



yourtown
POWERING kids helpline

Interim Report of the National Mental Health and Suicide Prevention Agreement Review

A submission to the Productivity
Commission

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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

- Early intervention mental health services for children aged 0-18 years old and their families
- Domestic and family violence refuge, transitional housing, and therapeutic supports for women and their children, including post-refuge support
- 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.
- 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 to 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, and
- Employment, education, and social enterprise programs to support young people at risk of long-term unemployment 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 first 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 133,386 contacts from children and young people across Australia, including 4,632 crisis responses for children and young people at imminent risk of harm.

Face-to-face Programs for 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'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.

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 with 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.

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.

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.

Employment Services

For over 20 years **yourtown** has been delivering specialist youth employment services. Our employment services programs, including 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 25 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.

Executive Summary

yourtown welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the Productivity Commission's interim review of the National Mental Health and Suicide Prevention Agreement. As a leading provider of services for children, young people, and families across Australia, **yourtown** offers a unique perspective grounded in over six decades of frontline experience.

This submission highlights the urgent need for reform in Australia's mental health system, particularly for children and young people. It presents evidence-based recommendations to strengthen early intervention, improve service integration, and embed digital mental health supports into national planning.

Priority Recommendations

1. **Integrate and Fund Digital Mental Health Services**
Embed services like Kids Helpline into regional and national planning to reflect modern help-seeking preferences and ensure 24/7 accessibility.
2. **Equitable Funding for National Services**
Include national services in bilateral agreements to ensure consistent support across jurisdictions and prevent service gaps.
3. **Interim Funding Measures**
Implement transitional funding to sustain critical services ahead of the 2027 Agreement, avoiding disruption in care.
4. **Prioritise Early Intervention**
Invest in developmentally appropriate programs that address mental health risks early, particularly in education and family settings.
5. **Strengthen Postvention Support**
Mandate follow-up care and safety planning for children and young people discharged from emergency or inpatient settings.
6. **Whole-of-Government Approach**
Promote cross-sectoral collaboration across health, education, employment, and social services to embed mental health supports where young people live, learn, and grow.

Conclusion

yourtown urges the Commission to recognise the unique role of national services like Kids Helpline in delivering universal, accessible, and developmentally appropriate mental health support. By embedding these services into the next iteration of the Agreement, governments can ensure that no child or young person is left without help when they need it most.

Embedding digital mental health supports in national reform

The Productivity Commission found that the current Agreement is fragmented, underfunded, and not fit for purpose. The numerous isolated initiatives and outputs in the Agreement fail to form a functional system due to the absence of a cohesive strategy and coordinated implementation framework. Services continue to operate in silos, with limited integration across Commonwealth, state, and territory systems. Furthermore, consumers, carers, and providers report uncoordinated care pathways which result in difficulties accessing timely and appropriate support.

While all these issues must be managed, the next National Mental Health and Suicide Prevention Agreement must recognise the critical role of digital mental health programs and ensure that services are designed for the 21st century, particularly those that enable children and young people to seek help when they need it and in the way they prefer. This includes committing to sustainable investment, embedding digital services in regional and national planning, and ensuring these platforms are recognised as core components of early intervention, crisis response, and mental health promotion.

Digital counselling and support services such as Kids Helpline play a vital role in meeting young people where they are, including in ways that they find safe and accessible. Kids Helpline offers children and young people the flexibility to seek support in ways that suit them best, via phone, webchat, online resources, social media, or through professionally moderated peer support platforms. Kids Helpline continues to see increasing preference for online support as evidenced in 2024 where half of all contacts with Kids Helpline were through our webchat service, the first time that this has occurred. This highlights the shift towards a preference for online support and its importance in the service ecosystem and spectrum of support.

Kids Helpline's core elements align with best practice in youth mental health support and early intervention, including:

- **Accessibility**
Kids Helpline is a free, confidential, and 24/7 service available to children and young people aged 5 to 25. Its multi-platform delivery (including phone, webchat, and email) ensures support is available outside traditional service hours, which is critical given that 75% of contacts occur after-hours.
- **Safe and non-judgmental environment**
The service is designed to be developmentally appropriate and emotionally safe, helping young people feel comfortable disclosing sensitive issues such as anxiety, depression, family conflict, and suicidal thoughts. This environment reduces stigma and encourages early help-seeking.
- **Mental health education and literacy**
Programs like Kids Helpline @ School provide virtual psychoeducational content aligned with curriculum standards, improving students' understanding of mental health, emotional regulation, and how to access support. In 2024, over 138,000 students participated in classroom sessions.
- **Support for decision-making and self-efficacy**
Counsellors work with young people to identify options, assess risks, and build coping strategies, fostering self-awareness and resilience. This approach supports long-term wellbeing and reduces reliance on crisis services.
- **Confidentiality and trust**
Confidentiality is a cornerstone of the service, helping to build trust and rapport with young people. This is especially important for those who may be reluctant to engage with formal mental health systems or fear judgment from adults.

Recommendation:

The next National Mental Health and Suicide Prevention Agreement should actively integrate and fund digital mental health programs and services that reflect 21st-century help-seeking preferences, particularly those that enable children and young people to access support when they need it and in the format they choose.

Strengthening national service integration through equitable funding structures

National services like Kids Helpline are a vital part of the mental health and suicide prevention systems due to their provision of critical, universally accessible support; and yet, Kids Helpline is excluded from bilateral funding arrangements between the Commonwealth and state/territory governments. This creates missed opportunities for integration because national services are not consistently embedded in regional planning or state-level strategies.

Kids Helpline continues to be a critical safety net for children and young people in all states and territories of Australia. Kids Helpline empowers young people by co-creating personalised safety plans that map warning signs, outlining coping strategies, and highlighting trusted contacts for immediate crisis management. It serves as a designated emergency contact in government and school wellbeing policies, guaranteeing the 1800 55 1800 number is prominently displayed and integrated into all crisis response procedures. Its widespread listings on official health-support portals and child-safety directories ensure that children, families and practitioners can instantly locate free, professional, confidential counselling around the clock.

Despite the crucial role of Kids Helpline, the service cannot keep pace with demand. A serious funding shortfall leaves many children and young people unable to access the timely support they need. In 2024, Kids Helpline responded to 133,386 contacts, which is just over half of the attempts made to contact the service. 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.

Considering these challenges, it is imperative that national services such as Kids Helpline are recognised and resourced as integral components of Australia's mental health infrastructure. Their unique role in providing affordable, accessible, after-hours support to children and young people, often when no other services are available, underscores the urgency of embedding them within state and territory planning and funding frameworks. Without adequate investment and integration, the system risks leaving vulnerable young people without the help they need and when they need it most. Addressing the funding shortfall and ensuring consistent support across jurisdictions should be a critical policy priority for strengthening Australia's mental health and suicide prevention systems. National services like Kids Helpline must be formally recognised within bilateral funding arrangements and embedded in state and territory planning to ensure coordinated, equitable access to care. Without strategic investment and integration, gaps in service delivery will persist, particularly during after-hours, leaving children and young people without timely support.

Recommendation:

Governments should explore and implement equitable financial support for national services such as Kids Helpline as part of bilateral agreements, ensuring these services are sustainably funded, integrated into regional planning, and recognised for their role in delivering early intervention, crisis support, and universal mental health promotion.

Interim funding measures to bridge the gap to 2027

The Productivity Commission's interim report recommends extending the current National Mental Health and Suicide Prevention Agreement to June 2027, allowing time for the development of a co-designed, comprehensive reform framework. We support this recommendation because meaningful reform requires genuine engagement with consumers, carers, service providers, and people with lived experience.

However, the proposed extension presents a critical risk – Without a new agreement in place, national services such as Kids Helpline may continue to be excluded from bilateral funding arrangements. This undermines service sustainability and limits the capacity of these organisations to meet growing demand, particularly for education, early intervention, and crisis support outside traditional service hours.

To ensure continuity of care and prevent further strain on the mental health system, governments must implement interim funding mechanisms that recognise and support national services which deliver universal, developmentally appropriate mental health promotion and crisis intervention. Embedding these services in regional and state-level planning even before the new Agreement is finalised will provide equitable and transparent funding pathways through existing bilateral arrangements, and enable service innovation and responsiveness, particularly in digital and after-hours support environments.

These interim measures are essential to bridge the gap between the current and future Agreements, ensuring that children and young people are not left without timely, accessible support during a period of policy transition. Failure to act risks widening service gaps and delaying progress toward the very reforms the Productivity Commission seeks to achieve.

Recommendation:

Governments should implement interim funding arrangements to ensure continuity of support for children and young people ahead of the 2027 Agreement. This includes providing equitable, sustainable funding for national services like Kids Helpline, recognising their critical role in education, early intervention, crisis support, and mental health promotion.

Prioritising early intervention in the National Agreement

While the Agreement references age-appropriate care, it does not sufficiently prioritise children and young people, despite evidence that most mental health conditions commence before age 25.¹

Mental health and substance use disorders are the leading contributors to disease burden among young Australians, particularly those aged 5 to 24. Conditions like anxiety, depression, and suicide-related distress are especially prevalent in this age group. Critically, 36% of this

¹ AIHW, Australia's youth: Mental illness, 2021 <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/children-youth/mental-illness?form=MG0AV3>

burden is preventable, driven by modifiable risk factors such as social isolation, substance use, poor emotional regulation, and lack of access to timely support.

These findings underscore the urgent need for evidence-based education programs and resources, and early intervention, especially in childhood and adolescence when mental health challenges often first emerge. Students struggling with mental health often withdraw quietly rather than act out, making their disengagement hard to detect and leading over time to poor attendance, low academic performance, and strained relationships. If unaddressed, this sustained disengagement increases the likelihood of early school leaving, unemployment, and persistent mental health issues in adulthood.² Investing in universal, developmentally appropriate supports (such as Kids Helpline, headspace, and school-based wellbeing programs) can reduce long-term harm, improve resilience, and prevent escalation to severe mental illness, ultimately increasing participation in education and employment opportunities.³ To meet the goals of the National Mental Health and Suicide Prevention Agreement, governments must prioritise early intervention for children and young people through dedicated funding, integrated service models, evidence-based programs, and co-designed initiatives with lived experience.

Recommendation:

The next iteration of the Agreement should explicitly prioritise education and early intervention for children and young people, with dedicated funding for evidence-based programs and measurable outcomes.

Strengthening postvention support through community-based youth support and national investment

The Productivity Commission acknowledges that postvention is a critical component of suicide prevention but has found that services are inconsistent and often lack follow-up. Many individuals discharged from emergency departments or inpatient programs report receiving no safety plans, referrals, or outpatient support, which undermines recovery and increases risk.

Children and young people are especially vulnerable in the wake of a suicide crisis or mental health episode, making consistent postvention support a crucial support during recovery. Developmentally, they often lack the emotional literacy, coping mechanisms, and stable support systems that adults might draw upon; therefore, being discharged from emergency or inpatient care without safety planning, referrals, or follow-up can leave them dangerously isolated.⁴ Moreover, young people are more likely to experience stigma and confusion about their mental health, which can discourage help-seeking unless services are tailored to their needs and delivered in accessible, youth-friendly formats.⁵ Education, early intervention and sustained follow-up are essential safeguards that can determine whether a young person's recovery gains momentum or stalls. Unless the National Agreement explicitly commits to funding and embedding postvention supports, children and young people risk

² Gossner M, Dittman C, Lole L, & Miller-Lewis L. (2025). Community insights into school disengagement: Perspectives from a regional-rural Australian context. *Australian and International Journal of Rural Education*, 1–18.

³ Curtis, R., & Mullen, P. (2019). Universal, school-based mental health promotion: a systematic review of Australian studies. *Early Intervention in Psychiatry*, 13(4), 814–833.

⁴ Australian Institute for Suicide Research and Prevention & Postvention Australia (2017). *Postvention Australia Guidelines: A resource for organisations and individuals providing services to people bereaved by suicide*. Brisbane: Australian Institute for Suicide Research and Prevention.

⁵ Clark, J. C., Bartik, W., Davies, R. L., & Rice, K. (2025). *Help-Seeking for Australian Youth who Experience Disadvantage: A Systematic Review*. Child & Youth Care Forum.

being neglected during a crucial phase of recovery when responsive, age-appropriate care can greatly shape their wellbeing.

Services such as Kids Helpline can play a critical and multifaceted role in postvention support for young people navigating mental health crises and suicide-related distress. With immediate, 24/7 access to free and confidential counselling via phone and webchat, the service ensures that young people discharged from clinical care can access support without bureaucratic barriers, thereby reducing the risk of isolation and relapse.

Beyond crisis intervention, Kids Helpline can assist in the development of personalised safety plans, empowering young people to stay safe during vulnerable moments. They also extend care to bereaved peers and families, offering understanding and emotional support during complex grieving processes. Importantly, Kids Helpline fills a systemic gap by acting as a continuity-of-care provider, stepping in where formal systems fail, and ensuring that compassionate, youth-tailored support is always within reach.

Recommendations:

To address critical gaps in postvention care, the next National Agreement should mandate consistent follow-up protocols and dedicated funding for aftercare services (including safety planning and referrals) for all individuals discharged from emergency or inpatient settings.

The next National Agreement should allocate dedicated and measurable funding specifically for postvention services to ensure consistent follow-up care, safety planning, and community support for individuals at heightened risk.

A whole-of-government approach to early intervention for children and young people

The Productivity Commission strongly supports a whole-of-government, integrated approach to early intervention for children and young people and recommends that the next iteration of the Agreement be designed to reflect this priority. It criticised the current Agreement for being too health-system centric and failing to embed supports in the ecosystems of young people where they live, learn and socialise – family environments, schools, TAFEs, universities, community and sporting clubs, and digital platforms. The interim report noted that early intervention must be cross-sectoral, involving health, education, employment, and social services.

To effectively reduce the burden of mental illness and suicide among children and young people, early intervention must be holistic, developmentally appropriate, and embedded across the environments where young people live, learn, and grow. This means recognising the interconnected nature of mental health, education, employment, and social development, and responding with evidence-based supports that reflect young people's age, life stage, and unique vulnerabilities. The National Mental Health and Suicide Prevention Agreement provides a framework for reform, but to deliver meaningful change, governments must invest in integrated, cross-sectoral approaches that reach children and young people early, at home, in schools, and through employment services. The following recommendations outline how targeted action in these settings can strengthen early intervention and improve long-term outcomes.

- **Governments should invest in evidence-based quality interventions focusing on early years child development and mental health and wellbeing support for children**

Developmental vulnerabilities (in the areas of physical health, social competence, emotional maturity, cognitive skills, and communication) that are left unaddressed

can take their toll on children's mental health as they navigate their way through school and with their peers. These vulnerabilities intersect with and exacerbate mental health issues at key foundational stages, which is why it is crucial to support early child development.

- **Governments should invest in evidence-based quality interventions delivered in the school environment that support mental health literacy and help-seeking**

Education settings are a key platform for the provision of mental health support that engage children, young people, and families along the continuum of intervention for health and wellbeing. Schools are well-accustomed to supporting students' learning and developmental needs and they also help students to develop resilience, social and emotional health, and confidence in seeking services and treatment. For these reasons, schools have long been regarded as suitable environments for implementing suicide prevention initiatives for vulnerable young people. The Agreement states that governments with Education ministers will identify and share best practice examples of mental health supports and suicide prevention across all education settings to encourage implementation of evidence-based approaches across jurisdictions.

yourtown strongly encourages this process to recognise Tier 1 positive mental health promotion programs⁶ such as Kids Helpline @ School that are based on the latest psychoeducational research and delivered nationally in schools with the aim of improving students' mental health, wellbeing and help-seeking. These Tier 1 programs are classified as such because they can reduce the onset of mental illness by building resilience and emotional skills early. Even modest outcomes may result in lasting, positive impacts across the lifespan, while also contributing to a reduction in social risks, including bullying and exclusion.

- **Governments should invest in evidence-based quality interventions delivered in the school environment for children and teenagers that recognise the intersections with other issues (e.g. bullying), develop pathways to support, and mitigate harm from mental health and suicide**

Children and young people's experiences of mental health can be complex and are often interrelated with other issues, including bullying, discrimination, stress related to school, relationship challenges with family and peers, trauma and abuse, offending behaviour, housing instability, and unemployment. For example, in 2024 one-in-seven contacts to Kids Helpline aged 10-14 years, who sought support for bullying stated that they currently had thoughts of suicide. This was even higher for 12-year-olds with one-in-six indicating thoughts of suicide. Mental health supports in education settings should be used to educate and recognise the intersections between mental health and suicide with other key areas such as bullying and relationship challenges. These supports can then be used to mitigate the impact of mental health and create pathways to support before the occurrence of harm, while at the same time potentially reduce the negative experiences that can result in the development of mental health crisis.

- **The Commonwealth Government should support Employment Services with assessment tools and staff training packages to identify and support young people with issues related to mental health and suicide**

Young people in unemployment, particularly long-term unemployment, are disproportionately affected by mental health issues compared to both their

⁶ According to the Victorian Schools Mental Health Menu, Tier 1 programs are whole-school approaches that involve students, teachers, staff, parents, and carers, promote mental health literacy, emotional regulation, and resilience, help students develop protective factors against mental ill-health, encourage help-seeking behaviours and reduce stigma, and are often aligned with the Victorian Curriculum F-10, especially in social and emotional learning.

employed peers and older cohorts in unemployment.⁷ Some of this cohort may not have sought help for these issues due to difficulties in navigating the complex nature of the support system. Employment services can play an important role in identifying young people who are at risk of mental health and suicide issues, provided they have appropriate assessments, expedited community links to give warm referrals, and staff with strong engagement skills so young people feel at ease divulging their situation. The Agreement states that the Commonwealth is primarily responsible for funding and providing some non-health sector mental health and suicide support services, including income and employment support. Furthermore, in previous reports the Productivity Commission recognised the interrelationship between unemployment and mental health and recommended that employment support programs should implement a mental health assessment tool and provide warm referrals to community services.⁸

Recommendations:

Governments should invest in mental health prevention and early intervention supports that address age and development needs and consider ecological factors including family, school, transition periods, and community contexts. Specifically,

- **Governments should invest in evidence-based quality interventions focusing on early years child development and mental health and wellbeing support for children**
- **Governments should invest in evidence-based quality interventions delivered in the school environment that:**
 - **support mental health literacy and help-seeking**
 - **recognise the intersections with other issues (e.g. bullying), develop pathways to support, and mitigate harm from mental health and suicide**
- **The Commonwealth Government should support Employment Services with assessment tools and staff training packages to identify and support young people with issues related to mental health and suicide while receiving support through employment programs and when they enter the workforce**

We 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.

⁷ Milner, A., Law, P., & Reavley, N. (2021). A systematic review of the effect of employment and transition into employment on mental health. Prepared for the Victorian Health Promotion Foundation, University of Melbourne.

⁸ Productivity Commission, Mental Health, Inquiry Report 2020.

<https://www.pc.gov.au/inquiries/completed/mentalhealth/report/mental-health.pdf>