

28 January 2022

The Hon Michael Sukkar MP
Assistant Treasurer and Minister for Housing

Submitted: online

Dear Minister

Budget 2022-2023 – public consultation – pre-Budget submissions

Thank you for the opportunity to make a submission on priorities for the 2022-2023 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 family services to Australian families, 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 70 years. Our State and Territory organisations, along with our consortium partners, operate around one third of the 65 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, to the development of public policy and to the provision of effective supports to families.

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 Family and Relationship Services and Family Law Services programs. The priorities identified by Relationships Australia in this submission relate to these programs.

2. Budget Priorities 2022-2023

This submission makes the following recommendations for Commonwealth funding priorities in the 2022-2023 Budget:

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

Recommendation 1

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 now and into the future.

Priority funding areas for Family Law (section 4)

Recommendation 2

We urge the Commonwealth to work with the sector to implement ALRC recommendations 57-60 (inclusive). We consider that enhancements are urgently needed to 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 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.

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.
- (b) The rollout of services should be concurrent with an evaluation and data collection framework to enable governments to build a robust evidence base.

Recommendation 5

That the Commonwealth dedicates funds sufficient to enable Australia to take a leading role in the development of an international convention for the rights of older people.

Addressing Loneliness in Australia (section 6)

Recommendation 6

Relationships Australia urges the Commonwealth to invest in the fight against loneliness by funding 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 7

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 impacts of COVID on families

The impacts of COVID-19 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.

The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated existing vulnerabilities and stressors, including for families affected by family and domestic violence. Relationships Australia recognises this, and

the resulting 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, and how COVID-19 has affected them, our Members have identified increases in client demand across a range of programs and services.

Demand is evidenced by increases in the numbers of clients on Relationships Australia service waitlists,¹ the increased waiting time for access to services,² and overall increase in numbers of clients seeking services.

Increased client demand – intensity

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.³

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.
- Increased concern for children’s wellbeing, 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.

¹ Including a 2,200% increase in number of counselling clients on the waitlist of Relationships Australia NSW, compared to pre-COVID numbers.

² Including increases in wait times from between 20% to 100% across a range of services across the country.

³ Across the country, for example, session numbers in a variety of counselling programs have increased by between 10% and 50%.

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 the changing nature of COVID-19, healthy and safe relationships assist people to manage the uncertainty that continues to surround the pandemic, 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 the pressures brought about, and exacerbated, by the pandemic and relevant responses.

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.

Recommendation 1

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 now and into the future.

4. Priority funding areas for Family Law

Relationships Australia commends the Commonwealth's ongoing focus on enhancing the family law system over recent years; noting, in particular:

- additional funding for existing Children's Contact Services and to support the establishment of new sites across Australia
- increased focus on family violence within the Family Law system and recognition of the need for expert, trauma-informed support for families experiencing family violence
- establishment of the Lighthouse Project with committed funding of \$13.5 million over three years until 2023
- additional resourcing of the Federal Circuit and Family Court of Australia in response to COVID-19
- extensive work to prevent and respond to abuse of older people
- the Joint Select Inquiry into Australia's Family Law System
- the House of Representatives Social Policy and Legal Affairs Committee Inquiry into family, domestic and sexual violence
- the establishment of a newly constituted Family Law Council
- the proposed establishment of a Domestic, Family and Sexual Violence Commission, and
- the current consultation on a draft National Plan to End Violence against Women and Children 2022-2032.

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 2

We urge the Commonwealth to work with the sector to implement ALRC recommendations 57-60 (inclusive). We consider that enhancements are urgently needed to 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.⁴

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, 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.

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).

⁴ 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.

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

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

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's Elder Abuse Service Trials, funded by the Attorney-General's Department. We gratefully acknowledge the Commonwealth's announcement in December 2021 of funding to secure the ongoing delivery of these services, and their formal adoption beyond the initial pilot period.

These Service Trials 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.

Amplifying the voice 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 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

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

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

that healthy ongoing relationships are as important for the older person's safety, wellbeing 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.
- (b) The rollout of services should be concurrent with an evaluation and data collection framework to enable governments to build a robust evidence base.

International convention on the rights of older people

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

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

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

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

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

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

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 wellbeing of carers and the wellbeing 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 wellbeing. 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 Commonwealth dedicates funds sufficient to enable Australia to take a leading role in the development of an international convention for the rights of older people. Australian support for an international covenant could be a powerful counter to ageism and could foster an age-inclusive culture. In particular, such a framework would facilitate:

- the exposure of ageism in all facets of community life
- the rebuttal of assumptions and biases associated with ageism
- the prevention, detection and effective responses to abuse of older people, regardless of whether they live in the community or in institutional residential premises, and
- embedding in society an explicit culture of respect for the dignity and innate value of all members of our community – including older people.

6. Addressing loneliness in Australia

The need for action on loneliness

The core of Relationships Australia's work is relationships. We work with people to enhance and improve relationships of all kinds, including among families (whether or not the family is together), with friends and colleagues, within communities and people's relationship with themselves. Relationships Australia contextualises its work with a commitment to strengthening relationships between people and a robust commitment to human rights.

Accordingly, we draw the Government's attention to evidence indicating:

- the adverse impacts of social isolation and loneliness, which include increased risk of becoming a victim or perpetrator of neglect, violence and abuse, as well as pervasive negative effects on mental and physical health, and

- the protective impacts of safe and healthy family relationships, and of social belonging and connection in both preventing violence, abuse, neglect and exploitation, and mitigating its impacts.

Relationships Australia has welcomed the Government's prioritisation of improvements to mental health and suicide prevention services, and the substantial funding, announced in May 2021, for mental health and suicide prevention measures under the *National Mental Health and Suicide Prevention Plan*.⁹

Relationships Australia believes that the connection between respectful relationships, human rights, mental health and loneliness is inextricable.

Loneliness is understood as a subjective state, a set of complex and upsetting feelings when an individual's social needs are unmet (distinct from the objective state of being alone or socially isolated) (Heinrich & Gullone, 2006).

Loneliness has increasingly been recognised as a public health concern (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. Experiences with acute loneliness have also increased during the pandemic, from 1 in 4, to 1 in 2 reporting feeling lonely since COVID-19 began.¹⁰ Accordingly, there is no doubt that loneliness is detrimental to both physical and mental health, and requires a concerted and dedicated response to address the complexity of loneliness and social isolation in Australia.

Developing a community awareness and education campaign

Relationships Australia notes recent focus on the need 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.¹¹

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.¹²

Since 2013, Relationships Australia has been the custodian of the annual Neighbour Day campaign, now in its 20th year, which promotes social connection and respectful relationships

⁹ See <https://www.pm.gov.au/media/historic-2-3-billion-national-mental-health-and-suicide-prevention-plan>

¹⁰ See Lim, M. (2021) <https://www.swinburne.edu.au/research/institutes/iverson-health-innovation/shaw-laboratory/> and <https://theconversation.com/lonely-in-lockdown-youre-not-alone-1-in-2-australians-feel-more-lonely-since-coronavirus-142724>

¹¹ 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.

¹² See, for example, Mance, 2018.

among neighbourhoods and communities.¹³

The primary purpose of Neighbour 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 Neighbour 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 Neighbour Day could be scaled to reach a greater number of Australians, in all communities and at all stages of the life course.

Recommendation 6

Relationships Australia urges the Commonwealth to invest in the fight against loneliness by funding 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. An obvious example is that people without smartphones could continue to face barriers to 'check in' to both essential and optional services, and to have an easy, 'low friction' means of demonstrating vaccination status. Another example was identified at the National Summit on Women's Safety 2021 by the Chief Justice of the Federal Circuit and Family Court of Australia. His Honour noted that, under streamlined arrangements for matters involving family violence (which has for many years now constituted an overwhelmingly dominant proportion of matters brought to the Court), victim survivors can use a mobile telephone, tablet or other device to get help from the Court. If victim survivors cannot access telecommunications services, it is much more difficult for them to get the benefits of these streamlined services.¹⁴

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.

¹³ For more information visit <https://neighbourday.org>

¹⁴ For data on the experience of domestic and family violence by women with disability, see Dyson *et al*, 2017; AIHW, 2019, at p 95ff.

Mental health and suicide prevention are cross-cutting issues, and the prioritisation accorded them, including in recent Commonwealth funding announcements, requires 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. Similarly, the authors of the Digital Inclusion Index concluded in 2020 that

Digital inclusion should take a central role in national policy making and planning, with a greater degree of coordination across sectors and the different levels of government. With the NBN now substantially completed, and the economic and social effects of the pandemic becoming clearer, Digital Ability and Affordability are critical areas for attention. (Thomas & Barraket et al, 2020, p 7)

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 2020* identified that

Across the nation, digital inclusion follows some clear economic and social contours. In general, Australians with lower levels of income, employment, and education are significantly less digitally included. There is consequently a substantial digital divide between richer and poorer Australians. (Thomas & Barraket et al, 2020, p 5)

Recommendation 7

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').

7. 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