

Interim Statement to Parliament



Australian Government

Domestic, Family and Sexual Violence Commission

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Acknowledgment of Country

The Domestic, Family and Sexual Violence Commission (the Commission) acknowledges the traditional country throughout Australia on which we gather, live, work and stand.

We acknowledge all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples across Australia, who are the Traditional Custodians of the land and waters and of the oldest continuous living culture on Earth.

The Commissioner acknowledges and honours the work of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to end family violence and is committed to partnership with First Nations communities in this work.

We acknowledge that we have a great deal to learn from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ways of working.

The Aboriginal concept of 'Dadirri' informs our approach. Judy Atkinson (2002) in her book *Trauma trails, recreating song lines: The transgenerational effects of trauma in Indigenous Australia*¹ writes of Dadirri, which refers to a deep contemplative process of listening to one another in reciprocal relationships. The word Dadirri is of the Ngangikurungkurr people of the Daly area of the Northern Territory, the activity of Dadirri has an equivalent in many other Indigenous groups across Australia. Dadirri is understood to be a way of deep listening and reflective non-judgemental observation of what has been heard.

Acknowledgement of people with lived and living experience of domestic, family and sexual violence

The Commission acknowledges the individual and collective expertise of people with experience of domestic, family and sexual violence.

We value the courage of those who share their perspectives for the purpose of learning and growing together and recognise their vital contributions to achieving better outcomes for all.

The Commission values the unique experiences, protective factors and strengths of children and young people and acknowledges they are also affected by domestic, family and sexual violence.



I am pleased to provide this Interim Statement from the Domestic, Family and Sexual Violence Commission (the Commission) to the Parliament of Australia, outlining the work undertaken to establish the Commission in its first year.

On 1 November 2022, I commenced as Australia's first Domestic, Family and Sexual Violence Commissioner. The Commission has been established as a non-statutory executive agency, within the Commonwealth Department of Social Services. Australia is one of only 3 countries in the world to have established such a Commission, building on the recommendation from the House Standing Committee on Social Policy and Legal Affairs Inquiry on Family, Domestic and Sexual Violence.

"A strong, independent voice is needed to hold all levels of government to account and ensure that through the National Plan they remain focused on the task of reducing violence in our community." ii, iii

On 17 October 2022, the Australian, state and territory governments released the National Plan to End Violence against Women and Children 2022–2032 (the National Plan).

The National Plan provides the overarching national policy framework that will guide actions towards ending violence against women and children over the next 10 years. The National Plan implementation architecture consists of a number of key documents.

In August 2023, the Australian Government released The First Action Plan (2023–2027), the dedicated Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Action Plan 2023–2025, the Outcomes Framework 2023–2032 and the Theory of Change 2023–2032.

The development of the Government Performance Management Plan is underway, and will be released in early 2024.

Since commencing as Commissioner, I have travelled extensively around the country. I have made listening a priority: spending time with people who have experienced domestic, family and sexual violence, sector leaders, passionate advocates, police and other frontline workers and family members.

Many have expressed to me their sense of hope that the establishment of the Commission signals a renewed commitment to collaboration. Many have also expressed their deep distress at the number of women and children who have been murdered this year, and the urgent need for action and change. There is strong support for reducing system fragmentation, and sharing the responsibility for eliminating gender-based violence in all its forms. The Lived Experience Advisory Council, which was established to inform the efforts of the Commission and governments to **centre lived experience** in all aspects of policy design and implementation, has received significant support and interest, with the Commission receiving over 400 applications following a national expression of interest process.

I have started as we mean to go on: drawing on the perspectives of the community to assist efforts to achieve the objectives of the National Plan to End Violence against Women and Children 2022–2032. The community has made it clear that it wants action, and to know how this plan will make a difference.

My role – and the role of the Commission – is to **amplify voices of people with lived experience of domestic, family and sexual violence, provide evidence-informed policy advice, and promote coordination and accountability towards ending gender-based violence.**^{iv} We will shine a light on what is working, identify opportunities for improvement, and bring attention to where systems are failing, or causing harm. We will learn from areas where progress is being made, and where policies, programs and structures are effectively responding to and preventing gender-based violence, to deliver our core goal: the elimination of gender-based violence within a generation.

The goal is ambitious. But it is the right ambition. Violence is always unacceptable, but on the scale that it is currently being experienced in our country, it is intolerable. Australians expect nothing less than the promise – indeed, the certainty – of safety from domestic, family and sexual violence.

We recognise that the impact of domestic, family and sexual violence, as with other forms of violence, can ripple through generations. Nargneit Birrang, Victoria’s Aboriginal Holistic Healing Framework for Family Violence (2019), notes intergenerational trauma can be unknowingly passing on trauma through behaviour as a result of not having an opportunity to heal.^v That ripple effect is amplified by institutions, systems, practices and conditions that enable, exacerbate, and, in some instances, perpetuate further harm upon people who have experiences of gender-based violence. We can reduce the intergenerational impact of gender-based violence within a generation by reforming these institutions, systems, and practices.

We have an ambitious and comprehensive National Plan with bi-partisan support and the endorsement of all governments. Across the country, we have seen significant investment in the activities outlined in the First Action Plan.^{vi}

What has become clear to me in the short time of the Commission's work is that maintaining progress towards the objectives of the National Plan will require focus and action in all 6 of the critical cross cutting principles it identifies:

1. **Advancing gender equality**
2. **Closing the Gap**
3. **Centring lived experience**
4. **Accountability**
5. **Intersectionality**
6. **Person-centred coordination and integration**

Advancing gender equality and addressing all drivers of gender-based violence is the first action of the First Action Plan. The Commission will work with all governments to promote this objective and ensure effective mechanisms are in place to measure impact. The forthcoming National Strategy to Achieve Gender Equality will provide a critical framework to guide whole-of-government and community action.

I recently provided evidence to the Northern Territory Coroner Elisabeth Armitage's inquiry into the Northern Territory's domestic, family and sexual violence system, examining the deaths of four Indigenous women, Kumanjayi Haywood, Ngeygo Ragurk, Miss Yunupingu and Kumarn Rubuntja.^{vii} The Coroner asked me, "What will be different about this National Plan?"

All governments have committed to the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Action Plan and the development of a standalone National Plan for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in recognition of the disproportionately high rates of family, domestic and sexual violence that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women and children experience.

The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Action Plan is fundamental to addressing Target 13 of the National Agreement on **Closing the Gap** – to reduce all forms of violence against Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women and children by at least 50% by 2031, as progress towards zero.

A clearer picture and **accountability** mechanisms for investment and funding across all levels of government, portfolios and agencies in relation to domestic, family and sexual violence are needed to provide continuity and ensure the long-term growth and development of appropriate system-wide responses.

The community expects government to take a targeted and evidence-based approach to allocating resources in the most effective and high-priority places to address gender-based violence. We know that investment in preventing and responding to gender-based violence is greater than ever before. Insight into this investment will enable whole-of-government operations to focus on the areas of greatest need.

Australia invested much of our efforts to date in responding to gender-based violence by moving women out of their homes and often out of their communities, into refuges and homelessness services. Many have told me that this is not enough and, in fact, is often not working. There is a strong call for a greater focus on working with men. We need to understand more about men who use violence. We need more men to have access to evidence-based behaviour-change programs.

To keep women and children safe, we must sharpen our focus on those who use violence and ensure that they are held accountable for their actions in ways that contribute to safety, and healing and recovery for the women and children they have harmed.

We also need to include men as collaborators, recognising that their experience and contribution goes beyond simply ‘persecutors, victims or rescuers’.^{viii, ix}

The National Plan recognises the need to be **intersectional** in our understanding and response to family, domestic and sexual violence. Our systems struggle with the compounding discrimination faced by women and children on the margins. When we get it right for the most marginalised, we get it right for the whole community.

Our deeply fragmented system requires **person-centred coordination and integration**, led by the stewards of those systems. It is time for governments to build mechanisms to work collaboratively across our policy silos for better outcomes for the community. For the National Plan to be effective, we require robust, coordinated governance with oversight and responsibility for implementation across all government portfolios, agencies and jurisdictions, at all levels of our system, from direct service delivery through to governance.

I acknowledge the enormous work done to date by workers^x, advocates and institutions, and we must collectively restate our intention: to make genuine and sustained progress towards ending violence against women and children. This is a complex challenge, there are no quick fixes – we must listen deeply to communities, through Dadirri, and learn from what they tell us is needed.



Micaela Cronin

DOMESTIC, FAMILY AND SEXUAL
VIOLENCE COMMISSIONER

ABOUT THIS STATEMENT



A year into my role, I am providing this initial Interim Statement to deliver an update on our work to date, notably the work underway to establish Australia's first Domestic, Family and Sexual Violence Commission. I have built a small, high-calibre team during this foundational phase and I would like to acknowledge the significant efforts of staff within the Commonwealth Department of Social Services for their efforts and commitment to support the complex task of establishing a new Commission.

Since becoming Commissioner, I have undertaken engagements across the country with governments, sector representatives, experts and researchers, community leaders and, importantly, people with lived experience. While each voice has been unique, there are key themes and insights.

This statement outlines my intentions for the Yearly Report I have been commissioned to provide to Parliament. I will present this report in mid-2024, one year following the release of the First Action Plan and the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Action Plan.

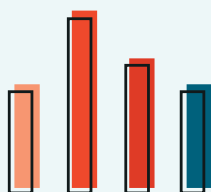


In 2022-2023, on average,
one woman died every 11 days from intimate partner homicide.¹

Almost **every Australian knows someone** who has lived or living experience with domestic, family and sexual violence.



Rates of domestic, family and sexual violence are **even higher** for **Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women.**²



Since the age of fifteen:



1 in 5
women have
experienced
sexual violence.³



1 in 16
men have
experienced
sexual violence.³

OUR OBJECTIVES



Earlier this year I delivered the first Strategic Plan for the Domestic, Family and Sexual Violence Commission.^{xi} That plan sets out the Commission’s objectives for our first 3 years of operation, informed by the Executive Order establishing the Commission^{xii} and the National Plan to End Violence against Women and Children 2022–2032.



1. Promoting the National Plan objectives to end gender-based violence and monitoring impact.



2. Amplifying the voices of people with lived and living experience for meaningful engagement in shaping policy design and service delivery.



3. Fostering collaboration and coordination across government and communities to enhance connection and reduce fragmentation to improve outcomes.



4. Providing strategic advice to inform strengthened policy and practice and improve outcomes.

HOW WE WORK



Five Principles for Action underpin the Commission’s approach to everything we do.^{xiii} They reflect the complexity of the challenges the Commission faces, and the approaches necessary to tackle them across our diverse country.

ENQUIRING

Approaching challenges and issues with curiosity and openness and using insights, evidence, expertise and knowledge to inform strategic advice

COLLABORATIVE

Partnering and facilitating coordination and connection across community sectors and government

RESPONSIVE

Maintaining flexibility to emerging issues and needs

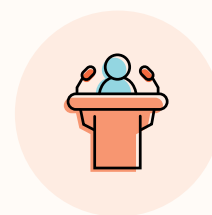
DIGNITY

Recognising our actions contribute to people being heard. Listened to and treated fairly, to being understood and feeling safe

INFLUENCE

Influencing positive change and informing priorities for policy, research and data collection

1 Promoting the National Plan objectives to end gender-based violence and monitoring impact



The Commissioner has delivered **24** presentations, with a further 5 planned for the remainder of 2023.



The Commissioner has held more than **172** stakeholder engagement meetings to listen to the voices of those with lived and living experience, as well as those who support prevention, early intervention, response, and healing and recovery.



The Commission focused its first National Roundtable on measurement, joining with **70** individuals and organisations to consider priorities for monitoring impact.

Public engagement across community, business and civil society

Promotion of the National Plan is a key element of the Commission's work. In its first year of operation, the Commission has conducted 3 national roundtables, and I have been to every state and territory to promote a national focus on domestic, family and sexual violence. At the same time, there has been a heightened public dialogue about the devastating number of women allegedly killed by current or former partners in Australia this year.

For some in our community, their experience is that it is still not safe to speak up about domestic, family and sexual violence. The National Plan correctly recognises that the increased effort and awareness generated by the National Plan "is likely to mean that the reporting of all forms of gender-based violence will increase in the short term, as individuals feel safer and supported to come forward and seek help."^{xiv}



Demand increase Snapshot

NSW	In 2022, 33,410 Domestic Violence-related assault incidents were recorded by the NSW Police Force. In the five years to December 2022, there was an increase in domestic violence-related assaults of 3.0% . ^{xv}
VIC	The number of recorded incidents by financial year grew from 75,984 in 2017–18 to 90,424 in 2021–22. ^{xvi}
TAS	Family violence incidents grew each year from 3,254 in 2015–16 to 4,225 in 2021–22, while sexual assaults grew from 240 in 2015–16 to 574 in 2021–22. ^{xvii}
NT	Domestic violence-related assault rose from 5,889 in the rolling year ending 31 August 2022 to 7,396 in the year ending 31 August 2023. Sexual assault rose from 366 to 457 in the same time period, an increase of 25.6% and 24.9% respectively. ^{xviii}
WA	In the 2022–23 financial year, family-related offences numbered 33,404, a 34.8% increase on the 5-year average (24,773.4). ^{xix}
QLD	The Queensland Police Service recorded 139,000 domestic family violence occurrences in 2021–22, an increase of nearly 48% in the last 6 years. ^{xx}
SA	In the rolling year to August 2019, 10,728 offences against person or property were characterised as Family and Domestic Abuse Related. In the rolling year to August 2023, the number was 14,886 , reflecting a 38.7% increase. ^{xxi}
ACT	Family violence related assaults in the ACT have increased by 12% in the 2022–23 financial year when compared to the 2021–22 financial year. ^{xxii}

I have heard from many specialist service organisations and police around the country – who are often the first (and sometimes only) responders for people experiencing violence. They are deeply worried about our capacity to respond to further growth in demand. However, we currently have no consistent measure of unmet need.^{xxiii}

Many of our frontline systems are under enormous pressure, often stretched beyond their capacity. Queensland's Auditor General noted this year that the "system that responds to DFV [Domestic and Family Violence] in Queensland is under pressure ... At a time when demand is increasing, there are significant gaps in the quality and coordination of responses and services. Responders lack training, are missing information or not using it, and are not adequately assessing risk." The Northern Territory Coroner has heard from Northern Territory Police that response times have increased enormously, which has had a deep impact on safety, community trust and workforce.^{xxiv}

Research on service demand by Safe and Equal in Victoria found that "within the current funding model ... [service organisations] are frequently unable to respond to the complex needs of victim survivors in a timely way. This was borne out in the data, which showed services are consistently providing services above their funded targets, there are wait times for clients to be allocated case management support and this places them at increased risk, case managers are only able to work with those clients at the highest level of risk and only for short periods of support, and these pressures are having a corrosive impact on practitioners and services."^{xxv}

This issue stretches across all forms of gender-based violence and the consequences are serious:

- for the safety of people seeking help
- for intervening early to reduce further harm and prevent significant individual and system cost
- for maintaining community trust in systems of support
- for supporting workers to have the capability and capacity to meet people's needs
- for preventing system mistakes that can have harmful consequences for those experiencing violence, such as misidentification of the person most in need.

The health system must also be adequately equipped to respond to disclosures of violence. A study by the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare shows that health practitioners are the most common professional group that women turn to for support. It remains vital that health professionals are resourced to support people effectively, and provide a response which is empathic, empowering and kind.^{xxvi}

Any work we do to amplify, extend and promote the work underway to eliminate gender-based violence needs to be accompanied by more targeted and coordinated resources for those tasked with responding to current and historical disclosures of violence.

Alongside this challenge we must, as a matter of urgency, renew a national conversation on the role and experience of men in preventing but also in responding to domestic, family and sexual violence.

Australians' understanding and attitudes regarding violence against women and gender inequality have improved slowly over time, but as the 2021 National Community Attitudes towards Violence against Women Survey (NCAS) notes: "there was no significant improvement in overall attitudes towards violence against women between 2017 and 2021, largely reflecting a plateauing of attitudinal rejection of domestic violence despite an improvement in attitudinal rejection of sexual violence since 2017."^{xxvii, xxviii}

Most concerning is the finding that even though 91% of people now agree that violence against women is a problem in Australia, only 47% think it is a problem in their own suburb or town.^{xxix}

We need to be having a national conversation that is inclusive and intersectional – so that everyone can see themselves in it – that challenges the myths and misconceptions about domestic, family and sexual violence that persist, and recognises gender-based violence as a community-wide problem that requires community-wide responsibility.^{xxx} More men need to be part of the conversation and involved in the social, cultural and attitudinal change required to end gender-based violence.

This means recognising that shame has been a poor motivator for behaviour change and that the drivers of violence and reinforcing factors are complex and multidimensional. There is more work to be done in understanding how to change behaviour.

Promoting high-quality evaluation and the sharing of knowledge

A key impediment to a clear understanding of both the context for domestic, family and sexual violence, as well as creating visibility for promising practice, is the many and complex ways in which we define and record data on domestic, family and sexual violence.

Shared definitions and mechanisms that allow policy makers, workers and the community to gain knowledge would contribute to ensuring that the goals of the National Plan are achieved. This is a key element of the National Plan, and Action 2 of the First Action Plan articulates the commitment government has made to addressing it. Whether assessing primary prevention activity, crisis responses, or men's behaviour change programs, the community expects that programs and policies will be routinely and rigorously assessed for outcomes. As with any publicly funded activity, evaluation findings must be shared with the community to ensure that we are collectively learning and strengthening our understanding and interventions.

I welcome the commitment made by governments in the First Action Plan to monitoring and reporting through the performance measurement framework and, particularly, the annual public reporting from the Department of Social Services to support accountability and transparency.

I look forward to delivery of the Performance Measurement Plan in early 2024, which will outline how governments plan to measure performance. This document, in concert with the Outcomes Framework 2023-2032 and Action Plans, will guide the Australian Government's monitoring and measurement of the actions and investments over the 10 years of the National Plan.

There is a great deal more work to do to be able to measure national outcomes with any level of comparability or consistency. It is vital that the targets, measures and data contained within this plan are robust and easily understood as contributing to the achievement of the goal to end violence against women and children in this generation.

The Commission's first National Roundtable focused on measuring impact to understand how the Commission can support the work that is underway to invest in, capture and share our learning more effectively and support the work of all parts of government under Action 2 to improve the national evidence base.

Measuring Impact Roundtable

In September 2023, the Commission co-convened with ANROWS^{xxxi} our first roundtable conversation on the role of the Commission in promoting effective measurement of the impact of the National Plan.

Measuring the impact and effectiveness of the actions taken under the National Plan to end gender-based violence is essential and must be done at multiple levels using appropriate evidence-based methods. Measurement of the impact of efforts to end gender-based violence is as complex as the challenge itself but must be prioritised.

The roundtable brought together more than 70 expert stakeholders from across the spectrum of social sector, government, business, research, people with lived experience and community. This process is designed to create avenues for connecting and sharing knowledge between different forms of expertise and stakeholders, and will be expanded as the Commission develops.

The Commission provided the Department of Social Services an opportunity to share their progress on the development of the National Plan Performance Measurement Plan with stakeholders. Once delivered, the National Plan Performance Measurement Plan will begin to drive the collective national focus for measurement.

Key insights from the roundtable stakeholders that the Commission will examine further for advice to government include:

- creating regular opportunities for reflecting on progress of the National Plan before the conclusion of the First Action Plan
- determining the critical impact questions to answer in the short and medium term
- mapping and then doing more with existing data sources and connecting data across systems
- understanding the service system experience from people with lived experience
- building workforce capability for high-quality evaluation and measuring impact.

2 Amplifying the voices of people with lived and living experience for meaningful engagement in shaping policy design and service delivery



The establishment of a Lived Experience Advisory Council (Advisory Council) is one of the key commitments in the National Plan.

In September 2023, **7 members** were directly appointed for a 6-month term by the Assistant Minister for Social Services and Assistant Minister for the Prevention of Family Violence, on recommendation from the Commission.

Between 29 August and 29 September 2023, the Commission ran an open expression of interest process, receiving more than **400 applications**. Further Advisory Council members will be appointed from this pool.

The method for selecting the Advisory Council members was developed by conducting a review of existing literature, and consulting with people with lived experience and a number of existing advisory council secretariats to develop a process that:

- reflected best practice for lived experience advisory council engagement and consultation
- provided an accessible and simple process for applicants
- ensured that a diverse range of perspectives and experiences will be reflected by the appointed council members
- was trauma informed and provided processes and supports to address the impact of exposure to traumatic material for council members and staff.

Establishing a Lived Experience Advisory Council

I am pleased to report that we have established a Lived Experience Advisory Council, as one of the key commitments made by government in the National Plan. This group of dedicated individuals each have personal experience of gender-based violence, of the systems and structures of support, and of the legal and justice system. They have all shared with us that they want to ensure that the violence they have been subject to, and the challenges they faced in seeking help and justice, are not experienced by others. They will be a powerful voice to government in focusing on the changes that matter.

People who have experiences of gender-based violence can lead the way to deeper understanding of what prevention, early intervention, response, and recovery and healing can, and needs to, look like.

Successful engagement with the Advisory Council will achieve much for both systems and individuals if we are diligent about establishing appropriate processes and mindful of a number of important principles:

- Sharing power with people with lived experience to achieve policy and system changes that will improve outcomes for people experiencing domestic, family and sexual violence.^{xxxii}
- Awareness that while working with people with experiences of violence provides significant public value, it also includes risks and challenges for the individuals involved, community and government.^{xxxiii}
- A careful and caring approach to working with people who experience trauma and a recognition that healing and recovery is ongoing for many.

Building the Lived Experience Advisory Council will be an ongoing program of work for the Commission. As a new body, there is significant thinking to be done to determine how the Advisory Council will provide insight to government departments and agencies. A key element of this will be education for governments about how to engage effectively with people with lived experience.

The Commission is committed to meaningful collaboration with people with lived experience of domestic, family and sexual violence, enabling them to play an important role in policy and system design, and monitoring.

Working with existing lived experience bodies and groups

“No two women’s or children’s experiences of violence are the same. Violence against women and children can be exacerbated in certain settings and where gender inequality intersects with other forms of disadvantage and discrimination. Violence is less visible and less understood for some groups in the community.”^{xxxiv}

– NATIONAL PLAN

The Commission is committed to finding and offering more ways to amplify the voices of groups of people who are often disproportionately impacted by gender-based violence. In particular, we seek to focus on those whose voices are often not heard and ensure that their perspectives are reflected in our strategic advice. The National Plan highlights the over-representation and diverse experiences of women and children from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island communities, women with disability, women and children from culturally diverse, migrant and refugee backgrounds, and LGBTIQ+ people.

The development of a dedicated Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Action Plan under the National Plan is an essential step forward in recognising Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people’s experiences of violence and systemic racism.

The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Action Plan calls out institutional racism and the ongoing impact of colonisation at every level of the system and recognises the task ahead in redesigning our institutions with equity and inclusion at their core. It recognises that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures and knowledge possess many of the essential components, methods and tools for healing, and the value of investing in the healing approaches of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

Australian governments commitment to truth-telling and self-determination, to place-based delivery of services, and inclusion and intersectionality are outlined in the Action Plan and indicate how government intends to work with and for First Nations people.

I will be led by, and work in partnership with, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to highlight the progress of the Australian Government on the 4 priority reforms outlined in the National Agreement on Closing the Gap, and to highlight areas where there is still work to be done.

Making the case for lived experience expertise in policy design and service delivery

Throughout the year, there has been one consistent thread through my conversations with people who want to discuss their experiences of domestic, family and sexual violence. They are passionate about advocating for change so that no one else has to experience what they have experienced. What they are driven to talk about, despite the personal costs, is the impact of the system – where it has worked and, tragically, where it has failed and harmed them. People with lived experience want to be sure the system does not harm those who seek to use it: this should be a priority for all of us.

Ensuring all governments' work is informed by people who have direct experience of gender-based violence and our systems, processes and institutional responses will be an ongoing advocacy priority for the Commission.

Our commitment is for the Lived Experience Advisory Council to become an important mechanism for government to engage with people with lived experience. However, while the Advisory Council will perform a critical role, it should not be the only avenue for government, institutions or organisations to engage with people with lived experience.

The Commission expects that all levels of government need to be deliberate about involving people who have experienced domestic, family and sexual violence in policy and practice development.

"I just want to make sure no one goes through what I have."
– SARAH, LIVED EXPERIENCE ADVOCATE

Best practice principles for engagement

The Commission contracted WhereTo Consulting to undertake developmental research to ensure we are achieving best practice in engagement with the community. Over 120 people participated in the development of our framework, including:

- 35 people with lived and living experience from across Australia (including young people, people with disability, people with experience of incarceration, people who identify as LGBTQIA+, multicultural

communities, and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples)

- 70 people who work in the women's safety sector (frontline services, peak bodies, academic and government stakeholders)
- 18 members of the public.

The completed research report *Best practice principles: Engaging people with lived and living experience* can be viewed in the Resources section of our website.

3 Fostering collaboration and coordination across government and communities to enhance connection and reduce fragmentation to improve outcomes



The Commissioner participated in the Attorney General's National roundtable on **strengthening justice responses** to sexual violence. The roundtable brought together Commonwealth, state and territory ministers to discuss with experts and victim-survivors the key challenges they face when seeking justice. The roundtable was convened to help frame the terms of reference for the Australian Law Reform Commission's Inquiry into justice responses to sexual violence.



The Commissioner participated in the Commonwealth Bank's Leadership Summit on Financial Abuse, **bringing together leaders** from business, government and the Domestic and Family Violence (DFV) sector to identify opportunities to work together to prevent and respond to financial abuse.

The systems are actually retraumatising. They're all siloed. They don't work together. I probably told my story of abuse countless times. I can't even remember how many.^{xxxv}

– NATIONAL PLAN VICTIM-SURVIVOR
ADVOCATES CONSULTATION FINAL
REPORT 2022

Creating national dialogues to build shared action

The Commission has worked to create national conversations around priorities identified in the National Plan and the Action Plans.

I have heard from many across the sector, and across governments, that they are eager to know more about what is going on in other departments, other organisations and other places. That there is learning going on everywhere, but sharing and building on that learning to create system change is difficult and slow.

I have already co-convened three national roundtable conversations to start bringing together parts of the system and sector that do not often get to speak and work together with people with lived experience.

These conversations, which are designed to cut across sectors, silos and governments, aim to build a shared understanding and approach to the problems and the solutions in domestic, family and sexual violence. These conversations are ongoing and will mature over the coming years into shared collaborative work and projects to accelerate change.

The roundtables are not simply a mechanism for input, they are part of our commitment to a genuine ongoing dialogue. A roundtable on men and healthy masculinity, exploring the social, cultural and attitudinal changes required to end gender-based violence and hold men accountable was held in November 2023. A further roundtable with a dedicated focus on responses to sexual violence practice and policy is planned for early 2024.

The Commission will work in partnership to maintain momentum and facilitate national conversations about what it will take to end gender-based violence and ensure that the input, expertise and experience brought to these conversations is translated into genuine change that the community can see.



“Too old for foster care, too young for a shelter, and the youth shelter that they offered me ... would put me out of area. Then I would have had to leave school, and my schoolteachers were the only adults in my life doing anything about what was happening to me, and had any clue about it, and it was where all my friends were, and I didn’t want to do that. I ended up couch-surfing for the last 18 months of high school, for the HSC, and it was when I was couch-surfing that I was gang raped ... If I’d had some safe housing, I wouldn’t have been gang raped.”^{xxxvi}

– NATIONAL PLAN VICTIM-SURVIVOR ADVOCATES CONSULTATION FINAL REPORT 2022

National dialogue with young advocates influencing change

There is now growing recognition and evidence that many of the systems and structures in place to support people experiencing violence are not designed for, or with, young people and that, as a result, they are failing them^{xxxvii}. The National Plan calls out the need to “recognise children in their own right” and Action 8 under the First Action Plan is to “develop and implement age appropriate, culturally safe programs across all 4 domains, informed by children and young people, that support recovery and healing from trauma, and intervene early to address violence supportive behaviours.”^{xxxviii} For those systems and structures to change, governments need to deeply listen to what young people say is needed and what is important to them.

In October 2023 the Commission co-convened with the Global Institute for Women’s Leadership Youth Committee a

roundtable conversation with more than 20 young leaders with knowledge and expertise in domestic, family and sexual violence about what they see as the priorities for system redesign and sought their advice on how young people can be engaged in that project.

Key insights from the roundtable stakeholders that the Commission will examine further in its advice to government include:

- building the capacity of young advocates with platforms and resources to amplify their voices
- co-producing new approaches and solutions with young people
- deeper engagement with young people from different marginalised communities and cohorts to understand their experiences.



On 16 March 1974, a group of Sydney feminists broke into 2 adjoining vacant houses, ‘Elsie’ and ‘Minnie’, at 73 and 75 Westmoreland Street on the Glebe Estate in Sydney. The group was led by Dr Anne Summers AO and included Jennifer Dakers, Carole Baker, Margert Power, Lina Clayton and Bessie Guthrie. Dozens of women joined them that day to break into the houses and start the massive clean-up needed to make them ready to accommodate women and children. **That day, without knowing it, they started a movement that would help save the lives of thousands of women and children across Australia.** Elsie Refuge for Women and Children was the first of what would grow to more than 800 refuges over the next half-century.^{xxxix}

Supporting and building mechanisms for collaboration across government

The policies, structures and service systems we put in place have the ability to provide enormous help for people experiencing violence, and to prevent future violence. As we approach the 50th anniversary of the opening of Elsie Refuge for Women and Children we know that there has been progress. Our understanding and responses to violence have increased and improved. As a nation, we can be proud of how far we have come.

Since they were first established, the systems and structures built by successive governments to respond to gender-based violence have grown enormously complex and, in some cases, are exacerbating the harm people experience. These systems failures are often the reason people contact the Commission. Too much harm is being caused by structures we have the ability to change.

That harm is too often the product of system complexity and a lack of integration. Domestic, family and sexual violence are rarely experienced in isolation. They intersect with health, mental health and addiction issues, and housing, financial, legal and justice system difficulties. But too often, responses to each of these challenges are treated in isolation.

We have created a system of policy and services that can be an enormous challenge for those seeking help, increase risks to their safety and create a barrier to some people seeking any help at all.^{xi}

The development of robust governance with oversight and responsibility for implementing the National Plan across governments must be a priority for all jurisdictions.



“Like I said, this tension between the state and the federal. So the state says, you must do this, you must follow this, you must do this, you’ve got to be a protective mother, you’ve got a Family Violence Protection 40 Order, fantastic, your son’s on the order, that’s great. You’re doing all the right things now. But you get to the family law jurisdiction, and all that is seen as obstructionist, okay. You’re obstructing access to the perpetrator to have access to the child. So then you’re pulled into this whole other world of family court ... So navigating the system sounds like a linear process, but it’s very complicated, and it’s very contradictory, and it’s extremely difficult.”^{xli}

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4

Providing strategic advice to inform strengthened policy and practice, and improved outcomes



The Commissioner has **contributed** to the formation of the Australian Law Reform Commission's National Inquiry into Justice Responses to Sexual Violence.



The Commissioner is a **member** of the Department of Social Services Child Support Stakeholder Advisory Group.



The Commissioner is an **observer** on the Department of Social Services National Plan Advisory Group and the Women and Women's Safety Ministerial Council.

Working with government departments and agencies

The First Action Plan under the National Plan released by the Australian Government in August this year represents the collective ambition and commitment across the Australian, state and territory governments and outlines the many activities underway. This is a complex area of policy and service delivery for the Australian Government. The First Action Plan under the National Plan identified 23 Australian Government national initiatives that intersect with gender-based violence, including in gender equality, women's health, criminal justice responses, housing and homelessness, drug and alcohol, modern slavery, mental health, and child health and protection.

The Australian Government is undertaking significant national work in areas of social policy reform and initiatives across government that are designed to prevent and respond to gender-based violence and improve gender equality, including:

- the Australian Law Reform Commission's Inquiry into justice responses to Sexual Violence
- the Attorneys-General Work Plan to Strengthen Criminal Justice Responses to Sexual Assault^{xlii}
- passage of the Family Law Amendment Bill 2023 and the Family Law Amendment (Information Sharing) Bill 2023^{xliii}
- development of a National Strategy to Achieve Gender Equality^{xliv}

- introduction of National Principles to Address Coercive Control in Family and Domestic Violence^{xlv}
- legislating 10 days of paid family and domestic violence leave entitlement^{xlvi}
- investment in Consent and Respectful Relationships Education^{xlvii}
- changes to social security programs, including the extension of the Escaping Violence Payment Trial and the Temporary Visa Holders Experiencing Violence Pilot, and changes to the Parenting Payment Single and the end of the Parents Next program^{xlviii}
- expansion of the Primary Health Network Pilots program^{xlix}
- introduction of the Housing Australia Future Fundⁱ
- introduction of Migration Regulations 199 – Specification of evidentiary requirements – family violence, to change evidence requirements for victims of family violence on temporary visasⁱⁱ
- reporting from the Women’s Economic Equality Taskforce.ⁱⁱⁱ

Government action to address gender-based violence is a complex and interdependent area of policy and practice, and there is extensive work underway to embed better policy and practice. In addition to this work by the Australian Government and its agencies, there are now more than 26 strategies and action plans in place across the states and territories.^{liv} I have heard from stakeholders that a great deal of the innovation in service design and delivery is being done by state and territory governments and by their partners in the community sector. One of the consistent requests I have heard from the community is to “please slow things down”. The volume and speed with which reform is occurring in some parts of the system is placing significant

burden on those who need to contribute to consultation processes – often without the resources to do so – we must be sure this speed does not create risk of harm.

The Department of Social Services continues to work with state and territory governments to develop the governance structures for enacting the National Plan. As outlined in the First Action Plan, this governance structure includes a series of jurisdictional and subject-specific working groups, a Women and Women’s Safety Ministerial Council Senior Officials group (WWSMCSO) and advice and consultation committees. I anticipate that this governance structure will grow to support the implementation of the National Plan and I will continue to work with the Department of Social Services and the Office for Women in the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet to support their work on governance to ensure that there is timely information sharing and decision-making.

As the work of the Commission grows, we are building productive relationships with government departments and agencies at all levels to provide avenues of sharing knowledge and promoting lived experience during policy development processes and program implementation.

The Commission will provide advice and support to all governments as they undertake this valuable work and will monitor the progress of the implementation of the National Plan and First Action Plan to ensure work is evidence-based.



There was nothing in that process or system that felt affirming or healing at all to me ... it was a very traumatic experience and I feel like I’d love to see some reform happen in the criminal legal space just so that we can save other women that sort of trauma.^{lviii}

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Reporting to Parliament on progress towards the objectives of the National Plan

Six national-level targets have been agreed in the National Plan:

1

25% reduction per year in female intimate partner homicide – based on the Australian Institute of Criminology National Homicide Monitoring Program.

2

2-point increase in knowledge of behaviours that constitute family, domestic and sexual violence – measured by the mean Understanding Violence Against Women Scale (UVAWS) score on the National Community Attitudes Survey (NCAS).

3

2-point increase in the mean AVAWS scores every 4 years in attitudes that condemn violence against women – measured by the mean Attitudes to Violence Against Women (AVAWS) scores on the NCAS.

4

2-point increase in attitudes that reject gender inequality – measured by the mean Attitudes to Gender Inequality Score (AGIS) scores on the NCAS.

5

2-point increase in the rejection of sexual violence – measured by the mean Sexual Violence Scale (SVS) scores on the NCAS.

6

Closing the Gap Target 13 – By 2031, the rate of all forms of family violence and abuse against Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women and children is reduced at least by 50%, as progress towards zero.

These are important targets. However, only the first of these targets can be reported annually.

Our next opportunity to understand progress on these targets will be with the release of the next NCAS report, due in 2026. In the case of Closing the Gap Target 13, there is not yet any available data.

We cannot wait until the First Action Plan is complete to assess its impact. Government must track progress within the timespan of the First Action Plan to ensure that every investment of money, time and focus keeps us on the trajectory to meet our aims.

All governments have made a commitment to contributing to increasing the amount and quality of data available to support the measurement of the National Plan and the First Action Plan. As part of this commitment, governments must develop a much clearer picture and oversight of the investment and funding across all levels of government, portfolios and agencies in relation to domestic, family and sexual violence to ensure continuity and the long-term growth and development of system responses.

The role of the Commission is to promote and support a coordinated approach to the work of all governments in monitoring and evaluating the effectiveness of their activity. This has the potential to accelerate our collective impact as we learn across portfolios, jurisdictions and the broader community.



I think you do need to have the numbers, but you've got to make sure that they're the right kind of numbers that you're actually measuring, what actually makes a difference in people's lives. And then also hear the stories so that you actually get the why or what's behind the numbers. I think that's important.^{lv}

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OUR YEARLY REPORT TO PARLIAMENT: WHAT TO EXPECT



As Domestic, Family and Sexual Violence Commissioner, my role is to promote an evidence-based approach to measuring the success and impact of the National Plan.

This means ensuring that the best evidence available from all critical sources is considered and incorporated into our evaluation of the actions taken to implement the National Plan. These evidence sources include:

- the voices of people with lived experience of domestic, family and sexual violence
- practitioner and organisational knowledge and expertise
- administrative, organisational and other forms of data
- academic research
- normal evaluation outcomes.

As noted above, I welcome the Department of Social Services' commitment in the First Action Plan to develop and deliver a Performance Measurement Plan in early 2024 to monitor and assess progress towards the changes the National Plan aims to achieve.

I anticipate that once complete, the Performance Measurement Plan will provide a critical foundation for the Department of Social Services and other relevant departments and agencies to monitor and report publicly on progress in annual reports. It will also support those agencies in providing input to our Yearly Report to Parliament, including any documentation and data that will help inform our independent assessment of progress.

While such input from agencies will be a crucial source of evidence for our Yearly Report to Parliament, it is clear to me from the extensive engagement I have undertaken around Australia this year that just as the project of ending gender-based violence in this country involves everyone, so too does reflecting on our progress towards that goal.

The deep understanding of the problems, knowledge of what works, and the impact of how laws, policies and services are implemented is not held by one person, organisation or government. This knowledge is held by many people in various places around the country, in different organisations and with varying levels of access to decision-makers.

This is why the Australian community can expect that our Yearly Report to Parliament will provide an independent perspective on Government's progress towards the National Plan's objectives by reviewing and reflecting on agencies' input on their progress in the context of our own understanding and expertise, along with the reflections and knowledge of those with lived experience and those working in the sector.

Our first Yearly Report to Parliament – 2024

Action 2 in the first National Action commits to improving the national evidence base by working towards consistent terminology and monitoring and evaluation frameworks, and by strengthening the collection and sharing of data and evidence.

As this work progresses, I anticipate that in its first years, our Yearly Report to Parliament will be more dependent on qualitative input. This input will be obtained from the stakeholder groups outlined in our Strategic Plan, using the engagement mechanisms set out in that plan, including:

- direct consultation, forums and roundtable consultations with people with experience of domestic, family and sexual violence
- inter-departmental committees and other working groups, forums and roundtable consultations with Commonwealth, state and territory departments and agencies
- targeted forums and roundtables
- consultations with domestic, family and sexual violence sector stakeholders, research organisations and researchers, businesses and community, other oversight bodies and commissions, and international organisations and bodies with a domestic, family and sexual violence focus.

By putting lived experience side-by-side with data, research and knowledge, our Yearly Report to Parliament will hold the space for learning, sharing and critical reflection on progress towards the National Plan objectives.

It will champion good practice in engaging with people with lived experience.

It will shine a light on examples of positive collaboration, system integration and shared governance.

It will reflect community expectations and hold us and all Australian governments accountable to the commitments made in the National Plan to end Violence against Women and Children 2022–2032.

It is tempting to imagine that there are simple causes and solutions to this issue, but the reality is that there are not. The task of governments and communities remains large, complex and nuanced. Our best efforts will come in the work we do towards our shared objective: the elimination of violence against women and children in our country.

As the measurement of data by government agencies matures over time, our reporting to Parliament will draw on quantitative measures of impact reported by agencies or other stakeholders.

Our advice will be constructive, acknowledging our shared commitment to genuine change. It will assist government to ensure that its investment is appropriate, and to be confident that the National Plan is making a difference.

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