

THE LODDON CONSORTIUM

— FOR GENDER EQUALITY + VIOLENCE PREVENTION —

July 20, 2021

Thank you for the opportunity to contribute to the next National Plan to Reduce Violence Against Women and Their Children.

The Loddon Gender Equality and Violence Prevention Consortium's purpose is to lead, influence and mobilise an enduring coordinated community response that ensures women and children are safe from gender-based violence and abuse, and holds perpetrators to account.

The Consortium consists of: Centre for Non-Violence (lead agency), Annie North Women's Refuge and Domestic Violence Service, Centre Against Sexual Assault Central Victoria, Women's Health Loddon Mallee and Sunbury Cobaw Community Health.

Each agency has a history and expertise in working in family violence/sexual violence/women's and community health services throughout regional and rural Victoria, spanning on average 30 years.

The purpose of the Loddon Gender Equality and Violence Prevention Consortium is to:

- Ensure women lead, participate in and benefit equally within our community.
- Challenge structures, beliefs and values that contribute to gender inequality and all forms of violence against women and their children.
- Provide integrated responses to gender-based violence and ensure that they prioritise the safety of women and children, and
- Hold men who use violence towards women and their children accountable for their use of violence.

Our vision is for a future where all women and their children experience gender and social equality, living to their full potential.

The Loddon Gender Equality and Violence Prevention Consortium recognises the National Plan as critical to addressing Australia's crisis that is violence against women and children.

To inform our submission, The Consortium convened two forums with community members from across the Loddon region, which covers the local government areas of City of Greater Bendigo and the shires of Macedon Ranges, Mount Alexander, Central Goldfields, Loddon and Campaspe. Forums were held in Bendigo and Kyneton.

We asked each forum to discuss 5 key questions relating to the Australian Government Department of Social Services' Developing The Next National Plan 'Have Your Say' survey.

Community members appreciated the opportunity to have their say and to engage in the consultation process. It would be our recommendation that DSS engages in wide ranging community consultations that engage those with lived experience of violence, experts working in the family, domestic and sexual violence sectors, and the broader community to help inform not only the development of the plan, but to provide input on progress.

Participants in our sessions were able to clearly identify the critical issues and opportunities in defining actions and priorities for the next national plan.

SUMMARY

While the Consortium submission to the National Plan has captured the key themes noted during 2 x two-hour community forums, it does not capture the mood and deep concern in the room at each event.

There was genuine concern that Australia is not doing enough to end our national crisis of violence against women.

Those attending were motivated in their resolve to shift the conversation about sexual assault and family and domestic violence from shame and victim-blaming, to placing the onus of responsibility on the perpetrator, and holding them accountable.

There was a shared commitment to amplifying the voices of women and children, and in particular those with intersecting experiences – and a resounding agreeance for all levels of government to recognise Australia needs to place greater focus on prevention efforts to address attitudes that excuse and condone violence against women, in all its forms.

Some themes identified during the Consortium-hosted forums related to complex justice systems, which cannot be adequately addressed in this format.

However, we note the intersection between family law and child protection delivers some of the most unsafe conditions for women and children in our communities.

There are also family and domestic violence response system design issues, where there is little to no accountability to victim-survivors and specialist services, who are directly affected by failed public policy or poor legislation.

Specialist services need to be adequately funded from prevention through to case management, and therapeutic counselling and support, and be active in co-design of future programs and funding, to ensure needs are being met when and where they are required.

Women on temporary visas face extraordinary barriers to safety, income support, health and medical support, and housing. These barriers are primarily supported by federal policy regarding immigration and income support. The federal government has the power to lift these barriers for this cohort.

We have seen little change in the rates of violence against women and children in this country. In fact, as a result of the Covid-19 coronavirus pandemic, we have seen an increase in the level of risk and complexity experienced by our clients.

The impact on our services is significant, and none of our organisations want to be in a position where we cannot meet demand. However, we are often at capacity.

We are thankful to the Loddon community for sharing their concerns with us, and for the opportunity to provide input to this consultation.

Detailed responses are attached.

Should you require any further information, please don't hesitate to contact me on 03 5430 3000.

Yours sincerely,

Nicole Ferrie, Centre for Non-Violence

On behalf of The Loddon Gender Equality and Violence Prevention Consortium

Margaret Augerinos, CEO Centre for Non-Violence

Julie Oberin, CEO Annie North Inc

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1. What do you think are the major issues for people experiencing family, domestic and sexual violence when they try to find support?

- Community members cannot identify a clear pathway for seeking support, and often victim-survivors are unaware of what is available until they are in crisis
- Victim-survivors not identifying or recognising all forms of family, domestic and sexual violence
- Specific intersectional related barriers to seeking and accessing help for some victim-survivors. For example cultural (language barriers, lack of access to interpreters) / LGBTIQ+ (lack of appropriate crisis accommodation, few perpetrator referral options, distrust of police, less recognition of family violence in the community yet high rates) about /ATSI (lack of access to culturally safe support services, distrust of police, fear of how perpetrators will be treated in custody), and the many experiences of people with disabilities and, young people.
- Victim-survivors' pervasive fear of not being believed
- Victim-survivors' fear of the legal/judicial system failing to protect them / being used against them
- Specific concerns in regional areas or small communities, where perpetrator is often known to police, or known by many in community as the 'good bloke'.
- Lack of knowledge/understanding by many about family, domestic and sexual violence – including professionals through to community/individuals/bystanders.
- Services are not always accessible – for example, long wait lists, no 24-hour police stations in rural and regional areas, lack of transport options to get to services in rural and regional communities.

Secondary themes: Fear of perpetrator; shame; no economic resources; fear of what the future will look like post-seeking help; impact on children/animals; wait lists when accessing services; lack of confidentiality/anonymity.

2. What improvements or useful responses have you seen in the prevention of family, domestic and sexual violence?

Key themes:

- Increased advertising and media campaigns, aimed at increased awareness and understanding of the drivers of violence
- Respectful Relationships
- In the Loddon region, strong local partnerships and collaborations – for example, The Loddon Gender Equality and Violence Prevention Consortium, various regional Family Violence Action Groups, multi-agency approaches

3: Are there any other priorities that would make a big difference to preventing family, domestic and sexual violence?

Key themes:

- Ongoing/long-term recurrent funding that supports prevention of gender-based violence through to response (eg ongoing case management and therapeutic support and counselling)
- Capacity building / investment for specialist family violence and sexual assault sectors
- Education/training – police/justice system, schools (start early), community, bystander. The need to address the drivers of violence and put a stop to rigid stereotyping and disrespectful attitudes towards girls and women.
- Improved court/justice system responses – that focus on better outcomes for victim-survivors and hold the perpetrator accountable, including training to understand trauma responses of victim-survivors and gendered violence.
- Funding and expansion of perpetrator programs – accountability/keeping him in sight/early intervention

Secondary themes: Australia-wide family violence information sharing legislation as it exists in Victoria; reform the Family Law Act and Family Court (removing or changing parenting requirements and really focus on the safest and best interests of the child not the right of the perpetrator). The intersection between family law and child protection delivers some of the most unsafe conditions for women and children in our communities; Engaging men in the conversation.

4: What are the most important things we can do to support people who are experiencing family, sexual and domestic violence?

Key themes:

- Believe victim-survivors
- Shift the onus on the victim to prove abuse happened to the abuser to prove it didn't
- Share victim-survivor experiences – reducing stigma, increased understanding of lived experience, address societal assumptions and judgement
- Increase specialist front line service funding and integrate services – housing, women's services, court support, mental health
- Training and capacity building and strengthened partnerships – police, magistrates, educators, local leaders, community-based groups, schools, early childhood, universal services
- Resources to strengthen systems to enhance safety and reduce risk
- Address lack of social and affordable housing

5: If you could recommend up to three things for a national strategy on preventing family, domestic and sexual violence, what would they be?

Key themes:

- Long term strategy (that is evaluated) with long term funding attached for prevention, education, early intervention and tertiary intervention to facilitate intergenerational societal change
- Bi-partisan support for a family law system change - that prioritises victim safety and perpetrator accountability
- Education at all levels - community and professional – focusing on gender equity, response, supporting victim survivors (women and children) and supporting men's behaviour change. We must address attitudes that support and enable violence against women and children, in all environments.

Secondary themes: Continue to invest in specialist agencies and evidence information such as from ANROWS, National Community Attitudes Survey, ABS Personal Safety Survey, Our Watch, etc; address nation's lack of social and affordable housing; Consistent responses and programs; media awareness strategy; collaboration and partnerships between services, community and LGA's to inform regional strategies that deliver local actions; local actions – campaigns, messaging, media, place-based programs/initiatives, training – connection prevention and response.