the functional capabilities being sought from the market do not presently include this.

As ACTCS rolls out the Digital Services solution we would strongly encourage it to engage with people in detention and oversight bodies to ensure potential benefits can be effectively realised.



### **Recommendation 5: Implement digital services solution**

ACTCS prioritise, and if possible, expedite its procurement and implementation of an effective, accessible digital services solution to improve access to communications for people in detention.

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<sup>18</sup> [NSW prison phone call costs made it hard for Chris to stay connected to his family](#), the Guardian, 1 September 2025.



**ACT**  
Government

Justice and Community Safety

Mr Iain Anderson  
ACT Ombudsman  
GPO Box 442  
CANBERRA ACT 2601

Dear Mr Anderson

## **Draft report on phone call charges at the Alexander Maconochie Centre**

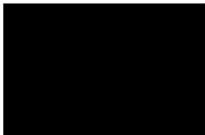
I refer to your correspondence of Friday 28 November 2025 attaching the draft report entitled '*Phone call charges at the Alexander Maconochie Centre: what does it really cost*' (the draft report) and associated recommendations.

Thank you for the work undertaken on the draft report and the ongoing consultative approach taken by your team. I, and ACT Corrective Services, acknowledge the importance of communication with family and community for people in detention in maintaining positive mental health and wellbeing and for rehabilitation and reintegration post-release.

I enclose a fact checking document at [Attachment A](#) for your consideration and have enclosed ACTCS' responses to your recommendations at [Attachment B](#).

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the draft report.

Yours sincerely



Ray Johnson <sup>APM</sup>  
A/g Director-General  
Justice and Community Safety Directorate

22 January 2026

## Attachment B – Response

ACT Corrective Service’s response to the ACT Ombudsman’s report

### **Recommendation 1: Review call costs**

ACTCS review the call charges and processes set out in the [Corrections Management \(Detainee Communications\) Policy 2024](#) and [Corrections Management \(Detainee Communications\) Operating Procedure 2024](#).

In conducting its review, ACTCS should:

- weigh the ability of people in detention to pay for calls against the pro-social benefits of supporting strong ties between a person in detention and their family and community
- consider re-introducing a subsidy for phone calls to ensure adequate opportunities are provided for people in detention to be able to remain in contact with family members, friends, associates and others by telephone, in accordance with s 46(1) of the *Corrections Management Act 2007*
- clearly document its decision-making and reasons under s 47(4) of the *Corrections Management Act 2007*, as to why, and in which circumstances, the Director-General believes on reasonable grounds, that is appropriate for a person in detention to pay for a call.

### **Accepted**

ACT Corrective Services is strongly supportive of detainees maintaining contact with family and friends and is continually seeking ways to improve opportunities for these connections. ACT Corrective Services has most recently weighed the value of



ties with family etc by seeking the cheapest rates possible for call charges for detainees through the related procurement process.

Section 47 of the *Corrections Management Act 2007* provides that a detainee who makes a call “must pay for the call if the director-general believes, on reasonable grounds, that is appropriate,” and envisages operating procedures about “arrangements for payment for the cost of calls made.” Affordability is cited in the Act as an example of reasonable grounds. These provisions support ACTCS’ approach of charging detainees at the service-provider rate and setting clear payment arrangements in policy and procedure.

The implementation of the interim DTS in December 2024 removed connection fees and set a single per-minute rate for Australian mobiles and landlines of \$0.187 (incl. GST), delivering substantial reductions compared with the previous system. Additionally, detainees have weekly access to various communication avenues free of charge, including in person visits, zoom visits, email, calls to up to 99 services on the free-to-call list, and free calls to legal representatives.

The \$20 per week COVID-19 call credit was introduced to mitigate the absence of physical visits during COVID-19 restrictions. With free face-to-face and video visits reinstated, the original circumstances justifying that temporary subsidy no longer exist. That said, the \$20 credit was maintained after visits recommenced to compensate for the higher costs whilst the appropriate procurement processes were underway to implement the DTS upgrades. The payment remained in place until in May 2024 when calls were temporarily made free of charge until implementation of the interim DTS on 5 December 2024, at which time the current call rate of 0.187 cents per minute came into effect.

All Australian jurisdictions charge detainees for telephone calls, and the ACT rates are favourably comparable to most jurisdictions. The above points notwithstanding, ACT Corrective Services is committed to continuous improvement and do engage with stakeholders on the best way to improve outcomes for detainees. This may include future changes to the current call payment arrangements.

**Proposed action:** ACTCS agrees to review and document its decision-making and reasons under s 47(4) of the [Corrections Management Act 2007](#), as to why, and in which circumstances, the Director-General or delegate believes on reasonable grounds, it is appropriate for a person in detention to pay for a call. The review will also consider what, if any level of subsidy might be applicable.

**Expected timeframes:** Within 12 months of the tabling of this report.

### **Recommendation 2: Reimburse impacted people**

ACTCS make all reasonable efforts to locate and reimburse the 486 individuals to whom it has not yet returned over-charged funds. This should include, as a minimum, reaching out through last known contact details (or other known appropriate contacts) and increasing public awareness of the issue to encourage affected individuals to contact ACTCS for reimbursement.

### **Accepted**

**Proposed action:** On 9 June 2024, detainees in the AMC were issued a notice informing them of the overcharging and the reimbursement process. On 17 July 2024, 323 detainees in the AMC were credited their reimbursement to their AMC Trust Account. Additionally, 657 people who were no longer in custody on this date had their reimbursement transferred to their unclaimed funds account. On 10 July 2024, a notice advising the public of the overpayment and the reimbursement process was published on ACTCS' website. ACTCS will continue attempts to contact the remaining 486 impacted individuals using an appropriate method that respects privacy considerations and ensuring personal information is not inadvertently disclosed. This communication will inform them of the overcharging and the process for reimbursement. In addition, ACTCS will publish relevant information to this effect on its website.

**Expected timeframes:** Within 6 months of the tabling of this report.

### Recommendation 3: Apologise

- ACTCS publicly apologise to all people in detention between April 2022 and 24 May 2024 for its failure to remove charges for calls to Australian mobiles and landlines and the impacts this may have had on maintaining their connections with family and community.

#### Accepted

**Proposed action:** ACTCS will issue an apology addressing impacted persons via its website.

**Expected timeframes:** Within 1 month of the tabling of this report.

### Recommendation 4: Facilitate receiving calls

ACTCS establish facilities for people in detention to receive calls, in accordance with s 47(1) of the [Corrections Management Act 2007](#).

#### Accepted in principle

ACT Corrective Services contends that it does meet its legislated obligations to ensure telephone facilities for people in detention to receive telephone calls to the extent possible and reasonable. The technology itself places limitations on the nature and method for receipt of incoming calls. To date there is no secure prison telephone system using the infrastructure available to the AMC that can support incoming calls made directly to detainees.

As noted in the report, ACTCS' *Detainee Communications Policy* outlines the current process for incoming calls for detainees relating to an emergency or welfare issue. Further, if a detainee is required to receive a phone call from a professional visitor,

they may book a time in order for the detainee to receive the call. Moreover, detainees can receive messages via emails and mail. ACTCS will continue to assess the feasibility of more direct ways for detainees to receive incoming calls to determine viability in the context of security, privacy and technology constraints.

ACTCS will include consideration of inbound calls as part of the ongoing implementation of digital services. Implementing further improvements to the facilities for receiving calls will be subject to future government decision.

**Proposed action:** This will be subject to the outcome of further investigations by ACTCS and future government decisions.

**Expected timeframes:** Subject to future budget processes.

**Recommendation 5: Implement digital services solutions**

- ACTCS prioritise, and if possible expedite, its procurement and implementation of an effective, accessible digital services solution to improve access to communications for people in detention.

**Accepted in Principle**

**Proposed action:** ACTCS has commenced planning for a digital services solution under the Offender Digital Services project. Timeline for implementation is, however, dependent on future decisions of government.

**Expected timeframes:** Subject to future budget processes.

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