



# Findings from the Evaluation of the National Plan to Respond to the Abuse of Older Australians (Elder Abuse) 2019–2023

Research snapshot | July 2024



## About the evaluation

This research snapshot sets out key findings of an evaluation of Australia’s first National Plan to Respond to the Abuse of Older Australians (Elder Abuse) 2019–2023 (the National Plan). The National Plan was established jointly by Commonwealth, state and territory governments, and identifies key priority actions for preventing and responding to the abuse of older people in Australia. The evaluation was commissioned and funded by the Commonwealth Attorney-General’s Department.

The evaluation focused on several issues including:

- **whether** the National Plan focused efforts in response to the abuse of older people in Australia
- **how**, and to what extent the National Plan has been effective in increasing the focus on preventing and responding to the abuse of older people and creating a foundation for further action
- **whether** the priority areas in the National Plan and their subsequent initiatives have been achieved, are ongoing (to continue) or should no longer be priorities for governments
- **whether** the term of the National Plan was sufficient to achieve the stated initiatives and consider a suitable term for future iterations.

Eight different elements were used to evaluate the National Plan

1	 <b>Desktop review</b>	5	 <b>Interviews with professionals</b>
2	 <b>Synthesis of previous evaluations</b>	6	 <b>Focus groups with professionals</b>
3	 <b>Targeted consultations</b>	7	 <b>Delphi survey of professionals</b>
4	 <b>Survey of community members</b>	8	 <b>Case studies</b>

## Findings

### Appropriateness of the National Plan

The data show that Commonwealth, state and territory governments were committed to the National Plan and to the prevention of and response to the abuse of older people in Australia.

- Their actions have included funding service provision including awareness-raising campaigns and education and training, advocacy, legal assistance, legislative and policy reforms, aged care reforms (including quality and safeguarding frameworks), and establishing investigative agencies.
- Some jurisdictions recommended a longer-term National Plan that regularly monitors progress against agreed objectives.

The Survey of Community Members showed:

- Most participants in the 18-64 years and the 65+ years age groups (54%-55%) were not aware of the National Plan.
- More than two-thirds, however, reported they had seen other information or material raising awareness about the abuse of older people.
- Most commonly, this information was a government publication or pamphlet.

Professionals working within organisations responding to the abuse of older people identified awareness-raising activities, further research and activities to safeguard the rights of older people as most important to achieving the National Plan's objectives.

### Efficiency of the National Plan

- Professionals concerned with the abuse of older people valued the collaborative approach underpinning the development of the National Plan.
- The National Plan meant that jurisdictions could share information and learnings about awareness, prevention and response activities.
- The evaluation identified a need to build relationships with First Nations people, culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) people, LGBTIQ+ older people and older people with a disability to understand their experiences of abuse and to address barriers to accessing services, programs and initiatives for these people to address their specific needs.
- The evaluation emphasised the importance of building and developing relationships across services and for collaborative, coordinated and multi-disciplinary service provision.
- Information and awareness materials need to be more accessible for people with disability, for members of Aboriginal and CALD communities and for people experiencing digital exclusion.
- Key professionals engaging with older people at risk of or experiencing abuse need better knowledge about how to screen for, assess and respond to the abuse of older people.

## Effectiveness of the National Plan

A number of jurisdictions reported effective collaboration with other agencies, frontline organisations and government departments about the National Plan.

- Several jurisdictions shared information about monitoring or evaluation mechanisms used to track and review progress against their strategies and frameworks and the National Plan.
- Participating state and territory governments requested more engagement with other jurisdictions to share lessons learned and to ensure that knowledge acquired through the delivery of initiatives did not remain primarily within the confines of their region.
- They also valued face-to-face engagement about the National Plan, with attention directed towards shared learnings about policies and initiatives that have worked, the reasons why they have worked, barriers to implementing objectives and opportunities for improvement.

Health professionals and therapeutic services delivered by allied health professionals (e.g. counsellors) have a critical role in identifying older people at risk of, or experiencing, abuse and facilitating their access to support services.

- Findings indicated that further training for professionals in specialist services, health justice partnerships, community organisations and advocacy services is critical in supporting these professionals to screen for, assess and respond to people experiencing or engaging in elder abuse.

The National Plan supported improved understanding of the abuse of older people (particularly due to the release of the National Elder Abuse Prevalence Study). However, there remains a need for:

- improved understanding of the nature and prevalence of the abuse and mistreatment of older people, the protective factors across sectors, and improved general community awareness
- further research to better understand this form of abuse in the context of First Nations peoples, CALD people, LGBTIQI+ people, people in aged care and those with a disability or cognitive impairment.

Survey participants also described how the advice or actions of professionals or services could be ineffective, too generalist or too costly, with some participants highlighting that services that relied on the older person experiencing abuse consenting to assistance or intervention were unhelpful.

## Conclusion and recommendations

The evaluation identified the National Plan to be a valuable mechanism for uniting governments, agencies and organisations towards the common goal of responding to the abuse of older people in Australia. It has improved understanding about the nature of this form of abuse, and has highlighted the value in jurisdictions working collectively to better meet the needs of people affected by it. However, the evaluation findings also indicate that further work is needed to continue the valuable efforts of Commonwealth, state and territory governments, organisations and individuals, including by focusing on the needs of diverse communities and older people with disability, and by finding ways to prevent the abuse of older people.

Based on the evaluation findings, recommendations to guide future action in relation to the abuse of older people are:

### Maximise impact through increased opportunities for engagement and information sharing:

- consider a longer operational period for the next National Plan that includes regular reviews and shorter-term action plans with measurable goals
- consider the development of a clear communication and engagement strategy for future National Plans
- examine actions applied in response to the abuse of older people including what has worked and why
- consider ways to improve data sharing across state, territory and Commonwealth agencies.

### Build on existing knowledge about the abuse of older people and guide improvements to practice by:

- further exploring themes and issues in the National Elder Abuse Prevalence Study, including how elder abuse manifests, factors that contribute to abuse and its impact on diverse community members
- reviewing criminal law in the context of elder abuse, including older peoples' access to justice
- exploring the need for better understanding of the role of public trustee and guardianship agencies, and the responses of such bodies to elder abuse concerns
- exploring and providing ongoing guidance about self-determination, building individual capacity and evidence-based best practice in the context of working with older people.

### Take further action to prevent and safeguard people from abuse including:

- increasing the focus on intervention and prevention
- reviewing and considering possible improvements to legislation and policy specific to the way that services are delivered and monitored
- exploring the potential for additional adult safeguarding measures/units
- considering the inclusion of financial institutions in safeguarding networks
- exploring opportunities to focus on older carers and the unique stressors they encounter.

### Develop individual capacity of older people to recognise abuse and to become more aware of their rights by:

- exploring possibilities to educate people who abuse older people and the general community
- examining opportunities to increase advertising and awareness through mainstream and social media
- exploring opportunities to provide education for older people, particularly to build their capacity to better understand their rights.

### Improve the capacity of sectors and services for older people affected by the abuse by:

- exploring opportunities to create guidance and recommendations about how information and materials can be made more accessible across a variety of formats
- recruiting service staff from diverse backgrounds in order to better reach First Nations and CALD communities and to promote engagement with services, especially for those who may be 'digitally excluded'
- increasing the focus on culturally appropriate responses to address the abuse of older people
- increasing training for primary care professionals and the aged care workforce
- considering the development of accreditation and standards applicable to elder mediation
- exploring a systematic (e.g. structured, coordinated and consistent) approach to assessing risk
- exploring needs of frontline services to support them to be more responsive to the abuse of older people and how services can be geographically equitable.