



lucy's project

Safe Families - Paws and All

# Submission into the draft National Plan to End Domestic, Family, and Sexual Violence

February 2022

## Acknowledgement of Country

Lucy's Project would like to acknowledge the Traditional Custodians of the lands across Australia on which we operate. We pay our respects to Elders past and present, and acknowledge First Nations communities' continuing connection to land and water. Always Was, Always Will Be Aboriginal Land.

We also acknowledge that First Nations women and children experience family violence at much higher rates and in different ways to non-Indigenous women and children due to the ongoing effects of colonisation. We support an Aboriginal-led, trauma-informed response to family violence crises in Australia.



## About Lucy's Project

Lucy's Project is a national harm prevention charity that is focussed on addressing domestic and family violence (DFV) in Australia. We seek to facilitate women and children's safety by reducing barriers to services and creating collaborative practices between human and animal services. Our work is in what we call the three A's:

- **Advocacy** – amplifying the voices of people experiencing DFV where an animal is involved in the nexus of abuse.
- **Awareness** – Improving knowledge of animal abuse as a risk factor for human safety within the DFV sector, animal service sector, government, and among the general public to increase focus and provisions for establishing pathways to safety for victim-survivors with animals.
- **Action** – Maintain a network of support through working directly with organisations to upskill, build capacity, and provide resources to remove systemic roadblocks to safety. This includes concurrent crises safety planning – where DFV occurs during a natural disaster/pandemic/other social disruption and an animal is present.

Lucy's Project is based in Lismore, New South Wales, and run by a team of volunteers. This includes our experienced board members who have expertise in animal abuse in the context of DFV.

Lucy's Project recognises that animal abuse in domestic and family violence situations is common, traumatising, and a risk factor for the most severe kinds of abuse. It is also a crime in and of itself. Including animals in our domestic and family violence conversations and practice saves human and nonhuman lives.

We advocate for human and animal victim-survivors because we know that when an animal is at risk of abuse, there is a human at risk of abuse.

# 1. Introduction

## 1.1. Context

*“Animal abuse doesn’t happen in a safe home. It’s not trivial and it’s an indicator of at-risk people and children.”*

– Anna Ludvik, Lucy's Project Founder/Executive Director

Australia has one of the highest rates of animal ownership in the world. Sadly, we also have one of the highest rates of domestic and family violence and abuse (DFV). This means that many companion animals also become victims when a family is subjected to abuse. For many people, leaving an animal behind to an uncertain fate is inconceivable. Victim-survivors often report that they delayed leaving a violent home, or returned to a violent home, because there was nowhere safe to care for the animal. As N Taylor and H Fraser explain (2019), the loving relationship that victim-survivors share with an animal can provide them with ‘the will to live, eat, sleep and keep caring for others, and in the process, maintain the will to rebuild their lives.’ An animal is often the only comfort, defender, or friend a victim-survivor has.

For many victim-survivors, talking about the abuse and disclosing what has been going on can be difficult. Often, the only insight we may have that there is abuse occurring in a home is when veterinary practitioners notice signs of animal abuse, or when children report family pets being killed or harmed (The Link Coalition). For this reason, Lucy’s Project works closely with vets to help support both the animals and people who may be in need of protection, and for whom the vet may be the only person able to link victim-survivors with domestic violence support services.

Lucy’s Project also focuses on how animal abuse affects children in DFV situations. For many children experiencing domestic and family violence, the family pet can be one of their primary means of comfort and support. Animals can be a source of security for a child in a turbulent home (Taylor & Fraser, 2019). For children, escaping crisis with the family pet can ensure continuity in their source of comfort, security, and enjoyment of life during a time of great uncertainty, fear and change. To protect children from domestic violence, we must also protect the animals so central to their sense of wellbeing.

Lucy’s Project recognises that animal abuse in domestic and family violence situations is common, traumatising, and a risk factor for the most severe kinds of abuse. It is also a crime in and of itself. Including animals in our domestic and family violence conversations and practice saves human and nonhuman lives.

## 1.2. When animals are at risk, people are at risk

- There is a strong link between violence towards animals and violence towards humans. People who abuse animals are more likely to physically or sexually abuse other people (Conroy, 2015; Bright et al., 2018; Degue & Dilillo, 2009).
- Threats to kill or mutilate the family pet is ranked as a high risk factor for severe abuse and lethality in a domestic and family violence situation (Arkow, 2014; Barrett et al., 2017; Campbell et al., 2018).
- Animal abuse is a high risk factor for child abuse (Coorey & Coorey-Ewings, 2018).
- Up to 48% of victim-survivors with companion animals delay leaving a violent situation out of fear for their animals' safety (Ascione et al., 2007; Carlisle-Frank et al., 2004).
- Perpetrators use threats or actual harm towards animals after the victim-survivor has left as a way to further intimidate, traumatise, and ultimately coerce the victim-survivor into returning to the relationship (Arkow, 2014).

## 1.3. Creating an animal-inclusive National Plan

*"My dogs were there for me through everything... I've gotten over the physical injuries, but not the trauma of losing my dogs... It would give confidence to people leaving if they knew they could take their animals with them"*

– Jennifer Howard, Safe Pets Safe Families

Lucy's Project welcomes the release of the draft *National Plan to End Violence Against Women 2022-2032* and our opportunity to provide feedback. A plan that recognises and addresses violence in all its forms and in all regions is imperative to reduce the high rates of emotional and physical trauma, injury, and death existent in Australian society as a result of domestic, family, and sexual violence.

Rates of domestic, family, and sexual violence remain high in Australia. As detailed in the draft Plan, intimate partner violence is the main contributing preventable risk factor for morbidity and death in women aged 15 to 44 (p.14). In 2016-17, there were **288 hospitalisations of children** for abuse injuries perpetrated by a parent or other family member. In rural and remote communities, women are **24 times** more likely to be hospitalised for domestic and family violence than women in metropolitan areas (p.15), yet they have less access to supports and less opportunities to report. Family, domestic, and sexual violence continues to have drastic economic impacts, costing approximately **\$26 billion** each year, of which half is borne by the victim-survivors themselves (p.15).

The draft National Plan also notes that the prevalence of intimate partner violence has remained stable since the first National Plan was launched in 2010, while the prevalence of sexual violence has increased (p.20). The ongoing – and in some cases increasing – issue of domestic, family, and sexual violence demonstrates the need for a renewed National Plan that is strong, effective, and representative of the needs of the communities that it serves.

Lucy's Project calls on the Australian Government to finalise a National Plan that recognises domestic and family violence in **all its forms** with a focus on prevention, response, and recovery with consultation with communities and the DFV service sector. Investment in community-led specialist services is integral to ensure culturally appropriate, holistic, and long-term support is provided to victim-survivors including children.

## 2. Feedback on key issues

### 2.1. Explanation of the prevalence, drivers, and forms of gender-based violence in Australia

The draft National Plan details the forms that gender-based violence can take. Lucy's Project believes that the explanation of DFV given within the Plan is insufficient to capture the scope of the issue, particularly with relation to animal abuse as a form of domestic and family violence. Animal abuse is a common and pervasive method of coercive control. The failure to include it a form of DFV despite up to 75% of victim-survivors with animals having experienced their animal being abused exposes a blind-spot in the National Plan's definition of family violence (Coorey & Coorey-Ewings, 2018).

Lucy's Project is additionally concerned that the issue of perpetrator misidentification and its impact on the reliability of data has not been addressed within the Plan. Due to misidentification of the perpetrator disproportionately affecting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women, Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) women, and people from LGBTQIA+ communities, it is imperative that this bias is not reflected in the National Plan (inTouch, 2022). More research is needed into this issue to gather accurate data on gender-based violence, and to rectify the common problem of perpetrator misidentification before victim-survivors suffer further trauma.

With regards to drivers of gender-based violence, the National Plan fails to clearly outline how these drivers will be addressed. Recognition is only the first step. The National Plan does not adequately explain how it will ensure that rectification of cultural attitudes will come from an intra-community perspective to create meaningful change within cultural groups with diverse traditions and attitudes towards gendered roles within the family.

Lucy's Project recommends that the National Plan:

1. Expands the definition of domestic and family violence to explicitly include animals and animal abuse as a form of DFV.
2. Commits to further research into prevalence, misidentification of the perpetrator, and types of abuse, prioritising data disaggregation.
3. Commits to further research into prevalence, misidentification of the perpetrator, and types of abuse, prioritising data disaggregation.

## 2.2. Transparency and stakeholder engagement

The draft National Plan calls for feedback on their reflection of issues highlighted through stakeholder consultations and the National Summit on Women's Safety, including the experiences of victim-survivors. Lucy's Project believes that there has been a lack of transparency in the consultation process as evidenced by the failure to release stakeholder recommendations and outcomes from community engagement. This results in an inability to cross-reference recommendations and key concerns. Without providing this information to demonstrate rigorous consultation and collaboration with the people that this Plan will affect, there has been an avoidance of accountability to the sector.

Lucy's Project recommends that the National Plan:

1. Involves the release of consultation reports, with permission from the organisations and individuals involved.
2. Commits to continued consultation with community organisations, groups, and DFV frontline services including animal services to respond to the changing needs of communities.

## 2.3. The Foundation Principles

The four Foundation Principles (gender equality, the diverse lived-experiences of victim-survivors are informing policies and solutions, Closing the Gap, and intersectionality) are important issues that should shape action on domestic and family violence. However, there remains a disconnect within the draft National Plan between these principles and the Pillars. In particular, the inclusion of intersectionality appears as a sub-section of each action, rather than integrated and incorporated at every stage of the response. It is imperative that culturally appropriate prevention, response, and recovery programs remain central to the Plan as a reflection of the Foundation Principles of Closing the Gap and Intersectionality.

Lived experience is also absent from much of the Plan. There is no mention of consultation with those who have lived experience in the development of programs. Involving people with lived experience must be a priority within the Plan, both as a form of acknowledgement and inclusion of the individuals that the Plan is intended to serve, as well as recognition of the epistemic advantage that

lived experience provides in many aspects of DFV response. The foundational principles are an accurate reflection of key priorities, though should be better reflected in the response.

## 2.4. A holistic approach

*"I already felt like I'd failed my kids, raising them in an unsafe home. When the worker told me to leave my animals it made me feel so guilty. I couldn't do it so then I felt like I was adding to my kids' suffering by choosing not to leave the animals."*

– Ela\*, victim-survivor

The draft National Plan requires increased focus on several key areas to ensure a holistic approach to identifying and responding to gender-based violence. In particular, the National Plan must prioritise the implementation of animal-inclusive DFV practices across the sector to account for the demonstrated need for services that can cater to victim-survivors with animals. The Plan must identify animals' safety as an integral aspect of DFV response and prioritise building capacity in animal and human DFV services. Frontline services have very little capacity to expand their services to include animals due to lack of funding, lack of training, and a gap in resources – particularly in rural, regional, and remote areas. The Pillars must demonstrate a framework for filling these gaps in resources through building networks of animal-inclusive services alongside consultation from Lucy's Project.

Lucy's Project recommends that the National Plan:

1. Includes animal abuse as a form of family violence
2. Reflects the need to address animal abuse in the Four Pillars.
3. Prioritises within the Four Pillars a commitment to invest in the development of a robust network of specialised human and animal DFV services across the country who are trained to respond to DFV involving animals.

## 2.5. Reflection of the family, domestic, and sexual violence service system

*"They tried to help me, but they didn't know how to help the animals, so I had to stay".*

– Sharyn\*, victim-survivor

The failure to recognise animal services as integral to the domestic and family violence service system exposes the Plan's insufficiently robust definition of family violence and, consequently, its deficient reflection of the DFV service system.

Animal services are key to many victim-survivors' ability to access supports. Without animal-friendly accommodation and support for their animals, victim-survivors often delay leaving violent situations, or are faced with the compounding trauma of leaving their animals to face further abuse and even death. Animals are also used to coerce victim-survivors into returning to the perpetrator. The failure to recognise animal services as part of frontline DFV services is a failure to acknowledge a common, pervasive, and deadly form of DFV.

For example, one key area that the National Plan neglects within in Pillar Two: Intervention (p.32) is the explicit mention of veterinary practitioners and animal services as frontline services that require support and training. In many domestic and family violence cases, veterinary practitioners are the first person to which a victim-survivor discloses abuse. This can occur when veterinary practitioners recognise that an animal who has been brought into their care has sustained deliberate harm. Animal abuse is one of the strongest indicators of abuse towards humans. It is ranked in the top three most reliable risk factors for lethality in a DFV situation, and it is a form of domestic and family violence in and of itself. Including animal services in the definition of frontline family violence services accurately reflects the reality on the ground in which many of the barriers to safety for victim-survivors depend on animal services and their capacity to recognise, respond, and refer when faced with animals and humans experiencing violence.

Lucy's Project recommends that the National Plan:

1. Identifies animal services as an integral part of the DFV service industry.
2. Includes provisions for support and investment in animal services for the purpose of training and expansion of services.
3. Prioritises building systems that facilitate communication and collaboration between human DFV services and animal services to ensure victim-survivors' and their animals' needs are met.

## 2.6. Reflecting the needs of women and children

*"Animals were my lifeline when I was growing up. They were that soft place to be, that unconditional love. They were the ones I could talk to whenever I needed and were a soft and loving place in a violent and dangerous family."*

– Talie Star, survivor-advocate

The draft National Plan reflects some of the needs of women and children but fails to address a prominent issue in the sector – animal abuse as a form of domestic and family violence. Comprehensive responses to domestic and family violence include increasing capacity to cater to victim-survivors with animals. Frontline services must be equipped with the ability to recognise and respond to situations of abuse involving animals, and individuals in the community must be educated on domestic and family violence in all its forms, including how to seek assistance. The Plan must include a framework for addressing key shortages in the sector –



namely, a lack of animal-friendly accommodation. Focus Area 3. For Pillar 3 (pp.36-37) addresses housing though does not cite a lack of animal-friendly housing as a key barrier to safety for many victim-survivors. Up to 50% of DFV victim-survivors leave a violent situation with their animal/s and yet the vast majority of victim-survivors with animals are turned away from refuges because the refuge is unable to cater to animals (Tong, 2015). The National Plan must reflect this key issue and provide a framework and actions for addressing this barrier to safety.

Furthermore, by overlooking animal abuse as a form of domestic and family violence the Plan does harm to the wellbeing of children in abusive situations. Exposure to animal abuse can have severe and long-lasting effects on children, particularly if a child is emotionally attached to an animal. Being separated from an animal upon leaving a domestic and family violence situation can leave a child without a key companion and support system, traumatising them further and inhibiting their ability to recover.

Witnessing brutalities to animals can desensitise young people, setting them up for a life where their ability to empathise is diminished. This can have devastating consequences, and research shows that animal abuse and its normalisation is correlated with domestic and family violence and its normalisation. Exposing children to animal abuse can affect children for the rest of their lives, and in some cases, can inhibit a person's ability to form healthy, equal relationships (Ladny & Meyer, 2020). The draft National Plan notes that Australia is a signatory for the United National Convention of the Rights of the Child (p.56). In line with Article 19 of the Convention<sup>1</sup>, and in line with a statement released by the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child identifying exposure to animal-related violence as a violation of a child's human rights (UNCRC, 2014), the National Plan must commit to taking steps to protect animals and by extension the children who love them. Children have a right to a childhood where they are free from witnessing violence against animals. They have a right to experience the joys of the human-animal connection. They have a right to be encouraged to nurture those bonds and build up empathy and connection with animals that will last them a lifetime.

#### **Lucy's Project recommends that the National Plan:**

1. Recognise that children's and adults' exposure to animal abuse is a violation of their human rights.
2. Prioritise keeping families together with their animals – where appropriate – by addressing and rectify the severe long-term, short-term, and crisis housing shortage for victim-survivors with animals.
3. Where children and adult victim-survivors have been exposed to the abuse of a companion or other animal, invest in specialised, animal-inclusive response measures that aid in a victim-survivor's trauma recovery.

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[1] Article 19 states that 'Parties shall take all appropriate legislative, administrative, social and educational measures to protect the child from all forms of physical or mental violence, injury or abuse, neglect or negligent treatment, maltreatment or exploitation, including sexual abuse, while in the care of parent(s), legal guardian(s) or any other person who has the care of the child' (UNHRC,1990). Exposure to animal abuse is a severe form of mental violence intended to harm children by inflicting emotional or physical pain onto a beloved companion.

## 2.6. Reflecting the needs of diverse communities and individuals

Lucy's Project endorses a separate First Nations Plan designed and managed by Indigenous community organisations and leaders. The creation of such a Plan is a strong step in ensuring culturally appropriate action from within and by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

Within the current draft Plan, there is a lack of nuanced recognition of the causes and symptoms of DFV for CALD, LGBTQIA+ communities, disabled victim-survivors, and victim-survivors in rural areas. Addressing gaps in support for these identities and communities should be a priority within this Plan.

One example of the complex ways that marginalised individuals experience abuse can be demonstrated through the intersection of disability and animal abuse. People with disability are already more likely to experience abuse than non-disabled people, and the abuse that they do experience is more frequent, more severe, and occurs in more ways (AIHW). When this abuse includes the abuse of a disability support animal, the consequences are severe. The harming of a disability support animal through direct abuse, neglect, withholding of veterinary care, and more, inhibits a disabled victim-survivor's independence and exacerbates their ability to access support that would allow them to leave the abusive situation. The Plan must reflect such diverse experiences and needs by centring the lived experiences of victim-survivors, including those with animals.

Furthermore, the Plan's limited focus on addressing gaps in resources for victim-survivors in rural areas will further exacerbate these disparities that trap victim-survivors in abusive situations. As victim-survivors in rural areas experience more frequent and more severe abuse than victim-survivors in metropolitan areas, and are also more likely to be responsible for both large (e.g., livestock, horses) and small (e.g., cats, dogs, birds) animals, the Plan must ensure that victim-survivors in rural areas are not left behind by a lack of animal-inclusive DFV services.

The Plan's lack of nuance or incorporation of the Foundational Principle of intersectionality into the Pillars undermines its ability to create equitable DFV responses that address the compounding barriers to support that marginalised individuals and communities face.

**Lucy's Project recommends that the National Plan:**

1. Prioritises the creation of a separate First Nations Plan led and managed by First Nations communities.
2. Adopts a more nuanced understanding of intersectionality and the experiences of abuse, barriers to support, and ongoing harm that marginalised communities face.
3. Recognise how animals and animal abuse factors into the above in order to prevent the exacerbation of barriers to support through a lack of animal-inclusive practices.

## 2.7. Building further evidence

*“We need to know more about the relationship between animal and human abuse in Australia so that we can recognise abuse earlier, save lives, and provide appropriate services for victims and for their pets.”*

– Dr Lydia Tong, veterinarian and researcher

The draft National Plan writes that it will support building further evidence on what works for gender-based violence prevention, early intervention, response and recovery. The draft Plan states that it will continue to ‘build available data sources and comparable measurement of a range of forms of violence’ (p.46). Lucy’s Project believes that this cannot be done without the inclusion of animal abuse as a form of DFV, and appropriate measures to track and report on instances of domestic and family violence involving animals.

The draft National Plan also reports that ‘The ABS and ANROWS will also undertake further waves of national surveys on family, domestic and sexual violence. This research will provide further insights into how people understand violence against women, their attitudes towards it, what influences their attitudes, and if there has been a change over time’ (p.47). We argue that including animal abuse as a form of domestic and family violence and recognising the lack of supports for victim-survivors with animals within the National Plan will better inform this further study by The ABS and ANROWS. This will ensure a comprehensive understanding of gender-based violence that exposes the prevalence, causes, and effects of animal abuse as a form of DFV.

**Lucy’s Project recommends that the National Plan:**

1. Includes the intersection of human and animal violence as a priority research area for the ABS and ANROWS.
2. Commits to data disaggregation in order to identify more nuanced trends and risk-factors.
3. Commits to funding research projects within a range of DFV organisations to diversify research perspectives and priorities.

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