

12 January 2024

The Hon Stephen Jones MP
Assistant Treasurer and Minister for Financial Services
By Email: PreBudgetSubmissions@treasury.gov.au

Submitted: online

Dear Minister

Budget 2024-2025 – public consultation – pre-Budget submissions

Thank you for the opportunity to make a submission on priorities for the 2024-2025 Federal Budget.

We note the ground-breaking work undertaken in 2023 to establish a national well-being framework and welcome the Government's attention to this important concept, and the recognition of relationships as being *integral to the human experience*¹. In that context, Relationships Australia is grateful for the opportunity to make a number of recommendations (summarised in section 2, below) that we consider as critical opportunities for the 2024-25 Budget to prioritise the well-being of Australians by funding a range of services and supports for relationships across the life-course.

1. The work of Relationships Australia

Relationships Australia is a federation of community-based, not-for-profit organisations with no religious affiliations. Our services are for all members of the community, regardless of religious belief, age, gender, sexual orientation, lifestyle choice, cultural background or economic circumstances.

Relationships Australia provides a range of services, including counselling, dispute resolution, children's services, services for victims and perpetrators of family violence, services for older people, and relationship and professional education. We aim to support all people in Australia to live with positive and respectful relationships, and believe that people have the capacity to change how they relate to others.

Relationships Australia has provided family relationships services for 75 years. Our State and Territory organisations, along with our consortium partners, operate approximately one third of the Family Relationship Centres (FRCs) across the country. In addition, Relationships Australia Queensland operates the national Family Relationships Advice Line and the Telephone Dispute Resolution Service.

The core of our work is relationships – through our programs, we work with people to enhance not only family relationships, but also relationships with friends, colleagues, and across communities.

Relationships Australia believes that violence, coercion, control and inequality are unacceptable.

We respect the rights of all people to live life fully within their families and communities with dignity and safety, and to enjoy healthy relationships. These principles underpin our work.

¹ Measuring What Matters, p55

Relationships Australia is committed to:

- Working in rural, regional and remote areas, recognising that there are fewer resources available to people in these areas, and that they live with pressures, complexities and uncertainties not experienced by those living in cities.
- Collaboration. We work collectively with local and peak body organisations to deliver a spectrum of prevention, early and tertiary intervention programs across generations and with men, women, young people and children. We recognise that often a complex suite of supports (for example, family support programs, mental health services, gambling services, drug and alcohol services, and public housing) is needed by people affected by family violence and other complexities in relationships.
- Enriching family relationships, including providing support to parents, and encouraging good and respectful communication.
- Ensuring that social and financial disadvantage is not a barrier to accessing services.
- Contributing practice evidence and skills to research projects, the development of public policy and the provision of effective services.

This submission draws upon:

- our lengthy experience in delivering diverse programs
- evidence-based programs and research, and
- our leadership and policy development experience.

The Commonwealth funds Relationships Australia to deliver a range of support services. These funds are administered by the Department of Social Services and the Attorney-General's Department, through the Families and Children Activity and Family Law Services Programs respectively.

2. Budget Priorities 2024-2025

This submission makes the following recommendations for Commonwealth funding priorities in the 2024-2025 Budget:

Ensuring the availability of services for all Australians (section 3)

Recommendation 1

Relationships Australia urges the Commonwealth to increase base level funding for a range of services aimed at supporting Australians and their relationships, to meet the increased demand arising from the COVID-19 pandemic, cost of living and other external pressures, now and into the future.

Priority funding areas for families (section 4)

Recommendation 2

To complement the Government's other measures in support of the National Plan to End Violence against Women and Children, Relationships Australia recommends dedicated funding to

enable research, evaluation and a national roll-out of primary and secondary family violence prevention and intervention services tailored to men and boys.

Recommendation 3

We urge the Commonwealth to dedicate sufficient funding to establish and maintain a public education campaign to raise awareness of the *Family Law Amendment Act 2023 (Cth)*, and Family Law Amendment Bill (No. 2) 2023, including by dedicating sufficient resources to existing service providers to ensure adequate dissemination of information across communities.

Recommendation 4

We urge the Commonwealth to initiate an evaluation of the impact of repealing section 61DA of the *Family Law Act 1975 (Cth)*.

Critical support for people with disability (section 5)

Recommendation 5

Relationships Australia urges the Government to dedicate ongoing funding beyond the cessation of the Royal Commission, and over the Forward Estimates, to support the continuation of holistic counselling and support services for people with disability, to ensure that people with disability are able to receive much-needed ongoing support into the future.

Eliminating the abuse and neglect of older people (section 6)

Recommendation 6

Relationships Australia urges the Government to commit resources to the implementation of a new plan to end abuse and neglect of older people, at a scale and with the priority that adequately reflects the prevalence of abuse and neglect within Australia.

Recommendation 7

Relationships Australia encourages the Commonwealth to commission further research on the nature and prevalence of abuse and neglect of older people, explicitly investigating the experiences of people with cognitive impairment and those of older people residing in institutional premises.

Recommendation 8

- (a) Relationships Australia urges the Commonwealth to fund a national rollout of services to help older people at risk of, or experiencing, abuse or neglect, that is proportionate to prevalence.
- (b) The rollout of services should be concurrent with an evaluation and data collection framework to enable Commonwealth, state and territory governments to build a robust evidence base.

Recommendation 9

That the Government take decisive action against ageism in Australia, by noting that older persons are one cohort which does not have the benefit of a specialised treaty articulating their rights, and:

- expressing its support for and commit to working towards the adoption of a United Nations Convention on the Human Rights of Older Persons
- ensuring the involvement of civil society organisations in the drafting, designing and negotiation of the instrument, particularly organisations that represent older persons and diverse communities of older persons
- engaging with the Human Rights Council, and the Open-ended Working Group on Ageing and other relevant bodies, to urgently move forward the agenda for drafting and adoption of a new treaty on the human rights of older persons, and
- supporting the Australian Human Rights Commission's involvement in the discussion concerning a future convention on the rights of the older persons, both at the international and at the domestic level.²

Recommendation 10

Relationships Australia urges the Government to dedicate resources to accelerate work on harmonisation of laws about enduring powers of attorney as a necessary prerequisite to developing a national register.

Addressing Loneliness in Australia (section 7)

Recommendation 11

Relationships Australia urges the Commonwealth to fund the expansion and evaluation of a community campaign to raise awareness about loneliness and to empower all Australians to build sustainable and respectful relationships.

Recommendation 12

Relationships Australia recommends that the Commonwealth fund a range of policy and programme efforts to close the digital divide to eradicate barriers to participation in the social, economic, political and cultural dimensions of the digital environment ('digital participation').

3. Current pressures impacting relationships in Australia

The impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic are, and will continue to be, felt across all sections of society; and the challenges for Australian families, individuals and the community more broadly have never been greater.

² See <http://www.rightsofolderpersons.org.au/>

COVID-19, a number of local, national and international events, the increased cost of living and housing unaffordability, have exacerbated existing vulnerabilities and stressors, including for families affected by family and domestic violence. Mental health challenges, vulnerability to addiction, social isolation, and relationship breakdown are symptoms of these pressures, all of which are becoming increasingly present in our clients (often in combination of two or more) and reflect a growing risk for Australian communities.

In November 2022, Relationships Australia launched the Relationship Indicators study, which provides a nationally representative snapshot of the state of relationships in Australia. Key findings from that study demonstrate the ongoing pressures impacting relationships across the country, including that:

- 22.1% of Australians experience mental health issues as a pressure on their relationships; and
- 20% indicated that money problems had placed pressure on their relationships.³

Relationships Australia recognises that these issues will have a continuing impact on people's relationships, resulting in a critical need to ensure ongoing universal services, as well as tailored and specialised services for those at risk.

Increased client demand – volume

Since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, there have been increases in demand for our services across the country. While this has manifested itself differently depending on characteristics of particular communities, our members have identified increases in client demand across a range of programs and services.

Demand is evidenced by increases in the numbers of clients on Relationships Australia service waitlists, the increased waiting time for access to services, and overall increase in numbers of clients seeking services.

Increased client demand – intensity and duration

In addition to the increased demand for services, our members have identified an increase in complexity and intensity of client needs. This manifests in a variety of different ways, including increases in the average number of sessions per client and increases to overall service delivery, among others.

Relationships Australia Members have identified a number of common trends that have arisen during the delivery of services to clients. These include:

- Consistent increases in the number of clients experiencing and seeking help in relation to domestic and family violence.
- Need for increased support for separating / separated families in relation to parenting matters – this was particularly acute when Children's Contact Services were very briefly closed during the early stages of the pandemic as we assessed how to achieve safety for children in delivering services online.
- Increased concern for children's safety, well-being, development and mental health.
- Increased reports of anxiety, depression and mental ill-health in clients of all ages.

³ For more information about these and other findings, see <https://relationships.org.au/relationship-indicators/>

- Increases in presentations for family / relationship stress and breakdown – including impacts on wider family units.

Ensuring the availability of services for all Australians

Relationships will be a crucial foundation from which society is able to withstand this challenging time and, importantly, to thrive over the coming years.

To ensure support for healthy and safe relationships, it is essential that due attention be paid to the ongoing needs of individuals, families and communities. As the country continues to experience a range of pressures and challenges, healthy and safe relationships assist people to manage uncertainty, build resilience, and thrive into the future.

At the same time, as indicated above, there is a clear need to ensure relationships receive adequate levels of appropriate support to navigate and respond to external pressures.

For this to occur, secure and adequate funding must be maintained for the dedicated community organisations that serve our communities. This requires an ongoing commitment from the Commonwealth.

Relationships Australia therefore warmly welcomed the Government’s announcement in the October 2022 budget of a dedicated supplementation of funding under the “Supporting Community Organisations” initiative, and its subsequent announcement in the May 2023 budget of efforts to improve the methodology for indexation applied to community grants. These initiatives go some way towards ensuring that community organisations are able to meet the increased cost of providing services.

Notwithstanding the above, we note that our services have received no meaningful or consistent increase in funding over the past decade to support additional resourcing required to meet the growing demand referred to above.

While funding designed to assist in meeting the increased costs of providing services is welcome, it should not be viewed as a solution to the growing demand for services necessitated by the increasingly complex pressures faced by our communities.

For this reason, Relationships Australia urges the Government to consider an additional and ongoing injection of funding nationally to ensure that community organisations are able to meet the increased demand for services and extend the reach of support to those in Australia who need it most.

Recommendation 1

Relationships Australia urges the Commonwealth to increase base level funding for a range of services aimed at supporting Australians and their relationships, to meet the increased demand arising from the COVID-19 pandemic, cost of living and other external pressures, now and into the future.

4. Priority funding areas for families

Relationships Australia welcomes the Government’s continuing focus on enhancing support for families, including improvements to the Family Law System. We eagerly anticipate future developments in this work. We anticipate that this will build on recent developments in this area noting; in particular, the recently passed *Family Law Amendment Act 2023 (Cth)*, and subsequently introduced Family Law Amendment Bill (No. 2) 2023, the recently completed evaluation of Children’s Contact Services (CCS)

and the ongoing review of the Family Relationships Services Program (FRSP). We are confident that these initiatives will, among other key improvements, support efforts to centre the rights and well-being of children in the Family Law System.

Funding to support the eradication of violence against women and children

Relationships Australia considers this to be a critical opportunity to consolidate and expand on the Government's plan to end violence against women and children within a generation, and looks forward to additional funding to support the community sector's vital role in this area. In particular, we note the need for adequate resourcing to give effect to both the first Action Plan and the dedicated Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Action Plan under the National Plan to End Violence against Women and Children.

Recommendation 2

To complement the Government's other measures in support of the National Plan to End Violence against Women and Children, Relationships Australia recommends dedicated funding to enable research, evaluation and a national roll-out of primary and secondary family violence prevention and intervention services tailored to men and boys.

Funding to support implementation of family law reforms

Relationships Australia has welcomed several recent Government initiatives focused on supporting the rights and well-being of children and young people; in particular, the amendments contained in the recently-passed *Family Law Amendment Act 2023 (Cth)*, and subsequently introduced Family Law Amendment Bill (No. 2) 2023.

For the amendments to fully achieve their aims, they must be buttressed by large scale, clear and ongoing public education campaigns to inform the community, users of the family law system, and professionals working in and adjacent to that system of the intention and nature of the reforms. Critically, this includes law enforcement professionals, professionals working in state and territory family violence and child protection system, and professionals in the education and health care systems.

The reforms will not succeed in their stated objectives without such education. We saw with the (now repealed) statutory presumption of equal shared parenting responsibility, for example, how easily the Family Law Act is mythologised and how quickly those myths become intractable entrenched.

The Government should leverage, *inter alia*, the Family Law Pathways Network and the Family Relationship Centres to support information and education campaigns, including through additional funding focused on implementation. Services should be appropriately resourced to update current materials, collateral and resources which may become redundant or irrelevant as a result of the amendments.

Recommendation 3

We urge the Commonwealth to dedicate sufficient funding to establish and maintain a public education campaign to raise awareness of the *Family Law Amendment Act 2023 (Cth)*, and Family Law Amendment Bill (No. 2) 2023, including by dedicating sufficient resources to existing service providers to ensure adequate dissemination of information across communities.

Evaluation of the repeal of statutory presumption of equal shared parental responsibility

A critical component of the *Family Law Amendment Act 2023 (Cth)*, and one which Relationships Australia supported, was the repeal of the statutory presumption of shared parental responsibility. We had observed, over many years, the distorting effect of entrenched misinformation and disinformation about the nature and intended effect of the presumption. We were concerned that, among other unintended consequences, the existence of the presumption had the effect of inclining courts to make contact orders where no kind or degree of contact could be safe, and dissuading courts from making 'no contact' orders where that was, in fact, more appropriate to safeguard the safety and best interests of children.

In the context of the Government's policies to end gendered violence within a generation, and to elevate the safety of children more broadly, it is critical to gather data to test this hypothesis and ensure that ongoing law reform is evidence-based.

Recommendation 4

We urge the Commonwealth to initiate an evaluation of the impact of repealing section 61DA of the *Family Law Act 1975 (Cth)*.

5. Critical support for people with disability

Relationships Australia welcomed the report of the Royal Commission into Violence, Abuse, Neglect and Exploitation of People with Disability in September 2023 and notes the significant body of work that will now be required to implement its recommendations. For its term, Relationships Australia provided counselling and support services to people affected by the Royal Commission across eight states and territories.

During this time, we have witnessed firsthand the resilience of people with disability, in the face of a range of significant challenges faced by this community. Reflecting insights afforded by this work, Relationships Australia has undertaken a number of measures to improve accessibility and inclusion across all of its services.

It is increasingly clear that people with disability face significant challenges accessing mainstream services, and that there is a compelling need for appropriate, tailored and well-resourced services supporting people with disability. In our service delivery, we have recognised that the service requirement extends beyond counselling and includes a more intensive case management and support service, the likes of which has never previously been, and is not otherwise, available.

In December 2023, following the conclusion of the Royal Commission, funding for all dedicated support services, including those provided by Relationships Australia, ceased.

Without pre-empting Government's response to the many crucial recommendations made by the Royal Commission, we consider it to be of critical importance that services such as those provided by Relationships Australia continue into the future and that this much-needed resource for the disability community be re-instated as a matter of urgency. Relationships Australia is gravely concerned about the impact for members of this vulnerable community if such services are allowed to cease with no meaningful replacement.

Recommendation 5

Relationships Australia urges the Government to dedicate ongoing funding to support the provision of holistic counselling and support services for people with disability, to ensure that people with disability are able to receive much-needed support into the future.

Further, and in addition to addressing this immediate need, we look forward to working with Government as it considers the implementation of the various recommendations made by the Royal Commission and welcome the opportunity to contribute to meaningful and much-needed change.

6. Eliminating the abuse and neglect of older people

Noting that the National Plan to Respond to the Abuse of Older Australians (Elder Abuse) expired in 2023, and that work is underway on the development of a successor plan, Relationships Australia looks forward to working with government on the implementation of a new, ambitious plan to eliminate the scourge of elder abuse in our society.

Recommendation 6

Relationships Australia urges the Government to commit resources to the implementation of a new plan to end abuse and neglect of older people, at a scale and with the priority that adequately reflects the prevalence of abuse and neglect within Australia.

Data collection and analysis

We note the groundbreaking research conducted by the Australian Institute of Family Studies into the nature and prevalence of elder abuse, which demonstrates the nature and prevalence of this issue within the Australian community.⁴ We would encourage the Commonwealth to commission further research that investigates the experiences of people with cognitive impairment and those of older people residing in institutional premises (eg residential aged care facilities and prisons).

The vast majority of data that is currently held about prevalence of abuse of older people, both in Australia and internationally, has been collected using methodologies that explicitly *exclude* the experiences of people with cognitive impairment. The Office of the Public Advocate in Victoria has put forward a possible approach to undertaking an inclusive prevalence study.⁵

A more comprehensive prevalence study would complement the work of the Royal Commission into Aged Care Quality and Safety (which estimated prevalence of abuse in residential aged care at 39.2%)⁶, as well as the Royal Commission into Violence, Abuse, Neglect and Exploitation of People with Disability, and be of great value to the Commonwealth in its consideration of the Royal Commissions' findings and recommendations.

⁴ Qu, L., Kaspiew, R., Carson, R., Roopani, D., De Maio, J., Harvey, J., Horsfall, B. (2021). National Elder Abuse Prevalence Study: Final Report. (Research Report). Melbourne: Australian Institute of Family Studies.

⁵ Lois Bedson, *Are national elder abuse prevalence studies inclusive of the experiences of people with cognitive impairment? Findings and recommendations for future research*, Office of the Public Advocate, 2017.

⁶ That is, significantly higher than the AIFS estimate of 14.8% for older people dwelling in the community, across all sub-types within scope of the AIFS research.

Recommendation 7

Relationships Australia encourages the Commonwealth to commission further research on the nature and prevalence of abuse and neglect of older people, explicitly investigating the experiences of people with cognitive impairment and those of older people residing in institutional premises.

Funding for essential services to address elder abuse

Relationships Australia is proud of its involvement in the Commonwealth-funded Elder Abuse Services, including services across three service streams in various locations across the country. As the only provider of the “Case Management and Mediation” stream, Relationships Australia offers case management, counselling and mediation services through our offices in Western Australia, Northern Territory, Queensland, and Canberra & Region.

Addressing the abuse and neglect of an older person in a family with conflictual dynamics requires a sophisticated and integrated response to engage all family members. Our experience confirms the value of a holistic model that is tailored to our clients’ unique circumstances, including complex co-morbidities experienced by the older person, their carer/s and other family members. Such co-morbidities include past trauma, mental ill-health, a history of family and domestic violence, homelessness and substance misuse.

In delivering these services, it has become evident (as demonstrated through the AIFS study) that complexity and high level of need is widespread, and that effective responses require a combination of case coordination, mediation and counselling to reduce the risk and impact of elder abuse. Further, our experience suggests that healthy ongoing relationships are as important for the older person’s safety, well-being and recovery as the immediate response to the circumstances leading to their abuse. Accordingly, effective resolution of these matters requires a focus on relationships, with a view to exploring and resetting relationship dynamics, and empowering individuals with the necessary skills to overcome conflictual dynamics post service and/or legal intervention.

Recommendation 8

- (a) Relationships Australia urges the Commonwealth to fund a national rollout of services to help older people at risk of, or experiencing, abuse or neglect, that is proportionate to prevalence.
- (b) The rollout of services should be concurrent with an evaluation and data collection framework to enable Commonwealth, state and territory governments to build a robust evidence base.

International convention on the rights of older people

We urge the Commonwealth to support an international convention on the rights of older people. The current legislative arrangements at the federal and state/territory levels do not, in our view, provide either an adequate rights-based foundation for laws to prevent, deter, detect and remedy abuse of older people, or even to catalyse a robust conversation about pervasive ageism in our society and its institutions.

Ageism devalues, others and segregates the older people of our community.⁷ Ageism has licensed the continued failure, over many years, to implement recommendations for reform emerging from a succession of reviews and inquiries prompted by intermittent exposure of scandalous mistreatment of vulnerable older people.⁸

The human rights of older people in Australia are rendered more precarious by the longstanding refusal of Australia Governments, across party political lines, to support an international covenant on the rights of older people. This does not appear to have a principled basis. Suggestions have been made that older people's rights receive adequate protection through:

- the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights
- the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights
- the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women
- the Convention Against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment
- the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, and
- the *Age Discrimination Act 2004* (Cth).

It is no longer plausible to contend that the rights of older people in Australia receive protection and vindication from these arrangements. They have not stopped the egregious and deplorable human rights violations exposed, for example, during the Royal Commission into Aged Care Quality and Safety.

Our final observation in this regard is that we consider an international convention on the rights of older people also to be vitally important in publicly valuing those who provide unpaid care and paid services to older people. There is ample evidence demonstrating the links between the well-being of carers and the well-being of those for whom they care; we therefore consider that the caring dyad must be consistently front of mind. This might play out, for example, in implementing the investment stream, proposed by the Royal Commission, by funding home modifications, assistive technology, respite care and social supports to support the capacity of the carer to stay at home and continue to care for their loved one while maintaining their own physical and mental health and well-being. We note that AIFS identified physical health problems as the most common issue experienced by perpetrators of neglect of older people.

Recommendation 9

That the Government take decisive action against ageism in Australia, by noting that older persons are one cohort which does not have the benefit of a specialised treaty articulating their rights, and:

- expressing its support for and commit to working towards the adoption of a United Nations Convention on the Human Rights of Older Persons
- ensuring the involvement of civil society organisations in the drafting, designing and negotiation of the instrument, particularly organisations that represent older persons and diverse communities of older persons

⁷ See Australian Human Rights Commission (2021). What's age got to do with it? A snapshot of ageism across the Australian lifespan, September 2021.

⁸ For an overview of major reviews and inquiries into the Australian aged care system, see Background Paper 8, *A History of Aged Care Reviews*, published by the Royal Commission, October 2019. See also the testimony of Professor R Paterson to the Royal Commission, in which he expressed disappointment about the lack of implementation of recommendations made in the Carnell-Paterson Report.

- engaging with the Human Rights Council, and the Open-ended Working Group on Ageing and other relevant bodies, to urgently move forward the agenda for drafting and adoption of a new treaty on the human rights of older persons, and
- supporting the Australian Human Rights Commission's involvement in the discussion concerning a future convention on the rights of the older persons, both at the international and at the domestic level.⁹

Harmonisation of laws about enduring powers of attorney

A further critical action for the protection of older people, and others with impaired decision making capacity, is the long-overdue harmonisation of laws about enduring powers of attorney, and the eventual implementation of a national register.

This has been on the agenda for Attorneys-General since at least 2017. There is general agreement by Attorneys-General that both harmonisation and a national register are urgently needed (including as safeguards against financial abuse), but work on this crucial issue appears to consistently slip down the priority list.

For this reason, we welcomed the opportunity in November 2023 to contribute to the Attorney-General's Department consultation: "Achieving greater consistency in laws for financial enduring powers of attorney".

We look forward to seeing this important work continue as a priority focus for the 2024-25 financial year.

Recommendation 10

Relationships Australia urges the Government to dedicate resources to accelerate work on harmonisation of laws about enduring powers of attorney, as a necessary prerequisite to developing a national register.

7. Addressing loneliness in Australia

The need for action on loneliness

Loneliness is a complex social problem and a public health concern. Like poverty, it should be considered to be a social determinant of health in its own right. It stems from dissatisfaction with our relationships, a lack of positive and respectful relationships, or both of these. It is often caused by experiences of exclusion due to structural and systemic social realities that form obstacles to participation in social, economic, cultural and political life. As a public health concern (Heinrich & Gullone, 2006; Holt-Lunstad et al, 2015; Mance, 2018; AIHW, 2019), loneliness has been linked to physical health risks such as being equivalent to smoking 15 cigarettes a day and an increased risk of heart disease (Valtorta, 2016). Loneliness is a precursor to poorer mental health outcomes, including increased suicidality (Calati et al, 2019; McClelland et al, 2020; Mushtaq, 2014).¹⁰

⁹ See <http://www.rightsofoldersons.org.au/>

¹⁰ The campaign Ending Loneliness Together has released a guide that explains how community organisations can use validated scales to measure loneliness: https://endingloneliness.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/AGuideto-Measuring-Loneliness-for-Community-Organisations_Ending-Loneliness-Together.pdf

Relationships Australia serves many cohorts who are disproportionately more likely to experience systemic and structural barriers to participation in Australian social, cultural, political and economic life and, as a result, are at heightened risk of loneliness which both compounds, and is compounded by, socio-economic disadvantage and poor physical and mental health. These cohorts (membership of which overlaps for many) include:

- First Nations people
- people with disability
- people who come from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds
- people affected by complex grief and trauma, intersecting disadvantage and polyvictimisation
- people living with intergenerational trauma
- survivors of all forms of abuse, including institutional abuse
- people experiencing mental ill-health
- people experiencing homelessness or housing precarity
- people who identify as members of the LGBTIQ+ communities, and
- younger and older people.

None of these circumstances, experiences and positionalities exist at the level of an individual or family. They become barriers to full enjoyment of human rights and full participation in economic, cultural, and social life through the operation of broader systemic and structural factors including:

- legal, political and bureaucratic frameworks
- beliefs and expectations that are reflected in decision-making structures (such as legislatures, courts and tribunals)
- policy settings that inform programme administration, and
- biases or prejudices that persist across society and that are reflected in media and entertainment.

Relationships Australia has a particular interest in isolation and loneliness. We are invested in supporting respectful and sustainable relationships not only within families, but within and across communities. Relationships Australia is uniquely positioned to speak on isolation and loneliness as we have clinical experience supporting clients who experience loneliness. We have conducted pioneering research into who experiences loneliness (eg Mance, 2018), and manage a social connection campaign, Neighbours Every Day,¹¹ which supports people to create connections which combat loneliness.

A recent economic evaluation conducted by the University of Queensland and the Australian National University¹² found that the Neighbours Every Day campaign reduces loneliness and increases quality of life for participants. The analysis measured cost effectiveness of the campaign, per quality adjusted life years (QALYs). It identified that the campaign has an average incremental cost effectiveness ratio of \$4,667 per QALY. Estimates project that the Government is willing to pay as much as \$28,033 per QALY for health interventions that benefit quality of life. The cost of the Neighbours Every Day campaign therefore compares very favourably, making it a cost-effective option for improving the health and relationships of Australians.¹³

¹¹ Neighbours Every Day is a celebration of community, encouraging people to connect with their neighbours. Neighbours matter (whether near, far, or online); see <https://neighbourseveryday.org/>

¹² Beilby, H., Spinks, J. & Cruwys, T. (2023). Neighbour Day Cost-Effectiveness Evaluation. The University of Queensland & Australian National University.

¹³ The analysis used data from previous Neighbour Day evaluations conducted by the Australian National University, and the nationally representative HILDA survey, to model the impact of Neighbour Day participation in terms of costs and outcomes.

Relationships Australia is also a founding member of Ending Loneliness Together.¹⁴ In our clinical practice and our advocacy, we apply a social model of loneliness which recognises systemic and structural barriers that inhibit people from making fulfilling social connections and from participating as fully as they would wish in all facets of our community.

Developing a community awareness and education campaign

Relationships Australia notes recent focus on the need for public policy to address loneliness, and a greater understanding of its consequences in particular for older Australians, as evidenced by the inclusion of Recommendation 33 in the final report of the Royal Commission into Aged Care Quality and Safety, and the December 2021 report by the Australian Institute of Family Studies into the prevalence and nature of elder abuse.¹⁵

We welcome the growing attention paid to the ill-effects of loneliness in our society, and note also that loneliness can, and does, affect anyone, at any age and across the life course.¹⁶

Since 2013, Relationships Australia has been the custodian of Neighbours Every Day, a campaign which promotes social connection and respectful relationships among neighbourhoods and communities.¹⁷

The primary purpose of Neighbours Every Day is to equip and empower individuals to build sustainable, respectful relationships with those around them. Research conducted by the Australian National University over a number of years has demonstrated the value of this campaign. The campaign fosters connection and belonging increasing individuals' mental well-being and reducing feelings of loneliness for those who participate.

Relationships Australia's Neighbours Every Day is an evidence-based campaign aimed at reducing loneliness by raising awareness and, importantly, providing tools to combat social isolation. With adequate resourcing, we are confident that Neighbours Every Day could be scaled to reach a greater number of Australians, in all communities and at all stages of the life course.

Recommendation 11

Relationships Australia urges the Commonwealth to fund the expansion and evaluation of a community campaign to raise awareness about loneliness and to empower all Australians to build sustainable and respectful relationships.

Digital inclusion, social inclusion and loneliness

As our social, economic and cultural lives increasingly move online – a move accelerated markedly through the COVID-19 pandemic - digital exclusion will lead to increased isolation and loneliness, with their attendant morbidities, for those facing digital exclusion.

¹⁴ For more information, see <https://endingloneliness.com.au/>

¹⁵ Qu, L., Kaspiew, R., Carson, R., Roopani, D., De Maio, J., Harvey, J., Horsfall, B. (2021). National Elder Abuse Prevalence Study: Final Report. (Research Report). Melbourne: Australian Institute of Family Studies.

¹⁶ See, for example, Mance, 2018.

¹⁷ For more information visit <https://neighbourseveryday.org>

Research indicates that digital exclusion is strongly affected by a range of demographic and other factors which erect barriers to social inclusion more broadly (see, eg, Park, 2017). Thus, digital exclusion and social exclusion (which can lead to loneliness) are associated. Loneliness is a complex social problem stemming from dissatisfaction with our relationships, a lack of positive and respectful relationships, or both of these. It is often caused by experiences of exclusion, due to structural and systemic social realities that form obstacles to participation in social, economic, cultural and political life.

Mental health and suicide prevention are cross-cutting issues, and require policy makers across all portfolios and agencies to take into account potential impacts on mental health, including impacts caused by digital exclusion and limited access to decision-making rights.

Relationships Australia considers that to address loneliness, we must address the structural and social barriers which inhibit participation and connection - digital exclusion is one of these barriers. The *Australian Digital Inclusion Index 2023* identified that highly excluded Australians are most likely to have a disability (24.5% highly excluded), live in public housing (28.2% highly excluded), have not completed secondary school (32.5% highly excluded), or be over 75 years of age (42.3% highly excluded).¹⁸

Relationships Australia is concerned that, despite improvements achieved in recent years, some 23.6% of the national population remain excluded or highly excluded in 2023.¹⁹

Recommendation 12

Relationships Australia recommends that the Commonwealth fund a range of policy and programme efforts to close the digital divide to eradicate barriers to participation in the social, economic, political and cultural dimensions of the digital environment ('digital participation').

8. Concluding remarks

Thank you again for the opportunity to make this pre-Budget submission. Should you require any clarification of any aspect of this submission, or would like further information on the services that Relationships Australia provides, please contact me or Dr Susan Cochrane, National Policy Manager, Relationships Australia, on (02) 6162 9301.

Yours sincerely,



Nick Tebbey
National Executive Officer

¹⁸ Thomas, J., McCosker, A., Parkinson, S., Hegarty, K., Featherstone, D., Kennedy, J., Holcombe-James, I., Ormond-Parker, L., & Ganley, L. (2023). *Measuring Australia's Digital Divide: Australian Digital Inclusion Index: 2023*. Melbourne: ARC Centre of Excellence for Automated Decision-Making and Society, RMIT University, Swinburne University of Technology, and Telstra. <https://www.digitalinclusionindex.org.au/digital-inclusion-the-australian-context-in-2023/> [accessed 9 January 2024].

¹⁹ Ibid.