



HIDDEN GEMS

The Unique Role of Collaborative
Approaches in Preventing and
Responding to the Abuse of Older People

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Relationships Australia
NEW SOUTH WALES



ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF COUNTRY

Relationships Australia NSW acknowledges Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as the Traditional Custodians of the land and waters on which we live and work.

We acknowledge their Ancestors who first walked on this land and pay our respects to Elders past and present, for they carry the cultural wisdom, the stories, the traditions and dreaming.

With a commitment to Reconciliation, we acknowledge the enduring impact of past policies and practices and commit our endeavours to creating a just society and sector that celebrates the ongoing resilience and self-determination of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and communities.

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KEY MESSAGES

1. **Older people deserve greater political ambition.** National commitments must be brought into line with those on violence against women, investing in action to not only prevent violence, but to end the abuse of older people.
2. **Political and media attention has increased public awareness** of the abuse of older people, supporting people to identify abuse and access services. However, ageism in media narratives of generational conflict presents an ongoing risk of enabling abuse.
3. **Australia's ageing population is creating greater demand for services, and greater complexity of support needs.** Intersections of geography and climate risks, disability, identity-based marginalisation, and population-wide economic distress require coordinated service responses.
4. **Older people experiencing abuse and their family members need a range of service options.** As demand for services increases, investment is required to ensure existing providers retain and expand their supports, rather than narrowing what they offer to be able to serve more people.
5. **Older people experiencing abuse need collaborative service models that engage their family members outside the legal system.** Many older people want to maintain their family relationships and need non-adversarial, non-criminal routes for support.
6. **Collaborative service models such as *Let's Talk* are a unique and critical offering within the service system responding to abuse of older people.** Stakeholders value its specialist blend of conflict resolution, counselling, and casework for its empowerment of older people, its ability to engage family members productively, and its capacity to facilitate service coordination and education.
7. **Endemic ageism in Australian society remains a contributing factor to abuse, and a barrier to identification and response.** Working towards ending the abuse of older people will require a long-term strategy to address social, structural, and institutional ageism.
8. **Investment is needed to continue innovating collaborative models, building on the existing strengths of elder mediation and support services.** Innovation requires support for research and evaluation, to develop and apply models in local contexts and understand efficacy.



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

“We believe that family mediation in relation to older people is an essential part of the elder abuse architecture and I’m more convinced of that today than I’ve ever been.”

– NSW Ageing & Disability Commissioner

Since Relationships Australia NSW (RANSW) established our *Let’s Talk Elder Mediation and Support Service* in 2018, there have been significant changes in New South Wales and nationally in the way we all respond to the abuse of older people. At our service’s five-year point, this study aimed to review the Let’s Talk intervention model in the current policy and service context, capture reflections on five years of learning, and make recommendations for the future of service provision. The findings in this report draw on analysis of policy documents published since 2018, and interviews and focus groups with nine Relationships Australia staff in NSW and the ACT, and interviews with 12 stakeholders working on the abuse of older people in external partner organisations.

FIVE YEARS ON, BUT STILL TEN YEARS BEHIND

There has been significant progress over five years on responding to the abuse of older people. In NSW, the establishment of the Ageing & Disability Commission has contributed to increased public awareness, clarified service

pathways, and supported coordination between service providers. At the federal level, publication of the National Plan and subsequently the first National Elder Abuse Prevalence study, were seen as critical positive developments.

However, stakeholders expressed frustration that, despite progress, responses to the abuse of older people still lag significantly behind those for domestic and family violence (DFV) more broadly.

“I’d say [intimate partner violence is] 10 to 15 years ahead of where elder abuse is in terms of the willingness of the public to hold policymakers accountable for responding... At the moment we’ve got a national plan to ‘respond’ to elder abuse. We’ve got now a national plan to ‘end’ domestic and family violence and that’s, to me, a very significant difference.”

– strategic manager, Relationships Australia

Further, while stakeholders were encouraged by increased public awareness of the abuse of older people, and a resulting increase in identification of abuse and help-seeking, they noted ongoing ageism in media and political narratives that highlight generational conflicts and exacerbate risks of abuse.

GREATER DEMAND AND COMPLEXITY, AGAINST NARROWING SERVICES

Australia's population is not simply ageing, it is ageing differently to how it has before. Current generations of older people have different expectations of ageing and high expectations of services. At the same time, people are living longer with disability, often outside of major cities where services are currently located. Older people are also more diverse, requiring service providers to be able to respond to a range of cultural experiences and needs, and people's specific experiences of identity-based marginalisation and abuse.

Increasing economic distress across the population, beginning during the pandemic and continuing through the current cost of living crisis,

is resulting in greater demand for services from older people experiencing abuse from their adult children who have become financially dependent on them.

“We were very concerned over COVID, because of a lot of [adult] children moving back in with their older parents. And there was all that isolation, and being locked down, and the stressors that went with that... Now children are moving back in, they've lost their units, they can't afford to pay rent. They're moving back in with mum and dad... there is a lot of potential for financial abuse”

– service manager, older people's service

At the same time, service providers expressed concern that some organisations have narrowed their service offerings to better meet increasing demand. This presents an important tension for providers, who see the need for depth of support to address complexity of needs, set against the need to serve more people.

LET'S TALK AND THE ROLE OF COLLABORATIVE, RELATIONAL APPROACHES

“What’s happening slowly is people are realising that elder mediation is a hidden gem, because it’s all about prevention, prevention, prevention.”

– academic/educator

Stakeholders described the unique role that *Let’s Talk* and other collaborative, relational interventions play in responding to the abuse of older people. While DFV interventions more broadly have prioritised criminal legal system approaches, stakeholders explained that as abuse is most often perpetrated by adult children, older people often want access to approaches that don’t risk criminalising their children. Elder mediation provides an important route to increasing safety and resolving conflict, outside of the legal system.

Beyond this, collaborative approaches, including elder mediation, differ in important ways from either the service coordination that happens in traditional DFV responses, such as through Safety Action Meetings (SAMs), and from mediation within the family law system. Firstly, unlike at SAMs, older people are present and engaged in collaboration processes, as are their carers and/or family members. Secondly, unlike mediation in family law, elder mediation can include professionals from across any number of service providers who are able to offer resources and support to the older person and their family. This innovative approach centres the human rights of older people to make decisions about their own lives, while enabling coordination of support that responds to complex and interrelated support needs. In this context, mediation is further supported by counselling and casework to maximise family support and opportunities for change.

PRIORITIES FOR SECTOR DEVELOPMENT

In welcoming the significant advancements of the past five years, stakeholders were hopeful for continued momentum over the coming five years. They noted that responses to the abuse of older people remain emerging and identified several priorities for development.

Firstly, they noted the need for substantive and long-term action to tackle endemic ageism across Australian society. Despite increased public awareness of abuse, stakeholders are seeing negative impacts of ageism across the service system. This contributes to enabling abuse of older people and creates barriers to identification of abuse and access to supports to prevent and respond.

“We’ve gotta turn that around and hopefully treat us [older people] like an asset, and use our knowledge and our experience, and acknowledge the contributions that everyone has made in life.”

– service manager, older people’s service

Stakeholders suggested that prevention efforts should include specific focus on unpaid carers, and on the aged care workforce. Both these groups have the potential to be more protective, if they are supported to identify and report abuse. Unpaid carers should also have access to the same development opportunities as paid carers, such as receiving training in supported decision-making.

Existing providers of collaborative approaches need investment to both sustain and innovate their service models. Stakeholders suggested a range of ideas for developing collaborative approaches, from introducing the US ElderCaring model to legislating mandated mediation. The sector is keen to develop further, but it requires commitments to research and evaluation to understand their impact and opportunities for further innovation.

CONCLUSION

Government, health, and social services should be celebrated for the substantial progress made in responding to the abuse of older people in Australia over the past five years. The sector has established a unique suite of interventions that offer important insights for its own future, and for the broader family violence and family mediation sectors it has emerged from.

The collaborative model embodied by RANSW's *Let's Talk Elder Mediation and Support Service* remains as relevant as ever, playing a unique role in the broader service system. The service's ability to work productively with older people and their families, alongside service providers, outside of the criminal and civil legal system, is a unique strength. In focusing on relationships, collaborative approaches offer opportunities

to centre older people's voice and rights and strengthen families' capacity to work together respectfully into the future.

However, we still have a long way to go. As Australia's population continues to age and public awareness of abuse of older people grows, we can expect surging demand for services. This will likely be paired with complexity of support needs, requiring multi-service responses. It is time to move beyond simply "preventing and responding" and set our collective ambitions on ending the abuse of older people. This will require commitments to maintain and extend existing collaborative approaches and the services that sit around them, to support the sector to innovate intervention models, and in long-term investment to tackle ageism across Australian society.





ACRONYMS

ACPO	Aged Crime Prevention Officer
ACT	Australian Capital Territory
ADC	NSW Ageing and Disability Commission
AVO	Apprehended Violence Order
DCJ	NSW Department of Communities & Justice
DFV	Domestic and Family Violence
EAHRU	Elder Abuse Helpline and Resource Unit (predecessor to the NSW Ageing & Disability Abuse Helpline)
IPV	Intimate Partner Violence
NSW	New South Wales
RANSW	Relationships Australia NSW
SAM	Safety Action Meeting

LANGUAGE

In line with the National Plan (Council of Attorneys-General 2019), this report uses the term “abuse of older people” rather than “elder abuse.” Our language choice respects the specific meaning of the term “elder” in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures as referring to “appointed community representatives with cultural and other responsibilities”. While the National Plan refers to “older Australians”, we have chosen “older people” as a term that recognises our work as inclusive of older people who live in this place but are not Australian citizens, and/or do not identify as Australian.

However, where we have quoted research participants, we have quoted the terminology they have used, including “elder abuse”, and reference to professional roles and practices such as “elder mediator” and “elder mediation.”

ATTRIBUTION OF QUOTES

Throughout the report, quotes are attributed to interviewees by their job role category (practitioner, service manager, strategic manager, legal professional, academic/educator) and/or the category of organisation they work in. Quotes from stakeholders employed by Relationships Australia NSW, Relationships Australia Canberra & Region, or Relationships Australia’s national office and collectively attributed as “Relationships Australia”, while external stakeholders are described either by job role category only, or in one of two organisation categories (older people’s service, government/health service). This approach to attribution is intended to provide contextual information, without identifying participants, however participants were aware that full anonymity could not be provided in this study, where many professionals are well known to each other. Where the NSW Ageing & Disability Commissioner is directly attributed, permission was explicitly sought and received.

INTRODUCTION

Five years ago, Relationships Australia NSW (RANSW) established the *Let's Talk Elder Mediation and Support Service* with funding from the NSW Department of Communities & Justice (DCJ). At the time, abuse of older people was an emerging issue, following the NSW Parliamentary Inquiry into Elder Abuse (NSW Parliament 2016) and the subsequent establishment of Aged Crime Prevention Officers (ACPOs) in the NSW Police Force. *Let's Talk* was designed in response to a gap we identified in our own services, in providing effective interventions for older people experiencing abuse from family members. The service design drew on RANSW's expertise in mediation, family violence, family counselling and case management to develop a unique collaborative and rights-based model of support for older people.

Since 2018, we have seen significant changes in the evidence, policy, and service context around the abuse of older people in NSW and Australia. This includes the establishment of the NSW Ageing and Disability Commission in 2019, the first National Plan to Respond to the Abuse of Older Australians (Council of Attorneys-General 2019), federal funding for specialist elder abuse services through the Attorney-General's Department (Inside Policy 2021), and the first National Elder Abuse Prevalence Study (Qu et al 2021). We have also seen media campaigns to increase public awareness of abuse, and through our work with older people and their families in *Let's Talk*, RANSW practitioners have noted a shift in understanding around this issue.

This five-year point presents an important opportunity for reflection, to review what has changed in our own practice and across the sector, and to focus our collective efforts on key opportunities for the next five years.

LET'S TALK ELDER MEDIATION AND SUPPORT SERVICE

RANSW's *Let's Talk* service supports older people and their families to address age-related conflict and abuse, and to make decisions that protect older people's rights and safety. It is available across New South Wales for people aged 65 years and older, and for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people aged 55 years and older. Services are provided in English, Mandarin and Cantonese and are tailored to needs identified in partnership with older people and their families. *Let's Talk* clients may access counselling for themselves and/or their families, engage in facilitated decision-making through mediation with legal representation, participate in practitioner-facilitated multi-party family meetings, and be supported with case management to plan and access other services.

RESEARCH AIMS AND QUESTIONS

This study was developed by RANSW's Practice Quality & Innovation and Research & Impact teams. It aimed to review the *Let's Talk* intervention model in the current policy and service context, capture reflections on five years

of learning, and make recommendations for the future of service provision.

Specifically, this study sought to answer:

1. How has increased public awareness of older people's experiences of abuse over the past five years impacted the service support needs of older people and their families?
2. What role do resolution services and collaborative models play within the broader landscape of interventions for older people experiencing abuse?

METHODOLOGY

We took a multi-methods approach to address the research aims above:

- Desktop review of research, policy and service documentation published between 2018 and 2023;
- Two semi-structured interviews and one focus group with nine Relationships Australia employees, from the federated organisations in NSW and Canberra and the National Office;
- Nine semi-structured individual and small group interviews with 12 external stakeholders who are leading work on the abuse of older people, including practitioners, service managers, academic/educators, legal professionals, policymakers, and academics.

Interviews and focus groups lasted between 30 and 60 minutes and were recorded and

transcribed. Initial thematic analysis was conducted by the lead author and developed in team analytical discussions and through the writing process with the other three report authors. A list of participant organisations and roles is available in the Appendix.

This approach focuses on the perspectives of professionals, rather than the direct experiences of older people and their families. RANSW conducts ongoing outcomes evaluation of the *Let's Talk* service, including interviews with older people and their families, under our Impact Framework (Althor & Harvey 2022) and Let's Talk's Theory of Change (Althor 2023). This evidence is reported separately.

REPORT OVERVIEW

This report is divided into four chapters, exploring key areas identified in documentation review and interviews. Chapter 1 discusses changes in the policy and service landscape and public awareness over the past five years, since Let's Talk was established. Chapter 2 discusses the impact of changes in the way Australia's population is ageing and the resulting increases in demand and the complexity of older people's service support needs. Chapter 3 looks specifically at *Let's Talk* and collaborative service approaches to the abuse of older people, and considers the unique place collaborative, relational models occupy in the abuse response system. Finally, Chapter 4 looks forward and identifies opportunities to develop the sector further over the next five years.

CHAPTER 1. FIVE YEARS ON, AND TEN YEARS BEHIND

This chapter explores shifts in evidence, policy, and interventions on the abuse of older people over the past five years since the *Let's Talk* service was established. Drawing on interviews with internal and external stakeholders, it describes their perceptions of the impacts of these changes over time. It compares progress on the abuse of older people with work to end violence against women, considers the impact of NSW's Ageing and Disability Commission and developments in national responses, and how increased public awareness has influenced service provision.

FAMILY VIOLENCE RESPONSES AND THE ABUSE OF OLDER PEOPLE

“We always say that [with] elder abuse, it’s that [we’re] where domestic violence was, about 15 or 20 years ago.”

— legal professional

The abuse of older people can be understood as both a form of domestic and family violence (DFV), and a distinct form of violence that requires its own advocacy and interventions. Almost all stakeholders interviewed compared the public DFV discourses, policy, and interventions with responses to the abuse of older people. Despite progress in addressing the abuse of older people over the past five years, stakeholders believed that responses are still lagging far behind those addressing violence against women.

This sense of “lagging behind” was perhaps driven by the similarities between stakeholders’ observations about DFV responses, and their

beliefs about what is needed to respond to the abuse of older people. Specifically, they noted:

- a. Strong public awareness of intimate partner violence (IPV) experienced by women from male partners, compared with low public awareness of older people’s experiences of abuse;
- b. Broad acceptance of state and community responsibility to intervene to prevent IPV, compared with minimal public pressure on the state to intervene in the abuse of older people;
- c. Increasing criminalisation of IPV and development of service pathways from the criminal legal system, compared with the lack of a specific criminal offence related to the abuse of older people and under-developed service pathways; and
- d. Federal political commitment through national planning towards “ending” violence against women, compared with a much weaker commitment to “respond to” the abuse of older people.

However, while stakeholders drew on similarities in arguing the ongoing inadequacy of responses

to older people, they were also clear that older people experiencing abuse need specific approaches that often differ substantially from those required to address IPV. For example, stakeholders noted that the person using violence is more often an adult child than an intimate partner, and that ending the relationship is not desirable or possible for the older person experiencing abuse.

“Often domestic violence and elder abuse are linked in together [but] domestic violence focuses on the protection of women and their children, and elder abuse focuses on the protection of older people from their children... about 70% of the matters that we see are around adult children being abusive to their parents”

— legal professional.

In drawing comparisons with approaches to DFV, stakeholders argued that an effective response to the abuse of older people requires national coordination and planning, and meaningful criminal legal responses across jurisdictions.

“I’d say [IPV is] 10 to 15 years ahead of where elder abuse is in terms of the willingness of the public to hold policymakers accountable for responding... At the moment we’ve got a national plan to ‘respond’ to elder abuse. We’ve got now a national plan to ‘end’ domestic and family violence and that’s, to me, a very significant difference”

— strategic manager, Relationships Australia.

IMPACT OF THE NSW AGEING AND DISABILITY COMMISSION

In July 2019, the NSW Ageing and Disability Commission (ADC) was established to protect older people and adults with disabilities from abuse, neglect, and exploitation. The ADC incorporated the former Elder Abuse Helpline and Resource Unit (EAHRU), which became the NSW Ageing and Disability Abuse Helpline. Stakeholders described the establishment of the ADC as a significant step forward for both public awareness and service availability, as well as increasing accountability for use of violence.



“Since [the ADC was established], there seems to be more publicity. There is more accountability. It used to just be the elder abuse hotline and I think that was all there was, whereas now there’s a whole established department, there is the helpline, which is more formalised and then they’re able to do some investigation.”

— practitioner, government/health service

The current NSW Ageing and Disability Commissioner, Robert Fitzgerald AM, noted the importance of the ADC’s establishment as a “will and preference” jurisdiction in centring a right-based approach to supporting older people experiencing abuse:

“Our jurisdiction requires me and the staff to take account of what the older person’s wishes and desires are, and before we can conduct investigation, we are required to get their consent... so at the very heart of our regime is the empowerment of older people.”

—NSW Ageing & Disability Commission

The Commissioner also reflected on the establishment of Adult Safeguarding Units in South Australia and the ACT, as evidence of a greater recognition at the state and territory level of the need for more robust interventions.

“What we’ve seen in the last five years is a growing realisation that it’s not simply good enough to provide advice... you’ve got to be able to do a great deal of work in relation to the issues. You’ve got to try and seek resolution of problems where they might be able to be resolved, but ultimately you’ve got to create environment where the person is in a much safer position than when it was first reported.”

— NSW Ageing & Disability Commission

Nevertheless, the lack of a specific criminal offence of abuse of older people was seen by some stakeholders as a barrier to developing strong service pathways, like those that exist around IPV.

“There’s no crime of elder abuse. Many people experience elder abuse without acknowledging it. I think the pathways to get assistance are still being developed.”

— legal professional

Stakeholders also noted the increasingly important role the ADC has played in supporting service coordination, such as through regional Elder Abuse Collaboratives which bring providers together regularly to share information about their services.

“You come together [as services] who have touch points with older people. So it might be ranged from the police, the ambulance, all the way through to care providers and so on, and they’re quite useful... the idea is that they champion the rights and wishes of older people and create collaborative service, so that you can you know who to call locally if you’ve got a client that needs something particular.”

— practitioner, Relationships Australia

The ADC noted that where they had originally received most reports of abuse from adult children of older people, service providers have become their strongest reporters. In their view, this reflects significant increases in awareness of the abuse of older people among practitioners.

However, some stakeholders who provided services before the ADC was set up in 2019 also shared a perception that the ADC provides less direct support for older people experiencing abuse than what was available through EAHRU. While EAHRU provided casework support, the ADC only offers telephone helpline support, and some practitioners reported that this has resulted in the necessary casework being shifted onto other services.

“So older people are being given – and their families – telephone numbers and services to contact, and that’s often not as effective as the casework model that was running [before]... We’ve done a lot more casework as a result. So we actually do a lot of the legwork for people because they haven’t got the knowledge of what’s available.”

—practitioner, Relationships Australia

IMPACT OF A COORDINATED NATIONAL APPROACH

Responding to increasing state-based interventions on the abuse of older people, there have been significant developments in national coordination of responses since Let’s Talk was established in 2018. A week after the NSW ADC was established, the first 5-year National Plan to respond to the abuse of older people was published, prioritising evidence generation, community awareness, service strengthening, supporting people to plan for their future decision-making, and strengthening safeguards (Council of Attorneys-General 2019). The Plan enabled the first national prevalence study, which revealed an elder abuse prevalence rate of 14.8% in the Australian population, with psychological (11.7%), neglect (2.9%) and financial (2.1%) the most common forms of abuse (Qu et al 2021).

Stakeholders described the importance of the National Elder Abuse Prevalence study, both in advocating for investment in service provision,

and in supporting their work directly with older people. One interviewee described how they use prevalence data to encourage clients to complete future planning documents:

“After we’ve gone through the future planning documents, I give them a little bit of information from the elder abuse prevalence study... and I give them the definition of elder abuse and an idea of just how prevalent it is based on the information we know from that study.”

— legal professional

The Royal Commission into Aged Care Quality and Safety (Pagone & Briggs 2021) provided further evidence to support action on the abuse of older people, with the finding that 39.2% of people living in Australian aged care facilities experience neglect, emotional abuse, or physical abuse.

IMPACT OF INCREASED PUBLIC AWARENESS

Stakeholders suggested that the Royal Commission into Aged Care Quality & Safety, media coverage, and greater availability of services and resources, have all played a role in increasing public awareness of the abuse of older people over the past five years.

“I think there’s definitely more awareness and exposure... There’s so much more talk about it in the media, there’s so many more resources out there... Before, I think people wouldn’t dare to talk about it or mention it, and it was very, very much a private matter and maybe even a shameful matter.”

— practitioner, government/health service

“I think what’s probably been the biggest change [has been] I think the Royal Commission [into Aged Care Quality & Safety] and a few ABC 4 Corners programs... a lot of media has really brought to the forefront the fact that this is happening and we need to address it... [and] what the ABC did by getting the actual visual impact of care workers abusing older people.”

— service manager, older people’s service

Stakeholders who deliver services for older people described how increased media attention has resulted in more clients being aware of abuse and raising it with them. However, some stakeholders also expressed concern about the risk of negative media narratives that exaggerate generational rifts, perpetuating harmful stereotypes of older people and excusing abuse.

“If you look at the commentary at the moment, there’s a lot of blame on the older generation for holding a high level of wealth because the younger generations are struggling... [The media] create this divide and what we actually need to be doing is creating connection. Like we absolutely know that when we put young people and older people together, we create a better community.”

— practitioner, Relationships Australia

They also raised concerns about the lack of nuance in media narratives around the abuse of older people, that fail to show the subtleties of how abuse presents and to contextualise it within the broader social problem of ageism. While public awareness of the existence of abuse may have increased, stakeholders believe that this awareness is still largely limited to knowledge of physical abuse, and that this is a barrier for older people experiencing abuse to seek help.

“For a lot of people, media and clients included, they think ‘well, if I’m not getting hit and I’m not getting physically restrained, that’s not abuse, it’s just a bit of fighting with my kid.’ So it’s getting that understanding that psychological abuse, emotional abuse, financial abuse, it is all just as bad, if not worse.”

— legal professional

SUMMARY

Overall, stakeholders were encouraged by increased government action at both state/territory and federal level on the abuse of older people. They reflected on an important shift towards a rights-based approach that respects older people’s agency, and greater public awareness that has supported increased service access.

However, stakeholders also noted that public awareness and responses to older people experiencing abuse remain far behind those of the broader DFV sector and called for greater ambition towards ending the abuse of older people.

“We’ve recognised that taking older people’s rights away from them, taking their choices away from them, taking their money... and their possessions... their right to live the way they want to live... I think it’s getting more mainstream attention. Policies have changed, and awareness has changed, and government recognition for the need to provide funding to address that has changed, and that’s been a really positive thing.”

— service manager, older people’s service

CHAPTER 2.

INCREASING DEMAND AND COMPLEXITY, AGAINST NARROWING INTERVENTIONS

This chapter explores stakeholders' reflections on how the population of older people experiencing abuse is changing, and the implications this has for policy and practice. It also considers the changing context of services, with providers narrowing their offerings to meet demand, and the challenge this presents to the sector's ability to meet increasingly complex client needs.

AUSTRALIA'S CHANGING, AGEING POPULATION

While it is not new information that Australia has an ageing population, with the so-called “baby boomer” and “interwar” generations making up nearly a third of the population (ABS 2022a), stakeholders identified a range of issues that point to increasing complexity for policymakers and service providers responding to the abuse of older people.

Firstly, stakeholders described the generational changes they are seeing in the older people who are beginning to seek services, and their expectations of how this will continue to change service provision. They explained that a new generation of older people, raised in greater prosperity after World War II, has different expectations and access to different discursive and cultural resources around support-seeking, financial capacity, and the possibility of experiencing abuse as they get older.

“There was a sort of that feeling, probably years ago that, well, ‘[my children are] gonna get the money anyhow, so when they might as well have it now’... I think there’s a big shift in that now. It’s now: ‘It’s my money and I will decide when and where you get it.’”

— service manager, older people’s service

“The generation coming through is financially more savvy. In some senses, they will certainly be more IT literate. There’s no question about that, and with that comes availability of information, you know, and all of those things that go with it.”

— strategic manager, government/health service

While expectations may be changing, stakeholders also explained that the intersections of older people's specific social and health-related needs with their experiences of abuse often differentiates them from other people who experience family violence. Factors that stakeholders identified as potentially complicating responses to experiences of abuse in Australia's ageing population include geography, disability (including mental health and dementia), identity-based marginalisation other than age, and economic stress.

GEOGRAPHY, CLIMATE AND DISABILITY

Older people, and those who will be older people in the next decade, are more likely to live in rural areas, away from where services are currently concentrated. Currently, people aged 55 years and over are more likely to live outside of capital cities, and in NSW people aged over 60 years

make up 28% of the population outside of Greater Sydney (ABS 2022b). This presents a challenge for health and social services, as health impacts from the escalating climate crisis are already disproportionately impacting people living in regional and rural areas (Horton et al 2010).

Related to this, half of people over 65 years old have a disability, and in 2018, 1.3 million older people in Australia who lived in their own home needed assistance with everyday activities (ABS 2018). Stakeholders particularly noted mental health and cognitive impairment as key issues. Globally, older people have significantly higher levels of mental distress and suicidality, with older men being at particular risk. Emerging evidence suggests this problem may be worsening in the wake of the pandemic (De Leo 2022), requiring service providers to be skilled in identifying and responding to these risks.



As people are living longer, Australia is also seeing substantial increases in the number of people living with dementia. In 2022, the number of people living with dementia in Australia had increased by 4% to 401,300 people and is expected to double over the next 35 years (AIHW 2023). Stakeholders explained how older people's cognitive impairment can be used as part of the abuse:

"When you sprinkle even an ounce of cognitive decline, or anything around [an older person's] capacity, you know it makes it really difficult for an older person to feel heard, and to feel like their voice is justified, because people will try to run them down, 'You didn't remember that right' or you know, 'That's not what happened.'"

— legal professional

This requires service providers to have both the skills and processes to identify abuse and to support older people's agency, in the context of changing cognitive capacity.

"We are dealing also with a cohort where a number of people are starting to lose cognitive abilities and so again one of the issues for us is, what stage is [an intervention] most appropriate when people are starting to lose cognition?"

— strategic manager, health/government service

IDENTITY-BASED MARGINALISATION

For older Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, older culturally and linguistically diverse people, and older LGBTQ+ people, addressing abuse involves both cultural specificities and intersecting discriminations. The NSW Government's Interagency Policy notes that responses to older Aboriginal people's experiences of abuse require an understanding of cultural and kinship responsibilities and practices of reciprocity, as well as acknowledgement of

ongoing systemic racism that means that people do not live as long on average, and government and other social service providers are often not trusted (NSW Government 2020). Interviewees described the need for humility and respect in working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander older people and their families.

"It's very important, if you're going to be working with Indigenous elders, that you have the respect of the Indigenous family you're working with. You may need to work with another Indigenous person, or it may be that we need to train Indigenous people to work as an elder mediator. But I think we need to be very careful not to come in with our Western ideas."

— academic/educator

"[Older people's] knowledge isn't revered as much as maybe it used to be... certainly some cultures, and especially even First Nations, their elders are a respected group... and we [non First Nations people] need to have to look at ourselves a little bit more with how much respect and acknowledgement we give older people for the role they've played."

— service manager, older people's service

Older people with connections to cultural and linguistic communities other than Australia's dominant Anglo-European, English-speaking culture are diverse in their experiences and needs, and how these may intersect with experiences of abuse. For example, their cultural norms and family expectations related to ageing may differ from those that service providers tend to be familiar with, they may be prevented from accessing social services and supports due to their migration or citizenship status or a lack of English language proficiency, they may have migration-related trauma experiences in Australia or their country of origin that impact their family relationships and willingness to seek support.

“When you’re looking at ageing with people from different cultural backgrounds, one of the first things that goes is their English language. They resort to their primary language, and therefore communication might be very difficult.”

— academic/educator

“[There can be] historical trauma of migration to another country and other areas of trauma. It’s big, because you’re dealing with everybody in different generations... so that kids or their grandchildren may not actually understand why this person is thinking the way that they do.”

— practitioner, Relationships Australia

Interestingly, none of the interviewees in this study referred to the experiences of LGBTQ+ people specifically, despite increased advocacy on this issue from LGBTQ+ health services and government guidance published (Department of Health 2019). LGBTQ+ people are at increased risk of experiencing abuse, for example from their families of origin or in aged care settings, and they are also more likely to receive care that does not meet their needs (Hosking et al 2021). Many older LGBTQ+ people have significant trauma histories related to their experiences of discrimination, which may be exacerbated with experiences of heteronormativity and cisgenderism in ageing services.

POPULATION-WIDE ECONOMIC STRESS

Stakeholders noted increasing economic stress in younger age groups as both a predictor and exacerbator of abuse, which financial abuse being a particular concern.

“We were very concerned over COVID, because of a lot of [adult] children moving back in with their older parents. And there was all that isolation, and being locked down, and the stressors that went with that... Now children are moving back in, they’ve lost their units, they can’t afford to pay rent. They’re moving back in with mum and dad... there is a lot of potential for financial abuse.”

— service manager, older people’s service

“There are changes in adult children moving home as a result of COVID, and parents having difficulty either removing them from the property if they want them removed, or just generally having ongoing difficulties with them because they’re living at home. And they said that they would be there for a short time and they’ve ended up being there for a lot longer.”

— legal professional

Stakeholders who deliver services for older people experiencing abuse noted that referrals to their services increased during pandemic-related lockdowns and have continued to grow. Most commonly, increases in referrals were related to adult family members – usually children – becoming financially dependent on them.

There’s been a massive increase... probably I would say 80% of our cases are older children who have returned home or have never left home.”

— practitioner, Relationships Australia

While these narratives position older people as the holders of wealth and therefore vulnerable to financial abuse from their children, stakeholders also described how housing distress can impact

older people. Australia's social support systems for retirement are predicated on an expectation that older people will own their home. For older people who don't own their home, this means they can be at risk of homelessness or of relying on unsafe family members for housing.

“Homelessness and housing unaffordability for older people... has enormous impacts, because it forces people to live in circumstances that [are] not safe, and they would not desire, that is often with other family members or in circumstances where it creates financial stress.”

— strategic manager, government/health service

“If I could fix housing, I reckon I could literally fix - at the moment – 90% of my clients easy.”

— practitioner, Relationships Australia

NARROWING SERVICE OFFERINGS

Despite identifying increasing demand and complexity as key issues for older people's service providers, stakeholders also described a perception that service offerings across the system were narrowing. While there was enthusiasm for greater media visibility and national coordination and commitment, for some practitioners, investment had been made in scaling services at the expense of providing an appropriate depth of service.

Practitioners described the loss of ongoing casework services, which had transitioned instead to being one-off services, such as telephone referral services.

“The Ageing & Disability Commission, from my experience of them, have gone from... a casework model [four years ago] to a telephone referral service. Seniors Rights similarly have done that. And that is difficult, because what it means is there's not a lot of people on the ground, you know.”

— practitioner, Relationships Australia

Service providers who do offer ongoing engagement reported that they are receiving more inappropriate referrals, and that they need to do a lot more initial work in supporting older people and their families through services.

“I think a lot of [services] are moving to marketing model. That's the problem: That... it's a tick box. So it's phone line, tick. I've made these referrals, tick, tick, tick. I've given them the numbers to call. And they have no idea whether people are going to use those numbers.”

— practitioner, Relationships Australia

While the expansion of online and telephone support during pandemic-related lockdowns has been broadly positive for health and social services, expanding access and convenience, stakeholders were less convinced of the benefits for older people's services. They expressed concern that services were moving away from in-person service delivery to reduce costs, at the expense of older people's needs.

“Not everyone that's an older person enjoys waiting online or a phone number to ask a question... to be able to sit with someone and build rapport and engage with the person is often, I feel, more successful.”

— practitioner, Relationships Australia

Stakeholders in more strategic roles also noted these changes, in what they described as “fragmentation” in the service system. They argued that providers struggle to retain quality staff, due to insecure funding cycles, which results in service gaps and challenges for older people and their families attempting to navigate support.

“One of the great barriers to effective help seeking in Australia across family law, across intimate partner violence and elder abuse is fragmentation, and the fact that we consistently put the burden of navigating that fragmentation on the people who are least equipped to deal with it.”

— strategic manager, Relationships Australia

This perceived narrowing of service offerings and fragmentation of the service system are set against stakeholders’ advocacy around the crucial role that collaboration between providers plays in preventing and responding to the abuse of older people. The complexity of support needs for this group, both in terms of the older person themselves and their family members, requires strategic partnership across health, social care, and legal services.

“It is just essential that we collaborate. We can do good things on our own, but when we work with someone else, we do great things.”

— legal professional

“I’m really proud that there’s a there’s actually knowledge of elder abuse and services, building risk collaboratives, professionals working together who never came in the same room together, working together for the difference of older people.”

— practitioner, Relationships Australia

SUMMARY

People are ageing differently to how they have in the past. They have higher expectations of social supports, and of governments’ responsibility to protect them from abuse. As people live longer, they are living longer with disability, and are more diverse in their identities and experiences. Economic stress across the population is increasing risk of financial abuse for many older people.

Service providers are experiencing this intersection of factors in the form of increasing service demand and increasing case complexity. Despite increased attention and commitment to addressing the abuse of older people, practitioners describe a fragmented service system and narrowing provision. Retaining and expanding service diversity is critical to providers’ ability to work collaboratively, supporting warm referrals and shared responsibility for risk and prevention.



CHAPTER 4.

PRIORITIES FOR SECTOR DEVELOPMENT

Stakeholders expressed overall positivity regarding the development of responses to older people experiencing abuse in NSW and nationally over the past five years and were optimistic about further positive change. This chapter describes a range of priorities stakeholders identified for further development of the sector in the future.

TACKLING ENDEMIC AGEISM IN AUSTRALIAN SOCIETY

While stakeholders were encouraged by greater public awareness of the abuse of older people, they were unanimous in arguing that ageism remains all-pervasive in Australia. Ageism is a significant contributing factor to abuse, and negatively impacts identification of abuse and timely access to appropriate services.

“You put it down to ageism, don't you? It's just that whole idea that as you get older, your life is worthless. Your opinions are worthless, and it's OK to make decisions ‘for’ [rather than ‘with’] older people.”

— service manager, older people's service

“As elder mediators, we have people coming in who have internalised ageism, and of course, all the children might be saying, ‘Oh well, mum is 70 years old or 80 or 90, whatever it is, and they don't need this and they don't need that.’ That's very ageist.”

— academic/educator

Stakeholders noted that older people themselves internalise this ageism, seeing themselves as a burden or undeserving of support.

“Our elder abuse practitioners... often encounter internalised ageism, ‘oh look, I don't wanna be a nuisance.’ In fact, my mother's last words were ‘I don't want to be a nuisance,’ you know, in a completely different context... but they were her last words.”

— strategic manager, Relationships Australia

Worryingly, practitioners also reported that some older people experience explicit ageism when approaching public services for support around abuse.

“We will still get people that will say I've called the police and they will say ‘oh you're just a grumpy old man, it's a civil issue.’”

— practitioner, Relationships Australia

Stakeholders noted that even in policy responses, older people were often cast as “problems” to be

fixed, rather than as respected older people with important roles and responsibilities in society.

“We’ve gotta turn that around and hopefully treat us [older people] like an asset, and use our knowledge and our experience, and acknowledge the contributions that everyone has made in life, and acknowledge their life experience.”

— older people’s service manager

INVESTING IN CARERS AND AGED CARE AS PREVENTION

Stakeholders identified two currently under-resourced areas that, with greater investment, could make a positive contribution to preventing the abuse of older people: support for carers and support for aged care workers.

The concept of “carer stress” has been implicated in the abuse of older people. However, it needs to be better defined and conceptualised as a systems issue related to broader concerns such as housing affordability, economic inequality, rather than being understood as an individual issue. Stakeholders noted that while paid care workers

receive professional development, unpaid carers would also benefit from similar development opportunities. In relation to the abuse of older people, stakeholders suggested carers would benefit from training around supported decision-making, alternatives to restrictive practices, and identifying and reporting abuse.

Related to this, several stakeholders noted that both carers and the broader community require improved education on the impact of Powers of Attorney and Guardianship laws, and the rights of older people.

“[We should be having] community group conversations about the importance of having documents in place if you need them in the future. [This] is really important because... it’s really empowering for people and anyone over 18 should have these documents in place. It’s not just an over 65 thing.”

— legal professional

Abuse of older people in aged care is at least partly related to workforce shortages, exacerbated by low pay and challenging working conditions. The sector currently also relies heavily on volunteer labour, further reducing decent paid career opportunities within aged care. If properly trained and adequately compensated, aged care professionals have the potential to be key contributors in detecting abuse.

SERVICE DEVELOPMENT

Some stakeholders identified training and certification through the Elder Mediation International Network as a key strategy for sector sustainability.

“I am very concerned at the moment that I’m seeing a lot of people, who aren’t even mediators in Australia, currently calling themselves elder mediators and intervening in situations involving vulnerable older people... very few people [have completed] the Elder Mediation International Network certification, which we strongly advise people to do because it’s the gold standard approach to certification.”

— academic/educator

There is also a need for certified professionals to undertake advanced certification to train other mediators, as there is currently only one certified trainer in Australia and New Zealand.

Stakeholders identified a range of opportunities to build on existing collaborative models, drawing on innovations internationally to expand offerings for older people in Australia. One suggestion was to explore ElderCaring Coordination, developed in the USA, which allows courts to mandate that family members or other people in conflict to work with a trained coordinator, in the best interests of an older person.

“ElderCaring coordination is an approach... which I think we also need in Australia, particularly where you have older people at risk of or experiencing elder abuse and it’s an approach which is used when families are not appropriate for mediation, where maybe their levels of conflict are too high, or they are resistant to attending [elder mediation].”

— academic/educator

For some stakeholders, the voluntary nature of elder mediation was seen as a service challenge that could be addressed through legislation mandating mediation, like what already exists in the family law system. They pointed out that where one or more family members in conflict with or around the older person are resistant to engaging with dispute resolution services, providing services can be time-consuming and often ineffective.

“Elder mediation is an extremely valuable tool in responding to elder abuse. What it requires though, is a willingness from all parties involved to actually attend these sessions, which in some cases is hard to achieve. So it may be helpful in the future to have some mechanism, in policy or regulation, to be able to encourage or require interested parties to engage in formal dispute resolution processes.”

— NSW Ageing & Disability Commission

“[We need to encourage] governments to fund some training, for legislation to include Elder Mediation or ElderCaring coordination, so that older people aren’t just left to deal with these situations on their own as older people. [We need] legislation and policies that encourage referrals to either Elder Mediation or ElderCaring Coordination.”

— academic/educator

Practitioners also noted the need for more culturally appropriate services delivered in community languages. Communities differ in a variety of ways, including their attitudes toward seeking help, conflict resolution, and the additional complexities related to minority stress when accessing mainstream service organisations.

“To have courage to come forward and say that you need help, but it’s sort of an extra step when that help isn’t available in your language. And so then you’ve got to rely on an interpreter... often we use telephone interpreters, and then there are hearing difficulties... And there isn’t enough information available in other languages. Just generally there isn’t, and it’s really poor.”

— legal professional

RESEARCH AND DATA COLLECTION

The National Elder Abuse Prevalence Study has provided significant value to the sector, but stakeholders noted continuing gaps in the evidence base around older people’s experiences of abuse and service needs. Stakeholders noted that research with older people experiencing abuse involves sensitive ethical issues, particularly around capacity to consent, confidentiality, and ensuring safety. Nevertheless, efforts must be

made to overcome ethical challenges to ensure that older people’s voices are reflected in research.

One stakeholder suggested a particular need for research into opportunities to address loneliness and the abuse of older people together, including the potential of intergenerational interventions:

“Thinking about in 20 years time, I think what’s concerning me is often the young people. Now the reports of high levels of loneliness that’s happening amongst them as well, and the impacts that has on all aspects of life... [can we] look at strategies in terms of helping address loneliness as well? Whether is there a link there around elder abuse, is there something that can help can tie in to help reduce it?”

— strategic manager, Relationships Australia

SUMMARY

Responses to the abuse of older people in NSW and Australia have advanced significantly in the past five years, but the sector remains new and there are continued opportunities for development. Over the next five years, attention must be paid to tackling ageism in Australian society, investing in preventing abuse, innovating collaborative service models, and strengthening the evidence base.

CONCLUSION

Together, federal and state/territory governments and health and community service providers have made substantial progress in responding to the abuse of older people in Australia over the past five years. However, the sector is still in its infancy and has a long way to go in matching the responses to other forms of domestic and family violence, particularly intimate partner violence perpetrated by men towards women.

Significantly, the sector may benefit from political ambition that moves beyond “preventing and responding”, to aim towards ending the abuse of older people. A commitment of this kind would require long-term investment in tackling ageism across Australian society, including in systems and institutions.

The collaborative model embodied by RANSW’s *Let’s Talk Elder Mediation and Support Service* remains as relevant as ever, playing a unique role in the broader service system. The service’s ability to work productively with older people and their families, alongside service providers, outside of the criminal and civil legal system, is a unique strength. In focusing on relationships, collaborative approaches offer opportunities to centre older people’s voice and rights and strengthen families’ capacity to work together respectfully into the future.

As our population continues to age and public awareness of abuse of older people continues to grow, we can expect to see surging demand for services. This will likely be paired with

complexity of support needs, requiring multi-service responses. This presents a challenge for government and the community sector, who will need to work together to balance providing equity of access, while also providing the depth of support required to address complexity. Services are already under pressures related to population-wide economic stress, which we might expect to increase with the anticipated escalation of the climate crisis over the next five years. This is likely to be particularly challenging for older people, who are more likely to live in regional and rural areas, so may be more impacted by extreme weather events and have less access to public services. In this context, it is critical that existing services are maintained, access to services expanded, and innovations in collaborative service models supported.

Over the past five years, policymakers, government service providers, community organisations and frontline practitioners have transformed responses to older people experiencing abuse in NSW and across Australia. In doing so, the sector has defined itself as a unique field separate to family violence and family mediation interventions, and produced innovative models of collaboration between older people, their family members, and service providers. These models remain novel in the broader family violence sector and may offer opportunities for service development in other contexts.



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APPENDIX. INTERVIEW AND FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANTS

PARTICIPANTS BY ORGANISATION

ORGANISATION	NUMBER OF PARTICIPANTS
Relationships Australia	
Relationships Australia (NSW)	6
Relationships Australia (Canberra)	2
Relationships Australia (National)	1
Sub-total:	9
External stakeholders	
Carers NSW	1
Elder Abuse Service, Legal Aid NSW	2
Elder Mediation International Network	1
Inner West Council	1
Justice Connect	1
NSW Ageing & Disability Commission	3
Prince of Wales Hospital	1
Seniors Rights Services	1
University of South Australia	1
Sub-total:	12
Total study participants:	21

PARTICIPANTS BY ROLE

PARTICIPANT ROLES	NUMBER OF PARTICIPANTS
Relationships Australia	
Practitioners	6
Service managers	1
Strategic managers	2
Sub-total:	9
External stakeholders	
Practitioners	1
Service managers	3
Strategic managers	3
Legal professionals	3
Academics and educators	2
Sub-total:	12
Total study participants:	21

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