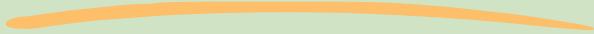


Submission on the Second Action Plan under the National Strategy to Prevent and Respond to Child Sexual Abuse



A submission to the Department of Social Services and the
National Office for Child Safety (Attorney-General's
Department)

August 2026

Acknowledgements

The National Centre for Action on Child Sexual Abuse (National Centre) respectfully acknowledges and celebrates Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Nations and we pay our respects to ancestors and Elders past and present.

We recognise that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, culture and lore continue to lead Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and acknowledge the tireless work to pursue justice outcomes for children and young people.

The National Centre supports decisions affecting people's lives being fundamentally informed by those people. And upholds truth telling and agreement making for justice as essential components of healing.

We seek to honour the lived and living expertise of all victim-survivors of child sexual abuse, harnessing all ages, cultures, abilities and backgrounds, and commit to substantially addressing the harm of child sexual abuse, now and well into the future.

We recognise that there are children and young people today who are experiencing sexual abuse and dedicate ourselves to doing all we can to expedite and promote their effective protection and care.

Our Commitment

The establishment of a national centre to raise awareness and understanding of the impacts of child sexual abuse, support help-seeking and guide best practice advocacy and support and therapeutic treatment was a key recommendation (9.9) of the 2017 Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse. The Royal Commission identified that ongoing national leadership is necessary to improve outcomes for victim-survivors of past child sexual abuse and to prevent future child sexual abuse.

Established in late 2021, the National Centre is a partnership between three respected organisations with strong histories of leadership in responding to child sexual abuse - Australian Childhood Foundation, Blue Knot Foundation and the Healing Foundation (each a Founding Member). The National Centre has an integrated governance structure that embeds the expertise of adults with lived experience of child sexual abuse, the rich strength of knowledge of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and the voices of children and young people, as well as the expertise of researchers, practitioners, justice organisations, corporate entities, government and policy leaders.

At its core, the National Centre is a symbol of hope and an essential vehicle for action for many victim-survivors of child sexual abuse. Its vision is for a community where children are safe and victim-survivors are supported to heal and recover, free of stigma and shame – a future without child sexual abuse.

To achieve its vision, the National Centre:

- ensures the knowledge and voice of victim-survivors of child sexual abuse is at the core of all of its activities
- commissions critical research
- builds the workforce capability of organisations working with victim-survivors of child sexual abuse
- strives to raise community awareness of the nature of child sexual abuse and how to prevent it.

Executive summary

The National Centre welcomes the development of the Second Action Plan under the National Strategy to Prevent and Respond to Child Sexual Abuse 2021-2030. The National Centre also recognises that the Second Action Plan is being developed within a broader national reform landscape, including the National Plan to End Violence Against Women and Children 2022–2032, Safe and Supported: The National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children 2021–2031 and Our Ways – Strong Ways – Our Voices: National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Plan to End Family, Domestic and Sexual Violence 2026–2036.

Child sexual abuse is a distinct form of harm requiring dedicated policy attention. It is also deeply connected to these broader reform agendas. The development of the Second Action Plan therefore presents an opportunity both to strengthen Australia's response to child sexual abuse, and also to ensure child sexual abuse priorities are visible and acted on across the broader systems that shape the experiences of children, families and victim-survivors.

Child sexual abuse occurs across institutional, community, online and family settings, with the majority of victim-survivors harmed by people known to them.

The Australian Child Maltreatment Study (ACMS) found that 28.5% of Australians aged 16 years and over have experienced child sexual abuse, underscoring the scale of the issue and the need for sustained national action.¹

This submission draws on the National Centre's engagement with victim-survivors, practitioners, researchers and service systems, alongside available evidence and policy analysis. Consistent themes emerging through lived expertise include the need to better recognise child sexual abuse, strengthen responses to disclosure, improve support across the lifespan and increase accountability for system outcomes.

The First Action Plans established important foundations for national reform. They increased national focus on child sexual abuse, strengthened child safe approaches, supported prevention activity and invested in evidence, policy development and national coordination. Australia has spent the last five years building foundations for reform. The task for the next phase is to ensure that reform is experienced in practice.

The National Centre suggests that the Second Action Plan should focus on four outcomes:

- Child sexual abuse is prevented before it occurs.
- Children are seen, heard, understood and protected from harm.
- Victim-survivors, including adult survivors, can access quality support across their lifespan.
- Systems are accountable for outcomes.

These outcomes should guide the design, implementation and evaluation of the Second Action Plan.

Child sexual abuse occurs in childhood, but for many victim-survivors its impacts are experienced across a lifetime. The Second Action Plan should therefore strengthen both child-centred responses and lifelong support, healing and recovery pathways for victim-survivors.

The National Centre recommends that child sexual abuse is recognised as both a distinct national reform priority and a cross-cutting issue within Australia's broader reform landscape. The Second Action Plan should therefore operate as both a dedicated child sexual abuse reform agenda and a mechanism for ensuring child sexual abuse priorities are embedded across intersecting national reforms.

The outcomes above describe the desired end state of reform. The recommendations in the box below identify the policy, system and implementation priorities required to achieve those outcomes.

Prevention should always be the priority. However, where child sexual abuse occurs, children should be seen, heard, understood and protected, victim-survivors should be supported across their lifespan, and systems should be accountable for delivering meaningful outcomes.

Success should not be measured by the number of activities delivered or initiatives completed. It should be measured by whether abuse is prevented; whether children are seen, heard, understood and protected from harm; whether victim-survivors can access support when they need it; and whether systems are becoming more effective, connected and accountable over time.

Recommendations

The National Centre makes six recommendations for action:

1. Strengthen prevention and early intervention through implementation of evidence-informed and promising approaches, and proven approaches where available.
2. Make disclosure recognition and response quality a national reform priority.
3. Establish nationally consistent survivor pathways and navigation support across the lifespan.
4. Establish a national outcomes, accountability and continuous improvement approach.
5. Embed child sexual abuse priorities across intersecting national reform agendas.
6. Invest in national capability to support implementation, learning and continuous improvement.

What we heard from victim-survivors

In developing the Second Action Plan, it is critical that governments listen to and address the priorities expressed by victim-survivors of child sexual abuse. Victim-survivors are experts in the systems, services and responses that affect their lives.

The National Centre recently conducted an outreach campaign, *Voices for Action*, to hear directly from victim-survivors of child sexual abuse about the changes they want to see and what is needed to make communities safer and more supportive for children, young people and victim-survivors.

In the submissions we received through *Voices for Action*, we heard the following key themes, which reflect the broad and interconnected impacts of child sexual abuse and the wide-ranging actions people with lived experience felt mattered most:

- Bring child sexual abuse and its impacts into view.
- Address child sexual abuse in family settings.
- Build greater understanding of the lifelong impacts of child sexual abuse.
- Reform systems so they do not cause further harm or trauma.
- Create access to appropriate support services across the lifespan, to enable victim-survivors' recovery and healing.

These key themes are reflected across this submission and will also continue to shape the National Centre's policy, advocacy, lived experience and sector capability work.

Lessons from the First Action Plans

The First Action Plans established important foundations for national reform. They increased national attention on child sexual abuse, strengthened child safe approaches, invested in prevention and awareness efforts, supported evidence development and strengthened national coordination. They also demonstrated the value of sustained leadership, victim-survivor expertise and cross-sector collaboration in driving reform.

The evaluation of the First Action Plans provides an opportunity to reflect on what has been achieved and what should be prioritised in the next phase of reform. From the National Centre's perspective, the challenge is no longer simply identifying what needs to change. The challenge is ensuring that reforms are implemented consistently, coordinated effectively and experienced meaningfully by children, families and victim-survivors. Australia has spent the last five years building foundations for reform. The task now is to ensure reform is experienced in practice.

The National Centre considers there are four lessons that should guide the development of the Second Action Plan:

Child sexual abuse requires sustained national attention

Child sexual abuse is a distinct form of harm with unique drivers, impacts, pathways, service responses and prevention requirements. While it intersects with broader child maltreatment, family violence, mental health, disability and justice agendas, it cannot be adequately addressed as a subsidiary issue within those systems alone. The Second Action Plan should maintain a dedicated focus on child sexual abuse while strengthening connections with related national reform agendas.

Implementation matters as much as policy design

Australia now has a growing evidence base, stronger child safe approaches and greater awareness of risks and protective factors across many sectors. The challenge is not a lack of knowledge about what needs to change. The challenge is ensuring that evidence is translated into practice, reforms are implemented consistently and improvements are experienced by children and victim-survivors. The Second Action Plan should place a stronger emphasis on implementation capability, including mechanisms for shared learning from implementation and continuous improvement.

The evaluation of the First Action Plans highlights the importance of implementation capability, governance, monitoring and evaluation, communication, and clearly scoped and prioritised actions as critical enablers of reform.

Reform should be judged by outcomes, not activity

The ultimate measure of success is not the number of initiatives delivered. Success should be measured by whether children are safer, whether abuse is prevented, whether disclosures are recognised and responded to appropriately, whether victim-survivors can access support when they need it and whether systems are improving outcomes over time. Governments should be able to demonstrate how reform efforts contribute to meaningful outcomes for children, families and victim-survivors. This means investing in an uplift in measuring outcomes across multiple sectors through tools that are easily implemented and engaged with by workers.

Victim-survivors must remain at the centre of reform

Victim-survivors provide critical insight into how systems operate in practice. They identify barriers to access, implementation challenges and opportunities for improvement that may otherwise remain invisible. The next phase of reform should continue to embed lived and living expertise across policy development, service design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation. This is essential to building systems that are responsive, accountable and capable of continuous improvement. This is complex and skilled work which needs to be appropriately invested in and scaffolded to be successful in supporting victim survivors to have influence over reform processes and accountability measures.

Outcomes for the Second Action Plan

The National Centre proposes a focus on four outcomes, noting that these are not intended to create another layer of activity. They describe what success should look like and provide a simple test for whether implementation is improving the lives of children, families and victim-survivors.

Outcome 1: Child sexual abuse is prevented before it occurs

The Second Action Plan should strengthen implementation of evidence-informed prevention, early intervention, child safe practice, harmful sexual behaviour responses and responses to emerging online and technology-facilitated risks.

Outcome 2: Children are seen, heard, understood and protected

The Second Action Plan should make disclosure recognition and response quality a reform priority, including how children and young people are recognised, supported and protected when they communicate harm or seek help for themselves or others.

Outcome 3: Victim-survivors, including adult survivors, can access quality support across their lifespan

The Second Action Plan should support nationally consistent pathways, navigation and recovery responses that recognise the lifelong impacts of child sexual abuse and the changing support needs of victim-survivors.

Outcome 4: Systems are accountable for outcomes

The Second Action Plan should strengthen outcomes measurement, public reporting, implementation review and survivor-informed continuous improvement.

These outcomes should guide the design, implementation and evaluation of the Second Action Plan.

Embedding child sexual abuse across national reform agendas

Child sexual abuse is a distinct form of harm that requires dedicated policy attention. It is also deeply connected to broader social, health, justice and community issues. Children, families and victim-survivors do not experience systems in isolation. They move between systems, services and institutions that are often designed, funded and governed separately.

One of the lessons emerging from the First Action Plans is that progress on child sexual abuse reform cannot be achieved through a single strategy acting alone. Prevention, protection, support, recovery and healing are influenced by a range of intersecting systems and policy settings. Efforts to address child sexual abuse will be strengthened when they are connected with broader national reform agendas and weakened when they operate in isolation.

The Second Action Plan should therefore operate in two ways:

- as a dedicated national reform agenda focused on preventing and responding to child sexual abuse
- as a mechanism for ensuring priorities for action on child sexual abuse are visible and acted upon across related reform efforts.

The objective is not to merge these agendas or dilute the focus on child sexual abuse, but to strengthen it.

Cross-portfolio governance arrangements should ensure victim-survivors and families do not fall through gaps between government plans, strategies and agencies.

National Plan to End Violence Against Women and Children

The National Centre welcomes stronger alignment between the National Strategy to Prevent and Respond to Child Sexual Abuse and the National Plan to End Violence Against Women and Children.

Child sexual abuse affects children of all genders. However, girls are disproportionately affected by many forms of child sexual abuse, sexual exploitation and sexual violence. For many victim-survivors, experiences of child sexual abuse form part of a broader continuum of gender-based violence across the life course.

The ACMS found child sexual abuse was reported by 37.3% of females and 18.8% of males, demonstrating disproportionate impacts on girls while reinforcing the need for inclusive responses that recognise and respond to the experiences of all children.² There are also distinct and increased risks for children and young people who are LGBTIQ+ and these must be addressed. The National

Plan and National Strategy share common objectives relating to prevention, early intervention, sexual violence, recovery, healing and system reform. Stronger alignment can support more coordinated responses while maintaining a dedicated focus on child sexual abuse.

The four outcomes proposed in this submission are broadly consistent with the prevention, early intervention, response, and recovery and healing domains of the National Plan. Strengthening alignment across these frameworks can improve accountability, reduce duplication and support more coordinated implementation across governments and service systems.

Safe and Supported: The National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children

2021-2031

The National Centre also welcomes stronger alignment between the National Strategy to Prevent and Respond to Child Sexual Abuse and Safe and Supported: The National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children.

Child sexual abuse is often subsumed under child maltreatment and responses to it left with child protection systems and approaches. The child protection system alone has been proven to be inadequate in preventing and responding to child sexual abuse in childhood and is an inappropriate space for adult survivors of child sexual abuse to access supports. The National Centre recommends that child sexual abuse be considered as a distinct harm within Safe and Supported to enable aligned strategies to be developed that address this. This would strengthen national efforts to achieve the framework's overarching goal of ensuring that all children and young people are safe, supported and able to thrive.

First Nations reform agendas

The National Centre strongly supports alignment between the Second Action Plan, Our Ways – Strong Ways – Our Voices and Safe and Supported.

Responses to child sexual abuse affecting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, families and communities must be informed by self-determination, community leadership and culturally grounded approaches to healing and wellbeing.

The Second Action Plan should support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership through genuine decision-making authority, community control, Indigenous Data Sovereignty, Indigenous Data Governance and investment in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledge systems and healing approaches. Alignment across these reforms can reduce duplication, strengthen consistency and create opportunities for shared learning about keeping children safe and connected to family, culture and community.

Consistent with Indigenous Data Sovereignty and Indigenous Data Governance principles, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples should have authority over how data relating to their communities is collected, governed, interpreted and applied within child sexual abuse prevention and response systems.

Closing the Gap

Many of the outcomes sought through the National Strategy are directly connected to Closing the Gap priorities, including community leadership, culturally responsive services, family wellbeing and accountability.

The National Centre considers that child sexual abuse should be explicitly addressed within broader efforts to improve outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, young people and families, with responses shaped and led by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leaders.

This includes alignment with the Closing the Gap Priority Reforms relating to shared decision-making, strengthening the community-controlled sector, transforming government organisations and shared access to data and information.

Disability safeguarding reform

Children and young people with disability face increased vulnerability to abuse and often encounter additional barriers to disclosure, safety and support.

The Second Action Plan should strengthen links with disability safeguarding reforms to ensure prevention initiatives, disclosure pathways, response systems and support services are accessible, inclusive and responsive. This includes improving communication supports, strengthening safeguarding arrangements and ensuring disability perspectives are embedded across prevention, response and recovery efforts.

Mental health and suicide prevention

The impacts of child sexual abuse are closely linked to mental health outcomes across the lifespan.

The Second Action Plan should strengthen alignment with mental health and suicide prevention reforms to ensure pathways between specialist child sexual abuse responses, trauma services, mental health supports and suicide prevention services are coordinated and responsive. Long-term healing requires investment in accessible services capable of supporting recovery beyond periods of crisis.

Online safety and technology reform

Technology is rapidly changing the nature of child sexual abuse, exploitation and harm.

The Second Action Plan should maintain strong alignment with online safety reforms and support greater collaboration between child protection agencies, law enforcement, regulators, technology platforms and specialist organisations. Industry must play an active role in mitigating risks to children and should be accountable for failures to address foreseeable harms.

Aged care and elder abuse

Child sexual abuse is not only a childhood issue, but its impacts can also endure or re-emerge across the lifespan, including in older age. As people engage with aged care, health and community services, experiences of trauma may be triggered by increased dependence on others, changes in health, loss of control, or the need to navigate multiple service systems. National strategies

relating to ageing and aged care should therefore explicitly recognise victim-survivors of child sexual abuse and embed trauma-informed approaches, safe disclosure pathways and access to appropriate supports. Doing so will help ensure that older Australians who have experienced child sexual abuse can access services that promote dignity, safety, choice and wellbeing throughout later life.

Justice and family law reform

Many victim-survivors engage with justice and legal systems throughout their lives, including criminal justice processes, family law proceedings, redress schemes and child protection interventions.

The Second Action Plan should strengthen connections with justice and family law reforms to improve access to justice, reduce re-traumatisation and strengthen responses to allegations and experiences of child sexual abuse. Particular attention should be given to ensuring that systems are child-centred, trauma-informed and capable of responding appropriately to the realities of child sexual abuse.

The Second Action Plan should also support implementation of outstanding reform recommendations aimed at improving access to justice, reducing re-traumatisation and strengthening accountability across justice and redress pathways. Specific recommendations from the National Centre's submissions to previous inquiries on justice responses and the National Redress Scheme offer valuable contributions here.³

National capability required for implementation

The First Action Plans established important foundations for reform. Achieving meaningful change through the next phase of reform will depend both on what governments commit to doing, and also on Australia's capability to translate those commitments into practical change.

Policy commitments alone do not improve outcomes. Meaningful reform requires capability across governments, service systems, communities and institutions to implement evidence, respond to emerging challenges, learn from experience and continuously improve.

The National Centre considers that the following six capability areas will be critical to the successful implementation of the Second Action Plan:

Evidence into action

Australia's understanding of child sexual abuse continues to grow through research, evaluation, lived and living expertise and frontline practice. The challenge is not generating more evidence but ensuring it is translated into practical improvements that can be readily applied across diverse settings.

Evidence must be translated into resources, tools, guidance and capability-building approaches that are accessible, timely and responsive to workforce needs. This may include practical implementation resources, targeted training, communities of practice and other approaches that support organisations and practitioners to apply evidence in real-world settings.

The value of evidence lies not in its production, but in its ability to improve decisions, practice and outcomes for children and victim-survivors.

Survivor-informed system improvement

Victim-survivors provide an essential source of expertise for system improvement.

The next phase of reform should move beyond consultation and strengthen the systematic inclusion of victim-survivor expertise to improve how systems operate in practice. Systems should also be accountable to victim-survivors and create meaningful opportunities for influence, participation and feedback.

Survivor-informed system improvement can help identify barriers to support, improve service access and navigation, strengthen responses to disclosure, test whether reforms are achieving their intended outcomes and identify unintended consequences that may otherwise remain invisible.

Embedding victim-survivor expertise throughout design, implementation and evaluation will help ensure reforms remain connected to the experiences of those they are intended to benefit.

Implementation and reform capability

Australia has developed strong policy frameworks and reform agendas. Yet implementation remains one of the most persistent challenges in child sexual abuse reform.

The Second Action Plan should support capability for implementation planning, organisational change, workforce development, cross-sector collaboration and implementation learning. It should also support mechanisms that allow governments, organisations and communities to share lessons, identify challenges and adapt approaches over time.

Implementation should be recognised as a capability area in its own right, rather than an assumed outcome of policy development.

First Nations leadership, healing and knowledge systems

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership should be recognised as a core capability within Australia's child sexual abuse reform architecture.

Stronger outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, families and communities depend on investment in community-controlled responses, self-determination, Indigenous Data Sovereignty, Indigenous Data Governance and culturally grounded approaches to prevention, healing and recovery.

First Nations knowledge systems provide essential expertise on healing, wellbeing, family, community and culture. The Second Action Plan should continue to support and invest in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership as a central component of long-term reform.

Adaptive system capability

The nature of child sexual abuse continues to evolve.

Technological change, emerging online harms, changing offending behaviours and new forms of exploitation require systems that can anticipate, learn and adapt rather than simply respond after harm occurs.

The Second Action Plan should strengthen capability to identify emerging risks, integrate new evidence, collaborate across sectors and develop responses to future challenges. Adaptive capability is critical to ensuring reform remains effective within a rapidly changing environment.

System accountability and leadership

Long-term reform requires sustained leadership, accountability and stewardship.

The National Centre considers that child sexual abuse reform should be supported by stronger national approaches to accountability, monitoring, implementation review and continuous improvement.

This includes:

- shared outcomes and indicators
- public reporting on progress
- implementation review mechanisms
- evaluation and learning processes
- survivor-informed accountability approaches.

Child sexual abuse intersects across multiple portfolios, agencies and reform agendas. Effective stewardship therefore requires coordination and accountability mechanisms that extend beyond a single strategy or agency. National leadership is required to maintain focus on outcomes, identify emerging issues and ensure reform efforts remain connected over time.

Recommendations

The National Centre recommends that the Second Action Plan focus on six priority areas that strengthen prevention, improve outcomes for children and victim-survivors, build accountability and support effective implementation. Collectively, these priorities support a child-centred, survivor-informed approach that prevents abuse before it occurs, improves responses when harm is identified, strengthens support across the lifespan and ensures systems are accountable for meaningful outcomes.

To strengthen implementation, the Second Action Plan should ensure actions include clear accountability, timeframes, indicators, reporting arrangements and resourcing.

Recommendation 1: Strengthen prevention and early intervention through implementation of evidence-informed and promising approaches, and proven approaches where available

Australia has invested significantly in prevention initiatives, child safe approaches, awareness raising, policy development and evidence generation. The next phase of reform should focus on implementation, consistency and scale rather than creating additional frameworks or disconnected initiatives.

Prevention should remain the primary objective of the Second Action Plan. Prevention should not place responsibility on children to protect themselves from abuse. Rather, it should strengthen the capability of adults, organisations, communities and online environments to recognise risk, reduce opportunities for abuse and intervene before harm occurs. This includes embedding and strengthening child safe cultures, improving understanding of grooming behaviours, building community confidence to act on concerns and ensuring institutions can identify and respond to warning signs.

Prevention efforts should also address behaviours and patterns that create risks of sexual harm to children. This includes improving understanding of risk factors, earlier identification and support for children and young people displaying harmful sexual behaviours, alongside evidence-informed responses that support adults who recognise concerning thoughts, behaviours or sexual attraction to children and seek help before harm occurs. While this remains a challenging area of policy and practice, early intervention and help-seeking approaches have an important role in preventing abuse before it occurs.

The ACMS found that 13.7% of Australians aged 16 years and over had experienced child sexual abuse or harm by a child or young person under 18 years. This finding reinforces the importance of early identification and therapeutic responses to harmful sexual behaviours as a core prevention strategy.⁴

Particular attention should also be paid to intra-familial child sexual abuse, which remains one of the most common and complex forms of abuse. Prevention and early intervention responses should strengthen the capacity of frontline services and communities to recognise and respond to concerns arising within family environments.

The scale of online harm also continues to grow. For example, in 2024–25, the Australian Centre to Counter Child Exploitation received 82,764 reports of online child sexual exploitation, a 41 per cent increase compared to the previous year.⁵

Technology-facilitated abuse, online grooming, child sexual abuse material, AI-enabled harms and emerging digital environments present new challenges that will continue to evolve throughout the life of the National Strategy and related action plans. Governments, regulators, industry and technology platforms all have a role to play in creating safer online environments. Where organisations fail to address foreseeable risks to children, appropriate accountability mechanisms should apply.

The National Centre sees prevention as a shared responsibility across governments, communities, institutions, families, digital environments and services. The objective should not simply be to increase awareness of child sexual abuse, but to create environments in which abuse is less likely to occur, where risks are identified earlier and responses are activated more quickly.

An important component of this work is strengthening disclosure recognition and response capability as part of Australia's prevention and early intervention infrastructure. Children, young people and adults need to be able to recognise and respond appropriately when concerns are raised, increasing the likelihood that abuse is identified and addressed before further harm occurs.

Governments should:

- strengthen child safe cultures and practices across organisations, institutions and community settings
- improve recognition of grooming behaviours and indicators of child sexual abuse
- support earlier identification and intervention for harmful sexual behaviours
- strengthen community capability and confidence to recognise and respond to concerns
- improve responses to technology-facilitated abuse, online grooming, child sexual abuse material, AI-enabled harms and emerging digital risks
- strengthen disclosure recognition and response capability as a core component of prevention and early intervention.

Particular attention should be given to evidence-informed approaches that support help-seeking before abuse occurs, improve early recognition of risk and create safer environments for children. Prevention efforts should ultimately be judged by their contribution to reducing risk, strengthening community capability and improving child safety outcomes.

The Second Action Plan should focus on implementation rather than the creation of additional frameworks or disconnected initiatives. Existing prevention approaches must be embedded across organisations, institutions, schools, community settings and online environments, supported by stronger accountability and improved capability.

Recommendation 2: Make disclosure recognition and response quality a national reform priority

The Second Action Plan should place children's experiences at the centre of reform. When child sexual abuse occurs, appropriate responses should be judged not only by whether abuse is

identified, but by whether children are seen, heard, understood and protected when they communicate harm.

Children communicate abuse in varied ways. Some disclose directly, while others communicate through behaviour, emotional distress, withdrawal, changes in relationships or other indicators. Reform efforts should focus not only on disclosure itself, but also on the quality of responses children receive when they communicate harm.

Disclosure recognition and response quality should be a national reform priority because disclosure is often delayed or does not occur at all. The ACMS found that 45.2% of people who experienced child sexual abuse had never disclosed the abuse to anyone, highlighting the substantial barriers to disclosure and the limitations of relying on disclosure alone to identify abuse.⁶

The Royal Commission found that, among those who did disclose, the average time taken to disclose was 23.9 years.⁷

Many victim-survivors first disclose abuse in adulthood. Improving disclosure recognition and response quality should therefore be viewed as a lifespan issue as well as an issue of protecting and supporting children. Adults who disclose childhood sexual abuse should receive responses that are trauma-informed, supportive and capable of connecting them with appropriate support.

Many children and young people who disclose in childhood do so to their peers. Efforts to support disclosure and help-seeking should recognise this reality and equip children and young people with age-appropriate skills to seek help and respond safely when concerns are raised, while recognising that responsibility for responding to abuse rests with adults and systems.

Children need responses that are safe, trauma-informed, culturally responsive and developmentally appropriate. They need to be believed, listened to and connected with support. They need adults and systems that understand the impacts of child sexual abuse and can respond in ways that reduce further harm.

Improving response quality should be considered a shared responsibility across education, health, child protection, justice, community services, disability services and child safe organisations.

One of the clearest tests of reform success is whether children experience systems as safe, responsive and protective.

Children should not be required to navigate complex systems in order to be heard. They should not be retraumatised by fragmented responses. They should not be left carrying responsibility for convincing adults that harm has occurred.

Children should also be supported to understand what happens after disclosure. This includes being informed, in developmentally appropriate ways, about decisions that affect their lives, the supports available to them and the processes that can follow disclosure.

Responses to child sexual abuse should recognise that disclosure may have significant consequences for children, families and communities. Systems must take care not to create additional harm by unintentionally isolating children from family, culture or community supports or placing responsibility for these consequences on the child who disclosed. Particular attention is

required in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and culturally and linguistically diverse communities, where culturally safe responses are essential.

This is particularly important in cases of intra-familial child sexual abuse, where disclosure may affect family relationships, living arrangements, connection to community and access to support. Systems must ensure responsibility for these consequences is never placed on the child who disclosed.

Governments should:

- improve recognition of the different ways children communicate abuse and harm
- strengthen workforce capability across education, health, child protection, justice, disability and community sectors
- support children and young people who receive disclosures from peers
- promote child-centred, culturally safe, trauma-informed and developmentally appropriate responses
- embed disclosure recognition and response quality within child safe approaches
- measure children's experiences of disclosure and response as an indicator of system effectiveness.

Improving response quality should be viewed as a shared responsibility across systems and sectors. Children should receive responses that believe, support and protect them rather than responses that compound harm, discourage help-seeking or create additional barriers to safety and recovery.

Recommendation 3: Establish nationally consistent survivor pathways and navigation support across the lifespan

Child sexual abuse begins in childhood, but its impacts are frequently experienced across a lifetime. Many victim-survivors seek support years or decades after abuse occurred, while others move in and out of support systems at different stages of life.

The case for lifelong support is reinforced by evidence that childhood sexual abuse is associated with substantial long-term health and wellbeing impacts, including suicidality. The ACMS found that Australians who had experienced child sexual abuse were 2.3 times more likely to have attempted suicide in the previous 12 months than those who had not experienced child sexual abuse.⁸ This is a significant risk factor that must be specifically considered across national mental health and suicide prevention strategies.

While prevention and child-centred responses are critical, Australia's response must also recognise the experiences of adults living with the long-term impacts of child sexual abuse and the supports required for healing, recovery and wellbeing across the lifespan.

Many people seek support immediately following abuse. Others first seek assistance as adults or reconnect with support years or decades later in response to parenting, relationships, health issues, justice processes, ageing, retirement or other significant transitions or life events.

For many victim-survivors, the impacts of child sexual abuse can affect health, mental health, relationships, education, employment, parenting, justice involvement, cultural connection and

overall wellbeing across the lifespan. Support needs are often non-linear and may re-emerge at different stages of life and in response to major life events.

Despite important investments in recent years, victim-survivors continue to describe fragmented systems, inconsistent access to support and pathways that are difficult to navigate. Many people are required to tell their story repeatedly across multiple services and systems, creating additional burden and, in some cases, further harm.

Constraints on resourcing can result in gaps in service quality and workforce capability to effectively support victim-survivors of child sexual abuse. This includes supports and services to address the impacts of all forms of child sexual abuse including in family, community and institutional settings, and, increasingly, the impacts of online facilitated child sexual abuse and exploitation.

Victim-survivors consistently report that one of the greatest challenges is not simply finding support, but navigating a fragmented system of services, programs and eligibility requirements. Improving navigation should be viewed as a core reform objective rather than an adjunct to service delivery.

People should not have to understand the service system in order to receive assistance. They should not need to identify the right program, the right entry point or the correct funding stream before they can access support.

The objective should be nationally consistent survivor pathways that support a no wrong door approach and ensure people can access support regardless of where they first seek help.

The Second Action Plan should focus on creating more connected, coordinated and accessible pathways that enable victim-survivors to access support when and where they need it.

The Second Action Plan should also support implementation of outstanding reform recommendations aimed at strengthening access to support, justice and redress pathways, recognising that many victim-survivors continue to experience barriers navigating fragmented systems years or decades after abuse occurred.

Governments should:

- support a nationally consistent 'no wrong door' approach to service access
- strengthen navigation, advocacy and care coordination support, including support for people moving between systems, re-engaging with services over time and navigating complex and changing support needs across the lifespan
- improve connections between therapeutic, healing, justice, redress and community services
- reduce the need for repeated disclosure across services and systems
- ensure pathways are accessible to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, people with disability, culturally and linguistically diverse communities, LGBTQIA+ communities, regional and remote communities and older adult survivors.

Older adult survivors should be a focus within the Second Action Plan. The ACMS highlighted that many people who experience child sexual abuse never disclose.⁹ As older adults enter or

increasingly rely on aged care and primary health care services, trauma-responsive pathways are critical to ensuring survivors receive safe and appropriate support.¹⁰

Victim-survivors and their families should not need to understand complex service systems to access support. Success should be measured by whether victim-survivors experience coordinated pathways, reduced barriers to help-seeking and improved access to support across the lifespan.

Recommendation 4: Establish a national outcomes, accountability and continuous improvement approach

The Second Action Plan presents an important opportunity to strengthen accountability across Australia's response to child sexual abuse.

Reform should be judged by outcomes rather than activity. The completion of actions, projects or programs is not, by itself, evidence of success. Accountability should focus on whether reforms are contributing to improvements in safety, wellbeing and outcomes for children, families and victim-survivors.

A stronger accountability framework should also include mechanisms for implementation learning and continuous improvement. Reform efforts should be regularly reviewed to identify what is working, what is not working and where adjustments are needed.

Victim-survivor expertise is particularly important in this context. Victim-survivors provide insight into how systems operate in practice and whether reforms are delivering their intended outcomes. Lived expertise can help identify barriers, unintended consequences and implementation challenges that may not be visible through traditional reporting mechanisms alone.

Accountability should extend beyond individual initiatives. Child sexual abuse intersects across multiple government portfolios, systems and reform agendas. Effective accountability therefore requires governance arrangements that extend beyond a single strategy or agency. Governments should establish mechanisms that support coordination, accountability and stewardship across portfolios to ensure victim-survivors do not fall through gaps between plans, programs and agencies.

Where appropriate, outcomes, indicators and reporting arrangements should align with existing national outcomes frameworks and performance measurement systems to support consistency, transparency and cross-portfolio accountability.

Governments should:

- develop nationally agreed outcomes, indicators and measures of success
- strengthen implementation review, evaluation and learning processes
- improve public reporting on outcomes and system performance
- support victim-survivor informed accountability mechanisms
- identify and address implementation barriers and unintended consequences
- use evidence, lived experience and evaluation findings to drive continuous improvement, implementation support and system learning.

Ultimately, the question for the next phase of reform is not whether actions have been completed. It is whether children are safer, victim-survivors are better supported and systems are becoming more effective, responsive and accountable.

Recommendation 5: Embed child sexual abuse priorities across intersecting national reform agendas

As outlined above, child sexual abuse should remain a distinct and visible national reform priority. At the same time, the drivers, impacts and responses intersect with a range of other national policy agendas.

Effective reform requires stronger alignment across government strategies, portfolios and service systems to ensure children and victim-survivors do not fall through gaps between plans, programs and agencies.

This alignment should be supported through formal cross-portfolio governance, shared implementation oversight, agreed outcomes and indicators, and public reporting on progress.

Governments should strengthen alignment between the Second Action Plan and:

- National Plan to End Violence Against Women and Children
- Our Ways – Strong Ways – Our Voices
- Safe and Supported
- Closing the Gap
- disability safeguarding reforms
- mental health and suicide prevention strategies
- online safety reforms
- aged care and elder abuse reforms.
- justice and family law reforms

Alignment should support coordinated implementation, shared accountability and improved outcomes while maintaining a dedicated focus on preventing and responding to child sexual abuse.

Recommendation 6: Invest in national capability to support implementation, learning and continuous improvement

As discussed above, successful implementation requires investment in long-term national capability that can translate policy commitments into practical change and measurable outcomes.

The Second Action Plan should be supported by national infrastructure that strengthens implementation, system learning, evidence mobilisation and reform stewardship over time.

Governments should invest in:

- translating evidence into action and knowledge mobilisation
- survivor-informed system improvement and co-design
- implementation and reform capability across sectors
- First Nations leadership, healing approaches and knowledge systems
- adaptive system capability to respond to emerging risks and challenges

- system accountability, coordination and stewardship.

These capability areas provide the foundation needed to move beyond policy commitments and support sustained improvements in prevention, child safety, victim-survivor wellbeing, service quality and system effectiveness.

The National Centre would welcome the opportunity to discuss this submission further with the National Office for Child Safety and the Department of Social Services to contribute our research, evaluation, sector engagement and lived experience knowledge and expertise to the ongoing development of the Second Action Plan. We look forward to working in partnership with relevant government departments and agencies as well as non-government partners in taking action on this critical national issue.

Endnotes

- ¹ Mathews, B., Pacella, R. E., Scott, J. G., Finkelhor, D., Meinck, F., Higgins, D. J., Erskine, H. E., Thomas, H. J., Lawrence, D. M., Haslam, D. M., Malacova, E., & Dunne, M. P. (2023). The prevalence of child maltreatment in Australia: findings from a national survey. *Medical Journal of Australia*, 218 (6 Suppl): S13-S18.
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- ² Mathews, B., Pacella, R. E., Scott, J. G., Finkelhor, D., Meinck, F., Higgins, D. J., Erskine, H. E., Thomas, H. J., Lawrence, D. M., Haslam, D. M., Malacova, E., & Dunne, M. P. (2023). The prevalence of child maltreatment in Australia: findings from a national survey. *Medical Journal of Australia*, 218 (6 Suppl): S13-S18.
<http://dx.doi.org/10.5694/mja2.51873>.
- ³ National Centre for Action on Child Sexual Abuse, *Submission to the Australian Law Reform Commission Inquiry into Justice Responses to Sexual Violence*, May 2024, at [Amended_December24_National-Centre-ALRC-Submission-24-May-2024-1.pdf](#); National Centre for Action on Child Sexual Abuse, *Submission to the Joint Standing Committee Inquiry into the continuing operation of the National Redress Scheme*, March 2026, at [National_Centre_Submission_Inquiry_into_continuing_operation_of_National_Redress_Scheme.pdf](#).
- ⁴ Mathews, B., Pacella, R. E., Scott, J. G., Finkelhor, D., Meinck, F., Higgins, D. J., Erskine, H. E., Thomas, H. J., Lawrence, D. M., Haslam, D. M., Malacova, E., & Dunne, M. P. (2023). The prevalence of child maltreatment in Australia: findings from a national survey. *Medical Journal of Australia*, 218 (6 Suppl): S13-S18.
<http://dx.doi.org/10.5694/mja2.51873>.
- ⁵ Australian Centre to Counter Child Exploitation. (2024–25) Research and statistics; online child sexual exploitation reports. [ACCCE Statistics | ACCCE](#).
- ⁶ Mathews, B., Finkelhor, D., Collin-Vézina, D., Malacova, E., Thomas, H. J., Scott, J. G., Higgins, D. J., Meinck, F., Pacella, R., Erskine, H. E., Haslam, D. M., & Lawrence, D. (2025). Disclosure and non-disclosure of childhood sexual abuse in Australia: Results from a national survey. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 160, 107183. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chiabu.2024.107183>.
- ⁷ Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse. (2017). *Final report, Volume 4: Identifying and disclosing child sexual abuse*. Commonwealth of Australia.
- ⁸ Haslam, D., Mathews, B., Pacella, R., Scott, J. G., Finkelhor, D., Higgins, D. J., Meinck, F., Erskine, H. E., Thomas, H. J., Lawrence, D., & Malacova, E. (2023). *The prevalence and impact of child maltreatment in Australia: Findings from the Australian Child Maltreatment Study: Brief Report*. Australian Child Maltreatment Study, Queensland University of Technology. At https://www.acms.au/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/3846.1_ACMS_A4Report_V2.1_Digital_20230627-1.pdf.
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