

DVNSW Response to the Homes NSW Discussion Paper: Action Plan for Children and Young People

May 2026

Acknowledgement

This report was written on the stolen and unceded lands of the Gadigal People of the Eora Nation. We pay respects to the Elders past and present.

DVNSW acknowledges Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as the first sovereign nations across the breadth and depth of Australia. We recognise that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have lived and cared for Country for over 60,000 years and continue to do so, honouring ancestors and knowledge holders within community, and observing ancient cultural practices. We acknowledge the damaging impacts of colonisation and hold their stories with great care.

We acknowledge that domestic and family violence are not part of Aboriginal culture and assert that the responsibilities of Aboriginal families and kinship systems do not align nor are reflected in current government policies. We work to position ourselves as allies and give voice and strength to the unique position that Aboriginal and Torres Strait people hold in their own family systems and communities.



About us

Domestic Violence NSW (DVNSW) is the peak body for specialist domestic and family violence (DFV) services in NSW. With approximately 200 member organisations across the state and diverse lived expertise advisory groups, we work to improve policy, legislative and program responses to domestic and family violence through advocacy and collaboration, while promoting good practice and primary prevention.

We exist to eliminate domestic and family violence from society.

DVNSW members represent the diversity of NSW specialist DFV services, working to support adults, children, families and communities impacted by domestic and family violence. Our member organisations consist of services such as crisis and refuge specialist homelessness services, domestic violence response enhancement, specialist DFV case management, Aboriginal controlled organisations, migrant and refugee specialist organisations, community housing, staying home leaving violence, women's legal and women's court advocacy services, men's behaviour change programs, and general community, women and children's support programs. It's our role to ensure our members are listened to, respected and heard by the change-makers in society.

We recognise that lived experience is central to change. We understand that DFV impacts some communities disproportionately – which is why we ensure the experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, LGBTIQ+ people, migrant and refugee people and people with disability have a central voice in our advocacy. With guidance from lived experts, we elevate the experiences, voices and needs of victim-survivors through all work we undertake.

Together with victim-survivors, our members, our partners and our team – we will end gender-based violence in NSW.

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Introduction

Domestic Violence NSW (DVNSW) welcomes the opportunity to provide feedback on the development of the NSW Government's *Action Plan for Children and Young People* (the Action Plan) under the NSW Homelessness Strategy 2025–2035. DVNSW supports the development of a whole-of-government, rolling action plan for children and young people aged 0–24, and welcomes the recognition that children and young people experience homelessness differently from adults and require specialised responses.

This response is informed by DVNSW's specialist Domestic and Family Violence (DFV) policy expertise, sector consultation with specialist DFV services, and findings from DVNSW's 2025 Regional Forum. It focuses on children and young people experiencing homelessness due to DFV.

DFV is a major driver of homelessness for children, young people and families, and the Action Plan must recognise that housing, safety, child protection, justice, education, health and specialist DFV responses are deeply interconnected.

DVNSW recommends that the Action Plan take a stronger DFV-informed approach by:

- recognising children and young people as victim-survivors in their own right
- preventing non-offending parents and children from being penalised for the impacts of violence perpetrated against them, and
- strengthening system coherence between DFV, housing, homelessness and child protection.

The Action Plan should also give greater weight to specialist DFV expertise in decision-making, so that victim-survivors are not required to repeatedly prove their victimisation of violence or retell their story across multiple systems.

Additionally, the Action Plan must deliver practical improvements to housing and support pathways, particularly in regional, rural and remote NSW. This includes:

- strengthening crisis, transitional and long-term housing pathways
- expanding specialist children and young people's DFV workers statewide
- improving integration between youth homelessness and specialist DFV services
- strengthening Safe at Home responses; and
- ensuring that responses to people choosing to use violence support victim-survivors to remain safely housed wherever possible.

Recommendations

DVNSW recommends that the Action Plan:

1. Prioritise housing and homelessness responses for children, young people and families experiencing DFV that provide early access to safe housing, practical support and specialist DFV case management, without penalising non-offending parents and children for the impacts of violence.
2. Build stronger system coherence between DFV, housing, homelessness and child protection systems.
3. Strengthen regional, rural and remote housing pathways.
4. Recognise children and young people as victim-survivors with distinct safety, recovery, developmental and housing needs.
5. Expand the *Specialist Workers Children and Young People* program statewide to levels that provide adequate access to a worker regardless of location.
6. Improve integration between youth homelessness and specialist DFV services.
7. Strengthen Safe at Home models and responses to people using violence.
8. Value specialist DFV expertise in housing, child protection, health and homelessness decision-making.

1. Prioritise housing and homelessness responses for children, young people and families experiencing DFV that provide early access to safe housing, practical support and specialist DFV case management, without penalising non-offending parents and children for the impacts of violence.

DVNSW members were clear that the Action Plan should explicitly commit to avoiding mother-blaming and victim-blaming across homelessness, housing and child protection systems.

Women seeking refuge are taking protective action. However, current systems can treat the consequences of DFV including homelessness, inadequate housing, housing instability or children's exposure to violence as grounds for child protection intervention. This creates an impossible situation where women may be at risk of child removal if they stay with the perpetrator, and also at risk of child protection scrutiny if they leave without access to safe housing.

DVNSW members emphasised that non-offending parents and children must not be penalised for the impacts of violence. Housing and homelessness responses should reduce unnecessary child protection escalation by providing early access to safe accommodation, practical support, specialist DFV case management and recovery support.

Suggested wording:

Housing and homelessness responses for children, young people and families experiencing DFV must avoid penalising non-offending parents and children for the impacts of violence. Safe housing, practical support and specialist DFV case management should be provided early to reduce unnecessary child protection escalation and support families to remain safely together wherever possible.

2. Build stronger system coherence between DFV, housing and child protection systems

DVNSW members identified a lack of coherence across the Department of Communities and Justice (DCJ), Homes NSW, child protection, homelessness and DFV systems. Families are often referred or placed into refuges without adequate housing or child protection support, after which agencies may disengage because the refuge is seen as managing the risk.

This creates a loop where families remain stuck because each system treats the issue as belonging somewhere else. For children and young people experiencing DFV-related homelessness, this is unsafe and inefficient. Refuges cannot carry the risk created by housing shortages, child protection thresholds, inadequate interagency coordination and limited exit pathways.

The Action Plan should include clear cross-agency responsibilities so that no family is left in limbo once they enter crisis accommodation. This should include shared accountability between Homes NSW, DCJ child protection, specialist homelessness services, specialist DFV services, health, mental health, education and youth services.

Priority action now:

Establish local escalation and coordination pathways between Homes NSW, child protection, specialist DFV and homelessness services and youth homelessness services for families and young people experiencing DFV-related homelessness, with clear responsibility for housing, safety planning, child and young person wellbeing and exit pathways.

Priority for future funding:

Fund integrated DFV, family-inclusive housing and family support models that provide coordinated case management for children, young people and non-offending parents experiencing DFV-related homelessness, including continued wrap-around support after exiting refuge to support long-term stability and prevent families cycling back into homelessness.

3. Strengthen regional and remote housing pathways

DVNSW strongly supports the Discussion Paper's focus on local delivery. This is particularly important in regional, rural and remote NSW, where services face acute shortages of crisis, transitional and long-term housing.

DVNSW members emphasised that families escaping DFV need more than refuge entry points. They need clear exit pathways, local infrastructure and housing options that allow families to remain connected to schools, employment, community, Country, culture and support networks.

DVNSW's 2025 Regional Forum identified that regional and remote communities experience significantly higher rates of DFV, while also facing severe housing shortages, limited transport, digital isolation and service access barriers (Domestic Violence NSW 2025). Discussions at the Forum also highlighted that current social housing targets are insufficient, particularly in regional and remote areas, and that transitional housing is critical for women and children exiting DFV refuges.

Increased investment in crisis responses alone will not resolve homelessness if there is no action to deliver all forms of housing in numbers that correlate with demand. Regional communities need crisis, transitional, medium-term and long-term housing pathways that are locally available and appropriate for children, young people and families escaping DFV.

Priority action now:

Map crisis, transitional and long-term housing geographical gaps for children, young people and families escaping DFV in regional and remote NSW, and identify immediate local solutions using existing government assets, head leasing, transitional housing and supported accommodation models.

Priority for future funding:

Increase dedicated transitional and long-term housing for children, young people and families escaping DFV in regional and remote communities, including youth-specific models and family-friendly models that prevent separation of mothers, children and older siblings.

4. Recognise children and young people as victim-survivors with distinct needs

DVNSW supports the Discussion Paper's recognition that children and young people experiencing homelessness due to DFV should be recognised as victim-survivors in their own right. Members strongly reinforced that this should be a central principle of the Action Plan.

Children and young people may be escaping violence directed at them, violence against a parent or carer, coercive control in the home, adolescent family violence, sexual violence, forced marriage, family rejection or systems failure. They are not simply accompanying adults into homelessness.

Children and young people also have distinct needs which relate to and impact their safety and recovery, including development, education, identity, disability, culture, family relationships and long-term wellbeing. Housing is essential, but housing alone is not enough.

Suggested wording:

The Action Plan should recognise children and young people experiencing homelessness due to domestic, family and sexual violence as victim-survivors in their own right, with distinct safety, recovery, developmental and housing needs. Children and young people are not only accompanying adults into homelessness; many are directly experiencing violence, coercive control, abuse, instability and systems failure.

Sector consultation participants also emphasised the need to keep family units together safely, including by addressing the way communal refuge and crisis accommodation settings can separate families, particularly where older boys are involved.

Suggested action:

Review refuge, crisis accommodation and transitional housing models to ensure families escaping DFV are not separated because of the age or gender of children, including older boys or the structural constraints of crisis accommodation settings. If separation is unavoidable, services should provide safe, connected alternatives that maintain family relationships and continuity of support.

5. Expand the *Specialist Workers Children and Young People* program statewide to levels that provide adequate access to a worker regardless of location

DVNSW members expressed strong support for expanding the dedicated *Specialist Workers Children and Young People* (SWCYP) program across NSW, including Aboriginal-specific and migrant and refugee-specific roles.

An evaluation of the SWCYP program's first 12 months of operation from 2022 to 2023 found the program is achieving positive outcomes for children and young people. It recommends the continuation and expansion of the program to other women's refuges (Smyth et al. 2024). While the program has been expanded to 32 refuges across NSW, this still does not meet the level of need across the specialist DFV sector.

Children and young people make up a significant proportion of refuge populations, yet many services do not have adequate specialist staffing to respond to their needs. SWCYP play a critical role in safety planning, recovery, school continuity, family relationships, therapeutic support, developmental needs and preventing family disconnection.

These roles are particularly important in regional and remote NSW, where children and young people have fewer service options and greater risk of disconnection from community, culture and education. DVNSW's Regional Forum identified workforce development, cultural safety and specialist capability as key issues for regional and remote services.

Priority action now:

Identify gaps in *Specialist Workers Children and Young People* (SWCYP) program delivery across NSW, including Aboriginal-specific and CALD-specific roles, and prioritise expansion in regions with high DFV demand and limited child and youth-specific supports.

Priority for future funding:

Fund *Specialist Workers Children and Young People* (SWCYP) in all specialist DFV refuges and relevant outreach services across NSW, with dedicated workforce development, supervision and cultural safety supports.

6. Improve integration between youth homelessness and specialist DFV services

Sector consultation participants noted that youth homelessness and specialist DFV services often work toward similar goals but from different parts of the system. Children and young people experiencing DFV-related homelessness should not have to repeatedly tell their story or navigate disconnected systems.

The Action Plan should strengthen integration between youth homelessness, specialist DFV, mental health, alcohol and other drug, education, health, child protection and youth justice services. This integration must be backed by housing and service capacity. Better referral pathways alone will not improve outcomes if young people are screened out because their needs are considered too complex.

DVNSW members also emphasised the need for stronger DFV capability across youth homelessness, SHS, education, health, child protection and youth justice workforces, including training in coercive control, child and young person risk assessment, safety planning, family violence-informed practice, cultural safety and working with young people using violence.

Priority action now:

Develop shared practice guidance for youth homelessness and specialist DFV services on responding to children and young people experiencing DFV-related homelessness, including risk assessment, information sharing, warm referrals, family safety, adolescent family violence and recovery support.

Priority for future funding:

Fund local integrated service models that bring together youth homelessness, specialist DFV, mental health, AOD, education and child protection responses, particularly in regional and remote communities.

7. Strengthen Safe at Home models and responses to people using violence

DVNSW members identified the need for stronger Safe at Home responses such as *Staying Home Leaving Violence* (SHLV) for children, young people and families experiencing DFV. Members identified the importance of integrated service delivery models, including security upgrades, tenancy support, legal assistance, brokerage, safety planning and links to specialist DFV services. Preventing homelessness should include options for victim-survivors to remain safely housed where it is appropriate, instead of assuming that women and children must leave.

Members also identified the need for stronger responses to people using violence, including accommodation options that support the person using violence to leave the home where appropriate. This would support models where victim-survivors can remain safely housed while the person using violence is supported to leave. Integrated service delivery is also needed to ensure people using violence are linked with appropriate Men's Behaviour Change Programs, group work and other accountability-based interventions, rather than placing the burden on victim-survivors and children to manage risk or leave their home.

The Action Plan should also include age-appropriate, trauma-informed and therapeutic responses for young people using violence in the home, including adolescent family violence. These responses should prioritise safety and accountability without defaulting to criminalisation or homelessness.

Suggested action:

Expand youth-appropriate Safe at Home responses, including *Staying Home Leaving Violence*, for children, young people and families experiencing DFV, including security upgrades, tenancy support, legal assistance, brokerage, safety planning, specialist DFV case management and accommodation options for people using violence where this enables victim-survivors to remain safely housed.

8. Value specialist DFV expertise in system decision-making

DVNSW members reported increasing scrutiny around the onerous requirements of victim-survivors proving their victimisation of DFV and a lack of professional regard for specialist DFV expertise when working across sectors. This creates duplication, delays and additional trauma for victim-survivors, who are forced to retell their story across multiple systems.

Where specialist DFV services identify that women, children and young people are experiencing DFV, this expertise should be respected by housing, child protection, health, mental health and homelessness systems. Greater professional regard would reduce duplication, improve safety planning, support faster housing outcomes and improve psychosocial outcomes for victim-survivors.

Priority action now:

Develop cross-agency guidance requiring housing, homelessness, child protection and health systems to give appropriate weight to specialist DFV assessments, risk identification and safety planning.

Feedback on the draft principles

DVNSW broadly supports the draft definitions of the *Homes NSW Action Plan for Children and Young People*. However, several definitions should be strengthened with a DFV lens.

Housing is a human right

This principle should recognise that safe housing for children and young people experiencing DFV must include safety from the person using violence, continuity of family relationships where safe, and access to recovery support.

Aboriginal expertise and leadership are respected

This principle should recognise that Aboriginal children, young people, families and communities must be supported to remain connected to Country, culture, kin and community wherever safe. Aboriginal-led and community-controlled responses should be prioritised, and mainstream services must be accountable for cultural safety.

People with lived experience inform service design

This principle should explicitly include the voices of children and young people with lived experience of DFV-related homelessness, including children and young people who have experienced refuge, child protection, youth homelessness, family separation, school disruption, cultural disconnection and unsafe temporary accommodation.

Person-centred principles are embedded in policy and practice

Person-centred practice for children and young people experiencing DFV must include specialist DFV risk assessment, safety planning, recovery support and developmentally appropriate responses. It must also recognise that children and young people may experience homelessness as part of a family unit or independently, and that these circumstances require different responses.

Prevention is prioritised

This principle should explicitly include preventing DFV-related homelessness by supporting victim-survivors to remain safely housed where appropriate, preventing unnecessary child protection escalation, and intervening early with people using violence.

Housing First principles are embedded in policy and practice

For children and young people experiencing DFV, Housing First must not mean housing without safety. Housing must be paired with specialist DFV risk assessment, safety planning, therapeutic support and practical assistance.

Service planning and delivery is flexible, localised and joined-up

This principle should name specialist DFV services as essential partners in local service planning, particularly for children, young people and families experiencing DFV-related homelessness.

The workforce is strong and supported

This principle should commit to building DFV capability across youth homelessness, SHS, education, health, child protection and youth justice workforces. This should include education and training on coercive control, child and young person risk assessment, safety planning, family violence-informed practice, cultural safety and working with young people using violence.

Systems, tools and measurement are consistent and fit for purpose

DVNSW members identified the need for better data collection on DFV-related youth homelessness. Data collection should better identify where DFV is a cause or contributing factor to homelessness, including where it is not the primary recorded presentation. Mental health concerns, alcohol and other drug concerns, family conflict, school disengagement or child protection contact may obscure underlying DFV-related homelessness.

Additional priority cohorts

The Action Plan should explicitly identify priority cohorts experiencing DFV-related homelessness and recognise that children and young people may experience multiple, overlapping forms of disadvantage. A child or young person may be Aboriginal, living with disability, from a migrant or refugee background, living in a regional or remote community, part of a large sibling group, and experiencing DFV at the same time. Priority cohorts should include Aboriginal children and young people, migrant and refugee children and young people, children and young people on temporary visas, children and young people with disability, LGBTIQ+ children and young people, young parents, large sibling groups, older boys in families escaping DFV, children and young people in regional and remote communities, and young people using violence who may also be experiencing trauma, violence, homelessness or systems involvement. Responses must recognise intersecting needs and avoid screening children, young people and families out of support because their circumstances are complex. They must be flexible, culturally safe, developmentally appropriate and connected to specialist DFV expertise.

Conclusion

The Action Plan is an important opportunity to build a homelessness response that recognises children and young people as victim-survivors in their own right, strengthens the connection between DFV, housing and child protection systems, and prevents families from being punished for the impacts of violence.

For children, young people and non-offending parents experiencing DFV, homelessness is often the result of unsafe housing, coercive control, poverty, disrupted education, child protection involvement and systems that operate in isolation. The response must therefore go beyond crisis entry points and deliver

practical changes: safer crisis accommodation, stronger regional and remote housing pathways, dedicated specialist children and young people's workers, better integration between youth homelessness and DFV services, stronger Safe at Home responses, and clearer cross-agency accountability.

A DFV-informed Action Plan must recognise that leaving violence is protective action. It should respond with safety, housing and support – not scrutiny, blame or family separation.

References

Domestic Violence NSW. (2025). *Ending violence in regional and remote NSW: A report based on Domestic Violence NSW's 2025 Regional Forum*. Domestic Violence NSW.

Smyth, C., Cortis, N., Blunden, H., Bates, S. and Katz, I. (2024). *Specialist Workers for Children and Young People Outcomes Evaluation – Final Report*. Sydney: UNSW Social Policy Research Centre.

A note on terminology

Domestic violence

Interpersonal violence or abuse perpetrated by an intimate partner or ex-partner. Domestic violence can include a variety of forms of abuse including but not limited to, physical, sexual, psychological, financial abuse, physical stalking, and intimidation. Domestic violence is gendered and is most commonly underpinned by coercive control, which is a pattern of behaviour utilising many different tactics to create a web of entrapment, often involving the exploitation of power imbalances.

Family violence

Violence perpetrated by a family member, carer, guardian, child, or kinship carer. Family violence can include a variety of forms of abuse including but not limited to, physical, sexual, psychological, financial abuse, physical stalking, and intimidation. Family violence is gendered and is most commonly underpinned by coercive control, which is a pattern of behaviour utilising many different tactics to create a web of entrapment, often involving the exploitation of power imbalances.

Gendered violence

Gendered violence or gender-based violence refers to harmful acts directed at an individual or a group of individuals because of their gender. It is rooted in gender inequality, the abuse of power and harmful norms. The term is primarily used to draw attention to the fact that structural, gender-based power differentials place women and girls at risk for multiple forms of violence. While women and girls suffer disproportionately from gendered violence, men and particularly boys can also be victims. The term is inclusive of LGBTIQ+ populations, referencing violence related to norms of masculinity/femininity and/or gender norms.

Intimate Partner Violence (IPV)

Abuse perpetrated by a current or former intimate partner such as a partner, husband, wife, girlfriend, boyfriend, or person who someone is dating. Term is often used interchangeably with domestic violence.

People with lived expertise

People with lived expertise are people who have experience of sexual, domestic and/or family violence whose expertise as context experts due to their lived experience is noted.

Specialist sexual, domestic, and family violence sector

The specialist sexual, domestic, and family violence sector includes crisis and refuge services, transitional accommodation and community housing providers, family support services, Aboriginal controlled organisations, specialist multicultural community organisations, specialist LGBTIQ+ organisations, counselling services, sexual violence services, specialist homelessness service providers, men's behaviour change programs and networks, community organisations working with high-risk communities, specialist women's legal and support services, women's health centres, women and children's support services, Safe at Home programs and the Women's Domestic Violence Court Advocacy Services.

Victim-survivor

Victim-survivor refers to a person who is being or has experienced violence, acknowledging that people who have been victimised are survivors and are also victims of crime. We acknowledge that people who

have been victimised are survivors and are also victims of crime. This is not intended as an identity term. In the specialist domestic and family violence sector, the preferred term is victim-survivor.

DVNSW notes that the justice sector and legislation use the term victim. In this submission, although used interchangeably, the emphasis has been placed on the term victim-survivor, with victim used at times particularly when discussing the justice system or legislation.

Coercive control

Coined by Evan Stark, Buzawa and Stark (2017, p. 105) define coercive control as “a strategic course of gender-based abuse in which some combination of physical and sexual violence, intimidation, degradation, isolation, control and arbitrary violations of liberty are used to subjugate a partner and deprive her of basic rights and resources”. This web of abuse has the end goal of entrapment and is a conscious, concerted effort by the abuser. Also known as intimate terrorism, this coercive control is the foundational underpinning of domestic and family violence, not simply another form of violence.