

28 July 2026

Dear Minister,

Please find attached Blue Knot Foundation's policy paper, **Complex Trauma Recovery: A National Approach to Strengthening Outcomes Across Australia's Reform Agenda**.

Australia is undertaking significant national reform across child wellbeing and safety, child sexual abuse, violence prevention, mental health, suicide prevention, disability and psychosocial support. While these reforms address different policy priorities, they increasingly engage the same individuals, families, communities and service systems.

Drawing on contemporary Australian evidence and national policy directions, this paper explores how recognising childhood adversity and complex trauma as shared drivers of harm can strengthen implementation across these reform agendas. It presents recovery not only as an outcome for individuals, but as a cross-government reform objective that supports prevention, improves wellbeing and participation, reduces long-term service demand, and strengthens the return on government investment.

The paper argues that Australia has established strong policy foundations across these sectors. The next opportunity lies in strengthening implementation through greater alignment around shared outcomes, workforce capability, trauma-informed systems, accountability and continuous learning.

Blue Knot Foundation has prepared this paper to contribute constructively to current and future policy development. We hope it provides a useful resource for considering how existing reforms can be better connected to improve outcomes for people affected by childhood adversity, child sexual abuse and complex trauma.

We would welcome the opportunity to discuss the paper and its implications for national reform should this be of interest.

Contact

T 02 8920 3611

E admin@blueknot.org.au

A 6 Middlemiss St, Lavender Bay 2060

**Blue Knot Helpline and Redress
Support Service**

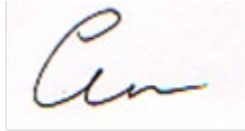
1300 657 380

W blueknot.org.au

ABN: 49 072 260 005

Thank you for your ongoing leadership and commitment to improving outcomes for Australians affected by childhood adversity and complex trauma.

Yours sincerely,



Dr Cathy Kezelman AM
President and Managing Director
Blue Knot Foundation

ckezelman@blueknot.org.au

If you would like to discuss this paper or Blue Knot Foundation's work in complex trauma recovery, please contact:

Dr Cathy Kezelman AM
President and Managing Director
Blue Knot Foundation

Phone: +61 425 812 197

Email: ckezelman@blueknot.org.au

Encl: Complex Trauma Recovery: A National Approach to Strengthening Outcomes Across Australia's Reform Agenda.

Contact

T 02 8920 3611

E admin@blueknot.org.au

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Complex Trauma Recovery: A National Approach to Strengthening Outcomes Across Australia's Reform Agenda

Position Paper – Blue Knot Foundation: National Centre of Excellence for Complex Trauma

FOREWORD

Australia is navigating one of the most significant periods of social policy reform in recent decades. Governments are progressing major reforms across child wellbeing and safety, child sexual abuse, violence prevention, mental health, suicide prevention, disability and psychosocial support concurrently. Collectively, these reforms present a unique opportunity to improve outcomes for individuals, families and communities through more coordinated prevention, recovery and system reform.

Australian evidence has established childhood adversity and complex trauma as shared drivers of many of the challenges facing these reforms. Complex trauma is a recognised consequence of repeated, cumulative and interpersonal experiences of adversity. It provides an explanatory framework for understanding the impacts of childhood adversity on health, wellbeing, relationships and participation across the life course. While prevention remains essential, millions of Australians are already living with the lifelong consequences of childhood adversity. Supporting recovery and healing for those affected can improve wellbeing, participation, productivity and the long-term impact of government investment.

Multiple reviews, inquiries and evaluations have established a compelling evidence base for reform. The challenge is no longer identifying what works, but translating this evidence consistently into policy, service design, workforce capability and implementation. Achieving this requires stronger coordination around shared drivers, shared outcomes and shared implementation across Australia's reform agenda. Persistent implementation challenges include fragmented systems, uneven workforce capability, inconsistent practice and limited mechanisms for coordination, shared learning and continuous improvement.

Contemporary policy increasingly recognises the need for prevention to incorporate opportunities across early intervention, response and recovery. In responding to the burden of childhood adversity and complex trauma, a targeted focus on healing and recovery will complement prevention efforts. Reducing the ongoing impacts of adversity will help reduce re-victimisation, suicide risk, mental health burden, intergenerational harm and long-term service demand.

This paper presents complex trauma recovery as a cross-government reform objective across Australia's national policy landscape. It demonstrates how strengthening trauma-

informed systems, trauma-specific services, workforce capability and recovery pathways can improve the effectiveness of existing national reforms.

Drawing on contemporary Australian evidence and national policy directions, this paper identifies childhood adversity and complex trauma as shared drivers across multiple reform agendas and positions recovery as a shared national outcome. It proposes a coordinated implementation approach that strengthens workforce capability, accountability, evidence translation and recovery pathways across existing reforms, improving wellbeing, participation and long-term outcomes while maximising the impact of government investment.

Dr Cathy Kezelman AM

President and Managing Director
Blue Knot Foundation

KEY MESSAGES

- Childhood adversity affects nearly two-thirds of Australians and is a significant public health, social and economic challenge.
- Complex trauma explains how childhood adversity contributes to poorer health, wellbeing, participation and life outcomes across the life course.
- Childhood adversity and complex trauma are shared drivers of many of the challenges addressed through Australia's child wellbeing, child sexual abuse, violence prevention, mental health, suicide prevention, disability and justice reforms.
- Childhood maltreatment contributes an estimated \$21.6 billion annually in health service costs and \$24.1 billion in productivity losses, demonstrating the substantial social and economic burden of unresolved trauma.
- While prevention remains essential, millions of Australians are already living with the impacts of childhood adversity and require access to effective recovery and healing pathways.
- People can and do recover from childhood adversity and complex trauma when they have access to appropriate support, safe relationships and trauma-informed systems.
- Recovery and healing improve wellbeing while also strengthening participation, productivity and long-term social and economic outcomes.
- Trauma-informed systems and access to trauma-specific services are essential components of an effective national reform agenda.
- Embedding lived experience leadership alongside professional, clinical and research expertise improves the quality, relevance and accountability of reform.
- Supporting recovery can reduce re-victimisation, suicide risk, mental ill-health, intergenerational harm and long-term demand across multiple service systems.
- Effective implementation requires capable systems, skilled workforces, evidence translation, shared accountability and continuous learning.
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-led healing, cultural safety and self-determination are fundamental to effective reform.
- Australia's current reform agenda presents a unique opportunity to align implementation around shared populations, shared drivers, shared outcomes and shared accountability.

- A national approach to complex trauma recovery would strengthen the effectiveness, efficiency and long-term impact of existing reforms.

SECTION 1: EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Australia is implementing major national reforms through *Safe and Supported: The National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children 2021–2031*, the *National Strategy to Prevent and Respond to Child Sexual Abuse 2021–2030*, the *National Plan to End Violence Against Women and Children 2022–2032*, and emerging reforms in mental health, suicide prevention, disability and psychosocial support. Many of these reforms are entering pivotal implementation phases, creating a unique opportunity to strengthen outcomes through coordinated action across portfolios.

Although these reforms address different policy challenges, they share common underlying drivers. The Australian Child Maltreatment Study found that 62.2% of Australians have experienced at least one form of child maltreatment and almost two in five have experienced multiple forms (Mathews et al., 2023). Childhood adversity and complex trauma contribute significantly to poor health, mental health, social and economic outcomes, driving demand across health, mental health, disability, justice and social service systems. Recent research estimates annual costs of \$21.6 billion in additional health expenditure and \$24.1 billion in productivity losses associated with childhood maltreatment (Le et al., 2025).

Complex trauma provides a unifying framework for understanding how childhood adversity contributes to mental ill-health, suicidal distress, psychosocial disability, vulnerability to violence and re-victimisation, social disadvantage and reduced participation. Recognising these shared drivers creates opportunities for more coordinated policy and service responses across portfolios. Yet current responses often remain fragmented.

Trauma-informed systems improve safety, accessibility and responsiveness while reducing re-traumatisation. Trauma-specific services provide pathways to recovery, healing and participation. Together they improve individual outcomes, strengthen service engagement and reduce long-term demand across multiple systems.

Emerging evidence demonstrates that trauma-informed and trauma-specific approaches improve wellbeing, functioning and participation (O'Hara et al., 2024). However, victim-survivor research repeatedly reveals fragmented pathways, implementation gaps and inconsistent care. These findings reinforce the need for coordinated implementation, stronger workforce capability, lived experience leadership and accountability across reforms. Effective implementation also depends on embedding lived experience leadership alongside professional, clinical and research expertise to strengthen policy, service design, implementation and evaluation.

This approach aligns strongly with *Safe and Supported*, the *National Strategy to Prevent and Respond to Child Sexual Abuse*, the *National Plan to End Violence Against Women and Children*, *Our Ways – Strong Ways – Our Voices*, and the Second Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Action Plan, all of which emphasise healing, cultural safety, self-determination and coordinated implementation.

Australia's major reform agendas already contain many of the policy settings needed to improve outcomes. Addressing childhood adversity and complex trauma as shared drivers across systems and recognising recovery as a shared reform outcome, will further strengthen implementation.

A National Approach to Complex Trauma Recovery would provide the implementation infrastructure needed to coordinate action, build workforce capability, strengthen accountability and support recovery across portfolios. By placing enhanced recovery and healing at the centre of reform, governments can improve wellbeing, participation and long-term outcomes while reducing avoidable demand and maximising the impact, efficiency and sustainability of existing investments.

SECTION 2: WHY RECOVERY AND HEALING MATTER



2.1: National Priorities for Reform

A National Approach to Complex Trauma Recovery should focus on six interconnected priorities:

- 1. Sustain and strengthen prevention efforts.**
- 2. Expand recovery, healing and participation pathways.**
- 3. Build trauma-informed systems, trauma-specific services and workforce capability.**
- 4. Measure and invest in healing and recovery outcomes.**
- 5. Recognise childhood adversity and complex trauma as shared cross-government reform priorities.**
- 6. Strengthen implementation capability, coordination and accountability.**

The following section describes the purpose, functions and guiding principles of a National Approach and how it could strengthen implementation across Australia's existing reform agenda.

SECTION 3: WHAT IS A NATIONAL APPROACH TO COMPLEX TRAUMA RECOVERY?

Australia has established a strong evidence base for prevention, healing and recovery. The challenge is no longer identifying effective approaches, but building the capability, coordination and accountability needed to implement them consistently and at scale. A National Approach to Complex Trauma Recovery provides the implementation architecture needed to align action across portfolios, strengthen workforce capability, improve accountability and advance recovery outcomes across Australia's existing reform agenda. It is not a new national strategy, but an implementation framework that strengthens coordination, consistency and accountability across existing reforms.

Childhood adversity and complex trauma underpin many of the challenges facing child wellbeing, child sexual abuse, violence prevention, mental health, suicide prevention, disability and justice reforms. Although these reforms pursue different objectives, they frequently engage the same populations, workforces and service systems. Aligning implementation around shared drivers, shared outcomes, shared capability expectations and shared accountability would strengthen coherence, reduce fragmentation and improve outcomes across portfolios.

A National Approach would strengthen prevention, early intervention, response and recovery by embedding trauma-informed systems, expanding access to trauma-specific services and improving coordinated pathways into care. It would help translate research, evidence and lived experience leadership into consistent policy, commissioning and practice across jurisdictions and sectors.

A National Approach would also establish a nationally consistent approach to defining, measuring and supporting recovery. Shared recovery outcomes, nationally consistent indicators, public reporting and continuous improvement mechanisms would strengthen accountability and provide a more complete picture of reform impact. Measures could

include wellbeing, participation, quality of life, connection and belonging, empowerment, cultural connection, trust in services and access to support.

Underpinned by lived and living experience leadership, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander self-determination, cultural safety and healing, a National Approach would strengthen implementation across portfolios while maximising the impact and long-term value of existing reform investments.

3.1: Strengthening Australia's Existing Reform Agenda

The table below aligns Australia's current reforms with the associated policy challenges and identifies practical actions for embedding complex trauma recovery as implementation framework across national policy settings and portfolios.

Table 1. Opportunities to Strengthen Australia's Existing Reform Agenda

REFORM	CURRENT REFORM DIRECTION (2026)	POLICY CHALLENGE	GOVERNMENT ACTION
 Safe and Supported and the Second Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Action Plan	 Implementation of the National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children 2021–2031	 Prevent child maltreatment, strengthen child wellbeing and early intervention	- Sustain prevention efforts while strengthening trauma-informed family supports - Strengthen early intervention - Expand recovery pathways that address the lifelong impacts of childhood adversity
 Child Sexual Abuse	 Development and implementation of the Second Action Plan under the National Strategy	 Prevent child sexual abuse and improve outcomes for survivors	- Expand recovery pathways for adult survivors - Strengthen specialist trauma services - Embed lived experience leadership - Build nationally consistent workforce capability in complex trauma
 National Plan to End Violence Against Women and Children and Our Ways – Strong Ways – Our Voices	 Implementation of the Second Action Plan under the National Plan to End Violence Against Women and Children 2022–2032	 Reduce violence, improve safety and prevent re-victimisation	- Embed trauma-informed and trauma-specific approaches across prevention, response and recovery initiatives - Strengthen integration across violence prevention and recovery systems - Support long-term healing and recovery outcomes
 Mental Health	 Development of a new National Mental Health and Suicide Prevention Agreement, integrated care and recovery-oriented reform	 Reduce mental ill-health, improve recovery and reduce system pressure	- Recognise childhood adversity and complex trauma as major contributors to mental ill-health and service complexity - Embed trauma-informed and trauma-specific care across policy, commissioning, workforce development and service delivery - Strengthen recovery-oriented services
 Suicide Prevention	 Implementation of the National Suicide Prevention Strategy 2025–2035	 Reduce suicidal distress, suicide attempts and suicide through upstream prevention	- Recognise childhood adversity and complex trauma as major upstream drivers of suicidal distress - Strengthen recovery from complex trauma as an upstream suicide prevention strategy
 Disability & Psychosocial Support	 NDIS reform, foundational supports and psychosocial support reform	 Improve participation, functioning and community inclusion	- Improve recognition of trauma-related functional impairment - Expand recovery-oriented psychosocial supports - Strengthen participation, wellbeing, inclusion and quality of life
 Justice & Corrections	 Justice reform, rehabilitation and community safety initiatives	 Reduce recidivism and improve rehabilitation	- Embed trauma-informed justice and correctional practice - Expand trauma-specific services - Strengthen rehabilitation, reintegration and recovery pathways
 Cross-Government Opportunity	 Concurrent implementation of major national reform agendas with increasing emphasis on integrated, outcome-focused and lived experience-led reform	 Fragmented policy, funding and implementation across portfolios	ESTABLISH A NATIONAL APPROACH TO COMPLEX TRAUMA RECOVERY  Shared outcomes  Shared workforce capability  Shared measures  Shared accountability  Shared implementation support

4.1: Childhood Maltreatment is Common in Australia

The Australian Child Maltreatment Study (ACMS), Australia's first nationally representative study of child maltreatment, found that 62.2% of Australians have experienced at least one form of child maltreatment (Mathews et al., 2023). The study reported that 28.5% experienced child sexual abuse, 32.0% physical abuse, 30.9% emotional abuse, 39.6% exposure to domestic violence and 8.9% neglect. Almost two in five Australians experienced multiple forms of maltreatment, demonstrating that childhood adversity is commonly cumulative and overlapping (Mathews et al., 2023).

The ACMS identified a clear dose-response relationship between childhood adversity and later outcomes. Health service use, mental ill-health and productivity losses increased progressively with the number of maltreatment types, highlighting the significant and enduring consequences of cumulative harm. Similar patterns are evident among young people involved in the justice system, where high rates of abuse, neglect, violence, caregiver instability, social exclusion and mental health difficulties reinforce the need for coordinated responses across multiple service systems (Thomsen et al., 2026).

Emerging evidence further demonstrates the interconnected nature of childhood adversity. A 2025 scoping review of 19 studies found that children who experience child sexual abuse are much more likely to also be exposed to domestic violence than other children, reinforcing the need for integrated prevention, early identification, response and recovery across service systems. (Olejníková et al., 2025).

The ACMS estimated that almost half of common mental disorders experienced in Australia may be attributable to child maltreatment and identified strong associations with depression, anxiety disorders, post-traumatic stress disorder, alcohol use disorder, self-harm and suicide attempts (Scott et al., 2023). These findings are consistent with evidence from the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, which identifies child sexual abuse as a significant risk factor for adverse mental health outcomes across the lifespan (AIHW, 2024).

Taken together, this evidence demonstrates that childhood maltreatment is widespread and contributes substantially to poor health, mental ill-health, disability, justice involvement and social disadvantage across the life course. Its prevalence, cumulative nature and long-term impacts reinforce the importance of sustained prevention while also demonstrating the need for recovery and healing pathways for the millions of Australians already living with its effects.

4.2: The Evidence Pathway: From Childhood Adversity to Better Outcomes

Figure 1 illustrates the evidence pathway linking childhood adversity and complex trauma to many of the health, social and economic challenges driving Australia's current reform agenda. The pathway also shows the reasons prevention and recovery should be pursued together.



Figure.7.From.Childhood.Adversity.to.Better.Outcomes

4.3: Complex Trauma: The Pathway from Childhood Adversity to Adult Outcomes

Childhood adversity includes experiences such as abuse, neglect and exposure to domestic and family violence during childhood. Complex trauma is a recognised consequence of repeated, cumulative and interpersonal adversity and provides a framework for understanding how these experiences affect health, wellbeing, relationships and participation across the life course.

Unlike single-incident trauma, complex trauma typically arises from repeated harm occurring within relationships in which safety, trust and protection would be expected (Herman, 1992;

Cloitre et al., 2013). Extending beyond the symptoms of post-traumatic stress, it can affect emotional regulation, identity, relationships, mental and physical health, learning, employment and social participation. These effects often interact and accumulate over time, creating complex needs that frequently require support from multiple service systems.

Research on adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) provides a strong evidence base for understanding complex trauma. Repeated exposure to abuse, neglect, violence and household adversity is associated with poorer mental health, wellbeing and functioning across the life course (Felitti et al., 1998; Madigan et al., 2025; Racine et al., 2025). Contemporary Australian evidence confirms these patterns and highlights their relevance across Australia's current reform agenda. Recognising complex trauma provides governments with a shared framework for understanding the interconnected challenges addressed across child wellbeing, violence prevention, mental health, disability, justice and suicide prevention reforms.

Increasingly, Australian policy and research bodies recognise complex trauma as a significant contributor to population health burden, service demand and service complexity. The National Mental Health Commission has identified complex trauma as an under-recognised driver of mental ill-health and complex service needs (National Mental Health Commission, 2024). Similarly, the National Centre for Action on Child Sexual Abuse has highlighted the enduring impacts of child sexual abuse and the importance of trauma-informed and trauma-specific responses for adult survivors (National Centre for Action on Child Sexual Abuse, 2023a; 2023b).

Importantly, recovery from complex trauma is both possible and measurable. Emerging Australian and international evidence demonstrates that trauma-informed and trauma-specific interventions can support recovery, improve wellbeing and functioning, and strengthen participation across the lifespan (Cloitre et al., 2013; O'Hara et al., 2024). Complementing prevention with accessible recovery and healing pathways for the millions of Australians already affected is essential to improving long-term health, wellbeing and participation.

4.4: System Demand, Economic Costs and Reform Efficiency

Childhood adversity and complex trauma contribute substantially to demand across Australia's health, mental health, disability, justice and social service systems. This includes downstream impacts on workforce participation, productivity, public expenditure and long-term pressure on government-funded services.

Childhood adversity is associated with a wide range of interconnected physical, psychological and social challenges that require support from multiple service systems across the lifespan (Su & Stone, 2020). The National Mental Health Commission has similarly identified complex trauma as a significant contributor to mental ill-health, service demand and service complexity in Australia (National Mental Health Commission, 2024).

The economic impacts are substantial. Recent Australian research estimates that childhood maltreatment contributes approximately \$21.6 billion annually in additional health service costs and a further \$24.1 billion in productivity losses (Le et al., 2025). Childhood adversity and

complex trauma are therefore not only public health and social issues, but also significant economic issues affecting workforce participation, productivity and public expenditure. Streamlining approaches across government and diverse service sectors would significantly reduce costs more broadly.

Australia's reform agenda increasingly emphasises prevention, early intervention, integrated care and coordinated service delivery. Recognising childhood adversity and complex trauma as shared drivers of demand across portfolios enables reforms to address underlying causes rather than responding separately to downstream consequences. Earlier recognition of complex trauma, greater access to trauma-informed and trauma-specific supports, and better coordinated pathways to care can improve outcomes while reducing avoidable demand across multiple service systems. Recovery should therefore be recognised not only as a wellbeing outcome, but also as a key indicator of reform effectiveness and long-term public value.

Australian governments spend billions of dollars each year responding to the consequences of childhood adversity through mental health, suicide prevention, family violence, disability, justice and related service systems. Strengthening recovery outcomes is an economic and reform objective as well as a social objective. By improving recovery, participation and wellbeing, governments can reduce avoidable demand, increase the return on existing investments and improve long-term outcomes for individuals, families and communities.

4.5: Policy Implications: Shared Drivers Across Reform Agendas

The evidence presented above demonstrates that the impacts of childhood adversity and complex trauma extend across child wellbeing, child sexual abuse, violence prevention, mental health, suicide prevention, disability and justice reform agendas. The same individuals, families, communities, workforces and service systems repeatedly experience different manifestations of the same underlying harms.

The policy implications are significant. Recognising childhood adversity and complex trauma as shared cross-government reform issues strengthens policy development, service design, workforce capability and investment decisions. Rather than responding separately to the downstream consequences of childhood adversity across different systems, governments have an opportunity to address shared drivers of harm while strengthening recovery pathways. This shifts the focus towards coordinated implementation, shared outcomes and long-term impact.

A cross-government perspective also highlights the importance of coordinated implementation, trauma-informed systems, trauma-specific services and recovery-oriented approaches. While individual reform agendas have distinct objectives, they share common implementation challenges, including fragmented systems, inconsistent referral pathways, variable workforce capability, inconsistent practice and limited mechanisms for coordination, accountability and continuous improvement.

A cross-government approach shifts the focus from responding separately to the consequences of harm towards addressing shared drivers and supporting recovery across systems. A National Approach to Complex Trauma Recovery provides the opportunity to align

implementation around shared populations, shared drivers, shared outcomes and shared accountability across Australia's reform agenda. In doing so, it creates opportunities to improve outcomes, reduce fragmentation and maximise the impact, efficiency and long-term value of existing reform investments.

SECTION 5: IMPLICATIONS FOR AUSTRALIA'S REFORM AGENDA

5.1: Mental Health Impacts

Australia's mental health reforms can enhance outcomes by recognising childhood adversity and complex trauma as significant contributors to mental ill-health, service complexity and recurrent service use.

The Australian Child Maltreatment Study found that mental disorders occurred in 48.0% of people who experienced child maltreatment compared with 21.6% of those who did not. Among people exposed to multiple forms of maltreatment, prevalence increased to 54.8%, demonstrating a clear cumulative effect (Scott et al., 2023). Similarly, the Ten to Men study found that higher levels of childhood adversity were associated with poorer mental health, greater psychological distress, lower wellbeing and increased use of mental health services into adulthood (Gasser et al., 2026).

These findings suggest that a substantial proportion of mental health burden and service complexity is linked to childhood adversity and complex trauma. The inclusion of Complex PTSD (CPTSD) within ICD-11 reflects growing recognition of these impacts, while Australian economic analyses indicate that increased mental health service utilisation accounts for a significant proportion of the costs associated with childhood maltreatment (Le et al., 2025).

Opportunity for Reform

Recognise childhood adversity and complex trauma within mental health policy, commissioning and service delivery. Embedding trauma-informed and trauma-specific approaches across policy, commissioning and service delivery would strengthen recovery outcomes and support broader mental health reform objectives.

5.2: Suicide Prevention

Australia's suicide prevention reforms recognise that reducing suicidal distress requires coordinated action across government, communities and service systems. Australian evidence demonstrates that childhood adversity is one of the most significant upstream contributors to suicidal distress and suicidal behaviour.

Suicide Prevention Australia estimates that childhood maltreatment may account for approximately 41% of suicide attempts among Australians aged 16–85 years (Suicide Prevention Australia, 2025). The Australian Child Maltreatment Study found that people who experienced child sexual abuse were nearly three times more likely to engage in self-harm and more than twice as likely to attempt suicide than those who had not been sexually abused as children. Risk increased further among people exposed to multiple forms of maltreatment, demonstrating a clear cumulative effect (Lawrence et al., 2023).

The National Mental Health Commission has identified complex trauma as a significant contributor to chronic emotional distress, self-harm, suicidality and complex mental health presentations (National Mental Health Commission, 2024). The National Suicide Prevention Outcomes Framework identifies reducing adverse childhood experiences as an important indicator of successful suicide prevention and emphasises social connection, coordinated systems, compassionate support and capable workforces.

Opportunity for Reform

Position recovery from complex trauma as an upstream suicide prevention strategy. Expanding access to trauma-informed and trauma-specific recovery supports, strengthening workforce capability and embedding trauma-informed practice across suicide prevention services would support the goals of the National Suicide Prevention Strategy by reducing suicidal distress, improving wellbeing and participation, and helping prevent future harm.

5.3: Childhood Trauma and Violence Prevention

Australia's violence prevention reforms create a platform to address both the causes and consequences of violence by recognising childhood adversity and complex trauma as important contributors to violence vulnerability, re-victimisation and intergenerational harm, while supporting recovery and healing. Trauma-informed approaches also help prevent re-traumatisation within service systems, supporting safety, trust, engagement and recovery for people affected by violence and abuse.

Australian evidence demonstrates that preventing violence requires both preventing childhood adversity and supporting recovery from its impacts. Exposure to child abuse, neglect and domestic and family violence is associated with increased vulnerability to future victimisation and can contribute to factors associated with the use of violence later in life. These findings reinforce the importance of prevention, early intervention and recovery across the life course (Scott et al., 2023; ANROWS, 2026).

Evidence demonstrates that childhood adversity, child sexual abuse and domestic and family violence frequently co-occur. A recent scoping review found that domestic violence commonly occurred alongside child sexual abuse, highlighting the need for stronger integration across child sexual abuse, domestic and family violence, child protection and trauma recovery responses (Olejníková et al., 2025). These findings reinforce growing recognition within the National Plan that adverse childhood experiences contribute to future violence vulnerability, re-victimisation and, for some individuals, factors associated with the use of violence (ANROWS, 2026).

Many people affected by violence interact with multiple service systems over their lives, including health, mental health, disability, justice, child wellbeing and community services. For victim-survivors, system fragmentation can result in repeated retelling of traumatic experiences, inconsistent responses and barriers to recovery. More coordinated pathways can improve safety, reduce re-traumatisation and better support recovery and healing.

Opportunity for Reform

Violence prevention policy and service systems should integrate prevention, response, recovery and healing as interconnected and mutually reinforcing elements of a comprehensive violence prevention strategy.

Embedding trauma-informed and trauma-specific approaches across prevention, early intervention, specialist family violence services, perpetrator interventions and recovery supports would strengthen implementation of the National Plan and improve safety, recovery and long-term wellbeing. Victim-survivors should experience coordinated, trauma-informed "no wrong door" pathways at different times during the life course in which support, referral, recovery and healing options are available regardless of where they first seek support.

SECTION 6: RECOVERY, HEALING AND TRANSFORMATION

6.1: Recovery as Prevention and a Reform Outcome

Emerging national policy directions increasingly recognise that prevention occurs across the continuum of prevention, early intervention, response and recovery. Recovery should therefore be understood not only as a response to harm, but also as a mechanism for preventing its recurrence and reducing future risk.

By reducing the ongoing impacts of complex trauma, recovery can help prevent suicide, self-harm, re-victimisation, family violence, psychosocial disability, intergenerational harm and repeated service utilisation. Recovery contributes to individual wellbeing while supporting safer families, stronger communities and more sustainable service systems.

Many adults continue to experience the impacts of childhood adversity decades after the original harm occurred. Recovery needs may emerge or re-emerge across the life course, including during parenting, relationship transitions, illness, ageing, bereavement and subsequent experiences of adversity. Effective systems must therefore support recovery across prevention, response and long-term healing pathways.

Recovery extends beyond clinical treatment and includes access to trauma-informed services, trauma-specific interventions, peer support and coordinated pathways into care. Australian evidence demonstrates that recovery is possible when people have access to appropriate support (O'Hara et al., 2024).

Opportunity for Reform

Governments should recognise recovery as a core objective across existing reform frameworks and enable access to integrated trauma-informed and trauma-specific supports across mental health, suicide prevention, violence prevention, disability, justice and community services.

6.2: Recovery is a Reform Outcome

Beyond individual outcomes, recovery and healing are outcomes of successful reform. Australian and international evidence, together with lived experience testimony, demonstrates that, with the right support, people can recover from even severe and prolonged childhood adversity.

Australian evidence demonstrates that recovery can improve wellbeing, functioning, participation, hope and quality of life. An independent evaluation of Blue Knot's National Counselling and Referral Service found significant improvements in trauma symptoms, psychological distress, coping, self-understanding and wellbeing among participants (O'Hara et al., 2024).

Recognising recovery as a reform outcome would broaden how success is measured beyond reductions in harm or service activity alone. Recovery indicators such as wellbeing, participation, social connection, empowerment, hope, cultural connection, trust in services and quality of life provide a more complete understanding of whether reforms are improving people's lives.

Opportunity for Reform

Governments should establish nationally consistent recovery indicators and public reporting across existing reform frameworks. Measuring recovery outcomes would strengthen accountability, support continuous improvement and deepen understanding of what contributes to long-term healing, participation and wellbeing.

6.3 Lived Experience Leadership

People with lived and living experience of childhood adversity, complex trauma and recovery bring essential expertise to policy development, implementation and evaluation. Their insights help ensure reforms are grounded in the realities of navigating systems, accessing support and pursuing recovery over time.

National reform frameworks now recognise lived experience leadership as a foundation of effective policy and service design. Meaningful participation can improve relevance, accessibility, trust and accountability while helping identify barriers, unintended consequences and opportunities for improvement.

Embedding lived and living experience leadership realises genuine influence in decision-making, appropriate remuneration, leadership development, trauma-informed engagement processes and ongoing support.

Opportunity for Reform

Governments should embed lived and living experience leadership across governance, implementation, monitoring and evaluation arrangements within existing reform frameworks.

6.4 Cultural Safety, Healing and Self-Determination

Cultural safety, healing and self-determination are fundamental to achieving equitable and sustainable outcomes across prevention, recovery and systems reform. Recovery is strengthened when services recognise people's identities, cultures, strengths and lived experiences, reduce barriers to support, foster trust and safety, and support healing in ways that are meaningful to individuals, families and communities.

For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, this includes recognising the importance of self-determination, cultural authority, community-controlled approaches and connection to Country, family and culture. Recovery should be understood within broader frameworks of healing, culture, community leadership and self-determination.

These principles align strongly with *Closing the Gap, Our Ways – Strong Ways – Our Voices, Safe and Supported* and the *National Strategy to Prevent and Respond to Child Sexual Abuse*, all of which recognise healing, cultural safety and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership as foundations for sustainable change.

Opportunity for Reform

Governments should embed cultural safety, healing and self-determination across policy, commissioning, implementation and evaluation and ensure Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership is central to reform design and delivery.

A National Approach to Complex Trauma Recovery

Strengthening Outcomes Across Australia's Reform Agenda



.....Figure.8.Strengthening.National.Reform.Through.Complex.Trauma.Recovery

SECTION 7: POSITIONING RECOVERY AT THE CENTRE OF NATIONAL REFORM

Australia has already established substantial reform architecture across child wellbeing, child sexual abuse, violence prevention, mental health, suicide prevention, disability and justice. The next phase is implementation: embedding evidence-informed approaches consistently, coordinating action across portfolios, and advancing prevention, recovery, workforce capability, accountability and trust.

The following recommendations apply these shared priorities to Australia's major reform agendas. While each reform has distinct objectives, common themes emerge across

implementation, including recovery, workforce capability, trauma-informed systems, lived experience leadership, accountability and coordinated pathways into care.

7.1 National Priority: Measure Recovery Outcomes

Why it matters

Recovery is a shared outcome across Australia's major reform agendas and a critical indicator of reform effectiveness. Measuring recovery would strengthen accountability, improve implementation and provide a clearer understanding of long-term outcomes.

Government actions

- Establish nationally consistent recovery indicators across relevant national frameworks.
- Incorporate recovery outcomes into monitoring, evaluation and public reporting.
- Measure outcomes such as safety, wellbeing, quality of life, participation, connection and belonging, hope, empowerment, cultural connection, trust in services, functional recovery, and access to appropriate support.
- Co-design recovery measures with people with lived and living experience and priority communities.
- Build an evidence base on recovery trajectories, effective interventions and long-term outcomes.

Reform outcomes

- Improved accountability.
- Better understanding of recovery outcomes.
- More effective investment decisions.
- Greater consistency in measuring recovery across systems.
- Stronger coordination across reform agendas.

7.2: Cross-Government Implementation Enablers

Government actions

- Embed lived and living experience leadership across governance, implementation, monitoring and evaluation.
- Ensure implementation is guided by cultural safety, healing and self-determination.
- Strengthen Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership and community-controlled approaches.
- Invest in workforce capability, wellbeing and sustainability psychologically safe workplaces, supervision and reflective practice to support workforce wellbeing and sustainable trauma-informed practice.
- Support cross-portfolio implementation, monitoring and accountability.
- Establish nationally consistent capability expectations for trauma-informed and trauma-specific practice.

Reform outcomes

- Stronger implementation across reforms.
- Greater trust and engagement.
- Improved accountability.
- More equitable outcomes.

7.3: Safe and Supported: The National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children

Why it matters

Safe and Supported is Australia's primary framework for preventing childhood adversity and fostering greater child wellbeing. Its successful implementation addresses far more than child protection issues. This is because childhood adversity is a major contributor to mental ill-health, suicide risk, violence, disability and long-term service demand across the lifespan.

Government actions

- Recognise childhood adversity as a significant determinant of lifelong health, wellbeing, participation.
- Build trauma-informed approaches across child and family services and improve identification of complex trauma.
- Expand timely access to support for children and families affected by adversity.
- Strengthen workforce capability and connections between child wellbeing, recovery and broader reform agendas.

Reform outcomes

- Reduced exposure to childhood adversity.
- Earlier intervention and improved child wellbeing.
- Stronger family functioning and resilience.
- Reduced long-term service demand.

7.4: National Strategy to Prevent and Respond to Child Sexual Abuse

Why it matters

The *National Strategy to Prevent and Respond to Child Sexual Abuse* provides Australia's strongest opportunity to embed recovery as a core policy objective for adult survivors of child sexual abuse alongside prevention. Many Australians continue to experience the long-term impacts of child sexual abuse and associated complex trauma.

Government actions

- Recognise complex trauma and Complex PTSD as common long-term impacts of child sexual abuse.
- Expand access to specialist counselling, peer support, recovery programs and coordinated referral pathways.
- Embed trauma-informed and trauma-specific capability requirements within accreditation, registration and workforce standards.

- Embed lived and living experience leadership in governance, implementation, monitoring and evaluation.
- Align implementation with broader cross-government complex trauma recovery initiatives.

Reform outcomes

- Improved child sexual abuse survivor recovery and wellbeing.
- Increased participation and quality of life.
- Stronger workforce capability.
- Nationally consistent recovery outcomes.
- Reduced long-term service demand.

7.5: National Plan to End Violence Against Women and Children

Why it matters

Preventing childhood adversity and supporting recovery from its impacts can both contribute to preventing violence against women and children. Identifying and addressing the complex trauma which ensues improves our understanding of violence vulnerability, re-victimisation and intergenerational harm while strengthening prevention, response and recovery. Recovery from complex trauma is a violence prevention strategy that can strengthen safety, reduce re-victimisation and support healing from the impacts of violence and abuse.

Government actions

- Recognise childhood adversity and complex trauma as contributors to violence vulnerability, re-victimisation and intergenerational harm.
- Embed trauma-informed and trauma-specific approaches across prevention, response, recovery and healing initiatives.
- Expand access to recovery-oriented supports as a component of long-term safety and violence prevention.
- Strengthen integration between violence prevention, child wellbeing and trauma recovery initiatives.
- Incorporate recovery and wellbeing indicators into monitoring and evaluation.

Reform outcomes

- Reduced violence and re-victimisation.
- Improved survivor recovery and safety.
- Stronger family and community wellbeing.
- Reduced intergenerational harm.
- Reduced long-term service demand.

7.6: National Mental Health and Suicide Prevention Reform

Why it matters

Mental health and suicide prevention reforms provide an important opportunity to recognise the roles of childhood adversity and complex trauma as major contributors to mental ill-health, suicidal distress, service complexity and long-term demand on multiple service systems.

Government actions

- Align implementation with the National Suicide Prevention Strategy by recognising recovery from complex trauma as an upstream suicide prevention intervention.
- Explicitly recognise childhood adversity and complex trauma within national policy frameworks.
- Embed trauma-informed and trauma-specific models of care across primary, community and specialist services.
- Strengthen trauma identification, assessment and referral pathways.
- Expand access to evidence-informed trauma-specific interventions and recovery-oriented supports.
- Develop nationally consistent complex trauma capability standards.
- Embed lived and living experience leadership and co-design in service design, implementation and evaluation.

Reform outcomes

- Improved recovery and wellbeing.
- Reduced suicidal distress, self-harm and suicide.
- Reduced avoidable mental health burden and service demand.
- Improved participation and quality of life.
- Reduced long-term service demand.

7.7: Disability, Psychosocial Support and Participation Reform

Why it matters

Many people living with complex trauma experience long-term impacts on functioning, participation and wellbeing that span disability, mental health and trauma service systems. Better recognition of trauma strengthens person-centred, recovery-oriented support.

Government actions

- Improve recognition of trauma-related functional impairment within assessment and eligibility pathways.
- Embed trauma-informed and trauma-specific practice standards across disability and psychosocial support services.
- Expand access to trauma-specific and recovery-oriented supports for people experiencing trauma-related functional impacts.
- Build workforce capability in complex trauma and dissociation.
- Strengthen coordination across disability, mental health and trauma-specific services.

Reform outcomes

- Improved participation and independence.
- Improved psychosocial functioning and wellbeing.
- More coordinated services.
- Improved participation and quality of life.
- Reduced avoidable demand across multiple service systems.

7.8: Justice and Corrections Reform

Why it matters

People in contact with the justice system are disproportionately likely to have experienced childhood adversity and complex trauma. Trauma-informed justice reform strengthens rehabilitation, reintegration and community safety.

Government actions

- Expand trauma-informed and trauma-specific services across correctional and community justice settings.
- Strengthen trauma identification, assessment and referral pathways.
- Increase access to specialist trauma counselling, recovery programs and peer support.
- Invest in rehabilitation pathways that support recovery and reintegration.
- Strengthen continuity of care, recovery support and service coordination between custody and community settings.
- Embed trauma-informed principles within justice policy, custodial environments and service delivery.

Reform outcomes

- Improved rehabilitation and recovery.
- Reduced recidivism.
- Improved psychosocial functioning and wellbeing.
- Stronger community safety.
- Reduced long-term service demand.

SECTION 8: A CROSS-GOVERNMENT IMPERATIVE

A National Approach to Complex Trauma Recovery would strengthen delivery of existing reforms through shared recovery outcomes, nationally consistent capability expectations, common outcome measures and mechanisms for cross-portfolio implementation, monitoring and accountability. The challenge facing many current reforms is no longer identifying what works but ensuring that evidence-informed approaches are implemented consistently, coordinated effectively and delivered at scale.

Childhood adversity and complex trauma are cross-cutting issues that sit at the intersection of child wellbeing, child sexual abuse, violence prevention, mental health, suicide prevention, disability, education, housing and justice reforms. The concurrent implementation of multiple

national strategies and action plans presents a unique opportunity to align efforts around shared populations, shared drivers and shared outcomes.

Despite growing recognition of prevention, healing, cultural safety and lived experience leadership, implementation often remains fragmented across portfolios and service systems. Different forms of violence, adversity and trauma frequently co-occur, yet policy, funding and service responses are commonly organised around separate systems and program boundaries. For many victim-survivors, this results in fragmented pathways, repeated retelling of traumatic experiences and inconsistent support.

Recent victim-survivor-led research continues to identify systems that are difficult to navigate, insufficiently coordinated and, at times, re-traumatising (Heward-Belle et al., 2026). These findings reinforce the need for stronger coordination, enhanced workforce capability, lived experience leadership and implementation support across reforms.

Without more coordinated implementation, governments risk continuing to invest primarily in the downstream consequences of childhood adversity and complex trauma rather than addressing shared drivers of demand across multiple portfolios. Adults who experienced childhood maltreatment access health and human services at significantly higher rates than those who did not, contributing an estimated \$21.6 billion annually in additional health service costs and a further \$24.1 billion in productivity losses (Le et al., 2025).

Implementation should be guided by lived and living experience leadership, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership, and underpinned by cultural safety, healing and self-determination.

Australia already invests billions of dollars each year across mental health, suicide prevention, family violence, disability, justice and related systems. A National Approach to Complex Trauma Recovery would strengthen the impact of these investments by improving coordination, supporting consistent implementation and advancing recovery outcomes across reform agendas.

SECTION 9: RECOMMENDATION – ESTABLISH A NATIONAL APPROACH TO COMPLEX TRAUMA RECOVERY

A National Approach to Complex Trauma Recovery would provide the national approach needed to translate policy commitments into consistent practice, coordinated action and measurable outcomes across existing reform agendas. It would support the integration of evidence, lived experience and implementation capability across jurisdictions, sectors and service systems.

Effective implementation is strengthened by trusted mechanisms that support information, navigation, coordination and referral across systems. Independent functions can help bridge fragmented service systems, improve access to support and create pathways into care for people who may be reluctant to engage directly with statutory services.

Purpose

Strengthen implementation, coordination, accountability and recovery outcomes across existing national reform agendas.

Core Functions

Shared Outcomes

- safety
- recovery
- participation
- wellbeing
- functional recovery
- trust
- quality of life

Shared Capability

- workforce capability, wellbeing and sustainability expectations
- trauma-informed and trauma-specific practice
- supervision and reflective practice
- lived and living experience leadership

Shared Accountability

- implementation monitoring
- nationally consistent indicators
- public reporting
- continuous improvement

Implementation Mechanisms

- support cross-portfolio delivery
- align implementation across child wellbeing, child sexual abuse, violence prevention, mental health, suicide prevention, disability and justice reforms
- embed implementation science approaches
- establish shared accountability for recovery outcomes
- monitor progress through nationally consistent indicators
- publicly report on implementation and outcomes
- support continuous learning and adaptation
- embed lived and living experience leadership in governance, implementation, monitoring and evaluation

SECTION 10: CONCLUSION

Australia does not need a new reform architecture. It already has substantial national frameworks addressing child wellbeing, child sexual abuse, violence prevention, mental

health, suicide prevention, disability and justice. The challenge is ensuring that evidence-informed approaches are implemented consistently, coordinated effectively and delivered at scale.

Childhood adversity and complex trauma are shared drivers of harm across many of these reform agendas, while recovery is a shared outcome. Recognising these connections creates an opportunity to strengthen implementation, improve coordination and increase the impact of existing investments.

A National Approach to Complex Trauma Recovery would provide the implementation framework needed to support shared outcomes, workforce capability, accountability and continuous improvement across reform agendas. By positioning recovery alongside prevention as a core reform objective, governments can improve wellbeing, participation and quality of life while reducing avoidable demand across multiple service systems.

Placing recovery at the centre of implementation offers an opportunity to improve outcomes across multiple policy domains simultaneously while strengthening the effectiveness, efficiency and sustainability of existing reform investments.

As Australia's National Centre of Excellence for Complex Trauma, Blue Knot Foundation brings expertise across survivor support, workforce capability, organisational transformation, policy development, evidence translation and systems reform. By connecting lived experience, evidence and implementation, Blue Knot supports governments, organisations and communities to translate complex trauma knowledge into practical reform and recovery outcomes.

Blue Knot can support governments through:

Policy and Reform

- Cross-government policy advice.
- Trauma-informed systems reform.
- Implementation support.

Workforce Capability

- Capability frameworks.
- Training and Supervision.
- Organisational transformation.

Evidence and Evaluation

- Outcomes measurement.
- Evaluation.
- Research translation.

Survivor Support and Practice

- Specialist counselling.
- Practice insights.
- Lived experience leadership.

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