

# Settlement and Multicultural Work are Essential to Ending Violence against Women and Children

The Social Policy Group's submission to the consultation on the Second Action Plan under the National Plan to End Violence against Women and Children 2022–2032

## **Settlement cannot remain outside a national response**

Australia's cultural and linguistic diversity is not a marginal consideration in national policy. By June 2025, 8.8 million people, almost one-third of Australia's population, had been born overseas<sup>1</sup> and almost half of Australians (48.2%) have at least one parent born overseas.<sup>2</sup>

A national plan intended to end gender-based violence for all must be designed around this reality. For people building their lives in Australia, settlement services are often the trusted bridge to housing, employment, education, health, legal assistance and government systems. Multicultural policy and initiatives support a broad range of Australians and work to ensure Australia's wider set of policies are responsive to Australia's diversity.

Domestic, family and sexual violence (DFSV) is not a migrant or refugee issue. It cuts across every suburb, background and income level, in Australia and around the world. However, ending violence against all women and children means responding to the specific circumstances some families face: shifting power structures within families and communities, the pressures of settlement and visa insecurity, unfamiliarity with local services, and families separated across countries and time zones. These dynamics vary and change. They shape how violence occurs and how it can be addressed. Recognising them, including through settlement and multicultural services, is crucial to ensuring DFSV responses are relevant, culturally responsive, and centre victim-survivors from all diverse backgrounds.

The consultation paper calls for strengthening DFSV prevention and early intervention wherever people live, work, learn and connect, and recognises non-specialist services as key points of engagement, identification and disclosure. Yet settlement services and the multicultural sector are not explicitly included in the proposed framework. This is a critical omission and a missed opportunity to connect Australia's gender-based violence response with an established national settlement and multicultural service system that builds trust and safety with refugee and migrant women.

Settlement and multicultural services already contribute across prevention, early intervention, response, and recovery and healing. Embedding them in the National Plan and related DFSV frameworks would connect trusted community infrastructure with the specialist system and strengthen support before, during and after crisis.

## **The settlement and multicultural sectors are key links already in place**

Australia's settlement sector, comprised of long-standing and essential programs including the Humanitarian Settlement Program (HSP), Adult Migrant English Program (AMEP), the Settlement Engagement and Transition

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<sup>1</sup> Australian Bureau of Statistics. (2025, June). *Australia's population by country of birth*. ABS.

<sup>2</sup> Australian Bureau of Statistics. (2022, June 28). *2021 Census: Nearly half of Australians have a parent born overseas*.

Support (SETS) program, alongside the broader network of services supporting refugees and migrants to build their lives in Australia, is an established national infrastructure with trusted relationships, multilingual capability and deep knowledge of the barriers newly-arrived people face.

SETS alone has supported over 200,000 humanitarian entrants and eligible migrants through close to one million individual sessions and nearly 202,000 group sessions since 2019. The National Plan to End Violence against Women and Children does not need to create a new entry point into multicultural and newly arrived communities but it should recognise and strengthen the trusted services already in place.<sup>3</sup>

**Settlement work is prevention work.** Addressing isolation, building social connection, helping people understand and navigate unfamiliar systems, and supporting families with programs for respectful and healthy relationships all address the conditions in which violence takes hold, long before crisis, and often without ever being named as DFSV work.

Furthermore, DFSV is not always disclosed through a specialist or crisis service. For many people from refugee and migrant backgrounds, a settlement worker is the first trusted professional to see what others may miss, recognise emerging risk and create the conditions for a safe disclosure before violence escalates to crisis. Safety and trust between service providers and women and children are often built up over several months and years, which is irreplaceable.

Violence often first appears as something else: a housing request, loss of access to money, concern for a child or fear about a visa. The abuse may not be named, but the risk is still present in less explicit cues. Settlement practitioners are often able to recognise the wider context because they have sustained contact with individuals and families, which creates opportunities to:

- build knowledge of rights, respectful relationships and available support
- identify risk and coercive control earlier
- challenge misinformation about visas, police, services and Australian law
- provide a safe first response
- support a warm referral into specialist services
- remain connected when a person is not yet ready or able to engage elsewhere

This does not make them specialist DFSV services, but it does make them essential partners across the DFSV continuum. When early signs are missed, preventable complexity is pushed downstream. Housing instability can become homelessness, financial abuse can lead to destitution, visa-related threats can delay disclosure, and children may remain exposed to escalating harm. By the time a person reaches crisis response, they may need coordinated support across multiple services at once.

The Social Policy Group's (SPG) 2026 Community Services Roundtables found that people's needs overlap, but programs, eligibility rules and referral pathways remain fragmented.<sup>4</sup> The result is predictable: specialist services receive higher-risk or complex cases later, and people outside settlement eligibility are left with fewer options. This is not only unsafe. It is an inefficient use of resources. Funding trusted settlement providers to intervene earlier preserves specialist capacity for those who need it most and uses public funds more effectively.

<sup>3</sup> Australian National Audit Office. (2026). *Settlement Engagement and Transition Support Program* (Auditor-General Report No. 28 2025–26).

<sup>4</sup> The Social Policy Group. (2026). *Strengthening links between settlement and broader community services: Findings and recommendations from community services roundtables*.

### Partnership, not substitution

Recognising settlement services does not mean turning settlement workers into specialist DFSV practitioners.

Specialist services must retain responsibility for risk assessment, specialist case management, perpetrator intervention, safety planning and accountability. Settlement services contribute something different and equally necessary: trusted relationships, language capability, settlement expertise, community knowledge and continuity of support. The strongest response combines both.

The 2026 Australian National Audit Office audit recorded provider evidence that community organisations were absorbing complex domestic and family violence and mental health cases. It also recorded that some providers' SETS models and staffing were designed for low-to-medium intensity support, while DFSV required high-intensity specialist practice.<sup>5</sup>

This demonstrates the current policy gap. Settlement providers are already encountering and responding to violence, but program settings do not consistently fund the workforce, partnerships and safeguards required to undertake this role safely.

Formal partnerships should include:

- direct referral and escalation pathways
- specialist secondary consultation
- warm, consent-based handovers
- joint appointments where appropriate
- qualified interpreter access
- workforce training, supervision and debriefing
- clear role boundaries and information-sharing arrangements

Coordination also requires time. SPG's roundtables found that warm referrals, joint appointments, service mapping, partnership meetings and follow-up are essential to effective access, but are often treated as incidental or unpaid work. Government funding and reporting arrangements should recognise these activities as core service delivery.

### Recommendations

In its role as a national settlement peak body, SPG recommends that the Second Action Plan recognises, includes and resources settlement and multicultural services as irreplaceable partners across prevention, early-intervention, response and recovery and healing.

This requires more than naming migrant and refugee communities as a priority population. It requires identifying, connecting and resourcing the service system through which many people already receive trusted support.

SPG recommends a dedicated action requiring the Australian Government to work with states and territories to:

1. **Embed settlement and multicultural services as crucial infrastructure** across the National Plan's four domains.

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<sup>5</sup> Australian National Audit Office. (2026). *Settlement Engagement and Transition Support Program* (Auditor-General Report No. 28 2025–26).

2. **Fund formal partnerships between settlement, multicultural and specialist DFSV services**, including secondary consultation, warm handovers, joint appointments, escalation pathways and sustained local relationships.
3. **Build workforce capability without transferring specialist risk**, through clear roles, training, supervision, safe interpreter access and support for bicultural and lived-experience workers.
4. **Recognise coordination as service delivery**, with funding and reporting arrangements that value partnership-building, referral completion and continuity of support.
5. **Establish formal coordination between the Department of Social Services, the Department of Home Affairs and state and territory systems**, recognising that safety is shaped by migration, housing, income support, health, legal assistance and settlement policy.
6. **Strengthen diversity in the outcomes framework**. While diverse people and communities are already recognised as priority groups, appropriately disaggregated data and clear measures of violence, access, safety and outcomes are needed to ensure they remain visible and inform responsive policy and practice.