

27 January 2023

The Hon Stephen Jones MP
Assistant Treasurer and Minister for Financial Services

Submitted: online

Dear Minister

Budget 2023-2024 – public consultation – pre-Budget submissions

Thank you for the opportunity to make a submission on priorities for the 2023-2024 Federal Budget. We note the ground-breaking work currently underway to establish a national well-being budget and welcome the government's attention to this important concept. We are separately preparing a submission to the consultation concerning that work.

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.

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 2023-2024

This submission makes the following recommendations for Commonwealth funding priorities in the 2023-2024 Budget:

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

Recommendation 1

Relationships Australia urges the Government to make an ongoing commitment to appropriate indexation across the Forward Estimates, to ensure that the community sector receives proper indexation to meet the rising costs of inflation and providing services generally.

Recommendation 2

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

Priority funding areas for families (section 4)

Recommendation 3

Without limiting 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 intervention services tailored to men and boys.

Recommendation 4

We urge the Commonwealth to work with the sector to implement ALRC recommendations 57-60 (inclusive). We consider that enhancements are urgently needed to build capacity within, and expand the functions of, the Family Advocacy and Support Services and Family Relationships Centres, as recommended by the Australian Law Reform Commission.

Eliminating the abuse and neglect of older people (section 5)

Recommendation 5

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

Recommendation 6

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 7

- (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 8

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.¹

Recommendation 9

Relationships Australia urges the Government to dedicate resources to accelerate the implementation of a national register of enduring powers of attorney.

Critical support for people with disability (section 6)

Recommendation 10

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.

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.

¹ See <http://www.rightsofolderpersons.org.au/>

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.

COVID-19, in combination with a number of local, national and international events, has exacerbated existing vulnerabilities and stressors, including for families affected by family and domestic violence. Prominent among those pressures have been increases in cost-of-living and the resulting challenges for people living in Australia. 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.²

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.

² For more information about these and other findings, see <https://relationships.org.au/relationship-indicators/>

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.
- 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 focus on thriving 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. This supplementation, together with indexation, will go some way towards ensuring that community organisations are able to meet the increased cost of providing services.

Recommendation 1

Relationships Australia urges the Government to make an ongoing commitment to appropriate indexation across the Forward Estimates, to ensure that the community sector receives proper indexation to meet the rising costs of inflation and providing services generally.

In addition to the above, we note that our services have received no meaningful or consistent increase in funding over the past decade to support additional resourcing needs in the face of 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 problems 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 2

Relationships Australia urges the Commonwealth to increase base level funding to a range of services aimed at supporting Australians and their relationships, to meet the increased demand arising from the COVID-19 pandemic 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:

- increased focus on family violence within the Family Law System and recognition of the need for expert, trauma-informed and DFV-informed support for families experiencing family violence
- centring the rights and well-being of children in the Family Law System
- national roll-out of the Lighthouse Project in the Federal Circuit and Family Court of Australia
- work to prevent and respond to abuse of older people
- the establishment of a Domestic, Family and Sexual Violence Commission, and
- the launch of a new National Plan to End Violence against Women and Children.

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 3

Without limiting 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 intervention services tailored to men and boys.

Funding to support family law reform

Consistent with the findings made by the Australian Law Reform Commission in its final report on the Family Law System, and ongoing expressions of concern about the system's fitness for purpose, Relationships Australia takes this opportunity to suggest the following funding priorities for the upcoming Federal Budget.

Recommendation 4

We urge the Commonwealth to work with the sector to implement ALRC recommendations 57-60 (inclusive). We consider that enhancements are urgently needed to build capacity within, and expand the functions of, the Family Advocacy and Support Services and Family Relationships Centres, as recommended by the Australian Law Reform Commission.

5. Eliminating the abuse and neglect of older people

Relationships Australia acknowledges that in recent years we have seen an increase in awareness and understanding of the scourge of elder abuse in our communities. The December 2021 release of the report by the Australian Institute of Family Studies into the nature and prevalence of elder abuse demonstrates the nature and prevalence of this issue within the Australian community.³

In particular:

- that policy and programme focus must broaden from financial abuse of older persons to recognise, prevent and respond to the other sub-types of abuse: psychological, physical,

³ 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.

sexual, and cultural abuse, as well as neglect; the AIFS Report identifies psychological abuse as likely to be the most prevalent form, followed by neglect, and psychological abuse and neglect as the most common concurrent sub-types

- the need for rigorous data collection to build the evidence base necessary to support effective policies and programmes
- that risk factors of experiencing (and perpetrating) abuse or neglect of older people share several features with the co-morbidities that commonly accompany intimate partner violence, and
- that social connection is a protective factor against experiencing or perpetrating abuse or neglect of older people.

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

Recommendation 5

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

Data collection and analysis

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.⁴

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%)⁵, 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 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.

⁵ 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 6

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.

These services have seen the establishment of pilot 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 7

- (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.⁶ 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.⁷

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

⁶ See Australian Human Rights Commission (2021). What's age got to do with it? A snapshot of ageism across the Australian lifespan, September 2021.

⁷ 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.

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 8

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.⁸

Development of a national register of 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 roll-out of a national register of enduring powers of attorney, and associated harmonisation of laws.

This has been on the agenda for Attorneys-General since at least 2017. There is general agreement by Attorneys-General that a national register is urgently needed (including as a safeguard against financial abuse), but it appears to consistently slip down the priority list.

Relationships Australia notes that there are well-developed model laws for a register and for harmonisation that have been on the public record for some years, and as a result, we consider that Government has at its disposal the tools and research to carry this forward. It seems now it simply needs the impetus.

Recommendation 9

Relationships Australia urges the Government to dedicate resources to accelerate the implementation of a national register of enduring powers of attorney.

⁸ See <http://www.rightsofolderpersons.org.au/>

6. Critical support for people with disability

Relationships Australia welcomed the Royal Commission into Violence, Abuse, Neglect and Exploitation of People with Disability and notes the expiry of its term in 2023. Since the inception of this Royal Commission, Relationships Australia has 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. As a result of its work in this space, 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 the need for appropriate, tailored and well-resourced services supporting people with disability is obvious. 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.

Following the conclusion of the Royal Commission, funding for all dedicated support services, including those provided by Relationships Australia, will cease.

Without pre-empting any of the findings of 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 does not disappear. 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 10

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.

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).⁹

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 (including people who have chosen to migrate and people who have sought refuge)
- 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,¹⁰ which supports people to create connections which combat loneliness. Relationships Australia is a founding member

⁹ 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

¹⁰ 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/>

organisation in the Ending Loneliness Together network.¹¹ 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.¹²

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.¹³

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.¹⁴

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.

¹¹ For more information, see <https://endingloneliness.com.au/>

¹² 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.

¹³ See, for example, Mance, 2018.

¹⁴ For more information visit <https://neighbourseveryday.org>

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.

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 2021* identified that

In 2021, highly excluded Australians are most likely to have not completed a secondary education (38%); fall in the lowest income quintile (31%); live in a single person household (26%); have a disability (23%); currently be unemployed (21%); or not be in the labour force (22%).¹⁵

Relationships Australia is concerned that, despite improvements achieved during, and necessitated by, the COVID pandemic, some 28% of the national population remain excluded or highly excluded in 2021.¹⁶

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').

¹⁵ Thomas, J., Barraket, J., Parkinson, S., Wilson, C., Holcombe-James, I., Kennedy, J., Mannell, K., Brydon, A. (2021). *Australian Digital Inclusion Index: 2021*. Melbourne: RMIT, Swinburne University of Technology, and Telstra. DOI: 10.25916/phgw-b725 <https://www.digitalinclusionindex.org.au/digital-inclusion-the-australian-context-in-2021/> [accessed 18 January 2023]

¹⁶ Ibid.

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,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Nick Tebbey', with a long horizontal stroke extending to the right.

Nick Tebbey
National Executive Officer