

11 December 2024

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

Submitted: online

Dear Minister

Budget 2025-2026 – public consultation – pre-Budget submissions

Thank you for the opportunity to make a submission on priorities for the 2025-2026 Federal Budget.

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 over 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 2025-2026

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

Ensuring the availability of fit for purpose services for separating and separated families (section 3)

Recommendation 1

That the Commonwealth implement in full the 16 recommendations made in the report of the review, by Mr Andrew Metcalfe AO, of the Family Relationship Services Program, supported by a New Policy Proposal to appropriate \$104.6million as envisaged in that report.

Eliminating the abuse and neglect of older people (section 4)

Recommendation 2

That the Commonwealth fund a national rollout of services to help older people at risk of, or experiencing, violence, abuse or neglect, that is proportionate to prevalence and informed by demographic data, supported by a concurrent evaluation and data collection framework to enable Commonwealth, state and territory governments to build a robust evidence base.

Recommendation 3

That the Commonwealth commit resources to the urgent 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 4

That the Commonwealth 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 5

That the Commonwealth 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 6

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.

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

Addressing loneliness in Australia (section 5)

Recommendation 7

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 8

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. The review of the Family Relationship Services Program (FRSP)

In 2023, the Attorney-General commissioned the first comprehensive review of the FRSP since its establishment 20 years ago. The reviewer, Mr Andrew Metcalfe AO, found that the program is essential for Australian families, and is efficient and effective, providing expert multi-disciplinary support to families affected by separation, while achieving substantial savings for the taxpayers by diverting families from traumatic and expensive court proceedings.

Mr Metcalfe identified opportunities to streamline its administration, to the benefit of clients, providers and Government. He further found that an immediate injection of new funding is vital, given that since the program was established two decades ago, base funding has not increased. It has remained static through the Global Financial Crisis, an indexation pause from 2014 to 2018, and the COVID-19 pandemic and its persistent effects on health, wellbeing, social connection and the economy. Nor has there been any additional funding to reflect population increases generally, or in locations of particularly intense population growth.

The Metcalfe recommendations offer a once in a generation opportunity to leverage existing benefits into establishing a program that meets contemporary and projected needs of separating and separated families, while also furthering the achievement of key Government objectives to:

- end gender-based violence within a generation
- keep children safe and support them to thrive
- Close the Gap and uphold self-determination among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families
- improve mental health and prevent suicide, and
- enhance social inclusion and accessibility of universal services, including access to justice.

In the context of recent developments in relation to gender-based violence, the increasing recognition of children as rights-bearers, and the maltreatment of children, we also welcome the Review's acknowledgement that FRSP providers are integral to preventing and responding to domestic, family and sexual violence, as well as offering support through recovery from DFSV. Mr Metcalfe's findings compellingly demonstrate that siloes between the 'DFSV sector' and providers of the full array of family

relationship services harm women and children and must be purposefully dismantled. Implementing Mr Metcalfe's recommendations in full would make meaningful progress towards this end.

Relationships Australia notes, too, the significant overlap between Mr Metcalfe's recommendations, those made by the Rapid Review of Prevention Approaches, and the observations recently made by the Domestic, Family and Sexual Violence Commissioner in her Yearly Report to Parliament. In particular, we have welcomed the recognition that children need child-centric family law, family relationship and DFSV services, and also recommendations and suggestions about workforce development and retention.

The transformative potential of the recommendations made in this Review is on a par with the measures included in the *Aged Care Act 2024* (Cth) and the Government's recent announcements to re-shape access to justice. The quantum of the investment in a new program for separating and separated families, as proposed by Mr Metcalfe, is modest in comparison with the sums announced for aged care and access to justice but, as explored below, can achieve transformation and future-proofing which compares favourably to that offered by the much larger investments announced for those reforms.

Relationships Australia therefore supports full implementation of the recommendations as envisaged by Mr Metcalfe, who notes that

The Review's recommendations are integrated, and they are mutually reinforcing.

The Review therefore believes that optimal future arrangements will be secured by agreement to, and full implementation of, all of its recommendations. (at p 173)

Quantum of funding required to implement the Metcalfe recommendations

The FRSP is currently funded at \$1.1 billion over four years.

Relationships Australia supports the development of a New Policy Proposal, to be brought forward for the 2025/2026 Budget, to implement the Metcalfe recommendations in full.

The increase in funding for the legal assistance sector, with a focus on responding to gender-based violence, amounts to \$800 million over five years, bringing Commonwealth investment to \$3.9 billion over five years from 1 July 2025.² The aged care package amounts to a \$5.6 billion investment, with a net impact of 'a \$930 million spend over four years and a \$12.6 billion save over the next 11 years.'³ These funding commitments are much needed and will confer significant social, economic and cultural benefits for decades to come, while offering sound and judicious stewardship of scarce resources.

The same can be said for the investment proposed by Mr Metcalfe.

² National Cabinet Media Statement 6 September 2024: <https://www.pm.gov.au/media/meeting-national-cabinet-7>

³ Media Release, 'Once in a generation aged care reforms', 12 September 2024 (<https://www.health.gov.au/ministers/the-hon-anika-wells-mp/media/once-in-a-generation-aged-care-reforms>)

The FRSP was initially established through an appropriation of \$397 million over four years.⁴ Committed grants for the FRSP over 2023/2024 amount to \$261.389 million, with \$1.1 billion committed over 4 years (Review, p 1). The proposed additional funding measures relate to enhancements to family relationship services that strongly align with broader Government objectives and which would offer both substantial therapeutic benefits to clients and strong return on investment for taxpayers. The business case for this investment is amply supported by research and analysis undertaken by the Review and the research undertaken by The Centre for International Economics for Family and Relationship Services Australia.⁵

The funding commitment that would be required to fully implement Mr Metcalfe's recommendations – just over \$100 million - is equally as vital as the access to justice and aged care packages, and will confer enduring intergenerational social, economic and cultural benefits, while also enhancing and reinforcing the effectiveness of your other reforms to date.

Relationships Australia acknowledges that funding proposals for family and relationship services have not, in the past, attracted support in the Budget process. It has often been the case that the Department of Finance asserts that the figures are so low, compared to bigger proposals in areas such as defence, health and direct social welfare, that they should be absorbed by providers and program departments. However, it has been nearly 20 years since the current ecosystem was established, during which time service providers have endured and absorbed funding constraints necessitated by the exigencies of the Global Financial Crisis, an indexation freeze between 2014-2018, and substantial (and continuing) increases in service delivery costs, including increasing remuneration and operating costs. Further, the Attorney-General's Department is not in a position to re-allocate money from its other major program, which funds legal assistance. Indeed, it would be objectionable for it to do so, because it would undermine other Government objectives, as articulated in the National Access to Justice Partnership, recently approved by the Standing Council of Attorneys-General.

In addition, fundamental changes to Australian society have, since 2006, exerted powerful influences on separating and separated families. The FRSP was not designed with the benefit of contemporary understanding of, for example:

- the imperative for First Nations families, and culturally and linguistically diverse families, to have access to culturally sensitive services, and to have choice among service providers
- the multi-faceted nature and prevalence, among users of family relationship services and the family law courts, of domestic and family violence, including mistreatment of older people, maltreatment of children, the use of coercive control against intimate partners (including through systems abuse), and technology-facilitated abuse

⁴ ANAO Audit Report No. 1 of 2010-2011, Implementation of the Family Relationship Centres Initiative, paragraph 1.3, p 33; accessible at <https://www.anao.gov.au/work/performance-audit/implementation-of-the-family-relationship-centres-initiative>

⁵ Family and Relationship Services Economic Evaluation, accessible at https://frsa.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/CIE-Final-Report_FRSA_Family-and-Relationship-Services-Evaluation-11092023.pdf; see also the cost benefit analysis of Family Dispute Resolution, undertaken by Relationships Australia Victoria, 2024, at <https://www.relationshipsvictoria.org.au/media/ajmhgjn/rav-fdr-cost-benefit-analysis-summary-24047.pdf>.

- the increasing prevalence and intensity of co-morbidities including poor mental health, alcohol and other drug misuse, and harmful gambling, among families using family relationship services and the family law courts
- the wishes of, and benefits to, children and young people in having their voices heard in decisions affecting them (in concert with a greater recognition of children as rights-bearers) and the effects on children of being victim survivors of domestic and family violence, including post-separation violence, and
- the serious adverse effects on children of institutionalising combative win / loss relationship between their parents, arising from the court-centric systems and processes of the family law system.

Rather, governments have periodically retrofitted the Act and elements of the FRSP to attempt to meet emerging and evolving needs, and provided bare indexation rather than new investment, to support these efforts. The review presents a generational opportunity to build a program that genuinely and fully reflects contemporary evidence about the needs of separating and separated families, benefits from authentic co-design, and offers universal access to skilled, expert and integrated support. We look forward to engaging further with your Government to implement this generational transformation and ensure that separating and separated families receive the connected support they need, when and where they need it.

Recommendation 1

That the Commonwealth implement in full the 16 recommendations made in the report of the review, by Mr Andrew Metcalfe AO, of the Family Relationship Services Program, supported by a New Policy Proposal to appropriate \$104.6 million as envisaged in that report.

4. 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 a draft successor plan has yet to be released for consultation, 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 2

Relationships Australia urges the Government to commit resources to the urgent 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.⁶ We also welcome the recently-commissioned research into the experience of elder abuse in CALD and LGBTIQ+ communities. This is important work. However, it will be affected by the lacunae in the broader research base into the abuse and neglect of older people. We recommend that 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.⁷

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%)⁸, 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.

Recommendation 3

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 Stopping 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

⁶ Qu, L., Kaspiw, 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.

⁷ 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.

⁸ 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.

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 4

- (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.⁹ 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.¹⁰

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

⁹ See Australian Human Rights Commission (2021). What's age got to do with it? A snapshot of ageism across the Australian lifespan, September 2021.

¹⁰ 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.

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 5

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.¹¹

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”. Regrettably, no progress has emerged from this consultation. The communiqué from the most recent meeting of the Standing Council of Attorneys on 22 November 2024 speaks eloquently to the complete lack of commitment from all jurisdictions to the financial safety of older people, with a range of items being ‘noted’ and none, save agreement to consider a report from the Age Discrimination Commissioner, being identified as requiring any action whatsoever.¹²

The recently released report from the Parliamentary Joint Committee on Corporations and Financial Services stated that

The committee considers that the harmonisation of state and territory schemes along with the resourcing of education and awareness raising should be pursued in the first instance, with the establishment of a national scheme to be considered in the event that inconsistencies between state and territory schemes prove to be intractable.¹³

After 20 years of no progress, we wonder what the Committee would consider sufficient evidence of intractability.

Recommendation 6

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.

¹¹ See <http://www.rightsofolderspersons.org.au/>

¹² See https://www.ag.gov.au/sites/default/files/2024-11/scag-national-access-to-justice-partnership-communique_22-november-2024.pdf.

¹³ See https://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/download/committees/reportjnt/RB000471/toc_pdf/Financialabuseaninsidiousformofdomesticviolence.pdf.

5. 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).¹⁴

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.

¹⁴ 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 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,¹⁵ which supports people to create connections which combat loneliness.

A recent economic evaluation conducted by the University of Queensland and the Australian National University¹⁶ 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.¹⁷

Relationships Australia is also a founding member of Ending Loneliness Together.¹⁸ 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.¹⁹

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.²⁰

Since 2013, Relationships Australia has been the custodian of Neighbours Every Day, a campaign which

¹⁵ 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/>

¹⁶ Beilby, H., Spinks, J. & Cruwys, T. (2023). Neighbour Day Cost-Effectiveness Evaluation. The University of Queensland & Australian National University.

¹⁷ 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.

¹⁸ For more information, see <https://endingloneliness.com.au/>

¹⁹ 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.

²⁰ See, for example, Mance, 2018.

promotes social connection and respectful relationships among neighbourhoods and communities.²¹

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 7

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.

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

²¹ For more information visit <https://neighbourseveryday.org>

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).²²

Relationships Australia is concerned that, despite improvements achieved in recent years, some 23.6% of the national population remain excluded or highly excluded in 2023.²³

Recommendation 8

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').

6. 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

²² 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].

²³ Ibid.