



**yourtown**  
POWERING **kids**helpline

## Sector-led Advice on Models of Care for Mental Health Services for Young People

A submission to the Australian  
Government Department of Health  
and Aged Care

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**yourtown** is a trusted provider of services for young people, with a focus on mental health and wellbeing, parenting and early childhood development, long-term unemployment, prevention of youth suicide, child protection, and support for those experiencing domestic and family violence. **yourtown** has evolved to helping hundreds of thousands of young people each year through a range of service offerings, supporting them through many difficult challenges.

## Our services

- Kids Helpline, providing professional counselling and support 24x7 to 5–25-year-olds across Australia since 1991
- Kids Helpline @ School delivering early intervention and prevention programs through primary and secondary schools nationally
- My Circle, a confidential, private, online peer support network for 13–25-year-olds to share information and build coping skills
- Early intervention mental health services for children aged 0-18 years old and their families
- Domestic and family violence refuge, accommodation, and therapeutic supports for women and their children, including post-refuge support
- Expressive Therapy interventions for young children and infants who have experienced trauma and abuse, or been exposed to violence
- Accommodation and therapeutic supports for young parents and their children at high risk
- Parentline, a telephone and online counselling and support service for parents and carers in the Northern Territory and Queensland
- Young Parents Program providing parenting support to help with child development, life skills and health and wellbeing activities in safe, supportive environments, and
- Employment, education, and social enterprise programs to help long term unemployed young people re-engage with education and/or employment.

## Kids Helpline

**yourtown's** Kids Helpline is Australia's only free and confidential 24/7 phone and online counselling service for any young person aged 5 to 25. It offers children and young people a range of care options that are right for their needs and circumstances. Our commitment to being there anytime, and for any reason, has meant that we have responded to more than 8.9 million contacts from children and young people nationally in the 34 years since our service was established, while also providing tens of millions of self-help interactions via our website and social channels. In 2024 our Kids Helpline counsellors responded to more than 130,000 contacts from children and young people across Australia, including 4,632 crisis/safety interventions for children and young people at imminent risk of harm.

## Face-to-face Mental Health Programs for Children and Young People

**yourtown's** Starfish program supports children and young people aged up to 18 years to improve their emotional health and wellbeing. We provide outreach early intervention and prevention support in the Moreton Bay and Logan communities. On average, the program supported 99 children and young people each month in the last financial year.

## Children and Families

**yourtown's** Care Plus program in Port Pirie is an early intervention and family support service that aims to improve the development and wellbeing of children. We support students to continue to engage meaningfully in their education. On average, Care Plus supported 27 children and young people each month in the last financial year.

**yourtown** is the Facilitating Partner for Deception Bay Communities for Children services. These community-based prevention and early intervention strategies support the development and wellbeing of children up to 12 years of age.

**yourtown's** Penrose Young Parents Program in Port Pirie South Australia and Glugor Young Parents Program in Deception Bay Queensland provide practical parenting support to help with child development, life skills,

and health and wellbeing activities in safe, supportive environments. In 2023-24, Penrose and Glugor supported 80 young children and their parents.

**yourtown** provides accommodation and intensive individualised support to vulnerable at-risk young parents and their children through our San Miguel service. For over 40 years, San Miguel has provided a place to call home for vulnerable and at-risk families. In 2023-24, San Miguel supported 43 parents and 52 infants and young children.

### **Family and Domestic Violence Refuge and Transitional Housing**

**yourtown's** refuge offers supported accommodation for up to 12 weeks. A specialised team provides women and children with a safe and welcoming environment and creates opportunities for mothers to re-build self-concept and experience control and empowerment over their lives. The wrap-around care also includes linking with transitional housing and community outreach programs for women and children exiting refuges. Transitional housing is a vital steppingstone for women and children moving towards long term, safe and sustainable independent living in the community. In addition to refuge support **yourtown's** transitional housing offers a safe and supportive environment for 6 – 12 months, with support for legal and financial matters, accessing pre-employment support, and helping children into school. In 2023-24, we supported 20 families (including 33 young children) in our refuge and 24 families (including 43 children) in our transitional housing.

### **Parentline**

Parentline offers free confidential phone and webchat counselling and support for parents and carers of children in Queensland and the Northern Territory. It offers a safety net for families by providing support when it is most needed. This includes after hours and weekends, where families feel isolated and where local services are unavailable. In 2023-24, there were more than 7,000 counselling contacts with parents and carers in Queensland and the Northern Territory.

### **Employment Services**

For over 20 years **yourtown** has been delivering specialist youth employment services. Our employment services programs, including ParentsNext, Transition to Work, Skilling Queenslanders for Work, and Get Back in the Game provide young people with training to expand their options and help them find sustainable employment. During 2023-24 there were more than 7,000 commencements in our employment services and programs in South Australia, Queensland, and New South Wales.

### **Social Enterprises**

**yourtown** has worked with young people and employers to break down barriers to sustainable employment for more than 20 years. As a leader in work-based enterprises we provide young people at risk of long-term unemployment paid jobs in the following areas: construction, landscaping, and asset maintenance to help their transition to open employment. In 2023-24, almost 200 young people were employed in our social enterprises across South Australia, Queensland, New South Wales, and Tasmania.

**yourtown** welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission on sector-led advice to the Australian Government Department of Health and Aged Care on the existing system of mental health services for young people aged 12 to 25 years, and potential new and/or refined models of care for mental health services for young people.

**yourtown** has been supporting children and young people across Australia since 1961. Our organisation delivers early intervention strategies that aim to alleviate risk factors, and which strengthen family bonds and their connection with community. We work to improve children's wellbeing and development, family functioning and children's mental health. Our face-to-face programs are tailored to meet the needs of the communities we support and work effectively within the ecosystem of support services for children, young people and their families.

Our Kids Helpline service is an integral component of the landscape of youth mental health services in Australia. In 2024, Kids Helpline counsellors provided 133,386 responses to children and young people, 75% of these responses occurred outside of normal business hours. Mental health and suicide-related concerns were among the top reasons for children and young people contacted Kids Helpline. Specifically, one-in-four contacts were about emotional wellbeing, one-in-four were about mental health, and one-in-six were about suicide-related concerns. In addition, there were 4,632 crisis interventions, for which the most common reason was suicide related.

Given **yourtown's** extensive experience in supporting children and young people's mental health, we are well-positioned to respond to this consultation. We have utilised our experience within the youth mental healthcare system to provide feedback on the summary of consortium early advice on new and/or refined models of youth mental healthcare. The main themes from our submission include:

- Youth mental healthcare models should reflect the varying needs of different cohorts of children and young people and the diverse range of services in the youth mental health system that are supporting these cohorts
- Prevention and early intervention are crucial components in the mental health support continuum and must be a core component of any advice to government regarding youth mental healthcare models and investment. We cannot just rely on clinical support.
- The advice to the Government should look beyond extending the headspace model that focuses on mild to moderate health challenges and explore ways to support the community sector to deliver mental health services, particularly prevention and early intervention for children and young people
- The Government should prioritise funding services with a proven track record of addressing the highest prevalence of mental health issues (e.g. rural and remote communities) and greatest barriers to accessing support (e.g. the 'missing middle')
- The advice to Government should cover a broad range of digital mental health supports based on young people's preferences for testing services and accessing support
- Care navigation models should be funded appropriately to enable long-term and consistent support and be flexible to meet the needs of individuals based on how they are engaging with the youth mental health system
- Any youth mental healthcare model needs to include the option of family-inclusive approaches which enable parents and supporters to be part of children and young people's support plan (where such is agreed by the young person)

## General feedback on the consortium early advice

### Prevention, early identification, and early intervention

The scope of the consortium early advice is too narrow, with its strong focus on models that provide clinical support for young people with mild to moderate mental health challenges. The youth mental health system has a diverse range of services; therefore, the advice to Government should reflect the diverse nature of the mental health system that supports the varying needs of numerous youth cohorts. Approximately half of mental disorders begin by age 14, and three-quarters by age 24;<sup>1</sup> therefore, any advice to government on youth mental healthcare models needs to cover prevention, early identification, and early intervention.

Parents have a key role to play in assisting and encouraging children and young people to seek support for concerns that may be early signs of mental health challenges. To facilitate this process, parents require accessible and reliable information about how to identify early signs as well as how to support children and young people to seek and access support. In addition, mental health screenings in schools and healthcare settings can play a crucial role in identifying concerns early and ensuring children and young people receive the support they need. For children and adolescents, early identification and intervention is particularly important as mental health challenges can impact their emotional, social, and cognitive development. Recognising early signs such as mood swings, withdrawal from activities, or difficulty concentrating can lead to timely support and better long-term outcomes including engaging in school, maintaining relationships, and developing healthy coping mechanisms.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, when mental health issues are identified and addressed early, it reduces stigma, normalises help-seeking and provides individuals with the capacity to manage challenges without relying on clinical support.

Early intervention is crucial because it can significantly improve outcomes and quality of life. In addition, addressing mental health concerns at an early stage helps prevent symptoms from escalating, making treatment more effective and manageable.<sup>3,4</sup> Altogether, effective prevention, early identification, and early intervention can reduce the financial burden on mental healthcare systems and families.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. (2021). *Mental illness in young people*

<sup>2</sup> National Mental Health Commission. (2021). *National Children's Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy*.

<sup>3</sup> Queensland Mental Health Commission. (n.d.). *Early intervention initiatives*

<sup>4</sup> Victorian Department of Health. (2021). *Early intervention in mental illness*.

<sup>5</sup> National Mental Health Commission. (2022). *Economics of Mental Health – The Case for Investment in Prevention and Promotion*.

#### Recommendation:

That advice to the Government on new and/or refined models of youth mental healthcare:

- Reflect the diverse nature of the youth mental health system that responds to the varying needs of different cohorts of children and young people
- Expand on approaches for prevention, early identification, and early intervention, and include accessible and reliable information for parents and appropriate assessment tools for schools
- Calls for more investment in mental health prevention, early identification and early intervention that address age and development needs and consider ecological factors including family, school, transition periods, and community contexts

### Supporting the community sector to deliver mental health support

The consortium early advice to the Government on mental healthcare models is heavily focused on government initiatives with clinical models that address moderate mental health challenges. There should be more regard for the community sector being a vital part of the youth mental healthcare system, particularly in the areas of prevention and early intervention.

The community sector has been supporting children and young people with their wellbeing and mental health for decades. The sector has proven itself to be resilient, tenacious, innovative, and responsive to need; however, it is experiencing increasing demand from children, young people and families, and all within the context of a steep escalation in the costs of doing business and workforce shortages.

We note that the consortium early advice states that there are, “many communities, particularly in rural and remote areas, and harder to reach cohorts which would never be able to sustain a headspace service or be in proximity to one, and that “these communities require nuanced, locally-led approaches that are resourced to address service needs”. Over the past five years, there has been a 48% rise in the number of young people from these areas presenting to Kids Helpline with suicidal ideation. Suicide-related concerns have increased from affecting one-in-six of these young people to one-in-four over the same five-year period. **yourtown** advocates for the Government to increase digital mental health supports and resources to address the growing mental health crisis affecting children and young people in rural and remote areas. Digital mental health services offer a scalable solution to bridge gaps in service delivery. They can function as independent counselling support while also enhancing face-to-face care, including the assistance provided by emergency departments.

The needs of certain cohorts of children and young people are not met by the current mental health system. For example, families are on the waitlist for **yourtown** Starfish program that is an early intervention and prevention service designed to support children and young people up to 18 years old in the Moreton Bay and Logan communities. It focuses on improving emotional health and wellbeing by providing counselling, family-based interventions, practical support, advocacy, information, referrals, and case management. Many families are seeking our early intervention services, leading to overwhelming demand that exceeds available resources. In addition, young people from culturally diverse backgrounds, LGBTIQ+ youth, and those experiencing socioeconomic disadvantage may struggle to find services that are accessible, cost-effective, inclusive, and tailored to their



needs.<sup>678</sup> The issues experienced by children and young people in the 'missing middle' are beyond early intervention support, but they are too young, or their issues may not be severe enough to access services that support issues further along the mental healthcare continuum. The consortium early advice acknowledges that the 'missing middle' will still not be fully solved by the proposed extended headspace model. Governments should explore ways to fund services to provide early intervention services and fund services to support the missing middle. This could include providing more funding to early intervention programs, which would need to account for the different supports, activities and skillsets required by staff.

## Enhancing psychosocial services

### Intersections with other systems

The consortium early advice states that there should be sufficient funding for youth-focused psychosocial services and that youth mental health should be a consideration in the Australian Government's current work on psychosocial policy. We agree that the funding for youth focused services needs to be sufficient to meet the needs that are currently present within the community and need to be considered as part of the review into psychosocial policy. The consortium early advice views youth mental health with a narrow lens, when it should be acknowledging and exploring the intersection between mental health and other issues such as bullying, housing instability, child protection, youth justice, relationship challenges with family and peers, trauma, education, and employment. The youth mental health system needs to interact with various other systems to provide comprehensive and seamless support for young people facing mental health challenges while also addressing different issues in their lives. This requires clear and available referral pathways and a workforce that is skilled in trauma-informed practice and complex cases.

**yourtown** recommends that funding for youth-focused psychosocial services delivering early intervention should account for the time and resources required to address the complex and nonlinear nature of young people's mental health and adjacent issues. Children and young people that access wellbeing and mental health support from our face-to-face services often experience multifaceted issues, which can be exacerbated by the complex issues within their families. While children and young people are experiencing early signs of mental health, the family setting may be at a secondary or tertiary stage (for example, in areas such as domestic and family violence, developmental delays, substance misuse by other family members, etc) which may require capacity building or referrals. Funding needs to recognise the complexity of the wider issues experienced and observed by children and young people, and the time and resources services need to address wider issues in the tertiary stage to see positive improvement in mental health.

### Meeting demand

**yourtown** recommends the consortium advice to the Government should include the expansion of existing services and programs where demand exceeds supply. Kids Helpline continues to be a critical safety net for children and young people; however, the service cannot keep pace with demand. The current serious funding shortfall means many children and young people are not able to access timely support. In 2024, Kids Helpline responded to

<sup>6</sup> Australian Bureau of Statistics. (2024). *Mental health findings for LGBTQ+ Australians*.

<sup>7</sup> Kairuz, C. A., Casanelia, L. M., Bennett-Brook, K., Coombes, J., & Yadav, U. N. (2021). *Impact of racism and discrimination on physical and mental health among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples living in Australia: A systematic scoping review*. BMC Public Health, 21(1302).

<sup>8</sup> Ferdinand, A. S., Paradies, Y., & Kelahe, M. (2015). *Mental health impacts of racial discrimination in Australian culturally and linguistically diverse communities: A cross-sectional survey*. BMC Public Health, 15(401).

133,386 contacts, which is just over half of the attempts made to contact the service. Three-quarters of the counselling sessions that Kids helpline counsellors responded to were outside of normal business hours. i.e., on weekends and after 5pm on weekdays. Our professional counsellors are often the last line of support when there is limited after-hours mental health support available.

#### **Recommendation:**

**That advice to the Government on new and/or refined models of youth mental healthcare:**

- **acknowledge the crucial role that the community sector plays in delivering early intervention to support youth mental health**
- **encourages the Government to prioritise funding services with a proven track record of addressing the highest prevalence of mental health issues and greatest barriers**
- **acknowledges the funding and time that is required to address the complex nature of mental health and the wider associated issues**

### **Child-centred, family-inclusive approaches**

The early advice from the consortium fails to recognise the importance of parents and the family environment in supporting the mental healthcare of children and young people. While young people have the right to privacy and should have the ability to access health care without reliance on their parents, parents and carers can play a crucial role in supporting the mental health and wellbeing of their children; and yet they are often overlooked by youth mental health systems.

Many youth-focused mental health services do not share information or work alongside families and parents. Staff in our face-to-face services report that the families they support whose older children access mental health support often feel sidelined by some services, which contrasts with the child-centred and family-inclusive approach of our face-to-face mental health services. This family-inclusive approach is effective because mental healthcare is improved when the children are supported by their family and the therapeutic messages are reinforced in their home where the environment is positive.

#### **Recommendation:**

**That advice to the Government includes options to deliver child-centred, family-inclusive approaches in the youth mental healthcare models that, where appropriate, enable parents and supporters to be part of the support plan for children and young people**

Families are a critical source of support for many children and young people; however, many families may not know how to support or respond to their child when they are experiencing mental health issues. Youth mental health systems and models need to encompass a scaffolded experience journey that supports children, young people and their families and supporters along every step of the way. Based on our research with parents and supporters of children and young people seeking help, this scaffolding journey in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century should include ongoing connectivity and availability of services; online access involving multichannel use; service components that do not feel like formal support such as peer support; and opportunities for testing of the service to build trust. In addition, a separate path



needs to be provided to ensure parents and carers are equipped with the knowledge and skills to support their children and enable them to help young people access support more efficiently.

**Recommendation:**

**That advice to the Government on mental healthcare models includes scaffolded experience journeys that support the young person and their parents/supporters along every step of help-seeking and accessing support**

## Specific feedback on the ideas presented in the early advice

### Digital technology as a youth mental healthcare model

The consortium early advice on mental healthcare models does not adequately acknowledge or explain the vital role of digital mental health counselling and supports in enabling young people to seek and access support. The advice to the Government needs to consider a broad range of digital mental health solutions. These digital supports can complement the headspace model, which the early advice focuses on, by supporting young people who are on the waitlist for headspace, have exhausted their time-limited sessions at headspace or do not find headspace to be accessible. It should be noted that digital interventions can also be an alternative and standalone mental healthcare model for young people.

#### Online counselling

In 2024, Kids Helpline responded to 133,386 contacts, which is just over half of the attempts made to contact the service. Of note, 75% of all counselling sessions are provided outside normal business hours, late in the evening or over the weekend. Kids Helpline's professional counsellors are often the last line of support when there is limited after-hours mental health support available.

Young people may not seek help due to stigma and shame, concerns about privacy, not realising they need help until their situation has escalated, and difficulties in navigating different systems. Digital counselling and support services such as Kids Helpline, allow young people to seek support on their own terms, whether over the phone, by webchat, website, social media content or through professionally moderated peer support. In 2024, one-in-four contacts to Kids Helpline were about mental health and one-in-six contacts were about suicide-related concerns. Kids Helpline empowers children and young people to seek help due to its:

- Accessibility - Kids Helpline is a free, confidential, and 24/7 phone and online counselling service available to young people aged 5 to 25. This accessibility encourages young people to seek help whenever they need it.
- Supportive environment - The service aims to create a supportive environment where young people feel comfortable reaching out for help without fear of judgment or stigma.
- Education and awareness - Kids Helpline provides educational resources and sessions to schools, helping students understand the importance of seeking help and how to access support services.
- Empowerment - The service focuses on empowering young people by helping them develop options for change, understand the consequences of their actions, and identify their own resources.

- Confidentiality - Kids Helpline ensures that all interactions are confidential, which helps build trust and encourages young people to seek help when needed.
- Ongoing support – young people can elect to return to the service and connect with the same counsellor. This enables young people to only have to tell their story once, so they are not repeating sensitive experiences and they feel heard and understood the first time, which builds trust and engagement.

### Information resources

Counselling and professional support websites and apps play an important role in help-seeking, dissemination of information, prevention, early intervention, harm minimisation, and access to crisis support. Our experience and consultations with children and young people have clearly articulated that young people assess and evaluate a service before accessing it and will use different channels to do so. Websites, apps and online resources are a core component of these processes and must be readily available to all children and young people to help them to build trust and willingness to commence the help-seeking process.

The Kids Helpline website and Quibble app provides instantly accessible, age appropriate, tailored resources to support Kids Helpline direct counselling activities and a variety of community and government organisations with information related to issues including mental health, emotional wellbeing, suicide-related concerns, family relationships, dating and relationships, grief and loss, bullying, and sextortion. These resources include articles, videos, quizzes, podcasts, stories, and content created so that young people can access the level of support that best meets their needs. The website and app have been developed using human-centred design processes and the content is informed by contemporary evidence and the expertise of professional and qualified Kids Helpline counsellors and staff. This process helps to ensure that the information is reliable, easy to understand, trustworthy, current and accessible.

### Peer support

My Circle is a clinically moderated peer-to-peer support platform designed specifically for 12-25 year olds in Australia. Evaluations of My Circle indicate young people engage with the service because it provides a safe, private, and supportive online space for discussing mental health and personal challenges. It offers:

- Anonymity & privacy – Users can share their thoughts without fear of judgment
- 24/7 accessibility – The platform is available at all times, making support more convenient
- Peer support – Young people can connect with others facing similar challenges
- Guided conversations – Moderators ensure discussions remain safe and constructive, and
- Diverse topics – Users can engage in discussions on mental health, friendships, school, and more.

### Recommendation:

**That advice to the Government on models of youth mental healthcare calls for more investment in a broad range of digital mental health supports, based on young people's preferences for using online counselling, peer support and information resources on websites and apps**

## Care navigation models tailored to the varied needs of young people

The consortium early advice notes that formal and informal models of care navigation are currently in place and that some care navigation models involve people providing

coordination and community services in an unpaid and/or invisible capacity to the wider system. Community-based services often invest significant time and resources into maintaining lived experience networks and roles, which can be used to deliver care navigation. **yourtown** agrees with the consortium early advice that care navigation should be bolstered and supported where it already exists across the system. In addition, we argue that funding should be provided for care navigation, with consideration of the time required to build trust with young people, their families, and the community.

It is not enough for care navigators to implement warm referrals for young people in the mental health system. At a minimum, care navigation models should enable young people to be supported with:

- Long warm entry into the system and re-entry if required
- Helping family to be part of the journey, if appropriate
- Warm referrals that also ensure appropriate support is provided and accessed
- Coordination of support from other systems (e.g. justice, employment, housing)
- Long warm exit from the system

While not all young people require care navigation, some young people in specific populations could benefit greatly from care navigators travelling alongside them and their families during their journey. Care navigators could assist populations (e.g. First Nations young people and those from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds) that have difficulties trusting mental health services to build trust in services and access support. It is important to note that individuals will have different needs when it comes to navigating the mental health system; therefore, the type of care navigation model that a young person requires may change as they travel through the mental health system. Furthermore, young people may require elements of support from different care navigation models at once. Examples of the different types of care navigation models include:

- Client-centred navigation where individuals are guided through the mental health system, ensuring they receive timely care and support.
- Integrated care navigation where mental health services are connected with primary care providers to offer holistic treatment.
- Community-based navigation where peer support workers or community health navigators assist individuals in accessing local mental health resources.
- Specialised navigation for complex cases where individuals with severe or persistent mental health conditions are supported to receive coordinated care across multiple providers.
- Rural and remote navigation where barriers to mental healthcare in underserved areas are addressed by providing tailored support.

#### Recommendation:

That care navigation models are:

- **Funded appropriately to account for the time required to build trust with young people, deliver warm introductions to and warm exits from the mental health system, and provide warm referrals that ensure services are provided and accessed**
- **Flexible to meet the needs of the individual based on where they are at in the mental health system**



## **A mental health system that meets the distinct needs of children, adolescents, and young people**

The consortium early advice strongly focuses on mild to moderate mental health challenges and views the youth mental health systems as supporting young people aged 12 to 25-year-olds. They support harmonising the age range of youth mental health systems across Australia to encompass 12 to 25-year-olds to increase the ease of implementing a nationally cohesive youth mental health system. This idea aims to address the inconsistencies between different jurisdictions' approaches to defining the 'youth mental health' age range that exacerbate the challenges of transition, access, and integration between services. We would also support an approach that harmonises the various systems so that services use common assessments, screening tools, and outcome measurements.

It is important to note that mental illness is likely to emerge in adolescence;<sup>1</sup> hence children and young people benefit from tailored early intervention approaches to support mental health and wellbeing.<sup>2</sup> With this in mind, **yourtown** suggests that the advice to the Government should discuss the different skills and approaches required to engage and support the different age cohorts based on developmental needs, service accessibility, and transition challenges.

### **Recommendation:**

**That the advice to Government regarding age range of the youth mental health sector discusses how the proposed mental health models can meet the varying needs of children, adolescents, and young people based on evolving developmental stages, access to appropriate services, and the challenges faced during transitions between services for different age groups**

We would welcome the opportunity to explore these ideas with you in further detail. Should you require further information about any issues raised in the submission, please do not hesitate to contact Tracy Adams, CEO of **yourtown** via email at [advocacy@yourtown.com.au](mailto:advocacy@yourtown.com.au).