



AASW

.....
Australian Association
of Social Workers

AUSTRALIAN ASSOCIATION OF SOCIAL WORKERS
NATIONAL POLICY PLATFORM
Federal Election 2022



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INTRODUCTION

The Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW) National Policy Platform (the Platform) is our organisation's position statement on addressing the issues which directly affect the quality of life of the people with whom social workers work, and the work environments for social workers.

Social workers operate at the interface between people and their social, cultural and physical environments. In all contexts, social workers maintain a dual focus on assisting people to develop to their full potential and improve their well-being; and on identifying and addressing the systemic and structural factors that create and perpetuate inequality and injustice.

At the core of our work is ensuring that the human rights of individuals and communities are fully realised and protected. To this end, we look to International Human Rights Law instruments¹ to provide guidance on how this should manifest in domestic law and policy solutions within Australia.

Practical and achievable policy recommendations are provided within this document to progress our **vision** of *Wellbeing and Social Justice for All*. We believe for this vision to be achieved, we must progress our **purpose** of *Supporting Social Workers and Empowering the Profession to make a Positive Difference*.

This Platform is structured around the three core principles which underpin the AASW *Code of Ethics*² and the work which we do. These principles are:

- Professional integrity
- Respect for persons
- Social justice

This document is informed by the experiences of our members who work across all industries, sectors and services systems, providing a robust, evidence informed, and holistic understanding of what policy changes are necessary for progress towards our vision of wellbeing and social justice for all, while upholding our principles.

This is a living document which will evolve with our organisation's priorities. It is not intended to be a comprehensive list of all policy priorities. Specific priorities on services, cohorts and investments are contained in submissions, reports and position statements – all of which have informed this platform.

1. For example see: The International Bill of Rights (encompassing: Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UNHDR); International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR); International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR); First Optional Protocol to ICCPR; Second Optional Protocol to ICCPR); Convention on Status Relating to Refugees; Convention on the Rights of the Child; Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples; Convention on the Rights of Peoples with a Disability; Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination; Convention on the Rights of Older Peoples; and, Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Particularly Women and Children, supplementing the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime.

2. See Australian Association of Social Workers *Code of Ethics* 2020.

POLICY PLATFORM OVERVIEW



PLATFORM 1 | PROFESSIONAL INTEGRITY

Investment in and recognition of the social work profession to enhance wellbeing outcomes for Australian communities and the peoples we work with.



PLATFORM 2 | RESPECT FOR PERSONS

A society which respects the human rights of individuals and groups and which provides humane services and support.

Working alongside First Nations Peoples and recognising and supporting their right to self-determination.

An equitable and safe society working to eliminate violence against women and other communities.



PLATFORM 3 | SOCIAL JUSTICE

Justice and social fairness, by acting to reduce barriers and to expand choice and potential for all persons, with special regard for those who are disadvantaged, vulnerable, isolated, oppressed or have exceptional needs.

Protection of the natural environment as inherent to health and social wellbeing.



PLATFORM 1

PROFESSIONAL INTEGRITY

Policy statement

We are a profession which is guided by principles of honesty, trustworthiness and good character in all aspects of professional conduct. We promote and facilitate lifelong learning, education, training and supervision to maintain professional competence and commitment to integrity.

However, we cannot do this alone without the support from the Australian Government.

The contribution of social workers is frequently underestimated in national debates about mental health, despite being one of the most important frontline roles across multiple service systems and sectors; and despite working closely with many of the most vulnerable people in our society. Appropriate professional recognition and greater investment into our profession are needed to enable social workers to better serve the needs of the Australian community.

We want to see this achieved through parity for identical services under relevant schemes such as Medicare Better Access with comparable mental health professions; investment in supporting the more than 2,200 students per year to undertake 1,000 placement hours which facilitate a job ready workforce to some of the most marginalised and disadvantaged communities in Australia; and the provision of student scholarships and worker incentives.

We also remain an unregistered profession. While we invest in the integrity of the profession through a self-regulation scheme, we know there are flaws in this model which exposes the public to risk, such as those seen in multiple coroners' reports relating to deaths of young children in child protection systems.³ The 'social work' title needs protection, so that only appropriately qualified professionals with a social work degree accredited by the AASW can call themselves a 'social worker' and work in social work roles with vulnerable people.

For this, we call on the Australian government to introduce and implement legislation for a national registration scheme for the social work profession to ensure high standards of care and accountability.

With strong accountability measures, adequate investment and support we can thrive as a profession and provide the highest quality services for vulnerable people in Australia.

3. For the example, the death of Chloe Valentine in South Australia:
<https://www.childprotection.sa.gov.au/documents/report/inquest-valentine-chloe-lee.pdf>.

We advocate for:

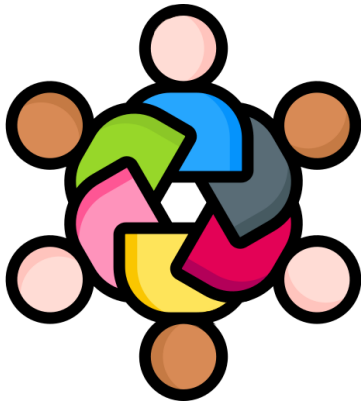
Investment in and recognition of the social work profession to enhance wellbeing outcomes for Australian communities and the peoples we work with.

We believe this can be advanced by:

1. Introducing national legislation to create a registration scheme for the social work profession in Australia.
2. Recognising the critical role social workers play in the mental health systems and in the Australian community. 40 per cent of Medicare registered social workers (AMHSW's) are located in regional and remote Australia.⁴ They support people experiencing distress and work with the complex nature of mental ill-health through holistic interventions and approaches. This needs to be better reflected in the existing system, as do initiatives which foster new and innovative means of drawing on these critical skills and experience. This includes:
 - a. Increasing the Medicare Better Access schedule fee rebated to Medicare registered social workers (AMHSWs); and,
 - b. Investing in social prescribing initiatives and ensuring qualified social workers are employed in the 'link worker role'.
3. Investing in scholarships for Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander social work students to develop a strong and culturally safe workforce.
4. Governmental cross-portfolio collaboration and with tertiary education providers, employers, and the AASW to develop innovative solutions to create quality placement opportunities and support students throughout their placements so that they are more job-ready by graduation, including:
 - a. Investing in social work student placement programs which employ a dedicated social work supervisor position so that barriers to hosting student placements can be removed; and,
 - b. Increasing scholarships (including for student field placement costs, stipends or providing accommodation supports) for *social work* students to increase the accessibility of regional, rural and remote placements.
5. Redirecting the funds currently spent on the school chaplaincy program to fund social workers in schools at a ratio of 1/ 500 students, ensuring that school social workers are employed and remunerated at levels which recognise their specialist expertise, and whom preferably have an **AASW School Social Work Credential**.
6. Recognising that key National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) roles which unlock timely, individualised and empowering services to participants (such as planners, Local Area Coordinators (LACs), and specialist support coordinators) should be filled by practitioners qualified in complex care, like social workers, preferably social workers with an **AASW Advanced Credential in Disability Work**.
7. Increasing the intake of qualified social workers under permanent skilled migration streams to ensure the sufficient supply of social workers to the workforce and fostering a culturally diverse workforce.

4. Accredited Mental Health Social Workers Qualifications, skills and experience, March 2019. <https://www.aasw.asn.au/document/item/11704>





PLATFORM 2 RESPECT FOR PERSONS

Policy Statement

We hold that every human being has a unique and inherent equal worth and that each person has a right to wellbeing, self-fulfilment and self-determination to an extent which is consistent with the rights of others, and opportunities to contribute to their community and society.

We continue to see the erosion of respect for persons in our governments' policies and service systems which impinges on the fundamental human rights of individuals and groups, disempowers peoples and alienates people from their cultures and communities.

We recognise Australia is facing some grave and prolonged human rights violations: the violation of human rights of people seeking asylum; systemic racism experienced by First Nations peoples; an epidemic of violence against women and their children, discrimination towards LGBTIQ+ communities, neglect of Australians who are living in aged care facilities; and/or, with disability in market-based care systems.

We believe it is time for the Australian Government is to create an environment which fosters wellbeing, balances autonomy with shared social responsibility, and promotes justice so that all individuals can thrive and participate in the decisions which affect them. Long-term, systemic strategies that provide funding stability are needed to move beyond the short-termism of election cycles and to meaningfully implement recommendations from multiple Royal Commissions across shared responsibility areas.

We are also a key profession in mental health. Social workers work to prevent psychological distress associated with disadvantage and discrimination and social workers work to alleviate and treat mental ill health. A fundamental respect for persons should inform our social services and to this end we advocate for a reorientation of commonwealth support away from crisis driven emergency payments and a punitive approach to unemployment.

We also call for a rights-based approach to supporting refugees and people seeking asylum; and for a society which promotes equality with systems which prevent and protect people from violence and discrimination. We call for the principles of self-determination for First Nations peoples to be enshrined in the Constitution to ensure they have a voice in national decision-making.

We call for systemic change to enhance the wellbeing for all Australians.

We believe that these policies can make Australia a fairer and just community which respects all members of the community and treats them with dignity and worth.

We advocate for:

A society which respects the human rights of individuals and groups and which provides humane services and support

We believe this can be advanced by:

1. Reforming public care settings where those reliant on disability, health, aged, or protective care, or subject to involuntary or corrections detention are not vulnerable to abuse and exploitation. To do this, we need to create empowering care settings to ensure the human rights of vulnerable people are always upheld. This includes:
 - a. Stronger reporting, investigation and accountability mechanisms for sub-standard care, exploitative and fraudulent practices;
 - b. Evaluation frameworks that incorporate lived experience and consult with service users through culturally appropriate and trauma-informed methods;
 - c. Longer-term funding contracts into programs and supports; and,
 - d. Ensuring support and services within institutional settings are rights-based, person-centred, culturally safe and trauma informed.
2. A mental health system which acknowledges and addresses the social determinants of health, is comprehensive, person-centred, accessible, culturally appropriate and staffed by a skilled, multi-disciplinary workforce which also:
 - a. Implements the reforms described by the Productivity Commission's report on the *Social and Economic Benefits of Improving Mental Health*, including:
 - i. meeting gaps in demand for psychosocial supports;
 - ii. making changes to Medicare to encourage the provision of more group therapy;
 - iii. helping schools support the social and emotional wellbeing and mental health of their students;
 - iv. developing a nationally consistent policy of not discharging people with mental illness from hospitals, correctional facilities and institutional care into a situation of homelessness;
 - v. addressing the shortfall in the number of supported housing places and the gap in homelessness services for people with severe mental illness;⁵ and,
 - b. Revises the National Mental Health and Suicide Prevention Agreement to embed the lived experience of service users, plan for its implementation and monitor its outcomes.

5. See: Productivity Commission Inquiry Report: Mental Health 2020.



We advocate for:

A society which respects the human rights of individuals and groups and which provides humane services and support

3. Fully implementing all 148 recommendations from the Royal Commission into Aged Care Quality and Safety and moving towards a rights-based approach to aged care where every older Australian is able to live well, with dignity and independence, as part of their community and in a place of their choosing, with a choice of appropriate and affordable support and care services when they need them. To achieve this, we want to see:
 - a. Investment and embedding of social workers in residential aged care as part of multi-disciplinary allied health services; and,
 - b. Social workers working in aged care with specialised skills and experience and who are recognised with the **AASW Aged Care credential** to ensure residents receive the highest quality of care.
4. Ensuring that people living with disabilities and other support needs are not left to advocate individually and repeatedly for resources to provide for their care, empowerment and progress towards self-determination. This requires a National Disability Insurance Scheme that supports collaborative and holistic care planning and coordination by qualified Allied Health professionals, who are registered under the scheme.
5. Recognising the legal rights of people to seek asylum and fulfilling our international legal obligations under the International Bill of Rights⁶ and the 1951 Convention on the Status of Refugees, by:
 - a. Ending indefinite and arbitrary mandatory detention of people seeking asylum and refugees;
 - b. Implementing community-based alternatives to detention, which include the provision of health, independent legal services, education, social and other holistic services necessary to ensure the wellbeing and settlement of people to Australia;
 - c. Increasing the intake of refugees into Australia, reflecting the higher numbers of globally displaced persons and people seeking asylum; and,
 - d. Increasing and expanding Refugee and Humanitarian support services and programs.
6. The Australian Human Rights Commission (AHRC) is an avenue of recourse for people, particularly marginalised communities, who have or are experiencing discrimination and is an essential function to ensure the human rights of the peoples and communities social workers work with are upheld.⁷ The Australian Government should restore its core funding to AHRC to the level it was in 2018 in real terms, which enables the Commission to fully undertake its statutory function of protecting human rights and investigating alleged discrimination.

6. Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UNHDR); International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR); International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR); First Optional Protocol to ICCPR; Second Optional Protocol to ICCPR.

7. The number of complaints to the Australian Human Rights Commission (AHRC) increased by more than 85% during the last 2 years. Source: *The Guardian*.

We advocate for:

Working alongside First Nations Peoples and recognising and supporting their right to self-determination.

We believe this can be advanced by:

1. Recognising the Uluru Statement from the Heart and First Nations Peoples' right to self-determination by:
 - a. Establishing a First Nations Voice to Parliament enshrined within the Constitution; and,
 - b. Establishing a Makarrata Commission for the purpose of treaty making and truth-telling.
2. Enacting recommendations to establish a National Commissioner for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children as outlined in the *Family Matters Report 2021*. This Commissioner would:
 - a. Sit alongside the Australian Children's Commissioner and the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner, in the Australian Human Rights Commission, as an equal and fully resourced member;
 - b. Advocate at the national level for the needs, rights (including cultural rights) and views of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people;
 - c. Provide rigorous oversight and accountability of governments' child protection systems and services, to guarantee the protection of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children's rights, as well as a voice dedicated to advancing these rights; and,
 - d. Be empowered to support strategies that lead to more effective collaboration and coordination both between and within governments.⁸
3. Implementing recommendations provided by *The Family Matters Report 2021* regarding enhancing the capacity of Aboriginal Controlled Organisations (ACCOs) to provide culturally safe, effective programs to their communities by:
 - a. Sustained capacity building and investment in ACCOs;
 - b. A dedicated, appropriately trained and identified Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workforce;
 - c. A peak body that supports ACCOs that deliver common services, with this body governed by a majority Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Board; and,
 - d. A dedicated, reliable and consistent funding model designed to suit common services that are delivered by ACCOs and required by communities.⁹
4. Raising the age of criminal responsibility from 10 to 14 to meet our international obligation under United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child to protect children from engaging with criminal justice systems in which Aboriginal children and young people are currently overrepresented.
5. Recognising that preventing and responding to violence against Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women is best achieved when they are the ones who undertake the consultation, design, implementation, monitoring and improvement of the process. Therefore, a specific plan to end violence against Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women, formulated according to these principles with adequate resourcing and devolved governance arrangements will be central to the effectiveness of this work.¹⁰

8. See: *Family Matters Report 2021*.

9. Ibid.

10. See Marcia Langton's comments in Hislop M., *Marcia Langton calls for Stand Alone Plan for Indigenous Women*.



We advocate for:

An equitable and safe society working to eliminate violence against women and other communities.

We believe this can be advanced by:

1. Ensuring the next National Plan to End Violence Against Women and Children is rigorous, comprehensive, and is an evidence informed approach to identifying, preventing and addressing violence against women. The first underpinning Action Plan must invest in programs which:
 - a. Minimise women's financial dependence on violent partners; and,
 - b. Increase women's options for safe affordable housing for themselves, their children and pets escaping from family violence.
2. Reforming two key aspects of the Family Law system which are currently used by the perpetrators of family violence to exacerbate and prolong their abuse on their partners and ex partners. This includes:
 - a. Introducing a Medicare item for family violence related mental health services. This will indicate that the source of the victim and survivors' specific mental health needs is the violence itself. This will avoid the misrepresentation of the victim's and survivor's parenting capacity by perpetrators and locate the accountability for the harm with the perpetrator of violence; and,
 - b. Overhauling the current system of family report writing to ensure that all reports are written by court appointed, court allocated, accredited experts with training in identifying and responding to family violence to at least the level required by the **AASW's Advanced Family Violence Social Work Credential**.



PLATFORM 3 SOCIAL JUSTICE

Policy statement

Social justice is a core principle that we promote and uphold for society in general and for the people with whom we work. We advocate for policies, practices and social conditions which empower individuals, families and groups, and promote equitable access to social, economic, and environmental resources, ensuring fairness, participation and legal protection for all.

The national conversation about health must be changed, starting with the recognition that health is a human right, and that everyone in Australia has a positive right to the highest level of services that are necessary for health.

This includes recognising and adopting policies which respond to the social and environmental determinants of health, that is, the non-medical factors which influence health outcomes such as income and social protection, employment, education, housing, social inclusion and non-discrimination, and, access to affordable health services of decent quality.

We believe healthy individuals and communities can only be achieved by recognising the social determinants of health. Yet many Australians in the community face housing insecurity, instability, and/or homelessness. Many in the community are dependent on government support payments which are too low to live a healthy or dignified life. Many experience intergenerational unemployment and this, combined with low income support creates additional barriers to entering employment or pursuing education.

We see every day the direct impact this has on the health and mental health of the Australian community. Yet, we saw through the pandemic that poverty in Australia could be alleviated when social security payments were increased, and rental payment freezes were put in place.

We also need real and immediate action against the climate emergency. Although the climate affects everyone, the burden of climate change is not distributed equally, and people who are living with social vulnerabilities and marginalisation are often more likely to experience the harm caused by climate change.

We know that we need a concerted and cross-portfolio effort to address the needs of people in the Australian community. We need to end poverty as the major contributing factor to inequality and poor health by increasing income support payments. We need to ensure that every person living in Australia has safe and affordable housing, by investing in a wide range of housing solutions. And we need to adopt ambitious climate actions to counteract the eco-social damage which has already occurred, and to prevent further damage.

We believe these policy reforms can foster social justice and access and equity for all Australians including our most vulnerable communities.

We advocate for:

Justice and social fairness, by acting to reduce barriers and to expand choice and potential for all persons, with special regard for those who are disadvantaged, vulnerable, isolated, oppressed or have exceptional needs.

We believe this can be advanced by:

1. Investing in more social housing and providing greater support for renters. This will mitigate homelessness, mental and physical health issues, financial stress and overcrowding. It will also assist families' financial stability and capacity to plan for long term goals such as educational attainment, and employment plans. It will support work currently underway to decrease domestic and family violence, Alcohol- and Other Drug-Related Harm. We believe we need to:
 - a. Build more social and affordable housing;
 - b. Develop a National Housing Strategy;
 - c. Increase the maximum rate of Commonwealth Rent Assistance by at least 50 percent; and,
 - d. Provide Commonwealth leadership to make renting fairer in all states and territories.
2. Fixing our social security system so that it keeps people out of poverty, enables people to maintain a minimum standard of dignity and health and enables people to find work. To do this we must:
 - a. Permanently increase the JobSeeker Payment to at least \$70 a day so everyone can cover the cost of the basics;
 - b. Index payments in line with wage movements at least twice per year;
 - c. Introduce a \$50 a week Disability and Illness Supplement;
 - d. Establish a Single Parent Supplement that recognises the additional costs of single parenthood;
 - e. Establish a Social Security Commission to advise the Parliament on the ongoing adequacy of income support payments;¹¹ and,
 - f. Institute a work or training guarantee to provide individualised assistance.
3. Discontinuing all trials of cashless debit cards. This punitive and discriminatory policy has prohibited vulnerable Australians, in particular, First Nations Peoples, from achieving community self-determination, without having any positive impact on their capacity for financial management.
4. Ending all initiatives which aim to limit or inhibit people's access to the NDIS, considering the rights of people with a disability to the services they need, and referring to the recent economic analysis which demonstrated that the NDIS has a net benefit to the economy.
5. Amending the eligibility rules for, and removing the barriers to the Disability Support Pension, so that all people who should be receiving it do so, instead of being forced into the arbitrary and punitive compliance regime of JobSeeker.

11. Points noted in a-e are outlined in the *Raise the Rate for Good* Campaign.



We advocate for:

Protection of the natural environment as inherent to health and social wellbeing

We believe this can be advanced by:

1. Implementing the recommendations of the Climate and Health Alliance's *Healthy, Regenerative and Just Framework*.¹²
2. Redirecting current fossil fuel subsidies and investment into initiatives which reduce health impacts and risks caused by the climate emergency.
3. Developing a climate change and equality policy statement which ensures that the burden caused by the climate emergency is distributed equally.
4. Adapting existing housing stock for renters and low-income people to control temperature, reduce energy costs and create employment.

¹² See Climate and Health Alliance's *Healthy, Regenerative and Just Framework*.

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