

24 February 2022

National Office for Child Safety
Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet
Ngunnawal Country, Barton ACT 2600

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Submitted via email: nationalofficeforchildsafety@pmc.gov.au

Dear Sir/Madam

RE: National Strategy Advisory Group Model Public Consultation

The Australian Psychological Society (APS) welcomes the opportunity to respond to the National Strategy Advisory Group Model Public Consultation Paper and commends the National Office for Child Safety for their commitment to engaging with key stakeholders on the design, implementation, and evaluation of measures under the National Strategy.

The APS is Australia's largest and pre-eminent psychological association with more than 27,000 members. We are dedicated to advancing the scientific discipline and ethical practice of psychology, in the communities we serve, to promote mental health and wellbeing. We strive to realise the full human potential of individuals, organisations and communities through the application of psychological science and knowledge.

The APS is committed to supporting efforts to prevent child sexual abuse and increase child safety. This is central to our mission, values and ethics, and involves applying knowledge from many areas of psychological research and practice. We strongly support the development of a non-government Advisory Group to provide timely advice and input to guide the implementation of the National Strategy. Our response to the current consultation is focused on supporting the development of an Advisory Group Model that ensures that we continue to serve all members of the community who have been, or are at risk of being, impacted by child sexual abuse.

The APS notes that the First Action Plans of the National Strategy to Prevent and Respond to Child Sexual Abuse (the National Strategy) will focus on the five following themes:

1. Awareness raising, education and building child safe cultures,
2. Supporting and empowering victims and survivors,
3. Enhancing national approaches to children with harmful sexual behaviours,
4. Offender prevention and intervention, and
5. Improving the evidence base.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide a response to this consultation. If any further information is required, I would be happy to be contacted through my office on (03) 8662 3300 or by email at z.burgess@psychology.org.au

Kind regards,

Dr Zena Burgess FAPS FAICD
Chief Executive Officer

Consultation questions

1. The proposed model of the National Strategy Advisory Group and any criteria for selecting membership

The APS considers a psychological understanding of child sexual abuse (for both victims and perpetrators) to be a necessary factor in minimising the longer-term impact on children, and recidivism in offenders. With this in mind, we share the following thoughts on the proposed model for the National Strategy Advisory Group, and the criteria for selecting its membership:

- We believe it is essential for the Advisory Group to utilise and recognise the accumulated knowledge of victims and survivors, their support networks, professional practitioners who work in the field, and researchers. Harnessing all voices is crucial to promoting a holistic and objective perspective on the shape, design, and implementation of the National Strategy.
- To develop a comprehensive knowledge base on the causes, treatment, and prevention of child sexual abuse, it is essential for the National Strategy to establish partnerships and networks between Government, peak bodies for health practitioners and educators, and other community-based service providers, along with people with lived experience - from diverse backgrounds.
- All partnerships should be cooperative, respectful, and trauma-informed, in order to co-design effective strategies to address and prevent child sexual abuse.
- With the wellbeing of victims and survivors in mind, it is important that any consultations and activities related to the implementation of the National Strategy uphold the dignity and anonymity of all contributors and promote sensitive and responsive collection of information. It is essential to recognise the unique needs of people with lived experience who may be at various stages of recovery.
- The APS believes the Advisory Group requires representation from practitioners who are highly skilled in the assessment and treatment of child sexual abuse in both children and adults, and can speak to the psychological implications of this experience, the longer term ramifications for those affected (including other family members), and best practice/evidenced-based treatment models to understand what is required to minimise the impact of this experience, as a protective factor for a child's ongoing development.
- We also believe that the Advisory Group requires representation from practitioners who are skilled and experienced in working with offenders and can speak to prevention/protection from this perspective. This will ensure that the causes of child sexual abuse are acknowledged and addressed with informed evidence-based input, along with information regarding best practice treatments to stop abuse before it happens and reduce recidivism.
- In addition, the APS believes that the Advisory Group's work would benefit from a representative of the forensic field who can speak to the need for appropriate training for professionals who interact with the legal system in cases of child sexual abuse. This is urgently required to ensure the psychological safety of children in these circumstances, and needs to be a consideration under the National Strategy.

We strongly recommend having an APS representative on the Advisory Group, who would provide both the depth and breadth of experience of our members, including the treatment of victims, survivors and offenders. In addition, in our capacity as a peak body, we can represent and/or advocate for the National Strategy's priority groups.

2. What should be included in the Terms of Reference for the Advisory Group?

The Terms of Reference for the Advisory Group should clearly outline:

- The **purpose** of the Advisory Group - including expected outcomes from meetings and other Advisory Group activities (e.g., time-limited working groups).
- The **membership** – who would need to represent a broad and diverse range of stakeholders; including individuals and non-government organisations, academic institutions, community members and people with lived experience from the National Strategy's priority groups. Whether membership is for a set term should also be made clear.
- The timing, frequency and nature of **meetings** – including expectations about the conduct of members and the process for resolving disputes; when meetings will occur and whether they will be virtual, in person or a combination of both; plus information about the format and frequency of meetings.

- Expectations around **confidentiality** – need to be clearly outlined, including whether the **Chatham House Rule** applies i.e., “When a meeting, or part thereof, is held under the Chatham House Rule, participants are free to use the information received, but neither the identity nor the affiliation of the speaker(s), nor that of any other participant, may be revealed.”*
- How potential or actual **conflicts of interest** need to be declared, and a procedure to manage them.
- **Payment of expenses** – as noted in the Discussion Paper, members of the Advisory Group will be remunerated in recognition for their time and expertise.
- A **timeline** for the work of the Advisory Group to ensure that members are aware of the commitment required and over what period.

3. If you are a victim or survivor, or an advocate, what additional alternative ways for engaging and partnering with us would you like to see established? For example, would a separate, dedicated victim-survivor advisory group be beneficial?

[And]

4. Whether other priority groups, such as people with disability, should be engaged in additional alternative ways

The APS commends the strong emphasis on incorporating the voices of victims and survivors in the National Strategy, and the empowering language used to recognise them.

- The APS suggests including people with lived experience, and those with a disability, in one group as their voices need to be heard, and further, to inform the general discussion of, and outcomes from, Advisory Group deliberations. A respectful and compassionate discourse will be essential to ensure a supportive environment for members with lived experience, and further, because it may not be possible to identify all participants who have lived experience.
- It will be vital to minimise any potential for re-traumatisation as a result of participating in the Advisory Group. Member selection needs to be carefully considered, and a support process implemented to ensure that participants are provided with the opportunity to debrief on a confidential basis, with a skilled and experienced professional, following meetings or Advisory Group-related activity.
- Providing ongoing access to support for people with lived experience during consultations, and Advisory Group meetings and other activities, is an imperative to prevent further harm.
- Engaging with victims and survivors (including representatives from priority groups), in addition to inviting them to be members of the Advisory Group, or as an alternative, should be offered as an ongoing option.

5. The establishment of the proposed stakeholder consultation list

The APS recommends collaborating with a wide range of stakeholders to promote a deeper understanding of the multiple causes and impacts of child sexual abuse, and to inform specialised interventions to support all those who are impacted. This will require broadening the scope of contributors at all stages of the National Strategy design, implementation, and evaluation to enable the development of appropriate education, resources and guidelines, intervention and treatment, and research. We recommend the following:

- Establishing partnerships and networks between government, peak bodies (such as the APS), educators, community-based service providers, and people with lived experience, as an ongoing priority for stakeholder engagement.
- Implementing ongoing feedback and evaluation processes to ensure the accuracy, relevance, and appropriateness of various initiatives informed by stakeholder input. This will involve utilising, for example, the experience and expertise of the APS across the design, implementation, and evaluation of the National Strategy, to provide a psychological perspective on the circumstances of both those who experience, and those who commit, child sexual abuse.

The APS would be pleased to support the implementation of the National Strategy, given the experience and expertise we have to help break the cycle of child sexual abuse. In particular, we can contribute towards developing evidence-based psychological treatment and prevention interventions for victims, survivors and offenders; facilitating community and professional education; and designing targeted research to add to the growing evidence base on all aspects of child sexual abuse.

* <https://www.chathamhouse.org/about-us/chatham-house-rule>