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Joint Standing Committee on Implementation of the National Redress Scheme
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Inquiry into the continuing operation of the National Redress Scheme – submission

Thank you for the opportunity to contribute to the Committee's inquiry into the continuing operation of the National Redress Scheme. Relationships Australia National Office is making this submission to the Terms of Reference on behalf of the 8 member organisations of the Relationships Australia Federation. In doing so, this submission draws on the practice expertise of our staff across the country and the experiences of our clients and the communities we serve.

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.

Relationships Australia Member Organisations deliver Redress Support Services (RSS) across all Australia States and Territories, as well as a range of specialised services for individuals and families who have experienced trauma, upheaval and grief including services for Forgotten Australians, Post Adoption Support Services and support services for members of the Stolen Generation.

Recommendations

This submission makes the following recommendations:

- Recommendation 1* That the operational timeline of the Scheme be extended indefinitely.
- Recommendation 2* That the Committee give consideration to the need for the Scheme's eligibility criteria to be expanded to include additional cohorts of impacted individuals.
- Recommendation 3* The development and early communication of a formal transition plan for RSS services.
- Recommendation 4* Further reform of case management practices within the Scheme, including:
- reconfirmation of the commitment to a survivor-centred, trauma informed Scheme, with a presumption of belief rather than suspicion and a commitment to the principle of "do no harm",
 - measures to ensure consistency in processing approaches and evidentiary requirements across similar applications,

- implementation of a health prioritisation protocol with clear criteria for survivors with terminal illnesses, serious health conditions, or other circumstances requiring expedited processing,
- implementation of quality review of Statement of Reasons by a panel that includes survivor advocates, with particular attention to language, tone, and consistency of decision-making
- greater utilisation of RSS providers as professional resources who can efficiently provide context and clarification, and
- regular and proactive communication with survivors and their nominees about application status and transparency regarding timeframes and processing backlogs.

Recommendation 5 That funding arrangements for the Scheme take into account the likelihood of increases in the number and complexity of applications over the coming years.

Recommendation 6 That further effort be made to enhance the accessibility and effectiveness of the Scheme for vulnerable cohorts, including through:

- genuine co-design of access initiatives with representatives from vulnerable cohorts including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, people with disability, CALD communities, people in custody, and care leavers,
- adequate resourcing for culturally safe and accessible outreach, both by the Scheme and by RSS, to underserved communities, and
- provision of accessible application alternatives for vulnerable cohorts.

Comments responding to the Terms of Reference

Term of Reference 1: The Scheme's operational timeline, and the potential for this timeline to be extended

Relationships Australia believes the current operational timeline for the National Redress Scheme is fundamentally inadequate to meet the needs of survivors who remain eligible but have not yet applied. We consider that the public interest is best served in maintaining a dedicated, trauma-informed and accessible Scheme for as long as it takes for any affected person to access justice.

For this reason, Relationships Australia **recommends** that the operational timeline of the Scheme be extended indefinitely (**Recommendation 1**).

Any decision about the Scheme's timeline should prioritise the principle of 'do no harm' to survivors over administrative convenience or fiscal considerations.

In support of this recommendation, our member organisations report consistent evidence that significant cohorts of survivors remain unaware of the Scheme or have been unable to access it to date. This is often a result of gaps in outreach to specific populations. For example:

- Contact with survivors in residential aged care facilities has been limited, with some facilities reportedly reluctant to facilitate awareness of the Scheme among residents who may be eligible.
- Similarly, outreach to remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities has been insufficient, with some APY Lands communities only receiving first contact about the Scheme in 2025.
- The homelessness sector represents another underserved cohort, with many survivors living precarious lives without stable access to information or support.

Several of our members are currently maintaining waitlists for RSS services, indicating ongoing demand that extends well beyond the Scheme's current timeline. This demand is compounded by the reality that the most vulnerable survivors often come forward last. Our experience during the Royal Commission was that those who had experienced the most severe trauma, or who faced the greatest barriers to accessing support, were among the last to engage with the process.¹ We anticipate the same pattern will occur with the Scheme.

The volume of applications already in the system presents a further challenge to the current timeline. Our members report that they are only now receiving outcomes for clients who submitted applications three or four years ago. This creates a cascading effect - even if no new applications were accepted from tomorrow, the Scheme would need to continue operating for several years to process existing applications, support survivors through the Direct Personal Response process where requested, and ensure that all review and revocation requests are properly addressed.

¹ Noting, for example, accepted literature showing that men, especially, take longer to disclose and take action; and that this is also true for other potentially marginalised cohorts including people from LGBTIQ+ communities.

We are also concerned about the quality of applications that may be submitted as the Scheme approaches its deadline. Our members anticipate that survivors will feel desperate as the closing date nears, potentially submitting incomplete or 'bare bones' applications without adequate support. These applications will require significant additional resources to process fairly, and survivors submitting them will need sustained support throughout what may be a lengthy determination process.

To further enhance the operation of the Scheme during any extension, Relationships Australia makes a number of recommendations throughout this submission, including:

- comprehensive outreach to underserved cohorts including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities in remote areas, aged care residents, people experiencing homelessness, and emerging populations such as young care leavers,
- injection of essential resources to enable timely processing of all applications already submitted, and
- ongoing commitment to the provision of support for survivors participating in Direct Personal Response processes as well as those required to engage with review and revocation processes.

Relationships Australia further **recommends** that the Committee give consideration to the need for the Scheme's eligibility criteria to be expanded to include additional cohorts of impacted individuals (**Recommendation 2**). We understand that when the Scheme was implemented there was the hope and expectation that the findings of the Royal Commission would be so embedded in contemporary practice as to prevent further abuses of this kind occurring in institutions. Regrettably this has proven not to be the case, and children are still being sexually abused in institutions where they should be safe and protected. For this reason, an ongoing Redress Scheme must acknowledge this ongoing harm and provide an accountability mechanism for institutions whose policies and practices have failed and continue to fail.

Term of Reference 2: The accessibility, funding, and transition plans for support services as the Scheme concludes

The sustainability and capacity of RSS providers represents a critical concern as the Scheme approaches its current conclusion date. Our members report that short-term funding extensions create substantial operational challenges that ultimately impact service quality and survivor outcomes.

Recruitment and retention of qualified RSS practitioners is becoming increasingly difficult. The staff working in these services possess highly specialised skills - they must be trauma-informed, culturally competent, and able to navigate complex systems while supporting survivors with multiple and complex needs. Our members describe these practitioners as rare, valuable, and difficult to replace. Short-term funding arrangements make it nearly impossible to attract and retain such staff, as practitioners quite reasonably seek employment security elsewhere.

The impact of uncertain funding extends beyond recruitment challenges. Our existing staff are experiencing increased vicarious trauma and burnout due to prolonged engagement with cases

that are taking years to resolve. When practitioners cannot provide clients with realistic timeframes, and watch vulnerable survivors deteriorate while waiting for outcomes, the emotional toll is substantial. This is compounded by the reality that RSS practitioners often maintain contact with clients for the entire period between application and outcome - in many cases now extending beyond two years. The implications of this for our practitioners are significant, with a real risk of moral injury that must be factored into service planning.

Current funding arrangements also fail to reflect actual demand. Our members report waitlists ranging from 50 to 650 clients, with some services forced to close their waitlists entirely due to overwhelming demand. In South Australia, our member was receiving 25 referrals weekly from within the SA prison population and had to stop accepting new clients due to lack of capacity.

The geographic distribution of funding creates additional inequities. Some regions have adequate RSS capacity while others face severe shortages, yet funding mechanisms do not allow for flexible redistribution based on actual need. This is particularly problematic for services supporting survivors in remote and regional areas, where the cost of delivering face-to-face support is substantially higher but essential for effective service delivery.

Of great concern to our members, should the current timeline of the scheme not be extended, is how the impending cessation will impact client relationships and well-being. This raises an ethical issue for our member organisations. If the Scheme is scheduled to close while we are still supporting clients through the application process, we face an impossible choice: either declining to take on new clients who desperately need support, or accepting clients knowing that our service may cease before their application is determined. Neither option is acceptable from a trauma-informed or ethical practice perspective and reinforces our earlier comments concerning the risk of moral injury.

Relationships Australia therefore **recommends** the development and early communication of a formal transition plan for RSS services (**Recommendation 3**). This plan must address:

- funding beyond the Scheme's application closure date to support survivors whose applications are still being processed, as well as those participating in Direct Personal Response processes and review/revocation mechanisms,
- transition to an appropriately resourced ongoing support mechanism to ensure continuity of care,
- adequate notice periods to allow for responsible closure of services, including proper discharge planning for clients,
- clear communication frameworks to help services explain changes to current clients, new applicants, and staff, and
- appropriate funding for any transition period to enable services to maintain trust and minimise additional trauma.

Our members emphasise that any transition planning must occur well in advance of service closure. The current funding uncertainty prevents effective planning and risks creating a crisis situation where services close abruptly, leaving vulnerable survivors without support at critical moments in their redress journey.

Term of Reference 3: Current case management issues and information requests, and the timeframe required to resolve these matters

The Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse established clear principles for trauma-informed engagement with survivors. The Scheme was designed to embody these principles and represent a fundamentally different approach from adversarial legal processes, placing survivors at the centre. However, our members report that case management and information requests by the Scheme have moved away from trauma-informed practice in concerning ways.

Processing Delays

Processing delays within the Scheme have reached crisis proportions, with serious consequences for survivors. Our practice experience is that applications are currently taking approximately two years to reach outcome, far exceeding the Scheme's target of six months. Some of our members report average processing times exceeding this, with Queensland applications averaging well over two years.

Despite these known delays, clients continue to be advised of 12-18 month total wait times when they submit applications. This establishes unrealistic expectations that can, when advertised wait times are exceeded, compound trauma and increase frustration and hopelessness for our clients.

These delays are not merely administrative inconveniences - they have profound impacts on survivor wellbeing and, in the most tragic cases, prevent survivors from receiving recognition and redress before they die. Our members report instances of seriously ill clients passing away while waiting for outcomes, despite having submitted medical documentation to the Scheme in support of an expedited application. The absence of any meaningful prioritisation process for survivors with terminal illnesses or serious health conditions represents a fundamental failure of the Scheme's trauma-informed principles.

The impact of delays is particularly severe for vulnerable populations.

Our members also note that initial outcome delays are compounded when determinations need to be reviewed or revoked. Some clients are forced to wait a further 12-18 months for the revocation process to be completed, even though, in our experience, a simple opportunity for clarification could address the eligibility concerns that led to an initial rejection. These survivors remain in limbo, unable to access redress while their circumstances are reconsidered.

Information requests

The nature and scope of information requests from the Scheme have become increasingly problematic. For example, our members report instances of what they characterise as 'unethical questioning' that appears driven by suspicion rather than genuine information needs. Questions such as "Why didn't you tell anyone when you were a child?" reflect a fundamental misunderstanding of trauma, child development, and the dynamics of institutional abuse.

Our members have identified a shift in the tone and approach of information requests that suggests the Scheme has moved away from its trauma-informed foundations towards a more investigative or inquisitorial model. This shift appears to be driven, at least in part, by what our members describe as a 'fixation on fraud' that is disproportionate to any actual evidence of fraudulent applications.

For example, members have noted that Statement of Reasons documents are increasingly questioning survivor credibility, raising concerns about 'collusion' when multiple survivors provide similar accounts of abuse patterns – a conclusion that does not seem to recognise that for many survivors the patterns of abuse were, indeed, identical.

The consequence is that survivors who have already demonstrated their eligibility through the initial application process are being subjected to additional questioning that feels accusatory rather than clarificatory.

The volume and complexity of information requests is also problematic. Our members report receiving requests for extensive additional documentation (in some cases, as much as nine-page responses) to address questions that could be resolved through a brief phone call with the RSS provider. This represents an inefficient use of resources and creates unnecessary burden for both survivors and support services. It also suggests a lack of trust in the professional expertise of RSS practitioners who work directly with survivors and are well-positioned to provide context and clarification.

Some information requests seek details that were explicitly not sought in the original application, or that duplicate information already provided. This suggests either inadequate review of existing documentation or a problematic approach to evidence gathering that places the burden of proof inappropriately on survivors.

The mental health impact of these information requests can be severe. Our members note many examples of survivors who experienced significant mental health deterioration following requests for additional information that required them to re-engage with traumatic material in greater detail than they had anticipated or felt able to manage safely.

Inconsistency in processes and decision making

Our members report concerning inconsistencies in how different applications are managed, including cases involving siblings who experienced identical abuse in the same institution being asked vastly different questions and being required to provide different levels of documentation.

Similarly, applications involving abuse by the same perpetrator, in the same setting, at the same time, have resulted in compensation differences of \$50,000. These inconsistencies cannot be explained by legitimate differences in individual circumstances and suggest problems with decision-maker training, guidance, or oversight.

The variations in information requests and decision making across applications and the unpredictability of how long each stage will take make it impossible for survivors or RSS

providers to have realistic expectations. This uncertainty is itself traumatising and makes effective case management nearly impossible.

The cumulative effect of these case management issues is substantial. RSS practitioners are holding cases for extended periods - often years rather than months - which affects their capacity to take on new clients and contributes to the growing waitlists. The unpredictability of processing times makes it impossible for practitioners to set realistic expectations with clients, which undermines trust and therapeutic relationships.

In light of the above, Relationships Australia **recommends** further reform of case management practices within the Scheme, including:

- reconfirmation of the commitment to a survivor-centred, trauma informed Scheme, with a presumption of belief rather than suspicion and a commitment to the principle of “do no harm”,
- measures to ensure consistency in processing approaches and evidentiary requirements across similar applications,
- implementation of a health prioritisation protocol with clear criteria for survivors with terminal illnesses, serious health conditions, or other circumstances requiring expedited processing,
- implementation of quality review of Statement of Reasons by a panel that includes survivor advocates, with particular attention to language, tone, and consistency of decision-making
- greater utilisation of RSS providers as professional resources who can efficiently provide context and clarification, and
- regular and proactive communication with survivors and their nominees about application status and transparency regarding timeframes and processing backlogs. (collectively, **Recommendation 4**).

Term of Reference 4: Outstanding applications and determinations, and the processes and procedures that may need to be implemented to maximise just outcomes before the Scheme concludes

The substantial backlog of outstanding applications represents the most significant barrier to just outcomes for survivors. Processing this backlog in a way that is consistent with the purpose of the Scheme requires not only additional resources but also fundamental reforms to current processes and procedures.

We are concerned that pressures to address the backlog may be resolved through measures that increase burden on survivors and RSS providers rather than through increased resourcing of the Scheme itself. Any changes to processing procedures must be adequately resourced and must not transfer the consequences of institutional delays onto survivors or support services. Imposing tighter deadlines on RSS providers or survivors, for example, to compensate for Scheme processing delays, would represent a profound failure of the 'do no harm' principle.

Our members believe that achieving just outcomes for the backlog of applications requires the Scheme to return to its foundational principle: believing survivors. The current approach, which our members characterise as viewing applications through a 'fraud lens', is counterproductive and retraumatising. If someone has been found eligible for the Scheme, subsequent questioning should be limited to that which is genuinely necessary for fair assessment rather than expressing scepticism about their account.

To maximise just outcomes for outstanding applications, Relationships Australia recommends immediate investment in additional resources to address the backlog, and the establishment of dedicated teams to address known processing roadblocks and systemic delays. At all stages of reform, paramountcy must be given to ensuring that the Scheme prioritises survivor outcomes over administrative efficiency.

Term of Reference 5: Planning for a possible increase in applications as the Scheme approaches its conclusion

For the reasons outlined in our response to Term of Reference 1, Relationships Australia believes a significant increase in applications is not merely possible but highly probable as the Scheme approaches its current conclusion date. This increase will come from multiple sources and will require substantial additional capacity across both the Scheme and RSS services.

Our members identify several emerging cohorts that are likely to drive increased demand.

Young care leavers, particularly those aged 18-25 years who have recently exited from out-of-home care through Specialist Aftercare Programs, are only now learning of their eligibility for the Scheme. These young people often experienced institutional abuse during childhood but were not aware that such experiences make them eligible for redress. As information spreads through this network, we anticipate substantial numbers of applications from this cohort.

Prison populations represent another source of increasing demand. Our members report consistently high demand from people in custody that current RSS capacity cannot meet. For example, one Relationships Australia member organisation has only recently received funding specifically for prison-based outreach, and this service immediately reached capacity, resulting in a substantial waitlist. Applications from people in custody are often more complex, involving multiple institutions and requiring extensive support to gather documentation and navigate the process.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander survivors are beginning to engage with the Scheme in greater numbers, but this engagement is occurring from a low base due to the long-standing failure to adequately reach these communities. Our members have been raising concerns about poor engagement with Aboriginal communities since 2019, with little meaningful response until very recently. As culturally safe outreach occurs and communities begin to see that the Scheme delivers tangible outcomes, we anticipate increased applications. Our Northern Territory member notes that many applicants are only now coming forward because they have seen community members receive redress and know the process is "not for nothing".

The broader pattern of survivors waiting until late in a process to come forward will also drive increased applications. As noted earlier, the most traumatised and vulnerable survivors are often the last to engage, a pattern we observed during the Royal Commission. Additionally, as the closing date approaches, survivors who have been uncertain about whether to apply may feel compelled to do so to avoid losing the opportunity permanently.

This anticipated increase in applications has significant implications for both the Scheme and RSS services.

We are further concerned that these new cohort of applicants appear to have more complex situations than earlier applicants. There are several reasons for this. Emerging cohorts such as young care leavers and prison populations often have experiences involving multiple institutions, incomplete records, and complex trauma presentations. Applications from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander survivors require culturally safe processes and often involve additional complexities around institutional records and community impacts.

RSS services are already struggling with waitlists and are not resourced to manage a significant increase in demand. Current funding models allocate a fixed number of support slots per provider regardless of actual demand, creating geographic inequities and preventing services from responding flexibly to need. Our Members are concerned that increasing the caseload targets of each individual practitioner (an approach that has been recommended to them) would place untenable strain on those practitioners while still falling short of the significant backlog, and failing to accommodate new demand.

The outreach requirements for supporting some cohorts also presents challenges. Supporting survivors in remote communities or correctional facilities involves substantial additional costs for travel and security requirements that standard funding models do not adequately cover. Our Northern Territory member notes that the costs of visiting a correctional facility or remote community are significant but essential for providing trauma-informed and culturally safe face-to-face support.

Relationships Australia therefore **recommends** that funding arrangements for the Scheme take into account the likelihood of increases in the number and complexity of applications over the coming years (**Recommendation 5**), including through:

- an immediate increase in resourcing of RSS services to prepare for increased demand, with funding allocated based on actual need rather than arbitrary caps,
- the allocation of specific resourcing for outreach to, and support of, identified emerging cohorts including young care leavers, prison populations, and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities,
- a move to more flexible funding arrangements that allow RSS providers to respond to demand fluctuations and redirect resources as needed, and
- a commitment to greater coordination between the Scheme and RSS providers to plan for and monitor demand trends.

Term of Reference 6: Access to justice by vulnerable cohorts following changes to the Scheme access in 2024

While our members have witnessed improvements to access to justice for vulnerable cohorts since the 2024 changes, they remain concerned about ongoing access challenges for several vulnerable populations.

People in custody continue to face significant barriers to accessing the Scheme. As noted earlier, demand from prison populations consistently exceeds RSS capacity, and the costs associated with providing in-person support in correctional settings are substantial. Applications from people in custody are often more complex and time-consuming due to difficulties accessing records, communication barriers, and the impacts of incarceration on mental health and capacity to engage with processes.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander survivors face compounded disadvantages that go well beyond the general challenges of accessing the Scheme. Our members report that despite years of raising concerns, outreach to Aboriginal communities has been inadequate and culturally unsafe. Issues include:

- Lack of culturally appropriate resources and support materials
- Failure to understand and accommodate cultural protocols around disclosure
- Institutional distrust rooted in ongoing experiences of racism and colonisation
- Limited outreach to remote communities
- Failure to recognise the collective and intergenerational nature of trauma in Aboriginal communities

Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) communities face similar challenges, with additional complexities around the specific role of institutions within migrant communities and the unique barriers CALD survivors face in recognising institutional abuse and accessing redress. Our members report that CALD communities are often left behind due to lack of targeted, culturally appropriate outreach and support.

Care leavers and Forgotten Australians represent two other cohorts where access issues persist. Our members report that the overlap between institutional child sexual abuse and other forms of institutional harm is not being adequately recognised. Many survivors experienced multiple forms of abuse and neglect, but the Scheme's focus on sexual abuse means other damaging experiences may not be acknowledged or may complicate the application process.

Survivors with disability face multiple access barriers including:

- a lack of accessible application alternatives such as AUSLAN interpretation or visual aids,
- complex application processes that disadvantage people with cognitive impairments,
- insufficient recognition of the role of support persons and carers in assisting applications,
- inadequate resources for disability-specific support needs, and
- a failure to recognise that many disability services were themselves the sites of institutional abuse.

Our members also note that some initiatives intended to improve access appear to be "tick the box" exercises rather than genuine efforts to address systemic barriers. Without meaningful co-design with affected communities and adequate resourcing, new access measures are unlikely to address the deep-seated issues that prevent vulnerable cohorts from engaging with the Scheme.

Relationships Australia therefore recommends that further effort be made to enhance the accessibility and effectiveness of the Scheme for vulnerable cohorts, including through:

- genuine co-design of access initiatives with representatives from vulnerable cohorts including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, people with disability, CALD communities, people in custody, and care leavers,
 - adequate resourcing for culturally safe and accessible outreach, both by the Scheme and by RSS, to underserved communities, and
 - provision of accessible application alternatives for vulnerable cohorts.
- (collectively, **Recommendation 6**).

Term of Reference 7: Any other matters associated with the conclusion of the National Redress Scheme that survivors would like to make known to the Committee

Our members have identified several additional matters that significantly affect survivor experiences and should inform the Committee's deliberations. While we have focused on systemic issues throughout this submission, we want to emphasise that these issues reflect survivor experiences as relayed to us through our RSS practitioners. The problems we identify are not abstractions but represent real harm being experienced by real people seeking recognition and redress for institutional child sexual abuse.

Information sharing and privacy concerns

Survivors have reported that information they provide to the Scheme is being shared with responsible institutions beyond what is necessary to confirm institutional 'care'. In some cases, institutions are using survivor information to conduct internal investigations or to make direct contact with survivors. This is particularly problematic in remote areas where it can create employment conflicts and community tensions. Statements of Reasons have also included personal details without survivor consent. These privacy breaches fundamentally undermine the trust required for a trauma-informed process and can expose survivors to further harm.

Interaction with other pathways

Our members report confusion among survivors about the differences between the National Redress Scheme and civil litigation. Many survivors lack clear information about what each option entails, what it offers, and the implications of choosing one pathway over another. Concerningly, some survivors believe they are better off pursuing civil litigation despite the well-known expenses, delays, higher burdens of proof, and complex causation requirements. This suggests the Scheme is still not being perceived as the accessible, survivor-centred alternative it was intended to be.

Our members emphasise the need for clear, accessible information about redress options that allows survivors to make informed choices. Such information should be widely available rather than requiring survivors to seek it out, and should be provided through multiple channels to reach survivors in different circumstances.

The role and value of RSS services

Only 20% of Scheme applicants access RSS support, meaning the vast majority of survivors navigate this complex process alone. This is concerning given the trauma-informed principle that survivors should have access to support at every stage of the redress process. The low uptake may reflect inadequate promotion of RSS services, geographic barriers to access, waitlists that deter people from seeking support, or survivors' understandable mistrust of institutional services.

Our members emphasise that RSS support is not merely a 'nice to have' option but is essential for many survivors to safely engage with the process. RSS practitioners provide trauma-informed support, help survivors understand their options, assist with gathering evidence, prepare survivors for potentially distressing aspects of the process, and provide ongoing support through what can be a lengthy and difficult journey. Applications submitted without RSS support may be less likely to result in just outcomes due to incomplete information, and survivors without support are more vulnerable to retraumatisation throughout the process.

Relationships Australia calls for increased promotion and resourcing of RSS services to ensure all survivors have genuine opportunity to access support. This includes addressing waitlists, improving geographic coverage, and building trust through culturally safe service delivery.

The voice of RSS practitioners

The practitioners delivering RSS services possess deep expertise in trauma-informed practice and detailed knowledge of how the Scheme operates in practice. They see patterns across multiple applications, observe the impacts of processes on survivors, and develop insights into what works and what causes harm. Yet this expertise is often undervalued within the Scheme.

Our members report that their professional input is sometimes disregarded, their advocacy for clients is ignored, and their suggestions for systemic improvements are not meaningfully considered. This represents a missed opportunity to improve the Scheme through the insights of frontline workers who understand survivor needs intimately.

Term of Reference 8: Whether the operation and administration of the Scheme by the Department of Social Services is meeting the expectations of survivors and the Scheme's statutory objectives

Relationships Australia believes the operation and administration of the National Redress Scheme is not meeting survivor expectations or the Scheme's statutory objectives. While we acknowledge that the Department has made some improvements in response to previous feedback, significant problems persist and some aspects of the Scheme have deteriorated in ways that contravene the nature and purpose of the Scheme.

Our assessment is informed by direct feedback from survivors as relayed through RSS practitioners, as well as our members' professional observations about how the Scheme operates in practice. We recognise the complexity of administering a national scheme addressing institutional child sexual abuse and acknowledge the commitment of many individual Scheme staff who demonstrate excellent trauma-informed practice. However, systemic issues undermine the Scheme's effectiveness and, in many cases, cause additional harm to the very people it was designed to support, as well as moral injury to the dedicated, committed staff of the Scheme and RSS Providers.

For further analysis of our experience of the operation and administration of the Scheme, we refer you to Term of reference 3, above.

Reform is both necessary and achievable. With adequate resourcing, commitment to trauma-informed principles, genuine engagement with survivor voices, and accountability for quality practice, the Scheme could fulfill its intended purpose. However, this will require leadership commitment, cultural change within the Scheme, and sustained investment in both the Scheme's operations and the RSS services that support survivors through the process.

Concluding remarks

For the reasons outlined in this submission, Relationships Australia holds grave concerns about the impending cessation of the National Redress Scheme. While we recognise genuine efforts to improve access in recent years, the Scheme remains plagued by administrative delays and inefficiencies and is not consistently meeting the needs of survivors. The gap between the Royal Commission's vision of a trauma-informed, survivor-centred, accessible redress process and the current reality is significant and growing.

We emphasise that survivors deserve better. People who experienced profound harm as children in institutions that should have protected them deserve a redress process that recognises their experiences, supports their healing, and treats them with dignity and respect.

Such a scheme should never be time-limited.

Thank you again for the opportunity to make this 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 (at ntebbey@relationships.org.au) or Dr Susan Cochrane, National Policy Manager, Relationships Australia (scochrane@relationships.org.au).

Yours sincerely



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