



# Ending Violence against Women and Children: Consultation on the next National Plan to Reduce Violence against Women and their Children

A submission to the:  
Australian Government, Department of  
Social Services

Prepared by:  
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**yourtown** is a national organisation and registered charity that aims to tackle the issues affecting the lives of children and young people. Established in 1961, **yourtown**'s mission is to enable young people, especially those who are marginalised and without voice to improve their quality of life. **yourtown** provides a range of face-to-face and virtual services to children, young people and families. These include:

- Accommodation and therapeutic responses to young parents with children who are at risk
- Accommodation and therapeutic responses to women and children seeking refuge from domestic and family violence, including post refuge support
- Expressive Therapy interventions for young children and infants who have experienced trauma and abuse or been exposed to violence
- Young Parent Programs offering case work, individual and group work support and child development programs for young parents and their children
- **Parentline**, a telephone and online counselling and support service for parents and carers
- **Kids Helpline**, a national free 24/7 telephone and online counselling and support service for 5 to 25 year olds, with special capacity for young people with mental health issues
- Employment and educational programs and social enterprises, which support young people to re-engage with education and/or employment, including programs specifically developed for those in long term unemployment
- Mental health service/s for children aged 0-11 years old, and their families, with moderate mental health needs.

**Kids Helpline** is unique within Australia as the only national 24/7, confidential support and counselling service, specifically designed to meet the needs of children and young people, aged 5 to 25 years. It offers counselling support via telephone, email and real time webchat and is staffed by a paid professional workforce, with all counsellors holding a tertiary qualification. The website and social media channels provide a range of tailored self-help resources designed to meet the needs of young people, parents, carers, and schools. Since March 1991, children and young people have contacted **Kids Helpline** about a range of issues, from everyday topics, such as family, friends, and school, to more serious issues of child abuse, bullying, mental health issues, drug and alcohol use, self-injury, and suicide.

Since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in Australia, there has been a significant increase in the numbers of duty of care interventions at **Kids Helpline**. Duty of care interventions occur when a **Kids Helpline** counsellor deems a child or young person to be at risk of imminent harm and accordingly contacts police, child safety, or ambulance services. In the period 1 January 2021 to 31 June 2021, these interventions were 114% higher nationally compared to the same period in the previous year. This escalation was largely related to suicide attempts (38%) and child abuse (35%).<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.yourtown.com.au/media-centre/new-kids-helpline-data-reveals-spike-duty-care-interventions>

**yourtown** welcomes the opportunity to provide feedback to the Australian Government on the next National Plan to Reduce Violence against Women and Children (National Plan).

**yourtown** considers that all of Australia, including governments, businesses, individuals and communities must be engaged to take responsibility for ending violence against women and children. Family and domestic violence is a complex issue, driven not only by individual behaviour, but also by complex social and environmental factors. While **yourtown** welcomes having a strategic approach to addressing violence, we recommend the development of one holistic (rather than fractured) national approach be developed. The National Plan should encompass prevention and early intervention strategies, through to crisis support, and post-crisis independence and economic freedom, taking into consideration not only the individual (victim and perpetrator's) journeys, but also the environmental, community and systemic contexts in which violence occurs. This broader context is essential if Australia is to effectively identify and address both the drivers that lead to violence, and halt the prevalence of domestic violence within our communities.

Therefore, while the consultation has requested information on discrete areas of interest to the Australian Government, **yourtown** has identified the following critical issues that will impact the success of the next National Plan and must be addressed in any future National Plan.

### The need for one comprehensive and unified national framework

**Recommendation 1:** Develop one comprehensive, and unified national framework that:

- promotes the safety and wellbeing of *all* women and children in Australia rather than just ending violence,
- addresses associated issues of gender equality, wellbeing, mental health and suicide, and risk of harm, and
- addresses the broader social context including workplaces, and the health, welfare, disability and educational systems.

All state, territory and federal governments should commit to developing one cohesive and national framework that addresses key issues and contexts that place women and children at risk. Despite the plethora of Commonwealth, state and territory plans there is no coherent and cohesive national approach to address safety and wellbeing issues facing women and children, or ending violence. For example, under the National Plan to Reduce Violence against Women and their Children 2010-2022<sup>2</sup> launched in August 2019, the Commonwealth has provided four subsequent Action Plans. This is in addition to each state and territory developing its own strategy or framework to address domestic violence, often broken down by even more portfolio specific

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<sup>2</sup> [https://www.dss.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/08\\_2014/national\\_plan\\_accessible.pdf](https://www.dss.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/08_2014/national_plan_accessible.pdf)

strategies.<sup>3</sup> These strategies are accompanied by other strategies addressing, for example, children's health, early intervention, cultural or child protection issues.<sup>4</sup>

**yourtown** strongly recommends re-examining the current approach of *all* governments (Commonwealth, state and territory) of developing isolated and disconnected strategic plans that impact the safety and wellbeing of women, children and young people. We recommend holistic reform is undertaken, and an integrated national approach is adopted to address these issues, and drivers of violent or unsafe behaviour. **yourtown** also recommends the National Plan address the broader social and environmental factors linked with violence and its impacts such as mental health, suicide prevention, gender inequality, protection and wellbeing of children (whether in the home, in physical or virtual communities, or at schools), as well as addressing barriers to identification and response to domestic violence in the health, education, disability, aged care, welfare and employment systems.

### The National Plan must be framed by the COVID-19 context

**Recommendation 2:** Frame the next National Plan within the current and ongoing context of COVID-19 and its impact upon the safety and wellbeing of *all* Australian women and children.

The immediate impacts of COVID-19 are apparent. There is strong evidence to suggest COVID-19 will continue to have long-term implications – far beyond these immediate impacts – for people's health, wellbeing and society more broadly.<sup>5</sup> It is forecast that the impacts of the pandemic will be felt for a decade or more, and that significant intervention will be needed to avoid an acceleration towards poorer health, social and economic outcomes, and more extreme patterns of inequality, such as threats to women and children's safety and wellbeing<sup>6</sup>. The next National Plan needs to address how *all* women, children and young people in Australia will be supported in crises such as COVID-19, bushfires, or floods. The successor plan will fail on this point alone if this is not addressed. Since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in Australia, **yourtown** has observed a significant increase in the numbers of duty of care interventions at **Kids Helpline**.<sup>7</sup> In the period 1 January 2021 to 31 June 2021, these interventions were 114% higher nationally compared to the same period in the previous year, with the escalation largely related to suicide attempts (38%) and child abuse (35%).

<sup>3</sup> See for example, in NSW: NSW Domestic and Family Violence Prevention and Early Intervention Strategy 2017-2021 at [https://www.women.nsw.gov.au/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0010/388846/dfv-prevention-intervention-strategy.pdf](https://www.women.nsw.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0010/388846/dfv-prevention-intervention-strategy.pdf), and Domestic and Family Violence Youth Justice Strategy 2019-2022 at <http://www.juvenilejustice.nsw.gov.au/Documents/youth-justice-domestic-and-family-violence-strategy-2019-2022.pdf>; or Victoria, FREE FROM VIOLENCE: Victoria's strategy to prevent family violence and all forms of violence against women First action plan 2018-2021 at <https://www.vic.gov.au/free-violence-victorias-strategy-prevent-family-violence>; Policing Harm, Upholding the Right: Victoria Police Strategy For Family Violence, Sexual Offences And Child Abuse 2018-2023 at <https://www.police.vic.gov.au/family-violence-sexual-offences-and-child-abuse-strategy>

<sup>4</sup> See the National Children's Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy (Department of Health); National Action Plan for the Health of Children and Young People (Department of Health); and the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Early Childhood Strategy (National Indigenous Australian's Agency); see also for example the Queensland Government *Protecting children and supporting families* <https://www.dsdsatsip.qld.gov.au/resources/campaign/supporting-families/protecting-children-supporting-families.pdf>; and the Tasmanian Government's *Strong Families Safe Kids Next Steps Action Plan 2021-2023*.

<sup>5</sup> COVID-19: Protecting People and Societies, OECD (2020) at [COVID-19: Protecting people and societies - OECD \(oecd-ilibrary.org\)](https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/covid-19/protecting-people-and-societies)

<sup>6</sup> The COVID Decade: Understanding the long-term societal impacts of COVID-19 (2021), The British Academy at [The COVID Decade: understanding the long-term societal impacts of COVID-19 | The British Academy](https://www.britishten.org/covid-decade)

<sup>7</sup> Duty of care interventions occur when a Kids Helpline counsellor deems a child or young person to be at risk of imminent harm and accordingly contacts police, child safety, or ambulance services.

Social distancing and lockdowns will continue to persist for the next few years. The next National Plan will need strategies to address violence in quarantine or isolation, or regional lockdowns, as well as during other crises (such as bushfires and floods). Without understanding or addressing the impact of crises such as COVID-19, it is not clear how the National Plan will be appropriate to adequately address violence against women and children either now, or into the future.

The strategies need to be matched by quantifiable and substantial commitment by all governments to fund and invest in services that are responsive in a crisis. Services should be integrated, and scalable, and able to adapt swiftly, modify and perform under increased pressure and demand. Funding should be stable, and long term to support face to face and virtual services to respond swiftly to demand. This is particularly important in the non-government sector which (in addition to providing core services and support) often operates as the ‘stop gap’ to meet gaps or an overload in the existing system.

### The voices and concerns of children must inform the next National Plan

**Recommendation 3:** Children’s voices must inform the National Plan, and children and young people should be involved in co-design of the final National Plan.

When the Prime Minister announced his invitation for public consultation in April 2021 on the next National Plan, there was no mention of any consultation directly with children and young people.<sup>8</sup> The National Summit on Women’s Safety in 2021 was heralded as ‘an important step towards developing the next National Plan to end violence against women and children’, yet what was noticeably absent from the Summit was the voice of children and young people. Further, while a list of adult helplines (such as Lifeline, Mensline, Qlife, 1800RESPECT, and 1800ElderHelp) was provided for those attending the summit needing support, there was no mention of youth hotlines such as **Kids Helpline** or Headspace. It could be easy to infer that children or young women were not anticipated to engage with the Summit, even though much was discussed ‘about’ them.

*‘Nothing about us, without us’* must be the central premise underpinning the next National Plan. It is essential that the voices of children inform both the development and design of the next National Plan. Only by adhering to this principle will the National Plan be meaningful for children and young people and address the real issues that they face. It must also include the broader context of the environments children inhabit, ensuring children feel, and are safe in those (physical and virtual) communities, whether from physical, mental or sexual violence, or more broadly from bullying or abuse. The capturing of children and young people’s voices must be deliberate so that all children and young people, regardless of their background, whether culturally and linguistically diverse, Indigenous, or those with a disability are given a voice. The next National Plan must be clear how it will involve and engage the full and direct participation of *all* children and young people from all backgrounds and enable their voices and their concerns to help direct and inform the national strategy to end violence for the next 10 years.

<sup>8</sup> Media Release, 7 April 2021 accessed at <https://www.pm.gov.au/media/australians-invited-help-shape-future-women-free-violence>

Anecdotal evidence from our front-line staff who work at our domestic and family violence refuge have observed how clients often experience significant delays and difficulty in accessing crisis payments from Centrelink. This is a compounding barrier for women who are in this country as refugees, or non-residents as they face significant challenges related to financial support, legal assistance, and custody arrangements of their children when experiencing or attempting to escape domestic and family violence. These women are particularly vulnerable to abuse such as coercive control (where threats are made about their visa status)<sup>9</sup>. Alongside this, they face significant barriers when trying to access support due to ineligibility for income support and access to housing. Having access to funds that enable women to escape or maintain their independence from the perpetrator is vital to preventing domestic violence. Delays in accessing protections, services, and justice, are unacceptable. The next National Plan must consider the needs of a diverse range of groups, including women on temporary visas. This includes the following steps for reform to ensure<sup>10</sup>:

- All women and their children who experience domestic, family and sexual violence, regardless of their visa status, can access protections, services and justice;
- Eligibility and access to services and government support are based on women and their children's needs for safety and recovery from experiencing domestic, family and sexual violence, as opposed to their visa status; and
- All women and their children who experience domestic, family and sexual violence, have immediate and full access to safety, protection, justice and fully funded specialist support with demonstrated gender expertise and cultural competency.

The following are de-identified case studies from our front-line services demonstrating further examples of issues faced by these women and their families:

### *Case Study I - Sarah and Mitchell*

Sarah and her son Mitchell (under the age of 10) were supported by a community service for counselling. Sarah had separated from her partner due to domestic violence and was diagnosed with PTSD, depression and anxiety as a result of her experience. Mitchell also experienced significant anxiety. The father had a diagnosed mental illness and would often stop taking his medication.

Interim family law orders were in place with the father who had fortnightly contact with Mitchell, who in turn reported that his father had been violent towards him during these visits. The service supporting Sarah referred her to a specialist domestic violence service; however their funding did not allow for them to support her with legal matters. Sarah was then referred to a community legal service, however she struggled to attend appointments or work through the legal processes without significant emotional support. While Sarah was safe in community and did not need a refuge service, there was no generalist or specialist service that could support Sarah to navigate the family law court, provide court support and also assist her emotionally. A not-for-profit refuge was contacted and asked to support Sarah as an outreach service to complete affidavits, provide court support, liaise with Solicitors on her behalf, assist her to navigate the court system and

<sup>9</sup> Australian Women Against Violence Alliance (2021), Women on temporary visas experiencing DFV at [Women on temporary visas experiencing DFV - AWAVA](#)

<sup>10</sup> Australian Women Against Violence Alliance (2021), Women on temporary visas experiencing DFV at [Women on temporary visas experiencing DFV - AWAVA](#)

provide emotional support and counselling through the process. This support was outside the normal scope of the refuge's work as there were no other services that were able to assist. Once supported, Sarah's emotional distress reduced dramatically and she was able to engage with other relevant legal services and Police, resulting in increased family functioning and safety for all members of the family. The father was also able to be better supported under a medical plan.

### *Case Study 2 – Bella and Corey*

Bella had an intellectual impairment and was supported through a community family support program. Bella lived with her young son, Corey, who was diagnosed with ADHD. Bella experienced family violence from a close relative who had a diagnosed mental illness, known drug use linked to psychotic episodes and history of arson attacks. The relative threatened to burn her house down, and murder her and her son. Due to Bella's disability she did not want to leave her own home and she struggled with change. She would become extremely distressed meeting new people, and would not allow Police to become involved and was fearful of them. Corey also had behavioural problems, and was on a return to school plan following multiple suspensions due to threatening behaviour to other children.

Bella and Corey were referred to a not-for-profit refuge. Bella felt coerced by mainstream services to enter the refuge, as her strong preference was to remain in her home. Bella consequently reacted to staff and other residents, and Corey also demonstrated significant problematic and threatening behaviour. While Bella and Corey remained at the refuge for well over a month until she left under an outreach program; during her stay Bella struggled deeply due to her disability and having to live with so many people. Sadly, there were limited alternative accommodation options for Bella and Corey, and none specifically designed to support her or her son's disability and needs.

### *What **yourtown** has learned from young people about violence and safety*

From our engagement with young people, **yourtown** has observed that children and young people want violence and safety issues addressed holistically and across systems, not just within the domestic violence context. **yourtown** recently conducted a survey of young people aged 15 to 25 regarding what they wanted to tell government and policy makers was important to them (May 2021, **yourtown** Your Voice project). Some of the safety and violence issues raised by young people concerned not only what happened in the home environment, but also what happened in school, online, and in their local communities. A key theme arising from their responses was how 'safety' (or lack of safety) was inextricably linked with other systems, such as mental health and education.

The *Your Voice* survey revealed the stories of young people struggling with issues of child abuse, and domestic and family violence. Their concerns included that there was not enough focus on supporting young people who may be experiencing abuse. Many young people felt silenced on these issues and wanted to have the opportunity to speak up. There was also a concern that due to a neglect of funding in this area there were not enough services to support young people. This is what they said:

*"I have first-hand experience [of] being silenced and I believe that it is vital to the well-being of minors' mental health as well as physical health to create a support system for children*



*who have experienced family violence. What this would aim to do is empower young people to find their voice and speak up about violence. I want to help young people like myself be empowered and gave a voice. In order for our country to have [a] future we have to invest in our young people. If we don't help young people who are in desperate need of our help, then we will not only see a plummet in the amount of students in education, but also the amount of children living with a roof over their head."*

*"More needs to be done in terms of safer environments for children living in a domestic violence situation. If it wasn't for my family, a child who attends school with my brother would be homeless..."*

*"From the personal stories from others and workers in the sector of foster housing and regulation, there are plenty of issues and trauma that is being swept under the mat"*

*"Help people in violent home situations move out by helping them financially, and finding accommodation."*

Abuse and violence were seen as much broader than what happens in the family home. Young people expressed a lot of concern about how women and girls are treated and the need to have a better focus on consent education and ongoing safe spaces for girls and women. This is what they said:

*"You need to make sure girls and women are safe and can get the education they want. They shouldn't feel scared all the time. Same with LGBTQIA+ and Aboriginal people. We chose you to fight for us."*

*"And in terms of domestic violence and violence towards women it is disgusting that nothing more has been done to make women feel safer. Instead of teaching me at school that as a girl there are high statistics of women in domestic violence and rape situations, teach boys not to!!?"*

*"You NEED to teach boys and men about the importance of consent. I've heard too many rape stories of the guys getting off fine and the women being told their clothes were an invitation."*

The next National Plan needs to represent and reflect the voices of minorities, as well as the mainstream. This means the National Plan must be culturally appropriate for both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, as well as for children from backgrounds where English is not the first language; or those that are gender diverse. The *Your Voice* project found that there were significant concerns regarding the safety of LGBTQIA+ young people, and a general perceived failure of support for these young people across the board, particularly when they were not supported by their own families. Many young people felt strongly about this, even if it was not their own personal experience. They wanted a better and more inclusive place for young people who identified in this group and were aware of their struggle. This is what they said:



*"There needs to be some sort of safety net for LGBTQIA+ youth to protect and take care of them [in] instances of being disowned by family for who they are, discriminated against in school environments, and provide clear access to the services they need become safe and independent without having to alert potentially unaccepting parents. This extends...to services for transgender youth seeking to legally and physically transition as the current system seems to make harder for them to reach their potential"*

*"LGBTQIA+ kids need some real help, we get no queer sex education, no education on discrimination so kids grow up to be homophobic because they were never taught any different"*

*"I would also like to talk about the fact that LGBTQIA+ and gender diverse people are given hardly any support and have no idea how to access anything. Many young people in these situations are facing hate from those around them, including family. We need support, and we need to know how to find it. There are also needs to be something that teaches EVERYONE that being LGBTQIA+ or gender diverse isn't wrong. It is a thing, and it is who we are, and they shouldn't get to tell us that we are bad and hurt "*

*"If you're a young person and your parents aren't good. As in abusive, not supportive, homophobic that's literally bad luck and there's not much help. There's a lot of people who apply for youth allowance and are denied because their parents earn too much, but their parents say you're 17 get out of my house."*

Some young people also considered that mental health systems did not take their safety issues seriously and this left them in distress and without adequate support. For young people struggling with both abuse and mental health issues it appeared for many that the system was not well designed to assist them in a coordinated way that would ensure their safety. This lack of integration and understanding only exacerbated their distress. This is what they said:

*"Dreadful. The government does not care about the mentally ill who cannot afford care. Mental Health Acute care teams are terribly trained and are garbage. Have to see a new person every week. I was in a domestically violent situation, and they sent me a letter in the POST saying that because I hadn't contacted them, "I was no longer in need of their services". The mental health care plan still costs too much money. It is impossible to see a psychiatrist in order to get on medication if you aren't earning good money."*

*"I have witnessed people right before my eyes face mental health crisis, abuse which was sexual, physical and mental...[with nowhere to go because] with rape the police could do nothing, with physical abuse there was not enough hard... evidence, and those people did not have access to help because the perpetrator was their parent"*

*"After experiencing a sexual assault, government support stopped after the rape kit. To this day, three years later, I have a Victims Assist claim asking for help paying for the therapy I need."*

These concerns were echoed by members of our Lived Experience Network<sup>11</sup>:

*"For some of us, we would continually be in and out of hospital for mental-health related concerns. Some of us would be forced to access services that aren't as youth friendly or accessible. For others, we wouldn't be here at all."*

Not surprisingly for most young people the real concern about schools was the lack of safety when it came to schools addressing bullying and abuse. Real concerns were held about the failure to take safety in school seriously and that this was also leading to greater levels of distress for many. Many young people also felt that many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people suffered discrimination and schools were not doing enough to address this. This is what they said:

*"Schools are out of control with bullying."*

*"The (systemic) discrimination indigenous students STILL face is disgusting. There needs to be more funding for indigenous youth (health, mental health support, education, and funding for the continuation of their culture(s)), particularly in rural communities."*

*"That they need to do something about the bullying that LGBTQIA+ and disabled students receive in schools."*

*"Kids should learn how to understand one another, rather than concealing things that encourage bullying."*

*"Please let kids be kids. All kids, including trans kids, deserve to feel safe. Kids deserve to be treated with respect".*

Young people also felt that schools, in general, were not always safe and that mental health services provided in schools also lacked safety and confidentiality. This is what they said:

*"The education system needs to change, and it needs to change now. People aren't feeling safe in schools, which should be a place that they can feel safe."*

*"That the school system is terrible at helping and managing things like bullying and mental health. There is no anonymity or confidentiality. Some kids can't talk to a counsellor in real life and want someone who knows the environment, so that means they can't go to an online counselling site. If there was some way to come up with an online form that you fill out (anonymous of course) that is sent out to the counsellor, and they respond. You can give them your name, but it is optional. This would make a lot of people feel safer and actually want to get help."*

*"I would like to tell them about the issues my high school is facing and the negative impacts on student and staff's mental health. The lack of budget and leadership from the principal*

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<sup>11</sup> yourtown 2020 annual report at <https://www.yourtown.com.au/insights/annual-overviews>

*has led to a lax in discipline which leads to very casual and "normal" acts of violence and sexual abuse."*

## Investment in services and supports specifically designed for children

**Recommendation 4:** More services should be developed and designed to target the specific needs of children, including addressing children's experiences of domestic and family violence using child-aware approaches.

Services to support victims of violence must also be designed to address the needs of children. For example, play-based therapy with books and toys are tools that can help a young child make sense of domestic and family violence, reinforce gender equality, and normalise respectful relationships from a young age. While there are several programs that currently exist in this area such as the 'Love Bites Respectful Relationships Program' and NAPCAN's 'Growing Respect' program, these are generally targeted at primary and high school ages only. There is a general lack of programs developed for early ages, or in the early intervention space. **yourtown** recognises the importance of intervening early with targeted therapy and currently runs several programs to target children and early intervention, including our communities for children program to create a pathway for stronger young people and their families; our starfish program to support children and young people aged up to 18 years of age who may be experiencing emotional health and wellbeing challenges; as well as yourtown's Expressive Therapy program. **yourtown's** Expressive Therapy Program, is a recovery initiative developed for children experiencing emotional and behavioural programs resulting from trauma or domestic violence. It has proven to be a positive way to treat the effects of trauma on children and improve the mental health outcomes of its young children participations. Without early intervention programs, children and young people may carry the trauma of family violence well into adulthood. This can lead to difficulties in developing positive relationships, a heightened risk of alcohol misuse, drug dependence and criminal behaviour later in life. The cost of not intervening early with children, young people, communities and society is immeasurable. Therefore, early intervention programs must be essential components of the next National Plan.

Other general interventions targeting children and young people should help them to:

- identify the difference between abusive and safe behaviours and know how to seek help if they see or experience that behaviour
- understand and recognise equitable gender roles
- develop the skills to respectfully resolve conflict, and solve problems, and
- develop respectful relationship skills

Investment is also needed in programs for young boys who are violent to their mothers, or are starting to demonstrate violence. A gender specific approach under the National Plan risks silencing the voices of young boys who have experienced violence themselves, and have learned violence from others. There are only a handful of programs specifically for young boys who are demonstrating violent behaviour. Investment is needed in services to address violence for boys across a range of ages, from early ages (below the age of 12), and for teenage years. There are

also issues surrounding the ability for young boys to accompany parents to a refuge. Refuges sometimes do not accept any boys over the age of 12, forcing mothers and their boys to be separated in order to find refuge from violence. These mothers are left with the impossible choice: stay with your child and be homeless or return to the violent home. The impossible outcome for the child is: homelessness, foster care/group home, or return to the violent home.

### **The need for whole of government commitment to outcomes that demonstrate success**

**Recommendation 5:** The next National Plan must include clear and measurable deliverables from government (Commonwealth, state and territory), with key performance measures each government is committed to meet in order to demonstrate success in the short, medium and long term.

This next National Plan must commit to achievable, clear and measurable targets to be met by the Commonwealth and state and territory governments in the short, medium and longer term.

The current National Plan, and subsequent Action Plans, as well as discussions at the recent National Summit on Women's Safety 2021 demonstrate the strong understanding within the sector of the problems and drivers regarding domestic and family violence including ensuring:

- Services, supports, and safe and secure environments are available and accessible at every stage (including early intervention, crisis, and post crisis) and that they are designed to respond to the complex needs of victims of domestic violence, and facilitate the collaborative delivery of multiple interventions from a range of service providers, including government, and non-government service providers
- Justice is accessible from the moment of engagement with emergency services, through to all court processes (at the Federal, state and territory jurisdictions) with justice systems designed to recognise and respond appropriately to both women and children and their respective domestic and family violence experience
- Services and supports do not re-traumatise or re-victimise women and children who have experienced, or are at risk of experiencing violence, but engage therapeutic and trauma responsive approaches
- Women are actively supported to gain financial and economic success, through innovative career and employment opportunities, and have certain access to secure accommodation post crisis, so that women and children who have experienced violence and come through the other side, and take control of their own destinies, and thrive.

However, what is lacking from the current National Plan are tangible and measurable commitments to be delivered by government so that it is clear what 'success' will look like in addressing these issues, and designing a responsive service system that responds to and addresses domestic violence. Without clear performance measures and indicators of success, there is little hope of securing real and lasting change, or identifying what has worked (if anything) to halt the prevalence of harm and abuse.

One outcome that could be measured, is a commitment to delivering purpose-built accommodation to address the housing and accommodation barriers facing highly disadvantaged families, particularly those women and children escaping violence and abuse.

### **An urgent national response is needed to address the housing and accommodation crisis**

The current National Plan includes the promise of ‘access’ to housing. It notes the Commonwealth will: work with states and territories to increase the supply of affordable housing homes through the National Rental Affordability Scheme and Nation Building Economic Stimulus Plan; increase spending on homelessness services; and fund specialist homelessness projects. However, 10 years later despite significant investment by states and territories in housing development,<sup>12</sup> there remains a significant shortage of housing that is neither affordable nor accessible to those who are most vulnerable to homelessness. Nor does there appear to be a holistic and coordinated response to address the practical and systemic barriers to accessing emergency and long term housing support. It is also well known that the housing crisis is worsening, impacted further by the increase in the cost of building homes, lack of existing affordable housing<sup>13</sup> and escalating rents accompanied by an increasing shortage in rental properties.<sup>14</sup>

Access to housing will only become a reality if there is a clear national economic strategy to invest in, and actually build affordable housing. For women and children escaping domestic violence, they need certainty that they have somewhere to go in a crisis, and certainty that afterwards they will have somewhere they can afford to live.

Alternative, and creative economic and housing solutions are needed to address the crisis. This includes a strategy from start to finish, including: funding; finding/buying/allocating land; building purpose-built, family and pet friendly, secure and affordable housing in local communities where women and children feel safe and want to live; and funding and delivering targeted support services.

**Recommendation 6:** The National Plan must prioritise strategies that commit to, and facilitate significant investment from government, non-government, individuals and the business sector to build purpose-built, family/pet friendly, early intervention, crisis, and post-crisis housing to ensure there is a supply of social housing for economically disadvantaged and at-risk families, and women and children leaving domestic violence situations.

Providing affordable and accessible housing requires significant investment in land, building and resources. The National Plan needs to provide certainty in funding and delivering more housing for those who need it most, by committing to strategies that involve investment by the government, non-government, business and community sector to build and deliver early intervention, crisis, and after crisis accommodation options. Without a whole of community response we will continue to

<sup>12</sup> For example, see the Queensland Government’s commitment under the 2021 Budget to invest \$1.9 Billion over four years to increase social housing stock. [New action plan and \\$2.9 billion investment set to fast-track housing delivery - Ministerial Media Statements](https://www.statements.qld.gov.au/statements/92391) at [www.statements.qld.gov.au/statements/92391](https://www.statements.qld.gov.au/statements/92391). In 2020, the NSW Government committed to taking their total investment in social and affordable housing to \$4.4 billion over four years. [www.budget.nsw.gov.au](https://www.budget.nsw.gov.au).

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/australias-red-hot-housing-get-hotter-affordability-worsen-2021-08-19/>

<sup>14</sup> <https://probonoaustralia.com.au/news/2021/08/advocates-call-for-change-as-social-housing-crisis-reaches-new-heights/>

fall short on having affordable housing available, and there will be ongoing housing insecurity for women and children for many more years to come.

#### *Need for purpose-built accommodation*

Accommodation must be 'fit for purpose' and should: adopt 'safety by design' principles, including secure fencing and access, security systems and CCTV; be like a 'home' and not hotel (for example, enabling family members to carry on their education and schooling needs); and support services should accompany the accommodation, and engage trauma responsive and child aware approaches.

Most importantly, the accommodation should be designed as a place where all members of the family are welcome and safe, whether human, furry or feathered. Pets are often abused as part of domestic and family violence, along with family members. Pets can be used by to frighten and control the victim into staying in the abusive relationship, with threats of violence/harm to the pet if the person does not stay or obey.<sup>15</sup> The challenge for many families with pets is that shelters and refuges often do not allow pets. For many families, this further traumatises the children or adult if pets are left behind and cannot accompany them. It is also known that if accommodation cannot be found for a pet with family or friends, a person experiencing violence or abuse may often choose to stay with their abuser for fear of what will happen to the pet if they leave without it.

#### *"Take a break" – Early Intervention options*

There should be investment in accommodation options at the early intervention stage in local communities. The aim of this type of accommodation should be to provide safe and secure, home-like, short term (up to 13 days) family/pet-friendly accommodation to women and children. During the stay, services would be able to work in a strengths-based way with families to address the emerging domestic violence concerns.

Most early interventions focus on programs, and services that can intervene early, but there is little focus upon providing purpose built accommodation that enables women and children to 'take a break' at the initial signs of domestic violence before matters escalate to a crisis. Investing in family, and pet friendly 'take a break' home style accommodation for women, and children who need early interventions could help address problematic behaviour when it first emerges, and enable services early opportunities to work with women and children in a de-escalated home-style environment. This short-term accommodation option for women and children to get away, 'take a break' and de-escalate, could also provide the opportunity for services to connect with the person demonstrating early signs of abusive behaviour, and work with the family to stop the behaviour before it goes further.

#### *Crisis care accommodation*

More investment is needed in purpose-built crisis care accommodation. This accommodation type includes crisis care/emergency accommodation to provide longer term accommodation for the duration of the crisis, with access to intensive wrap around supports for those directly impacted by violence. Delivery of services within these facilities should consider the individual and cultural needs

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<sup>15</sup> [Pets in Crisis cares for pets of families escaping domestic violence \(dvconnect.org\)](https://dvconnect.org/)

of the potential residents, and be designed in collaboration with those who have experienced, or are experiencing disadvantage. In particular, they should be designed to support a maximum of five families at a time, to ensure that conflict and violence does not arise, given the already heightened context of residents, and the interpersonal dynamics that this will inevitably involve.

Investment in crisis accommodation should be made in all parts of Australia (particularly rural, and remote), to ensure that all women and children facing violence have access to purpose built emergency accommodation in communities where they can be both safe, and will want to live.

### *Affordable long term housing*

Secure, stable housing is essential for the safety and wellbeing of people experiencing violence and abuse, particularly for children.<sup>16</sup> However, it is a well-known and ongoing problem that there is a lack of secure and long-term accommodation available for people who have escaped a domestic abuse crisis.<sup>17</sup> It is also well-known that the high (and increasing) demand for social housing and competitive rental market is placing extraordinary strain on existing domestic violence refuges. For women escaping violence, the lack of social housing and long term affordable (low-cost) housing means that many women are faced with the unenviable choice between homelessness, or returning to their abuser.<sup>18</sup> This problem is heightened when children are involved. Because of this crisis, more and more families are staying longer in crisis accommodation, and through no fault of their own, are bottlenecking the system.

The evidence regarding these issues is overwhelming. It is well known that the number of people seeking help from homelessness due to domestic and family violence has risen in recent years. In 2019, only 4% of those who approached a homelessness service who had experienced domestic and family violence and needed long-term housing received it.<sup>19</sup> The current bottleneck in the system will only be reduced through the establishment of a stockpile of purpose-built accommodation for disadvantaged families, not just those experiencing domestic violence.

Reliance upon private rental market subsidies as a way to achieve housing outcomes is also not the answer. Subsidies are problematic and insufficient, particularly given the increased tightening of rental markets and the reluctance of landlords to take on potentially financially insecure tenants. Rental assistance can only go so far and is insufficient to overcome barriers such as affordable supply and competition from other prospective tenants. Women and their children often find themselves forced into unsafe or sub-standard housing arrangements in risky or dangerous neighbourhoods because there is no alternative.

What is needed are quality post-crisis housing options within their local communities where families do not have to move frequently (due to insecure or short term tenure). Housing security facilitates not only continuous schooling for children, but also ensures vulnerable women and children can

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<sup>16</sup> Breckenridge, J., Hamer, J., Newton, B. and valentine, k. (2013) *NSW Homelessness Action Plan extended evaluation: final evaluation report for long-term accommodation and support for women and children experiencing domestic and family violence*. (4 reports) Report produced for Housing NSW, Centre for Gender Related Violence Studies and the Social Policy Research Centre, University of New South Wales, Sydney

<sup>17</sup> [Housing outcomes after domestic and family violence \(ahuri.edu.au\)](https://www.ahuri.edu.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0026/37619/AHURI-Final-Report-3II-Housing-outcomes-after-domestic-and-family-violence.pdf) AHURI Final Report No. 3II, November 2019 accessed at [https://www.ahuri.edu.au/\\_\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0026/37619/AHURI-Final-Report-3II-Housing-outcomes-after-domestic-and-family-violence.pdf](https://www.ahuri.edu.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0026/37619/AHURI-Final-Report-3II-Housing-outcomes-after-domestic-and-family-violence.pdf)

<sup>18</sup> Mission Australia (2019), *Out of the shadows – Domestic and Family violence: A leading cause of homelessness in Australia*

<sup>19</sup> Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2019), *Special Homelessness Services annual report 2017-18*, Canberra, AIHW



remain close to their support networks, and have continuity with after crisis support care such as access to therapeutic, rehabilitation and re-integration support services that can lessen or reduce the long term impacts and consequences of the experience of violence.

### **Commonwealth leadership – through innovative housing investment and financial schemes**

The next National Plan provides the Commonwealth Government with the unique opportunity to demonstrate leadership in addressing some of the barriers facing women and children who experience violence, particularly the issue of social housing availability.

One option that the Commonwealth Government has at its disposal is using the significant policy lever of its taxation power. The government could use the taxation power to provide tax benefits to individuals and/or companies to invest in supplying land and building purpose-built (safe and secure, family and pet friendly) early intervention, crisis and post-care accommodation in collaboration with local community organisations or not-for-profits. By placing a time limitation on the investment (first five years of the National Plan), it could encourage an immediate surge in investment by those wishing to take advantage of the tax break, and would deliver critically needed housing stock.

**Recommendation 7:** The Australian Government could lead the national agenda by exploring use of its taxation power to provide businesses and/or individuals with tax incentives to invest in the funding and building of purpose-built, family/pet friendly, safe and secure early intervention, and crisis accommodation, and long term affordable housing for victims of domestic violence and abuse through receipt of tax benefits in the first five years of the next National Plan.

Planning, development and delivery of the services should occur in collaboration with local community organisations and/or not-for-profits who would deliver the relevant wrap around supports and services to support the early intervention, crisis or after-care accommodation service.

Ongoing tax benefits could be considered for identified areas of highest disadvantage, and rural and remote settings.

The National Plan could also commit to facilitating and working with financial service providers, banks and businesses, to provide innovative financial solutions to help women and families who have experienced violence to be empowered to address their housing insecurity and inequity. The USA has several innovative collaborative and co-investment financial options to enable disadvantaged families and women to get onto their feet and buy their own homes. For example, 'HomeFundIt' in Baltimore, USA is an online crowdfunding platform that allows home buyers to use gifts from family and friends for the down payment on a home.<sup>20</sup> Community businesses also participate and extra pledges can be received when the participant or their donors shop at participating retailers who pledge anywhere between 1% and 50% back on the person's purchase. Another innovative alternative that could be explored is the real estate project such as 'Small Change' in Pittsburgh, USA that pro-actively connects investors with developers to build better

<sup>20</sup> Down Payment Gifting - Raise Funds With Crowdfunding | HomeFundIt at <https://www.homefundit.com/en>

cities. On the Small Change crowdfunding platform, anyone over the age of 18 can invest in affordable housing projects, or community-centric projects.<sup>21</sup>

**Recommendation 8:** Governments, businesses, banks and financial services should commit to exploring collaborative and innovative solutions to address financial barriers to owning their own property for people leaving domestic violence situations. This could include development of a national scheme to facilitate flexible financial options to help people qualify for a mortgage, or other mechanisms to purchase their own homes.

### **Ensuring all social support services apply a domestic violence lens in their work**

To ensure a holistic approach to addressing domestic violence, all social support services (whether generalist or specialist) should apply a domestic violence lens to the work that they do.

**Recommendation 9:** A domestic violence lens should be applied to all social support services delivered across all systems, in order to build the capability of workers within those services to identify, and respond to instances of domestic and family violence.

Governments should consider inclusion of this requirement in all service agreements where government funding is received.

Mainstream services support women and children every day who are victims of domestic and family violence, often without knowing it. Whether for reasons of stigma or fear, victims of violence may not attend a specialist domestic violence service, yet a gap remains in capability within mainstream services to identify and respond appropriately to their domestic violence concerns. It may also be that when a mainstream service identifies that a person has domestic violence concerns, they choose to no longer engage with the person, and require them to use a specialist domestic violence service instead.

### **Develop a national centralised database of homelessness services**

**Recommendation 10:** The Commonwealth Government should explore development of a nationwide 24/7 online homelessness service portal, such as Queensland's Homelessness Information Portal where all homelessness and domestic violence services (irrespective of funding status) are eligible to use the portal to access accommodation and support for vulnerable persons when needed.

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<sup>21</sup> Abby Ivory and Kent Colton 'Innovative Solutions for the Housing Crisis' *Stanford Social Innovation Review*, Dec. 1, 2020 available at <https://protect-au.mimecast.com/s/0KD8CMwGLkHxxOLhwGop7?domain=ssir.org>

Many social and welfare services are privately funded, whether through charitable or philanthropic donations. However, an organisation's status as privately or publicly funded has significant implications for the data it is eligible to access. This in turn impacts the services that organisations, such as **yourtown**, can access to support those experiencing homelessness.

In Queensland, access to Queensland's Homelessness Information Portal (QHIP) – the homelessness assessment and vacancy management system for homelessness and domestic family violence – is only accessible by publicly funded organisations delivering domestic and family violence services. Therefore, despite **yourtown** supporting women and children experiencing domestic and family violence, **yourtown's** status as a privately funded service prevents it from using QHIP to access client information and manage referrals for their clients experiencing domestic and family violence. The inability for organisations, such as **yourtown**, to access this Queensland specific service, alongside the absence of a nationwide database, hinders the ability of those escaping domestic and family violence to receive or be referred to appropriate accommodation and support from other frontline services when they need them.

What is needed is a national and centralised digital database of homelessness services that enables all homelessness and domestic violence services (whether privately or publicly funded) across Australia to access and identify accommodation and supports for vulnerable people. The model should also incorporate learnings from Western Australia's new homeless services portal to:<sup>22</sup>

- Allow agencies and providers to check, in real time, which service, such as beds is available
- Open-up referral pathways to meet a person's specific needs at any time, and
- Incorporate a no-wrong door system to ensure that, regardless of which service or agency individuals initially connect with, they can access appropriate accommodation and support from other services when needed.

## Conclusion

We would welcome the opportunity to explore these ideas with you further in more detail. Should you require any further information, please do not hesitate to contact Kathryn Mandla, Head of Advocacy and Research at **yourtown** via email at [kmandla@yourtown.com.au](mailto:kmandla@yourtown.com.au).

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<sup>22</sup> Government of Western Australia, New homeless services portal to remove barriers to getting help (August 2020), [Media statement - New homeless services portal to remove barriers to getting help \(mediastatements.wa.gov.au\)](https://mediastatements.wa.gov.au)