

Submission to inform the Second Action Plan under the National Plan to End Violence against Women and Children 2022-2032

NSW Advocate for Children and Young People

July 2026

Acknowledgement of Country

The NSW Office for Youth acknowledges the Traditional Custodians of the lands where we work and live. We celebrate the diversity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and their ongoing cultures and connections to lands, waters and seas.

We pay our respects to Elders past, present and emerging and acknowledge that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people, their families and communities, continue to be disproportionately impacted by domestic, family and sexual violence.

Role of the NSW Advocate for Children and Young People

Established under the *Advocate for Children and Young People Act 2014 (NSW)*, the NSW Advocate for Children and Young People (the Advocate) is an independent statutory appointment overseen by the Parliamentary Joint Committee on Children and Young People.

The Advocate promotes the safety, welfare and wellbeing of children and young people aged 0-24 years and their participation in decisions that affect their lives. The Act requires the Advocate to give priority to the interests and needs of vulnerable and disadvantaged children and young people and to focus on systemic issues affecting children and young people¹.

The Advocate has led the NSW Office for Youth since it was established on 1 July 2025.

This submission has been written in my capacity as an Independent Statutory Officer under the *Advocate for Children and Young People Act 2014*.

¹ *Advocate for Children and Young People Act 2014 (NSW) Part 2 (s2)*

Executive summary

As the NSW Advocate for Children and Young People, I welcome the opportunity to inform the Department of Social Services' Second Action Plan under the *National Plan to End Violence Against Women and Children 2022-2032*.

Any exposure to domestic and family violence (DFV) for children and young people is harmful, with lasting impacts on safety, wellbeing and development. Across Australia, DFV remains the most common form of child maltreatment². This is not good enough.

While national and state strategies increasingly recognise children and young people as victim-survivors in their own right, outdated system responses do not reflect this change in policy and practice. Australia cannot end DFV without increased investment in integrated and child-centred supports.

I support the focus of **children and young people in their own right** as one of the five priority areas in ANROWS Consultation Paper, *Evidence to action: information direction for the Second Action Plan*. This submission responds primarily to this key priority area, together with prevention and early intervention. It outlines recommendations to strengthen support for children and young people with DFV experiences, and to break cycles of violence across the continuum of:

- Prevention
- Early intervention
- Response
- Recovery and healing.

Although important progress has been made in recent years to increase understanding and investment into DFV responses, the current system continues to fall short for young victim-survivors – both at national and state levels. Key challenges include:

- Decision makers are not listening to the experiences of and acting on what young DFV advocates have told us to improve policy and service design.
- Many children and young people are not able to recognise their experiences as DFV and therefore unlikely to seek support from specialist DFV services.
- The critical shortage of specialist DFV services for children and young people – including accompanied and unaccompanied victim-survivors – combined with the absence of a coordinated, child-centred response system. Service delivery remains fragmented, with young victim-survivors often referred between services without a clear lead agency responsible for risk assessment, safety planning, or recovery and healing.
- Some children and young people are at higher risk of DFV, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, with culturally diverse backgrounds, living with disability, have out-of-home care experience, LGBTQIA+ young people, young parents, and those living in regional and rural area.
- Increasing environmental and economic stresses that contribute to DFV risk, including housing affordability, increasing cost of living, and natural disasters.
- Risks from rapidly changing social, cultural and technological environments, including harmful online content, the influence of the “manosphere”, technology-facilitated abuse, and the misuse of artificial intelligence systems.
- The lack of sustainable funding for service provider and community responses across the DFV continuum, from prevention through to recovery and healing.

² Scott, J.G., Malacova, E., Mathews, B., Haslam, D.M., Pacella, R., Higgins, D.J., Meinck, F., Dunne, M.P., Finkelhor, D., Erskine, H.E., Lawrence, D.M. & Thomas, H.J. (2023). The association between child maltreatment and mental disorders in the Australian Child Maltreatment Study. *Medical Journal of Australia*.

Recommendations

Priority area: Children and young people in their own right

Embed children and young people's voices in policy and service design

1. Review and deliver on existing recommendations from young DFV advocates, including the priority areas for action identified in the ANROWS and DFSV Commission *Children and Young People Roundtable Report* (2025).
2. Embed partnering with young DFV advocates in any reform of policies and services relating to DFSV as standard practice. This collaboration with young advocates should:
 - be incorporated from the outset of policy, program and service planning and design
 - be supported through appropriate, trauma-informed and culturally safe supports to enable safe and meaningful participation
 - include clear feedback mechanisms that demonstrate how participation from young advocates influenced DFV policy, programs and services.

Ensure children and young people have access to child centred, culturally appropriate services that are safe and respectful

3. Fund state and territory governments to design and implement place-based DFV programs and response service models. This includes:
 - Specialist children's services for all refugees and ensure a no wrong door policy for all children and young people.
 - Youth specific DFV services for unaccompanied young people who are often turned away by traditional DFV services.

Programs should reflect local community needs, service availability, demographics and cultural contexts. For example, outreach models in rural areas; drop-in centres or youth hubs in metro areas.
4. Increase investment in DFV resources and capability across existing systems to strengthen support for children and young people victim-survivors. This includes investing in:
 - Capability building for universal system responders (including health services, neighbourhood programs, and schools).
 - Increasing resourcing and training for specialist and statutory systems (including youth justice, homelessness services, settlement support services, and child and family services).

Priority area: Prevention and Early Intervention

More action needed to address drivers of violence

5. Address social determinants that increase risks of violence and barriers to leaving. This includes action on housing affordability, cost of living, harmful online content and natural disasters, and providing adequate income support to victim survivors escaping violence.

Investment in community programs and social infrastructure to break cycles of violence

6. Establish ongoing and equitable funding streams for state and local governments to invest in social infrastructure and programs that strengthen protective factors and connect children and young people to trusted adults and positive role models. This includes youth hubs, mentoring programs and other community-based initiatives.
7. Partner with community, cultural and faith leaders to deliver prevention programs that challenge harmful gender norms, reduce stigma, and improve awareness of DFV and support options.

Respectful relationships education should be done across the community

8. Fund the long-term implementation of the Respectful Relationships Education (RRE) Program and adequately train educators and teachers.
9. Expand investment to whole-of-community prevention strategies and mentoring programs that reinforce positive attitudes and behaviours beyond the classroom.

Priority area: Children and young people in their own right

DFV has a profound impact on children and young people. Their voices need to be embedded in policy and decision making.

Recommendation

1. Review and deliver on existing recommendations from young DFV advocates, including the priority areas for action identified in the ANROWS and DFSV Commission *Children and Young People Roundtable Report* (2025).
2. Partner with young DFV advocates in any reform of policies and services relating to DFSV. This collaboration with young advocates should:
 - be incorporated from the outset of policy, program and service planning and design
 - be supported through appropriate, trauma-informed and culturally safe supports to enable safe and meaningful participation
 - include clear feedback mechanisms that demonstrate how participation from young advocates influenced DFV policy, programs and services.

In NSW, DFV is the most common form of child maltreatment.

NSW Police data in 2025 shows that:

- One in eight victims of domestic assault are young people.
- One in ten domestic and violence assault offenders are young people.

Children and young people's experiences of DFV are often complex, with impacts being widespread and lifelong. Research finds that exposure, either as direct victims of violence or harm through indirect exposure, leads to worse outcomes for children and young people across health, development, social and educational outcomes³.

Each year, the NSW Advocate for Children and Young People commissions statewide polling to gain insights from children and young people across NSW. More than 2,300 young people (10 to 24 years) from across the state completed the 2026 NSW Youth Week Poll.

We asked children and young people what they think are the biggest problems, issues or worries⁴. Domestic and family violence is regularly identified as a concern. Similarly, consultation with 8,340 young people as part of the NSW Youth Summit 2024 report identified DFV as one of the top ten issues impacting young people⁵.

³ Australia's National Research Organisation for Women's Safety. (2018). *Research summary: The impacts of domestic and family violence on children* (2nd ed.; ANROWS Insights 11/2018). ANROWS.

⁴ Office for Youth (2026). NSW Youth Week Poll 2026. Prepared by Insight Centre.

⁵ Office for Youth (2025). Report on the NSW Youth Summit 2024. NSW Government.

“I believe that violence against women is an important topic to me due to my personal experience with the matter and the climbing rates of it. People need to discuss sensitive matters, such as this, to inform and educate the emerging generations of the signs of abuse and prevent abusers.

- Online survey response (What we heard during consultation for the NSW Strategic Plan for Children and Young People 2027-2030)

“Domestic violence in homes profoundly impacts the health and wellbeing of young people.”

- Young man, 18-24 years, living in Hunter Valley region (NSW Youth Week Poll 2026)

“More help to kids in abusive households and abusive or unsafe relationships.”

- Young man, 13 years, living in Northern Rivers region (NSW Youth Week Poll 2026)

Children and young people are already telling government what needs to change.

Although national and state government strategies now recognise children and young people as victim-survivors in their own right, this shift is not reflected in current system responses and service design.

This is reflected in existing research and consultations, including the DFSVC and ANROWS' roundtable report with young advocates with lived experience of domestic, family and sexual violence (DFSV). Youth advocates have identified gaps in the system and six priorities for government action. Their voices, experiences and solutions should be central to the Second Action Plan.

The six priorities include⁶:

1. Children and young people of all ages should be able to access the supports they need.
2. Children and young people and their families should be empowered through education to prevent and respond to DFSV
3. Children and young people should have access to safe housing
4. Police engagement with children and young people must be safe and respectful.
5. Children and young people voices and experiences should be heard and considered in court processes.
6. The system must be co-designed with children and young people to ensure individualised and culturally appropriate supports.

⁶ Domestic, Family and Sexual Violence Commission. (2026). *Children and Young People Roundtable Report: What children and young people with lived and living experience of domestic, family and sexual violence want government to know*. Australian Government.

The system needs to provide a coordinated child and youth friendly response that meets the unique needs of each child.

Recommendation

3. Fund state and territory governments to design and implement place-based DFV programs and response service models. This includes:
 - Specialist children's workers for all refuges and ensure a no wrong door policy for all children and young people.
 - Youth specific DFV services for unaccompanied young people who are often turned away by traditional DFV services.

Programs should reflect local community needs, service availability, population demographics and cultural contexts. For example, outreach models for rural communities; drop-in centres or youth hubs in metropolitan areas.

Children and young people continue to be supported as extensions of a protective parent rather than as individuals with their own support and recovery needs.

For example, almost all Commonwealth and NSW Government funded supports are for adults or families, including Staying Home Leaving Violence (SHLV), Integrated Domestic and Family Violence Services (IDFVS), and Safer Pathway. While specialist children workers exist, they are not available in all refuges meaning that often children accompanying their protective parent will not receive any child centred supports.

Many victims are too old or ineligible for refuge services.

Service eligibility requirements also create significant barriers for young men and unaccompanied young people. Many DFV and refuge services are for adult women accompanied by dependent children, rather than young people seeking support in their own right. In many cases, young people without a protective parent are left without support and often rely on homelessness services. These services are often not resourced or consistently trained to provide specialist DFV support and are already at capacity.

For some young people, requirements for parental consent can be used coercively by people using violence to prevent access to help, leaving young victim-survivors to rely on Child Protection as their only pathway to safety.

Children and young people need services that are child friendly, place based and tailored to their needs.

Children and young people with DFV experiences are not homogenous. Service data and research show some population groups experience higher levels of violence, face additional barriers to support, or have greater contact with statutory systems. This includes:

- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people
- multicultural and multifaith young people, particularly with migrant, refugee or asylum seeker backgrounds
- children and young people living in regional and rural communities
- children and young people with disability
- young people with out-of-home care experience
- LGBTQIA+ young people
- young parents, and

- young women and girls⁷.

There is an urgent need to design and deliver holistic child-centred systems, policies and supports. This includes services that are:

- age-appropriate
- trauma-informed
- meet children and young people where they're at
- recognise children and young people as victim-survivors in their own right (e.g. unaccompanied)
- culturally safe and inclusive
- confidential and private.

ANROWS also highlight the need for young victim-survivors to access broader service system, that is collaborative and able to respond holistically across all systems and services working with children and young people and their families⁸. This includes health, mental health, alcohol and other drugs, homelessness services, family law, and education systems.

Recent accounts of how young victim-survivors experience the service system and where critical gaps in support exist, include:

- Some young people, and especially First Nations young people, are avoiding seeking support altogether due to concerns that engaging with services will result in reports to Child Protection.
- Young people on temporary visas experiencing DFV are being advised to seek safety overnight in emergency departments because they are ineligible for many specialist support services.
- For young transgender and gender diverse people who need to leave home for safety or who are experiencing homelessness, there are only two specialist homelessness services available in NSW, both located in Greater Sydney.

Young victim-survivors come into contact with multiple systems but support remains fragmented and without coordination

Recommendation

4. Increase investment in DFV resources and capability across existing systems to strengthen support for children and young people victim-survivors. This includes investing in:
 - Capability building for universal system responders (including health services, neighbourhood programs, and schools).
 - Increasing resourcing and training for specialist and statutory systems (including youth justice, homelessness services, settlement support services, and child and family services).

Many children and young people do not recognise their experiences as DFV.

The DFSV Commission and ANROWS' consultation with children and young people finds many do not identify their experiences as DFV⁹. Young victim-survivors are therefore more likely to receive

⁷ Department of Communities and Justice (2022). NSW Domestic and Family Violence Plan 2022-2027. NSW Government.

⁸ Gillfeather-Spetere, S. and. Watson A. (2024). In their own right: Actions to improve children and young people's safety from domestic, family and sexual violence. ANROWS.

⁹ Domestic, Family and Sexual Violence Commission. (2026). *Children and Young People Roundtable Report: What children and young people with lived and living experience of domestic, family and sexual violence want government to know*. Australian Government.

support from sectors other than specialist DFV services. Research shows that schools, mental health services, homelessness services and other health services are often first touchpoints for supports for children exposed to violence.

This shows that many systems already interact with children and young people experiencing DFV - but these interactions are not always recognised or explicitly framed as responses to DFV. This includes:

- Universal systems such as schools, early learning centres, health services, and community programs. These often act as important soft entry points for identification, support and referrals, particularly when trust and ongoing relationships already exist¹⁰.
- Statutory or specialist systems, including child protection, youth justice, and homelessness services.

Additional investment in service capacity and coordinated responses is urgently needed.

Children and young people experiencing DFV are already known to multiple service systems. The challenge is not identifying those at risk, but ensuring services have the capacity and coordination to adequately respond.

Research commissioned by Domestic Violence NSW (DVNSW) finds a DFSV sector under significant strain, with two in three new referrals to specialist DFV service providers unable to be allocated a caseworker, and one in four referrals redirected elsewhere due to capacity constraints¹¹. Consequently, many women and their children, are unable to access timely support. Others disengage from help-seeking altogether.

Capacity constraints also exist across statutory systems. In the year to December 2025, 429,337 children were reported to the Child Protection Helpline. It is estimated that around one in three (approximately 141,000) of these reports related to DFV. But in NSW, more than two-thirds of Risk of Significant Harm (ROSH) reports are closed without allocation to a caseworker due to capacity constraints, and only around one quarter of children receive face-to-face follow-up after a report.¹² Similarly, data shows that 78% of children and young people who were victims of NSW Police-recorded DV-related assault had previously been the subject of ROSH reports.

Other services, such as community and family supports (CAFS) and youth homelessness services, also play a pivotal role in the DFV ecosystem. These services often become the referral points for children and young people to access supports. However, many of these services are not recognised as providing DFV services and are therefore not appropriately funded or consistently trained to provide DFV support to victims. More recognition and supports are required for these services so that children and young people receive consistent support.

Young people report being “handballed” between services, with no single agency taking responsibility for risk assessment, safety planning or ongoing support. This fragmentation leaves young victim-survivors without the support required to achieve safety and healing – or remaining in unsafe situations.

Priority area: Prevention and early intervention

¹⁰ Nelson, J. (2026) Domestic and family violence experienced by children and young people in NSW. Parliament of NSW.

¹¹ Equity Economics and Domestic Violence NSW (2025). *Stretched Beyond Capacity: The unmet demand crisis facing domestic and family violence services in NSW*.

¹² NSW Ombudsman 2026, “No capacity to allocate” — The Department of Communities and Justice’s practice of closing ROSH (Risk of Significant Harm) reports, Report to Parliament, Sydney, viewed 16 June 2026, <https://www.ombo.nsw.gov.au/reports/report-to-parliament/no-capacity-to-allocate-dcjs-practice-of-closing-rosh-reports>.

More action needed to address drivers of violence

Recommendation

5. Address social determinants that increase risks of violence and barriers to leaving. This includes action on housing affordability, cost of living, harmful online content and natural disasters, and providing adequate income support to victim survivors escaping violence.

In addition to social and emotional factors, broader economic and environmental conditions increase risk of DFV. It also impacts on people's ability to access safety and support. These include increasing cost of living, housing affordability and quality, and post-natural disasters¹³.

For example, Anglicare Sydney's *Cost of Leaving Report* (2026) shows how rising housing and living costs is preventing people from leaving unsafe situations. Young people have also told us that they remain due to not being able to afford to leave the family home. Similarly, a 2020 study from Melbourne University finds incidents of DFV are higher in bushfire-affected communities.

“My friends and I all live at home. It's a not a healthy situation for me, but I can't afford to move out.”

– Workshop with young people at the NSW Youth Summit 2024¹⁴

DFV prevention requires more than awareness raising and education. It also requires measures to address the economic and environmental stresses that increase DFV risk and create barriers to help-seeking.

Investment in community programs and social infrastructure to break cycles of violence

Recommendation

6. Establish ongoing and equitable funding streams for state and local governments to invest in social infrastructure and programs that strengthen protective factors and connect children and young people to trusted adults and positive role models. This includes youth hubs, mentoring programs and other community-based initiatives.
7. Partner with community, cultural and faith leaders to deliver prevention programs that challenge harmful gender norms, reduce stigma, and improve awareness of DFV and support options.

Preventing DFV requires more than crisis responses. It requires sustainable investment in programs and initiatives that support children, young people and families before harm occurs.

Social infrastructure

Consultation with young people for the NSW Office for Youth *Report on the NSW Youth Summit* (2025) highlights the importance of social infrastructure as low-barrier entry points to safety, connection and support, especially for children and young people with challenging family circumstances. Young people with experiences of unhealthy family relationship dynamics described

¹³ Impact Economics and Policy (2022). Report Two - Domestic and Family Violence - Aftershock: Addressing the Economic and Social Costs of the Pandemic and Natural Disasters. NSW Council of Social Services.

¹⁴ NSW Office for Youth (2025). Report on the NSW Youth Summit 2024. NSW Government.

spending time in libraries, at school, friends' houses or in public spaces to escape unhealthy family dynamics and the home¹⁵.

There is opportunity to expand prevention and early intervention activities in community settings where children, young people and families already spend time and/or have trusted relationships, including community sports, arts programs, early childhood education and care, faith-based and cultural community organisations, libraries and public spaces, and online.

Youth hubs and libraries are particularly important in this context. Youth hubs provide welcoming spaces where young people can engage in free activities, meet friends, and connect with social workers or other trusted adults. Similarly, libraries provide free and accessible environments that can act as soft entry points to support.

Universal family and parenting supports

Expanding access to universal parenting supports is also an important prevention and early intervention strategy. According to ANROWS, making parenting information, advice and programs available to all parents and carers, rather than only those identified as at risk, can strengthen family wellbeing, support positive parent-child relationships, promote non-violent parenting practices, and reduce risk factors associated with DFV¹⁶.

Ongoing investment is needed to maintain and expand parenting and family support services, including antenatal education, child and family health services, parenting programs, peer support groups, online resources, and family support services.

"Having someone who can work with both the young person and the family can do a lot of prevention work."

- Consultation with Yfoundations Youth Homelessness Representative Council to inform the NSW Strategic Plan for Children and Young People 2027-2030

Mentoring programs and role models

Young people consistently identify the importance of trusted adults and role models. This is both for children and young people experiencing violence and young people who use violence.

Young people say to help them, services need to support their family, and shared the impact that trusted and respectful adults and role models make in setting a good example or advocating for them.

"They need mentors. More people who can speak to their students and build a connection with them so they can understand what their students need."

- Consultation with young person in Youth Justice Centre to inform the NSW Strategic Plan for Children and Young People 2027-2030

¹⁵ NSW Office for Youth (2025). Report on the NSW Youth Summit 2024. NSW Government.

¹⁶ Gillfeather-Spetere, S. and. Watson A. (2024). In their own right: Actions to improve children and young people's safety from domestic, family and sexual violence. ANROWS.

Respectful relationships education (RRE)

Recommendation

8. Fund the long-term implementation of the Respectful Relationship Education (RRE) Program and adequately train educators and teachers.
9. Expand investment to whole-of-community approaches and mentoring programs that reinforce positive attitudes and behaviours beyond the classroom.

The Advocate supports recent changes to the NSW Curriculum to incorporate the Respectful Relationships Education (RRE) program. Funded through the Commonwealth Consent and Respectful Relationships Education Measure and NSW Pathways to Prevention: NSW Strategy for the Prevention of Domestic, Family and Sexual Violence 2024-2028, the program supports schools to deliver age-appropriate and evidence-based learning about respectful relationships, coercive control, consent and pornography.

Research finds that prevention is most effective when delivered long-term. Curriculum reform should be complemented by community-based programs, mentoring opportunities, and ongoing evaluation.

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