

ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER KNOWLEDGE, LEADERSHIP, HEALING AND TRUTH-TELLING

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Together, We Create Change



Your membership forms part of the collective force driving the profession forward. Your membership supports advocacy, professional recognition, and resources that empower social workers to create real change.

Check out what you have access to as a member.

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On the cover



WATA 'FOLLOW'

This artwork represents the journey of leadership.

As this person goes through life, growing and developing, people begin to follow them. They are followed because of the dreams they pursue, a dream that we as a Nation will be reconciled. A true leader does not try to control someone and what they think, they inspire them. They are confident to stand alone and use courage to make bold decisions despite what others may think of them.

Copyright Merindah-Gunya 2023.

'Mer-rin-dah Gun-yah'

Bayley Mifsud is a contemporary Aboriginal artist born in the country town of Warrnambool, located in South-West Victoria. She takes great pride in her heritage as a descendant of the Peek and Kirrae Whurrong clans. For Bayley, practising and sharing her culture through art and storytelling holds immense significance for herself, her family, and her community.

Her Aboriginal name is Merindah-Gunya meaning 'Beautiful Spirit' in Peek Whurrong language, which was gifted to her through a naming ceremony on Country, supported by her Elders and community.

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NEXT EDITION

Advertising contributions for the Summer 2026 issue will be accepted until 25 January 2026, with a publication date of w/c 16 February.

AASW Members whose articles are published in *Social Work Focus* can claim time spent to research and prepare them towards CPD requirements, specifically Category 3.

MANAGING EDITOR: Amanda Weavers

SENIOR EDITOR: Dr Matt Loads

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF COUNTRY

We respectfully acknowledge the past and present Traditional Owners and ongoing Custodians of the land. We pay our respects to their Elders past and present, their ancestors and their families.

Join us on social media:

National President's report: beyond statements and into action



LIZ LITTLE

AASW National President

As I write this introduction, I do so with deep respect for the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples on whose unceded lands we live and work, and with a clear conviction: reconciliation must sit at the heart of who we are as a profession, not on the margins of what we do.

This edition of Social Work Focus centres on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander voices, and it arrives at a time of change and renewal within the AASW. The new Board steps into its role at a pivotal moment. Members have been very clear that you want an association that is transparent, responsive and grounded in the realities of practice. You also want an association that honours cultural authority and lives its reconciliation commitments.

This Board has been formed with a strong member-centred focus and with reconciliation embedded in its foundations. Together, the Board is committed to strengthening member voices, refocusing our association, and ensuring that every strategic decision we take is shaped by our values.

As a new Board, we are conscious that we inherit both a history and a mandate. Members have told us you want an association that listens and is honest about our past, that centres Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership, that supports a culturally safe and nationally consistent professional workforce, and that remains firmly grounded in the realities of day-to-day practice.

It is a particular honour to introduce Rachel Bruce as the AASW's first dedicated Torres Strait Islander Director. Rachel is a proud Torres Strait Islander woman, born and

raised on Waibene, also known as Thursday Island, with ancestral ties to Meriam and Maluligal Nations. She brings extensive experience across government, non-government and community-controlled organisations.

Rachel's appointment is historic for our Association. Torres Strait Islander cultures, experiences and knowledges are distinct and must not be subsumed under a single First Nations label. Having a dedicated Torres Strait Islander voice on the Board affirms that distinctiveness, strengthens our cultural governance and deepens our accountability to Torres Strait Islander communities.

I encourage you to read Rachel's reflection on what it means to lead with cultural strength in social work and to ground governance in community controlled practice, which speaks powerfully to the kind of profession we are striving to be.

The theme of this edition asks us to move beyond statements and into action. Across these pages you will find Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander social workers and educators sharing their insights on healing, cultural supervision, education, truth-telling and governance.

Reconciliation is not a chapter we finish. It is the way we choose to work, decide and lead. As you read this edition, I invite you to listen deeply to the voices and stories shared here, to reflect on your own practice, workplaces and communities, and to consider at least one concrete change you can make to better centre Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledges and leadership.

As your National President, I am committed to a member-centred, future-focused AASW that is worthy of the trust the social work community places in us. To get involved or to find out more about what's happening near you, please connect with your state or territory branch.

Thank you for your continued work on the front lines of practice and for the courage you bring to reconciliation.

Warm regards,

Liz Little
National President and
Chair of the Board

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Refreshed podcasts – by and for social workers: Member voices. Real issues. Shared insights.

Check out our new podcast catalogue that dives into the issues, voices, and innovations shaping social work across Australia. From frontline practice to policy change, professional wellbeing to system reform, our aim is to bring you conversations that are timely, relevant, and inspiring.

Hear directly from practitioners, leaders and change makers as they explore the realities of practice, professional wellbeing, policy influence and system reform. Each episode reflects the issues shaping our profession, grounded in lived experience and shared insight.

Whether you work on the frontline, in leadership or in policy, these podcasts offer thoughtful discussion, practical reflection and stories that reflect the many roles, settings and communities social workers serve.

CHECK OUT OUR TWO LATEST EPISODES

Looking Ahead: How Social Workers are Shaping the Future of Mental Health

Recorded 23 September 2025, this episode draws on a live webinar where panellists from across the sector explore how social workers are contributing to prevention, early intervention, and building more connected mental health systems. [Listen here.](#)

National Disability Insurance Scheme: What We Are Doing to Support You

Released 2 September 2025, this episode reflects on AASW's advocacy, policy work and new resource development related to the NDIS, and the evolving role of social workers in the disability space. [Listen here.](#)



These are just the beginning; we have more episodes in our library and in the pipeline, covering topics including Indigenous peoples and reconciliation, workforce support, research, child protection and more.

HOW TO LISTEN

All podcast episodes are available on the AASW Podcasts page.

Got suggestions for future topics? Drop us a line at editor@asw.asn.au, we want your voice in this conversation.

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Advocating for change:

AASW's recent advocacy highlights for October and November

The AASW continues to represent and elevate the social work profession across key national reforms, inquiries, and policy developments. Below is an overview of current advocacy, workforce initiatives, and sector engagement underway to support members and strengthen the visibility of social work in Australia.

PAY PARITY AND RECOGNITION

- AASW will be meeting with the Australian Services Union (ASU) to discuss the Fair Work Commissions proposed changes to the SCHADS Award following its gender-based undervaluation decision. Focus will be on ensuring social workers' voices are heard throughout negotiations.

NATIONAL DISABILITY INSURANCE SCHEME (NDIS)

- New resources have been added to website including 'Ask for a social worker' flyer and 'NDIS check in' flyer now available on the AASW Website. The working group is developing a member survey and a marketing campaign to highlight the contribution of social workers to participant outcomes.
- Thriving Kids Initiative - AASW Policy and Advocacy team provided evidence to the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Health, Aged Care and Disability on 7 November 2025.

AGED CARE

- The Aged Care Act 2025 commenced on 1 November 2025, introducing a new definition of social worker. A webinar for members was held on 24 November 2025.
- An Aged Care Working Group is being established. Fact sheets in development for members.

PRIMARY CARE

- Working with Capital Health Network (CHN) to develop a toolkit for General Practices Hiring Social Workers. The project will produce a practical, evidence-informed resource to support the integration of social work roles within primary care.

CHILD SAFETY AND FAMILY VIOLENCE

- New AASW Working Groups established to support submission development for following Inquiries:
 - › Child Safety Commission of Inquiry (Queensland)
 - › Relationship between domestic, family and sexual violence and suicide (Parliament of Australia).



MENTAL HEALTH

- Better Access reforms to mental health plans commenced on 1 November 2025. A member webinar was held on 27 November 2025.
- New private health insurers recognising AMHSWs as mental health service providers including GMHBA, Mildura Health Fund and Peoplecare Health

AMHSW WORKFORCE DATA

- Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) - contributed AMHSW workforce data and commentary for the Mental Health Online Report. The 2025 AMHSW Survey has received a strong response, with analysis underway.
- Early findings include rich qualitative insights to inform advocacy on pay parity, scope of practice and sustainable workforce planning.

RECENT SUBMISSIONS AND REPRESENTATION

- Consultation regarding National approach to worker screening in the care and support Economy (October 2025)
- Quality and Safety of Australia's Early Childhood Education and Care System (October 2025)
- Inquiry into Thriving Kids initiative (October 2025)
- NDIS Quality and Safeguards Commission Practice Standards Review (November 2025)

Across mental health, disability, aged care and family services, AASW is ensuring that the expertise of social workers is recognised in national and state-level decision-making.

Through active policy engagement, targeted advocacy campaigns and ongoing work across major reforms, the AASW is committed to strengthening professional recognition and supporting social workers in every sector. These initiatives ensure the perspectives of social workers continue to shape Australia's social policy landscape and contribute to improved outcomes for individuals, families and communities.

[Learn more](#)

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Susan Gair is Editor of *Australian Social Work*, and Adjunct Associate Professor at James Cook University, Townsville, Queensland.

Highlights from Australian Social Work

Australian Social Work continues to highlight impactful research that informs practice and policy. Our first Issue of 2026 features articles that tackle topics at the intersections of social justice, cultural strengths, community capacity building and eco-social work. AASW members receive free access to this Journal, so make sure you are making the most of your membership through MyAASW.

FEATURED ARTICLES

Kinship and Cultural Strengths—Learning from an Aboriginal Perspective [Editor's Pick]

Sorby, J., Buchanan, F., & Smith, A. (2024)

This article highlights cultural strengths of community self-determination when an Aboriginal child needs to be relocated to other carers/family members. A participant and co-author (*Amelia) collaborated with academics to tell her story as an illustration of the strengths of community and kinship that can support vulnerable children. We learn the importance of Aboriginal community involvement in Amelia's progression from early childhood experience of family violence to thriving young adulthood.

Reflections from a Community Capacity Building Forum to Support People Bereaved by Suicide

Carlton, C., Tarrant, J., Eckersley, M., & Vindin, P. (2025)

It is estimated that as many as half the population may be impacted by suicide loss. The combination of grief and trauma makes the experience particularly complex. Recognised as the most stigmatised of all sudden losses, Social workers in the South West Region of Western Australia devised a unique approach to strengthen self-support while building broader community capacity for informal support. Sharing experiences of suicide bereavement in the community proved to strengthen understandings and disrupt societal silences and stigmas.

Therapeutic Gardening Groups with Children and Young People Who Have Experienced Maltreatment

McVeigh, M. J., Kassiotis, E., & McVeigh, C. G. (2024)

Despite the burgeoning interest in eco-social work, there is a dearth of publications exploring eco-social work practice with children and young people who experience violence, abuse, and neglect. In this article

authors argue that therapeutic gardening groups with children and young people who have experienced abuse and violence deserve a place in the eco-social work field. They describe an established gardening program that successfully ran for five years and impress upon readers the need for researchers and practitioners to contribute to this growing body of social work knowledge.

Mental Health Workers' Perceptions of Transcultural Practice with Young People and Families

Poon, A. W. C., Cassaniti, M., Katz, I., Karan, P., & Zwi, A. B. (2025)

Australia is a culturally and linguistically diverse country. However, there is limited information regarding mental health challenges faced by young people from migrant communities. In this study, authors explored perspectives and experiences of mental health workers who used a family-oriented perspective and adopted a culturally responsive lens. Tailored education for parents from multicultural communities achieved outcomes of a better understanding of mental health issues and increased support for young people to help them in their journey.

Follow *Australian Social Work* on LinkedIn and X for further updates.

ACCESSING THE JOURNAL

AASW members can read these articles and reviews for free through the [Journal button on the AASW homepage](#). If not logged in, you'll be redirected to MyAASW.

Getting It Right: embedding First Nations practice in a nationally registered workforce

DR SUE GREEN



Dr Susan Green is a Galari woman of the Wiradjuri nation and was the Association's Aboriginal Director, until November 2025.

When I co-authored *Getting It Right: Creating Partnerships for Change* in 2013, it was envisaged that the project would build to something that would last, a framework for integrating First Nations knowledges into the heart of Australian social work education. We wanted more than symbolic inclusion. We wanted to imagine a profession that could hold both First Nations and Western ways of knowing with equal respect and strength.

Twelve years on, I find myself returning to those original conversations. The questions we wrestled with then are still urgent now. How do we ensure that First Nations practice is not an adjunct to social work, but its living core? How do we build a national system that reflects the diversity of our stories and our strengths?

In *Getting It Right*, we proposed the idea of epistemological equality, the belief that First Nations knowledges are not secondary, not supplementary, but equal systems of understanding and practice.

This principle remains vital today. For registration to serve all Australians, it must recognise that First Nations worldviews offer complete and sophisticated ways of caring, teaching, and healing. A registered workforce should not measure First Nations practitioners against Western standards alone. It should value the expertise that comes from community, Country, kinship, and cultural responsibility.

The AASW's moves in this direction, calling for frameworks that reflect the richness of First Nations-led knowledge. It reminds us that equality in principle must become equality in structure.

Our 2013 framework also called for First Nations-centred social work, a way of thinking and practising that begins with

Indigenous knowledge rather than fitting it into Western models.

In a nationally registered workforce, this must mean that First Nations practice is recognised as foundational, not peripheral. First Nations social workers have always led the way in community-driven, relational, and strengths-based practice. National registration should reflect that leadership by supporting First Nations governance, self-determination, and pathways into professional practice.

This is not about separation. It is about shared ground, where all social workers learn from First Nations principles of care and accountability.

When we wrote *Getting It Right*, we questioned the idea of cultural competence. The word "competence" implies completion, as if one could ever fully master another culture. What we argued for instead was cultural responsiveness, a way of practising that is humble, reflective, and continually evolving.

The AASW echoes this approach. Cultural responsiveness asks social workers to be open to guidance, to understand that respect is an active process, and to work in partnership with First Nations peoples rather than on their behalf.

Embedding responsiveness into registration requirements would mean that every social worker is accountable not only to professional standards, but to the people and communities they serve.

Getting It Right also highlighted the power of Indigenous pedagogy, teaching and learning grounded in story, relationship, and Country.

Education is where we shape the next generation of practitioners. If registration defines who can practise, then Indigenous pedagogy should define how we learn to practise. First Nations-led education programs, guided by Elders and community educators, should be recognised as legitimate and equal pathways into the profession.

This approach nurtures not only knowledge, but integrity, empathy, and connection, the qualities that sustain real social work.

As one of the authors of *Getting It Right*, I feel both pride and responsibility in seeing how far we have come, but equally can see the importance of reminding ourselves how far we still have to go. The campaign for a nationally registered workforce is an important opportunity to embed First Nations practice at the centre of social work in Australia.

If we get this right, national registration will not be a gatekeeper. It will be a meeting place where First Nations knowledges stand alongside Western models, not in competition but in conversation.

Our vision in 2013 was for a profession grounded in partnership, respect, and healing. That vision still guides us today. This is what we mean when we say we want to get it right.

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REFERENCES

Young, S., Zubrzycki, J., Green, S., Jones, V., Stratton, K., & Bessarab, D. (2013). "Getting It Right: Creating Partnerships for Change": Developing a Framework for Integrating Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Knowledges in Australian Social Work Education. *Journal of Ethnic & Cultural Diversity in Social Work*, 22(3-4), 179-197.



Latest Continuing Professional Development: looking forward through innovation

These upcoming workshops delve into emerging knowledge and innovative approaches that are shaping the future of social work. Designed for social workers across all career stages, these events offer opportunities to stay ahead in a rapidly evolving profession.

From Silence to Strength – Supporting Mental Health in Men from CaLD Backgrounds

- Date: 17 March 2026
- Time: 2:00 PM–3:30 PM (AEST)
- CPD Hours: 1.5 hrs

Despite experiencing high levels of psychological distress, CALD men are significantly less likely to access mental health support—often presenting only at crisis points or through involuntary services.

Betting on Balance – Understanding and Overcoming Gambling Addiction

- Date: 23 April 2026 and 30 April 2026
- Time: 10:00 AM–1:30 PM (AEST)
- CPD Hours: 6 hrs

Gambling harm intersects with financial stress, family violence, trauma, substance use, and suicidal risk—issues social workers confront daily. Yet many practitioners still feel uncertain about how to raise the topic, conduct effective screening, or deliver evidence-based interventions once a problem is identified.

When They Hurt The Ones We Love: Animals, Interpersonal Violence and Coercive Control

- Date: 14 April 2026
- Time: 2:00 PM–3:30 PM (AEST)
- CPD Hours: 1.5 hrs

Pets are more than companions—they are part of the family. In the context of IPV, they can become targets, tools of control, and barriers to safety. As social workers, recognising this link is vital to supporting the whole family.

Our commitment to professional development has transformed traditional webinars into engaging, high-quality resources that empower social workers. Crafted by social workers for social workers, and guided by our learning and development staff, our training programs are designed to enhance the professional toolkit, enabling practitioners to continue their life-changing work within the community.

Leading with cultural strength in social work

RACHEL BRUCE, AASW TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER DIRECTOR



Culture has always been the foundation of my work and the lens through which I see wellbeing. It shapes how we listen, lead and connect with others. As the Australian Association of Social Workers' first Torres Strait Islander Director, I see this role as a continuation of what my community has always done: leading with care, cultural knowledge and collective responsibility.

When I was elected in October 2025, it was a moment that represented more than just an individual appointment. It symbolised the recognition of our distinct Torres Strait Islander identity and voice within the broader social work profession. It affirmed the importance of representation and the value of drawing on our cultural knowledge to guide ethical, inclusive and responsive practice.

I was born and raised on Thursday Island (Waibene), with ancestral ties to Meriam (Eastern) and Mabuiag (Western) Islands. My Parents, Family, Elders, Community, and the many people I have worked alongside have shaped my approach to leadership. I have always believed that social work, when grounded in cultural strength, has the power to heal, connect and empower entire communities.

I currently serve as the Operations Manager at Mura Kosker Sorority Inc., a community-controlled organisation that delivers programs supporting the wellbeing of families and individuals across the Torres Strait. In this role, my focus is on ensuring that every aspect of our work is community-led and grounded in cultural protocols.

My day-to-day responsibilities include managing the operations of multiple funded programs, contributing to strategic and service delivery planning, and work closely in a team that ensures that our direction remains aligned with community priorities. I am responsible for ensuring contract compliance, operational reporting and the coordination of program delivery that meets both funding requirements and cultural expectations.

One of the most meaningful parts of my work is leading and mentoring our workforce. We work together to design service models that reflect the needs and aspirations of our communities rather than imposing external frameworks. I provide internal supervision and support to team members within a culturally competent framework, supporting them to build their practice and confidence in culturally informed case management and additionally, provide external supervision to social workers.

Through our Holistic Wellness Programs, we have created spaces for early intervention and prevention, where yarning sessions with families and community members explore safety, wellbeing, and relationships. These programs have been delivered across the Torres Strait with strong engagement and positive feedback. Seeing people feel heard, respected and strengthened through these programs is what motivates me every day.

My role also involves stakeholder engagement and partnership building. Collaboration with government agencies, other community organisations and local leaders is essential. These relationships ensure that our programs remain responsive, sustainable and aligned with the aspirations of Torres Strait Islander people.

I think good social workers see leadership as something that is shared. The people I admire most at work are those who embody cultural humility and demonstrate a deep respect for community wisdom. I've been fortunate to learn from strong First Nations colleagues who model inclusive leadership, people who remind me that

good governance is as much about listening as it is about leading.

My background across government, non-profit and community-controlled sectors has taught me that the most effective services are those designed and delivered by the people they serve. Cultural knowledge must guide how we define success, measure outcomes and support healing. Whether I am working on case management systems, mentoring staff or helping shape organisational strategy, I draw upon the lessons learned from community – the same lessons that have guided my entire career.

As the Torres Strait Islander Director on the AASW Board, I am committed to embedding representation, self-determination and cultural safety across every level of our profession. This role allows me to help ensure that Torres Strait Islander perspectives influence policy, education and professional practice reform in meaningful ways.

Meet our new Board



National President
Liz Little

Liz Little has been actively contributing to the AASW for over a decade, as a member of the National Accreditation Panel since 2015; as President of the Tasmanian Branch Management Committee since 2023 (previously a Member); as a national Case Reviewer of alleged breaches of the AASW Code of Ethics from 2021–23; and now as National President.

Liz is proud to be part of a profession whose core value is the 'betterment of the human condition'. Social work has given her a Code of Ethics, knowledge base, skill set and practice framework that focus her energy, resource her intellect, and give her the courage and confidence to stand up publicly for social justice and pursue social change. Social work's capacity to engage individuals, families, communities, organisations and governments makes it like no other.



National Vice President
Chris Hannan

Chris Hannan is an experienced executive, clinician and governance leader with more than 25 years' experience across the social work, mental health, disability and community sectors. She is the National Vice President of the Australian Association

of Social Workers and has previously served as an AASW Director on the Board in 2021 and 2022, bringing strong continuity and institutional knowledge to her current leadership role.

Chris has extensive experience in board governance, strategic leadership and advocacy, and is committed to strengthening professional standards, ethical practice and organisational culture across the not-for-profit and community services sectors. She has held senior leadership and board roles across multiple organisations and is known for her collaborative, values-driven approach to governance and reform.

In addition to her governance work, Chris is an Accredited Mental Health Social Worker and the Managing Director and Principal Therapist of a private practice providing relationship therapy, counselling and clinical supervision, including mentoring early career social workers. She holds qualifications in social work and wellbeing science and brings a depth of clinical expertise, lived experience and strategic insight to her leadership. Chris is deeply committed to advancing safe, inclusive and person-centred systems that improve outcomes for individuals, families and communities.



Torres Strait Islander Director
Rachel Bruce

Rachel Bruce was born and raised on Waibene (Thursday Island). A proud descendant of Maluligal Nation (Western Islands) – Wagadagam tribe of Mabuyag Island, and Kemer Kemer Nation (Eastern Islands) – Mer and Erub, Rachel is an Accredited Mental Health Social Worker with over 25 years' experience

in Government and Non-Government Organisations. She is passionate about Mental Health and Family & Domestic Violence and is a strong advocate for social justice, equality, self-determination and human rights.

Rachel has a strong stance on accountability, transparency, good governance and upholding the ethos and fundamentals of AASW.



Director
Professor Bindi Bennett

Professor Bindi Bennett is Gamilaroi woman from Northern NSW currently living, working and playing on Jinibara Country in Queensland. Bindi was elected to the board in 2024. Bindi is a social justice scholar, a compassionate radical and activist. Bindi was supported and encouraged by a significant Elder to start social work. Bindi spent 17 years working in mental health and youth health advocating for young people who had experienced a disadvantaged life, like hers. Bindi is a past Member of AASW's National Research Committee. She enjoys research having been in academia since commencing her PhD scholarship in 2013. Bindi is passionate about diversity, representation, and inclusion. She is a tutor for First Nations social work students and believes that lived experience offers a pathway to deconstruct current challenges and barriers in systems, to become more equitable.



Director
Charlie K Evans

Charlie is an Accredited Mental Health Social Worker employed with a regional Area Mental Health Service in Victoria, working as a specialist family violence advisor with a focus on the social model of mental health and systemic change.

Her social work experience includes work with people experiencing complex trauma, survivors and users of family violence, families, international development, supervision, research and ethics. Charlie has lectured and facilitated education and training across university, TAFE, and the health and community services sectors, and has served as convenor of the AASW VIC Mental Health Social Work Practice Group and as AASW VIC Branch Management Committee Vice President.

Charlie is dedicated to social justice, equity and empowerment, and to an Association that values its members, embraces diversity and inclusivity, and operates with transparency and accountability.



Director
Dr Andrew Richardson

Dr Andrew Richardson is a Senior Lecturer in Social Work with practice experience and research interests in mental health, social justice, social

policy, social inclusion and community development. He has been a proud member of the AASW Northern Territory Branch and served as Branch President for 2.5 years.

Andrew is a passionate advocate for democratic participation, leadership accountability and transparency, and strong member ownership of the AASW.



Director
Leonie Vela

Leonie Vela is a social worker and governance leader committed to a strong, ethical and member-centred AASW. Formerly President of the AASW Queensland Branch (2022-2024), she has a proven record of collaborative leadership, strategic thinking and practical advocacy for members.

As a Director on the AASW National Board, Leonie is focused on keeping the Association accessible, affordable and responsive to social workers across diverse practice settings. She is passionate about developing CPD opportunities that are relevant, affordable and equitable for members in all regions.

Leonie's leadership philosophy is grounded in the four C's: Collaboration, Communication, Critical reflection and Creativity, which guide her approach to governance, engagement and decision-making, and her commitment to a trusted, future-ready AASW that supports social workers to thrive and lead change in their communities.

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Aboriginal women sharing their work: conversations inside a women's domestic and family violence shelter

SARAH WENDT, RACHEL ABULLA, TANIA SANBURY, KATE SEYMOUR AND SHARYN GOUDIE
(EXTRACT FROM *AUSTRALIAN SOCIAL WORK JOURNAL*)

ABSTRACT

Colonial systems and structures have influenced the lack of attention to, and documentation of, Aboriginal ways of responding to family and domestic violence. Through an in-depth focus group with Aboriginal women working in a women's shelter, this article contributes to building knowledge by providing a nuanced analysis of the nature and experience of domestic and family violence work by Aboriginal women for Aboriginal women. The findings highlight the material reality of the work through descriptions of day-to-day tasks and challenges; navigating the enduring structures and practices of colonisation; and celebrating Aboriginal culture and survivorship.

HEALING WORK

The centrality of healing to family and domestic violence (FDV) work was emphasised by the focus group participants as an increasingly pressing concern given the overriding focus on accommodation and administrative accountability to funding bodies. This is at the expense of connection and relationships with women and children as the work of attending to their emotional and spiritual needs becomes devalued:

"I think for, what we do here is we work with our community in keeping them safe. And when I say keeping them safe, I think for us, there's an element that's missing and that's the healing process, which we can't get to because of system requirements and admin and all that kind of stuff. If a system valued healing, you would give time for therapeutic work, but contracts do not allow for this. We need healing led by Aboriginal people for Aboriginal people." [Sabrina]

Participants pointed out that the importance of healing work is not



confined to FDV; instead, healing is holistic, encompassing spiritual needs and connection to culture, family, and land. While the shelter had a worker whose own connection to culture, ancestry, and spirit enabled her to undertake healing work, work such as this is not recognised, let alone funded, in a colonial system. As expressed by Sabrina, having to explain and justify such work within a system that has, itself, perpetrated violence and abuse is profoundly wearying:

"A woman said to me, I'm tired of people thinking because I'm Aboriginal, that violence is a normal part of my life." I was blown away that, for her to heal, she needed something that was really appropriate for her, but yet the system didn't allow for that. And yet she could vocalise that and say that, that she didn't want to be in violence anymore. I wanted to work with that but often the opportunity isn't there, the time... as an Aboriginal woman to deal with intergenerational grief and loss, the intergenerational poverty, with the compounded trauma... how do I fit that in the schedule of making sure that women move on as quickly as possible in terms of housing... I try and work

with some women but we're not doing it for all women. So, I think there is an inequity in that. I think a system that values healing would not link DV and housing together. I think a system that values healing would recognise that women need, anybody needs, a safe and secure home to be able to do any kind of work and healing." [Sabrina]

Participants emphasised work with children as a critical need to ensure

that the material and healing needs of children as well as their mothers are met. As Patricia explained, in advocating extensively for a "children's worker" to be funded:

"What we wanted was to try to have something where we put the kids as the focus, put the kids front and centre, alleviate some of that from the case managers, and also have some therapeutic connection around what's happening for these children." [Patricia]

You can access it anytime via the journal button on the [AASW homepage](#). If you're not logged in, you'll be redirected to MyAASW.

References available through Australian Social Work via MyAASW.



Social worker spotlight: Melissa Puertollano

Championing culturally informed mental health practice

AS TOLD TO DR MATT LOADS

From the heart of Rubibi (Broome, WA), on Yawuru and Djugun Country, Melissa brings together deep cultural knowledge and professional expertise to strengthen mental health care for First Nations young people and communities.

A proud Ballardong, Whadjuk and Gija woman, Melissa is an Accredited Mental Health Social Worker and Level 2 Counsellor whose career spans youth mental health counselling, mediation, tertiary education, and family and community services. In her role as Program Manager, Cultural Supervision at headspace National Youth Mental Health Foundation, she leads work that ensures clinical and cultural supervision are meaningfully intertwined—helping services become safer, more culturally responsive, and grounded in relational ways of working. Alongside this, she operates a private practice offering clinical and cultural supervision, consultancy, and Employee Assistance Program (EAP) counselling.

Melissa's practice is shaped by her passion for culturally safe and trauma-informed care. She integrates a social and emotional wellbeing framework into every aspect of her work, ensuring that services honour the strengths, knowledge systems, and lived experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Her advocacy is both personal and professional—driven by a belief that meaningful change happens when communities lead the design of services that support them.

"Being able to connect with others face to face in the profession is absolutely essential," Melissa reflects. "It helps me remain motivated, create meaningful connections, and affirm our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ways of working within our social work profession."

Melissa's leadership extends beyond her own roles as she continues to advocate for culturally informed supervision

models and practices that privilege Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives within the broader social work profession. Her work exemplifies the values at the heart of social work: equity, inclusion, and empowerment. By grounding her practice in culture and compassion, Melissa is helping to shape a more culturally responsive future for mental health care across Australia.

She also extends her gratitude to the AASW, having received a scholarship to attend the International Conference on Social Work in Health and Mental Health (ICSWHMH), an experience that strengthened her connections and affirmed her dedication to advancing culturally safe, relational approaches in social work.

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FEATURE ARTICLES

From surviving to thriving: Dr Josephine Lee on healing, humanity and the work of compassion

DR JOSEPHINE LEE AND DR MATT LOADS

"Healing's our main gig, every single human being. Whatever you've got to do to help you with your healing and to make life worth living, that's what you've got to do."

For Dr Josephine Lee, healing is not a slogan or an optional extra to social work. It is the whole point. And when she speaks about it, she does so with the authority of lived experience. Her story is one of violence and racism, of homelessness and despair, but also of resilience, compassion and transformation.

It is a story of choosing humanity in the darkest places and then helping others find their way from surviving to thriving.

A CHILDHOOD IN "SEWAGE"

Josephine describes her childhood bluntly. "I wasn't growing up in this pure pool of things. I was growing up in sewage, the worst of human behaviour."

Her father was violent, armed, and racist; her mother, though loving, was herself brutalised. "By the age of 13, I was seriously considering killing him," she says. "If he's going to take us, I'll take him out first."

But even then, she made a conscious decision to stay human. "If I take his life, I will be worse than him. I have no right to take another human's life, even though they're a monster."

That moment of moral clarity, of refusing to let cruelty turn her cruel, would become a foundation for her philosophy of healing. "We have to believe we will eventually be free of this," she told her siblings.

Freedom, however, didn't come easily. Racism and rejection came not only from strangers but from family. "You will never be allowed in my yard because you are nothing but an -----," she remembers being told.

By her early teens, she was self-harming, homeless and alone, sleeping in a riverbed. "The violence at home became unbearable. I had no phone, no stable adult to turn to."

A CALL FOR SURVIVAL

One of her most vivid memories is of trying to reach child protection through the police. "With no phone, I told them I would wait by a public phone box at a certain time." When the call came, she learned her siblings had been placed in care.

"The relief was so great just knowing they were still alive," she says. It was a moment of reprieve, proof that survival was still possible.

But survival was not enough. At just 17, she took on responsibility for her brothers and sisters, with other members of her family. "There is a rare 17-year-old out there who goes all out to not only break the cycles for herself, but also for her siblings. But I knew I couldn't just operate as an individual. Always in the back of my head was: there are other human beings who shared the same experience as me. They too deserve a break."

She moved the family to Townsville so her siblings could attend different schools. By day, she was a student. By afternoon, she was a carer for traumatised children.

"We grew up with a harsh reality that we were disposable, particularly as Aboriginal children," she says. "My determination was simple: survival had to lead to something more."



Dr Josephine Lee's journey from violence and homelessness to leadership in social work is a testament to the power of healing, compassion and authenticity. Through lived experience, she reminds us that social work is not just about intervention but about staying human in the face of suffering. Dr Josephine Lee, a proud Gudjula woman from North Queensland whose career has included years of practice in remote Northern Territory communities

DISCOVERING SOCIAL WORK

Josephine's first encounter with a social worker was hardly inspiring. "She came to investigate me when I was in a not-so-good situation. She walked away, and I lied so I wouldn't be removed by welfare. That was my introduction to social work."

Ironically, that disappointment became her calling. "Social workers have been used as instruments of power and control," she says. "I wanted to do it in a way that was authentic."

Authenticity has been her touchstone ever since. "When you do the talk, you've got to walk it."

Her lived experience has become a resource that clients and colleagues instinctively trust. One placement student once said to a colleague: "Within seconds of meeting, you'd swear you'd known her for years."

In remote schools, years after she left, teachers still remembered her simply as "the calm lady". "It's not so much what you did," she reflects, "it's how they felt."

Her authority doesn't come from textbooks, but from survival. "When I share my story with others who are struggling, you can see where it hits them: if she can do it, I can do it."

SUFFERING IS SUFFERING

Josephine resists the temptation to measure or compare pain. "Human suffering is human suffering, and everyone's got a different level of tolerance they can have. We've got to be careful when we judge others."

Reading Matthew Perry's recent memoir challenged her. "At first, I struggled to empathise with a wealthy actor who seemed to have everything. But by the end, I felt compassion. I would not wish his addiction on anyone."

In contrast, she also draws strength from Holocaust survivor Eddie Jaku. "Such trauma, and yet he chose joy," she says. "The lesson for me is simple: suffering comes in different forms, but all of it is real."

This refusal to "rank" pain has become central to her practice. Whether she is supporting someone in crisis, or listening to a student's story, she reminds herself: suffering is suffering.

COMPASSION AS PRACTICE

"To be a blessing to another is how I best can describe it," she says. "It's a bit like when it's a hot day and you feel a gentle breeze, it just makes it a little bit more tolerable."

For Josephine, compassion is not about fixing everything. "Compassion is the greatest gift we can give each other. It doesn't mean you have to fix it. It means being kind, acknowledging, and respectful."

Her compassion doesn't come from idealism. It comes from knowing despair. "Because I have felt the weight of cruelty, I understand the power of even small gestures of kindness."

And compassion, for her, is inseparable from healing. "Healing's our main gig, every single human being."

VULNERABILITY AS STRENGTH

"I used to be tough," Josephine admits, "but I read a brilliant article about vulnerability and the importance of embracing your humanness. And so I've done that."

She speaks candidly about complex Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), attachment wounds, and intimacy struggles, not for shock, but for solidarity. "When I share these stories, I want readers to see this person walks the talk. She has lived experience and has moved from surviving to thriving."

For her, vulnerability is not weakness. It is honesty. And in a profession where clients can see through pretence, honesty itself becomes a form of healing.

THE ETHICS OF EMPATHY

Josephine's compassion has boundaries. "It doesn't matter who you are. If you're taking me for a ride, I will say to you, I don't think I'm the right person to help you."

She calls this self-respect. "I value me and value my time and value my skill set, so I will not allow myself to be used and abused."

That balance of care without collapse is central to her understanding of ethics. Healing, she says, is not only about helping others, but also "helping yourself, so you can help the others as well, to get out of the river of misery we've got going on here in Australia."

REMEMBERING OUR HUMANITY

"Humans are designed for connection. We are designed for relationship," she says. It is easy, she warns, for bureaucracy and professionalisation to dull empathy. "Technology, forms, policies, they can all distance us from what matters."

Her ability to connect instantly with clients, colleagues, and communities is not a technique but a philosophy. "That moment of feeling heard and acknowledged, that you matter, that is what makes life more tolerable."

In this way, compassion is not just something social workers give. It is something they model. "By staying human in the face of suffering, you invite others to stay human too."

CARRYING SADNESS, CHOOSING JOY

"There will be sadness with me for the rest of my life," Josephine says quietly. "But healing doesn't mean erasing the past. It means finding ways to live fully despite it."

Her life is a lived example of resilience and responsibility, of the long, deliberate work of healing. "Sharing lived experience isn't just telling a story", she says. "It's an act of healing."

At its best, social work is not about programs or reports, but about presence, accompanying people from survival toward healing, and making sure they don't walk that road alone.

STAYING HUMAN

"Healing's our main gig," she repeats. "But at its heart, social work is about compassion, vulnerability, and staying human in the face of suffering."

It is a philosophy forged in the darkest places, yet lived out daily in quiet acts of presence, kindness, and courage. And in a world where it is easy to harden, Josephine's voice calls us back to what matters most: being human.

IF THIS ARTICLE HAS RAISED ISSUES FOR YOU

If you or someone you know is thinking about suicide or experiencing a crisis, please call Lifeline Australia on 13 11 14 for 24/7 support.

Truth telling and the “lead splinter”: Aboriginal Elders’ perspectives on community service provision and intergenerational trauma

JANELLE CADDY, EYAL GRINGART AND DARREN GARVEY (EXTRACT)

ABSTRACT

This article is based on PhD research aimed at improving community services for remote Aboriginal people with intergenerational trauma. It focuses on the role that Yamatji Aboriginal Elders played in cocreating a framework to enhance service provision for Aboriginal clients and the importance of local truth telling in this endeavour. Elders specified that local truth telling was essential in building shared understandings of healing from intergenerational trauma between Aboriginal people and community service providers. The characterisation of intergenerational trauma as a “lead splinter”, continually poisoning the wellbeing of Aboriginal people provided an illustration of trauma and the complexities of facilitating healing. The findings emphasise the need for community service providers to undertake truth telling to understand and resolve these key challenges. This engagement facilitates the decolonisation of social work practice through deeper knowledge of local history, incorporation of Aboriginal perspectives of wellbeing, and the development of culturally based approaches to social work with people with intergenerational trauma.

Intergenerational trauma refers to the transmission of historical trauma impacts, including grief, loss, and cultural separation, across generations (Menzies, Citation2020; Ralph et al., Citation2006). The pervasive and devastating impacts of colonisation-related atrocities and the ongoing trauma for First Nations peoples globally are well-documented (Atkinson, Citation2013; Dudgeon et al., Citation2020). For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, ongoing trauma symptomatology is reflected through rates of family and domestic violence, significantly

higher than average unemployment rates, lower educational outcomes, and disproportionately elevated incarceration rates compared to mainstream Australia (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare [AIHW], Citation2023; Productivity Commission, Citation2023). Koolmatrrie and Williams (Citation2000) specifically identified the connection between unresolved grief and the removal of Indigenous Australian children, highlighting how these historical practices continue to manifest in contemporary trauma symptoms. These disparities are attributed to colonisation, Stolen Generation policies, and ongoing systemic disadvantage (Bennett & Green, Citation2019; Garvey et al., Citation2024; Holl et al., Citation2025) that continue the legacy of many colonial practices. Furthermore, the damaging impacts of intergenerational trauma have been attributed to governments’ delayed recognition of its severity on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples until recent decades (Menzies, Citation2020; Ralph et al., 2018).

Despite academic research recognising intergenerational trauma and its detrimental effects on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, broader Australian society has yet to appreciate the impacts of unresolved trauma and grief, compounded by ongoing systemic racism and prejudice against Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples (Anderson et al., Citation2023; Ralph et al., 2018). These factors contribute to ongoing emotional harm and underscore the importance of services to support healing in a manner respectful of historical and current experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples (Atkinson, Citation2013; Chamberlain et al., Citation2022). Dudgeon and colleagues

(Citation2020) emphasised that cultural continuity and revitalisation are essential preconditions for responding to intergenerational trauma. This suggests that interventions for people with intergenerational trauma must centralise culture and the perspectives of cultural authorities such as Aboriginal Elders to address how community services can adequately meet the healing needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in culturally responsive and trauma-informed ways. Although efforts have been made at better supporting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people with intergenerational trauma within social work practice, the approaches have been based mostly on international models adapted for use in Australia, or Western approaches that do not meet the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people (Bennett, Citation2022; Bennett & Green, Citation2019; Garvey et al., Citation2024; Healy, Citation2011; Holl et al., Citation2025). The aim of this study was to develop an Elder-led framework to improve community services for remote Aboriginal people with intergenerational trauma in the Gascoyne region of Western Australia, with particular emphasis on the role of truth telling.

You can access the full article anytime via the journal button on the [AASW homepage](#). If you’re not logged in, you’ll be redirected to MyAASW.

References available through *Australian Social Work* via MyAASW.

The Advanced Supervision Program: a deep dive into advanced practice



The AASW has developed the Advanced Supervision Program in direct response to the recommendations outlined in Coronial, Royal Commission, and State Ombudsman reports. These reports underscored the critical need for advanced supervision in frontline social work and highlighted gaps in supervision training and support.

This is the AASW's flagship, award-winning supervision program, designed specifically for experienced social workers looking to deepen their capability, confidence, and ethical practice as supervisors.

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"As a current supervisor, it was great to have some formalised training on what I have already been doing which will allow me to hopefully become a better supervisor as I impart the information and knowledge gained in this training."

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More information

Working alongside, looking ahead: why I joined the AASW Accreditation Council

ANASTASIA READ

Lecturer in Social Work, College of Education, Psychology and Social Work



I often introduce myself to students by talking about “we” before I get to “I.” That’s not a rhetorical trick, it’s the way I’ve learned to see the world. In Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, you’re held in relationship. You carry your family, your Elders, your community, and Country with you. So when I talk about my work, I’m always aware that I’m not walking alone. I’m working alongside.

Today, that work spans a few spaces. I’m a lecturer in social work, and I coordinate a topic that focuses on working alongside First Nations peoples. I also bring a long practice history in child protection and community-based roles into the classroom. Most recently, I’ve joined the AASW Accreditation Council. I’m new to academia, new to accreditation, and very much still learning, but I’m here because I care about what happens when students leave the classroom and meet community. Our responsibility doesn’t end at the lecture door. If anything, it begins there.

When I say I teach from a collaborative frame, I mean it practically. In our team, we’re deliberately building a coordinated approach to First Nations content across the curriculum, so that ideas don’t live in one “Indigenous topic” and then disappear. It’s about flow: topic to topic, year to year, classroom to placement. We’re also working together on a decolonising and indigenising project, creating a practical tool that helps topic coordinators examine what they teach, how they teach it, and who their teaching centres. The goal isn’t to bolt on a reading list; it’s to shift practice with care and intention so the work is sustainable when any one of us moves on. If it relies on the Aboriginal person in the room, we haven’t embedded it.

Collaboration isn’t just internal either. Community watches what we do. Even when I don’t know everyone personally, I’m accountable to them. That accountability is a privilege and a weight. You can’t perform it. You have to mean it, because it has real-world

consequences for the people students will soon meet.

I’m often asked about the tension between Indigenous ways of knowing and Western university structures. The truth is: there is tension. Universities reward individual output and speed; community knowledge values relationship, time, and reciprocity. I can hold both truths. And I’ll also say this: I’ve experienced Flinders as forward-thinking and supportive of doing this work properly. The energy in our social work program right now is about aligning systems with values, building coordinated approaches, redesigning curricula, and making space for reflective learning, not just content coverage.

That reflective space really matters. Most of my Master’s students are international. Many come with only media-shaped ideas about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples; our domestic students, meanwhile, often arrive with very formed views from growing up here. Both groups carry assumptions. The classroom has to be a safe place to put those assumptions on the table, to listen, to be uncomfortable, to unlearn some things and reconstruct others.

Let me give you a small moment. A student once approached me after class, frustrated. “What do you want me to do about all this?” she asked, meaning the weight of history and the ongoing impacts of colonisation. It stopped me. I’d assumed I’d been clear. She’d heard a demand to fix the past. I explained: no one can change history. The work is to understand context, recognise power, and use

your role ethically in the present. What she surfaced was the “now what?” that so many students feel. Universities are good at teaching *about*; we have to get better at guiding students into what next, so the learning doesn’t collapse into guilt, paralysis, or performative answers.

So we start with self. In our topic, we begin not with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, but with the student, values, culture, faith, family, story. It can be destabilising. Culture is foundational, and asking people to interrogate their own can feel like an attack. That’s why the space has to be gentle and bounded. I’d rather students wrestle openly with discomfort with me than carry it unexamined into community. Some will never meet an Aboriginal client in their first few years of work; still, how they hold themselves, whose knowledge they centre, how they listen, will affect every relationship they have.

I also name my own positioning. I look white. That visibility means doors open for me that may not open for my darker-skinned family members, who still encounter overt racism in everyday life. My experiences are not universal. They’re one thread. I want students to take in many threads, to practise contextual judgment rather than seeking a script. “Tell me what to say” is a natural impulse; learning to listen, adapt, and be accountable is harder, and that’s the point.

People sometimes imagine that because social workers are progressive, they’re free of bias. None of us are. Bias isn’t a moral verdict; it’s a starting point for work. I make the work explicit: put

the stereotypes you've absorbed on the table, see where they came from, fact-check them, learn to sit with the discomfort of having carried them. Then practise differently.

That work can ripple out into students' lives. They go home and challenge comments from friends or family. That brings conflict and courage into their day-to-day. Again, we hold the space. We keep it practical. We bring people back to relationship and responsibility, not shame.

And we keep saying: you can love Australia and still want it to be more honest, fair, and expansive. Those things aren't opposites. I grew up in a regional town with a mix of communities, Greek, Indian, Aboriginal. On Australia Day, we'd all turn up, celebrate our cultures and the country we share. That experience gives me a different angle from some of my kin whose daily encounters with racism look very different. I try to be transparent about that: perspective comes from where you're standing and how people read your body in a room. All of that matters in practice.

Because people ask: yes, I think Flinders is doing the work. We're building coherent pathways so students encounter First Nations content consistently rather than as an aside. We're designing assessments that privilege practice, reflection, and role-play, not just essays, so we see how students are with people, not only how they write about them. And we're investing in staff coming together to map, test, and refine. That's what forward-thinking looks like in a university: not grand statements, but structures that back values.

Continuing on with my role on the Accreditation Council. I see accreditation as simply a quality-assurance process. Universities put their social work programs forward to be checked against agreed national standards. A panel conducts a detailed review, documents, site visits, conversations, and produces a report. The AASW then makes a decision about accreditation, sometimes with conditions or recommendations for improvement.

Where does the Accreditation Council fit? Think of it as an independent oversight layer that helps ensure the

system is fair, consistent, and credible across universities. The Council doesn't run a site visit or rewrite the standards; it looks at how the process is operating and at the findings that come from panels, providing a broader lens and asking, in effect: *Is this robust? Is it consistent with the standards? Does it stack up?* That external view strengthens trust—students can be confident their degree meets the mark, communities can expect graduates to practise safely and ethically, and universities receive clear, constructive signals about where they're strong and where they need to lift.

Independence matters here. Quality is strongest when someone one step removed is checking the checkers. It's the same principle many of us have seen in other systems, like external examiners for theses, where a program benefits from a fair-but-firm outside eye.

Joining the Council, I bring the glue between classroom and community. Years in child protection taught me the difference between knowing about a standard and living it with families under pressure. Lecturing has taught me the craft of building safe, developmental learning. Both matter to quality.

I'm interested in that fact that standards should be applied steadily across universities, but with an understanding of each program's student cohort, placements, and community relationships. A one-size rubric can miss whether graduates are actually ready for practice where they will work. First Nations content can't be an elective or a name change. It needs to be deep and scaffolded, with community voices inside it, and with staff supported to teach it well. Good practice isn't a single charismatic lecturer. It's structures, tools, and habits that outlast any of us. Accreditation

should nudge toward that kind of embedding.

I also bring a commitment to care and candour. People sometimes imagine accreditation as punitive. In my experience so far, the best expressions of it are collegial: rigorous, yes, but ultimately about supporting programs to do their best by students and, in turn, by community. When a program doesn't meet the mark, naming that clearly protects the public and the profession. When it does, saying so with the same clarity builds pride and direction.

At the end of the day, my teaching and my role on the Accreditation Council share a single centre: responsibility to community. Not an abstract community, but the families and Elders and young people who will sit across from the graduates we send out. My hope is that those graduates listen more than they speak, notice power and use it well, and recognise that they're part of something larger than themselves.

I was taught to move into the world: start with relationships, be accountable, and leave things stronger than you found them. I'm grateful to be doing that work here, with colleagues who are up for the hard conversations, and with students who are brave enough to ask, "Now what?" and then stay for the answer.

And yes, it's a lot of work. But it's good work. It's the kind that changes practice and, quietly, changes people. That's why I'm here.



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Embedding cultural supervision in a mainstream organisation: a First Nations-led model for systemic change

MELISSA PUERTOLLANO



This article will refer to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, culture and communities and will use the terms 'Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander' and the term 'First Nations' interchangeably to refer to the First Peoples of Australia. The term non-Indigenous will be used to refer to peoples and communities of a non-Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander cultural background.

At headspace National Youth Mental Health Foundation, a First Nations-led Cultural Supervision pilot project was delivered from December 2022 to June 2024, paving the way for the ongoing development and delivery of a reflective and relational approach to culturally informed supervision to support culturally informed mental health care across the headspace network. As a First Nations social worker, the success of this pilot represents much more than another internal initiative; it is a story of co-design, cultural governance, and deep listening in action.

This article shares key learnings from the Cultural Supervision Pilot at headspace National and offers insights for others in the mental health and allied health sectors working to embed cultural supervision and strengthen cultural integrity within their organisations.

RECLAIMING SUPERVISION THROUGH A CULTURAL LENS

Cultural supervision offers something distinct. It is not merely an extension of clinical supervision, nor is it only an educational tool. When grounded in First Nations ways of knowing, being and doing, cultural supervision becomes a relationship-led, and culturally anchored space. At its core, it provides a two-way, reflective practice opportunity where cultural knowledge is honoured, and the cultural and clinical interface of youth mental health care can better understood, strengthening practice.

Not only seeking to inform youth mental health care in terms of the culturally informed clinical practice and engagement strategies with First Nations young people and communities - cultural supervision is also a powerful tool for First Nations workforce support. Drawing on the words of Professor Roz Walker, cultural safety is "a space that is safe for people: where there is no assault, challenge, or denial of their identity, of who they are and what they need." This is the very foundation of cultural supervision for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff, who navigate cultural, community and clinical responsibilities, while grappling with colonial load in their daily work context.

A MODEL GROUNDED IN SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL WELLBEING (SEWB)

The model implemented at headspace was shaped through consultation and workshop delivery by Cox Inall Ridgeway in a process of co-design with headspace National's First Nations Wellbeing & Engagement Division. Through in-depth design drawing on clinical expertise, cultural governance and lived experience, it centres on the SEWB framework, which understands health as holistic, relational, and culturally grounded - spanning mind, body, spirit, kinship, community, culture and Country.

Key elements of the model include:

- **Culturally informed supervision** for First Nations workers, acknowledging colonial load

and providing an environment that supports cultural identity and identity.

- **Critically reflective spaces** for non-Indigenous staff to build cultural responsiveness, anti-racist practice, and accountability.
- **First Nations-led supervision relationships** that challenge power systems, promote reciprocity, and are led by cultural strength and integrity.
- **Flexible delivery methods**, including 1:1 supervision, group reflective practice, secondary and tertiary consultation.

IMPACT AND OUTCOMES

Over the delivery period, the pilot saw:

- **10 First Nations supervisors** trained and delivering sessions.
- **20 non-Indigenous supervisees** supported.
- **120+ sessions** delivered across diverse teams and programs.

Quantitative outcomes included:

- **+17% improvement** in supervisee confidence when working with First Nations young people.
- **+6% growth** in culturally informed knowledge and skills.
- **+33% increase** in cultural supervisor confidence and capability.

Qualitative feedback was even more compelling including participants' sharing:

"I didn't realise how much I didn't know until I had a safe place to unpack it."

"This has changed how I listen, reflect and support my clients."

"I now bring SEWB principles into all my team meetings."

(feedback from participants deidentified)

Beyond individual development, we saw systemic shifts—teams embedding SEWB, stronger cultural leadership, and more authentic engagement and service relationships with First Nations young people and communities.

SUSTAINING MOMENTUM: POST-PILOT EXPANSION THROUGH STRATEGIC COLLABORATION

Following the pilot's success, the cultural supervision model has expanded through strategic collaboration with headspace's Digital Mental Health Programs (DMHP). These efforts demonstrate the model's adaptability across remote and digital service settings, proving cultural supervision isn't limited to traditional environments and physical spaces.

Activities to date include:

- Providing cultural consultation in the design and delivery of First Nations-led digital mental health supports.

This next phase proves the model's relevance and scalability and supported by the soon-to-be-released First Nations Cultural Supervision Framework to meet the increasing demand across sectors for culturally informed supervision.

FOR ORGANISATIONS WANTING TO START

If your service is looking to embed cultural supervision, start with governance. Ensure strong cultural leadership and co-design from the outset. Understand cultural supervision not as an add-on to clinical practice, but as its own knowledge system—grounded in cultural integrity, respect, relationship, and reciprocity.

Importantly, invest in the First Nations workforce—not just to deliver care, but to lead, teach, and guide. Cultural supervision cannot be successful without cultural authority.

By building this relational infrastructure, organisations can shift from cultural awareness to cultural responsiveness and safety—and ultimately, to culturally informed care for all young people and communities.

This is more than supervision—it is systems change!

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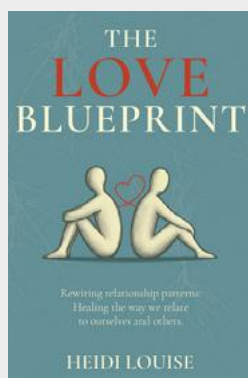
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Rewiring the way we love: understanding our inner blueprint

HEIDI LOUISE



Heidi Louise is a psychotherapist specialising in trauma, attachment, and relationship repair. Her book, *The Love Blueprint*, offers readers a compassionate roadmap for understanding and transforming the patterns that shape how we love.



ABOUT HEIDI LOUISE AND THE LOVE BLUEPRINT

Heidi Louise is a psychotherapist and couples therapist based in Brisbane, Australia. Her work is grounded in Internal Family Systems Therapy and the Gottman Method. Drawing on years of practice in trauma and relationship repair, she helps individuals and couples understand how their earliest experiences shape the way they connect, love, and heal. Her book, *The Love Blueprint: Rewiring Relationship Patterns - Healing the Way We Relate to Ourselves and Others*, explores how childhood imprints influence adult attachment and how we can begin to create new, secure connections from the inside out.

The Love Blueprint [is available now](#).

Long before we had words, we were learning about love. The rhythm of a caregiver's heartbeat, the warmth of a familiar voice, the stillness or tension in a room all became messages about what it meant to need, to trust, to reach. Our nervous systems absorbed those lessons and stored them as truths about love and safety.

For some of us, love felt like warmth that always returned. For others, it was the echo of a door closing, a silence that lasted too long, or a tenderness that came and went unpredictably. These early moments became the scaffolding of our relational world. They shaped what I call our love blueprint, the unconscious map we carry into every relationship, guiding how we reach for closeness or protect ourselves from it.

As a therapist, I see this blueprint alive in the room every day. It is not fixed. It can be understood, tended, and rewritten. Healing begins when we start to see that the ways we love, avoid, cling, or shut down are not flaws. They are intelligent adaptations that once kept us safe.

HOW THE BLUEPRINT FORMS

Our blueprint begins even before birth. A mother's wellbeing, stress, and sense of safety can shape the developing nervous system of her child. The emotional climate we are born into becomes our first language of attachment.

When care is consistent and soothing, we learn that the world is safe and that our needs will be met. When love is unpredictable, we learn to monitor for threat, to work hard for closeness, or to protect ourselves from the pain of disappointment.

John Bowlby called this attachment. His research, later expanded by Mary Ainsworth, revealed that the quality of our earliest bonds forms a template for later relationships. Some of us move through the world with a secure attachment, an inner sense that love can stay. Others carry anxious or avoidant patterns, always scanning for connection or retreating from it when it feels too close. Some of us live in both spaces, wanting love and fearing it at the same time.

For social workers, this understanding is essential. Every client arrives not just with a story, but with a nervous system shaped by the emotional availability of those who came before. When we view behaviour through the lens of attachment and protection, we can see the person behind the pattern. What looks like resistance, shutdown, or over-dependence is often an expression of the blueprint doing its best to survive.

MEETING THE INNER SYSTEM

Through Internal Family Systems Therapy, we can understand the self as an internal family made up of different parts. Each part has its own story, emotion, and purpose.

There are protectors, the parts that control, plan, or criticise to prevent pain. There are firefighters, the parts that distract, soothe, or numb to avoid distress. And there are exiles, the younger, more vulnerable parts that carry the wounds of rejection, shame, or fear.

At the centre of it all is a Self, calm, compassionate, and connected. When Self leads, healing becomes possible. We can begin to notice our parts without becoming them. We

can comfort the anxious one without judgement, reassure the avoidant one without pushing, and stay with the frightened one without retreating.

In social work practice, the Internal Family Systems lens invites a shift from problem-solving to presence. Instead of asking clients to control or eliminate unwanted behaviours, we invite them

partner from a place of connection rather than desperation.

Each of these stories reflects how early blueprints shape adult love and how awareness can begin to rewrite them. For social workers, recognising these patterns in clients, and sometimes in ourselves, helps build empathy and more effective interventions.



to understand what each part is protecting. This approach honours the intelligence of survival and opens the door to change through compassion, not coercion.

STORIES OF THE BLUEPRINT IN ACTION

Emily came to therapy confused by her tendency to withdraw whenever her partner became emotional. Through our work, she discovered a part of herself that had learned to disappear during childhood conflict. Her silence was not indifference but protection. When she began to meet that part with compassion, the need to vanish softened.

Marcus had learned as a boy that emotions made him weak. As an adult, he struggled to comfort his partner without feeling overwhelmed. Through Internal Family Systems work, he met the teenage part of himself that had survived by staying quiet. By offering that part understanding rather than criticism, he began to choose presence over retreat.

Claire carried a deep fear of abandonment. When her partner pulled away, even briefly, panic took over. With support, she learned to turn inward first, to soothe the younger part that once feared being left behind. Gradually, she could reach for her

THE BODY REMEMBERS

Our bodies hold the memory of everything we have endured. Before healing becomes cognitive, it is cellular. The body remembers what it cost to ask for help, to cry, to be seen. It remembers the tone of a caregiver's voice and the moments we were told to stop feeling.

Stephen Porges' theory of neuroception describes how the body constantly scans for cues of safety or threat. When our nervous system perceives danger, real or remembered, it shifts into protection. This can look like fight, flight, freeze, or collapse. For many clients, relational conflict triggers these states.

Social workers often encounter clients whose bodies remain on high alert long after the threat has passed. The task is not to force calm but to cultivate safety. Regulation cannot be commanded, only invited. When we meet heightened states with grounded presence and curiosity, the client's system begins to trust that it no longer has to brace for impact.

This principle applies equally to practitioners. Our ability to remain self-regulated in the presence of another's distress is one of the most powerful tools we have. It models safety and offers co-regulation,

reminding the client's nervous system that connection can be secure.

FROM PROTECTION TO PRESENCE

In both therapy and social work, we witness daily how old blueprints collide with new relationships. Two people can be arguing over a text message but, underneath, their younger selves are negotiating safety and belonging. Awareness transforms these moments. When we recognise that we are responding from an old part rather than our present self, choice becomes possible.

This is not about never being triggered. It is about noticing when we are. Awareness is the beginning of change. With practice, we can stay curious rather than reactive. We can speak for our parts instead of from them. Instead of saying "You never listen," we might say, "A part of me feels unheard and needs reassurance."

For social workers, modelling this language can be transformative. It teaches clients that emotions and reactions can be named without shame. It helps couples, families, and communities move from accusation to understanding.

CREATING SAFETY IN RELATIONSHIPS

Love, in its healthiest form, grows in the soil of safety. Safety is not the absence of conflict but the presence of repair. Relationships thrive when people can turn toward each other even after rupture.

Research by John and Julie Gottman shows that relationships rise and fall on small moments of connection, what they call bids for attention. When these bids are met with presence, trust deepens. When they are ignored or dismissed, disconnection grows.

For social work practice, this insight extends beyond couples therapy. It applies to the micro-moments that build or erode trust between practitioner and client. Every time we offer attunement through tone, pacing, or eye contact, we invite regulation. Every time we rush or withdraw, we risk reinforcing the client's existing blueprint of disconnection.

THE ROLE OF SELF IN HEALING

Internal Family Systems describes Self not as an idealised state but as a grounded energy within all of us. When Self leads, we become both witness and healer. We can hold the anxious part that fears rejection, the avoidant part that needs space, and the inner child that still longs to be chosen.

This work requires patience, humility, and compassion. For social workers, it also requires boundaries and self-care. We cannot guide others into safety if we have abandoned our own. When practitioners cultivate connection with their own Self through reflection, supervision, or mindfulness, they strengthen their capacity to hold others.

The aim is not perfection but presence. Presence allows us to meet our clients with curiosity instead of control, empathy instead of exhaustion. It is from this place that genuine healing occurs.

USING THE BLUEPRINT IN PRACTICE

Understanding the love blueprint changes how we listen. When a client describes relationship conflict, we can look beneath the content to the pattern. Is this a protective response? Which part of the system is speaking? What does safety look like for this person?

By integrating attachment theory, polyvagal awareness, and Internal Family Systems, social workers can support clients to notice their responses, regulate their nervous systems, and access their inner capacity for connection. This approach is gentle yet powerful. It reminds us that healing happens through relationship, both with others and within ourselves.

In practical terms, this may involve slowing down sessions to notice the body, naming parts as they arise, and helping clients create small moments of safety before exploring pain. It means celebrating every act of staying present, however small, as a step toward rewriting the old map.

A RETURN TO SELF AND CONNECTION

At its heart, this work is about return, to self, to compassion, to connection. When we begin to meet ourselves with the same tenderness we offer others, everything changes.

Our blueprints were formed through survival, but they can be rewritten through awareness and care. Each time we choose curiosity over criticism, breath over reaction, compassion over defence, we rewire our systems toward safety and love.

For social workers, the invitation is both professional and personal. We are not separate from this work; we live it. Every time we meet a client with presence, every time we pause before reacting, we model what secure attachment feels like.

Healing does not ask us to erase our stories, only to hold them differently. It begins with the quiet bravery of staying, with ourselves, with others, with love.

Expert Employment and Industrial Law Support for AASW Members

Hall Payne Lawyers is a leading Australian firm with over 30 years of experience in employment and industrial law. HPL is committed to social justice and now offers tailored legal support to AASW members across the not-for-profit, health, and social services sectors.

What services are available?

AASW members can access legal support across a broad range of workplace matters, including:

- Employment disputes and unfair dismissals;
- Disciplinary and performance management issues;
- Employment contracts and negotiations;
- Discrimination, harassment, and bullying;
- Breaches of the Fair Work Act or state-based industrial legislation.

What benefits are available to members of AASW?

- One free 45-minute consultation per financial year for eligible AASW members.

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AASW members wishing to access a complimentary legal consultation with HPL should contact AASW to obtain a referral.

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LEARN MORE

Lyra Taylor Social Work Impact Summit: a powerful day of connection, courage and commitment

The inaugural 2025 Lyra Taylor Social Work Impact Summit, held in Sydney on 20 November 2025, and what a remarkable day it was. Bringing together social workers, policymakers, advocates, researchers and community voices from across Australia, the summit created a vibrant space for honest conversations, shared learning and renewed commitment to ending family and domestic violence.

Named in honour of Lyra Taylor, a founding member of the AASW whose trailblazing work in policy reform and advocacy helped shape social work in Australia, the summit celebrated her legacy of perseverance, innovation and unwavering dedication to social justice. Throughout the day, delegates reflected on how her vision continues to guide contemporary practice and our collective push for safer, fairer systems.

The Summit opened with a full pre-summit workshop of 30 participants before welcoming around 140 attendees to the main program. The energy in the room was palpable from the outset, thoughtful questions, strong panels, and rich discussion set the tone for an inspiring and impactful event.

Throughout the day, ideas and insights flourished both in sessions and across social platforms under the hashtag #LyraTaylorSummit. Highlights included a thought-provoking session on responding to people who cause harm, encouraging us to view accountability as ethical engagement that prioritises victim-survivor safety. A dynamic panel on innovative responses for real-world impact further showcased the creativity and evidence-informed practice driving change in the sector. It was truly wonderful to see social workers and colleagues connecting, networking and sharing ideas, reinforcing the strength and passion within our community.

The Summit closed on a wonderful high on the last night as we came together to honour outstanding social workers, researchers and students at the National Excellence Awards. With a record number of nominations received this year, the awards showcased the extraordinary depth of talent and commitment across the profession (see winners in this issue).





SUPERVISION

SAVE THE DATE

Join us in Adelaide for the 2026 Social Work Impact Summit – a national gathering dedicated to advancing excellence in social work practice through the power of **professional supervision**.

The Summit will bring together leaders, practitioners, and educators to explore innovative models, reflective practice, and strategies that strengthen the social work workforce and improve outcomes for the communities we serve.

7 May 2026 – Adelaide



AASW Norma Parker NextGen Leadership Program

The AASW Norma Parker NextGen Leadership Program is a transformative investment in your leadership future. In a profession that urgently needs bold, values-driven leaders, this program is your launchpad. It connects you with the right people, the right knowledge and the right opportunities to highlight your impact and amplify your voice.

You will be surrounded by future leaders of social work—professionals who are driven to make change happen. The connections you build will last long after the program ends, forming a trusted network of peers who support, challenge and grow with you. This is more than a learning experience. It is a leadership community, united by purpose and committed to advancing the profession.

Led by one of the most respected facilitators in the sector and backed by the AASW's legacy of excellence, this program offers more than theory. It offers the confidence, clarity and practical tools to lead with integrity and purpose.

If you are serious about stepping into your leadership potential and doing it alongside the best, this is the opportunity you have been waiting for.

Apply now to receive your invitation to join the Melbourne 2026 cohort of the AASW Norma Parker NextGen Leadership Program, a select, supportive group of social work leaders committed to shaping the future of the profession.

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Vale: Dr Jim Poulter

Dr Jim Poulter, who passed away in 2025, was a deeply respected Aboriginal Studies tutor, historian, author, and social worker whose contributions spanned education, cultural advocacy, and professional leadership. Known for his profound connection to the Yarra Valley and his lifelong commitment to honouring Aboriginal culture, he authored more than thirty books on Aboriginal history and heritage.

His work was grounded in collaboration with Elders, ensuring that his storytelling upheld authenticity, respect, and the voices of the First Peoples of Australia. Among his many contributions, Dr Poulter played a notable role in highlighting the connection between Australian Rules football and the ancient Aboriginal game of Marngrook, helping to broaden public understanding of the cultural foundations of the sport.

Alongside his work as a writer and educator, Dr Poulter had a distinguished and enduring involvement with the Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW). A Life Member of the AASW, he served as President of the Victorian Branch from 1976-77 and contributed extensively across multiple decades. He was a member of the Victorian Branch Management Committee between 1975-78 and again from 2000-2012, holding portfolios including ethics, reconciliation, and statutory regulation. Dr Poulter also served on the Victorian Branch Ethics Committee from 2000-2012, including as Chair from 2002-2006, and was Secretary of the Ethics Group in 2010. Nationally, he was a member of the AASW's National Regulation Committee from 2006-2012.

In the later years of his professional involvement, Dr Poulter was a key advocate for securing Collective Trade Marks authority for the profession, an achievement that significantly strengthened social workers in Australia. His work helped



establish the professional and legal foundations for the AASW, representing a major contribution to the standing and recognition of the profession.

Dr Jim Poulter leaves behind a powerful legacy of cultural education, professional leadership, and unwavering advocacy. His contributions enriched understanding of Australia's First

Peoples, strengthened the social work profession, and touched the lives of countless colleagues, students, and community members.



Social worker spotlight: A.J. Williams-Tchen

A.J. Williams-Tchen is a social worker, educator and cultural mentor whose work bridges personal experience with professional purpose. With a background in nursing and a deep commitment to social justice, he has spent more than two decades advocating for culturally safe practice, particularly in health and education settings. Through consultancy, mentorship and national recognition, A.J. continues to challenge systems, elevate First Nations voices and reframe the role of social work in healing intergenerational trauma.

It wasn't just a career choice, it was personal. "My biological family had been through the welfare system for generations. I knew I wanted to create systemic change and give voice to those who are so often unheard, especially First Nations people."

His path began in nursing, but the leap to social work felt natural. Working in hospital settings, he noticed something striking: many health professionals had little cultural understanding when caring for Aboriginal patients and Torres Strait Islander patients. "I wanted to change that. I wanted to help others provide culturally safe care, not just tick a box."

It was this conviction that led him to found **Girraway Ganyi Consultancy** in 2008, named for his children, 'Girraway' (Goanna in Wiradjuri) and 'Ganyi' (Echidna in Wotjobaluk). Through the consultancy, he has created and delivered programs in Aboriginal cultural awareness, mental health first aid, mentoring for Aboriginal health professionals and students, and Reconciliation Action Planning. He's also a podcaster, his *YarninBlak* series has reached over 110 episodes, sharing honest stories of First Nations people from all walks of life. A.J. is also a Swinburne University alumni.

A pivotal moment came while working at an Aboriginal Gathering Place in Melbourne's western suburbs. He discovered that of 34 local HACC services, not one had received cultural awareness training. "That was when I realised, I couldn't wait for systems to change. I had to be part of creating the tools myself."

His impact is not only felt in training rooms and classrooms, but also in the lives of those he mentors. For nearly a decade, he's worked with schools like Scotch College, supporting First Nations students through tailored cultural mentoring. "It means so much when young people stay in touch after they graduate, when they choose to keep you in their lives. That tells me we've built something meaningful."

One really proud moment that he highlights was seeing a former mentee recognised as Young Victorian Australian of the Year. "He told me the time we spent together partly shaped who he became. That's everything."

But the work doesn't come without challenges. He names systemic disadvantage, lack of trauma-informed understanding, and reactive health services as some of the biggest hurdles. "We still see huge gaps in life expectancy, justice, and education. Social workers are in these spaces, but the trauma we're addressing is recent and ongoing."

Recognition for his efforts has been widespread. He's a 2021 AASW Aboriginal Social Worker of the Year, a 2023 Allied Health Social Worker of the Year, and a 2025 Fellow of the AASW. He's also a Victorian Australian of the Year nominee, a Humanist of the Year, and has won NAIDOC Awards for 'Community Spirit & Self Resilience' and for 'Health & Well-being' and a

multiple-time alumni award recipient from Victoria and Swinburne University.

Even with these accolades, he remains grounded in reflection and growth. "I make mistakes. I'm human. But I reflect constantly, through journaling, writing poetry, and publishing professional pieces. It keeps me honest and evolving."

His advice for social workers entering the Aboriginal health space is clear and unapologetic:

"Understand how recent our history is. Learn what cultural safety and allyship really mean. And admit you don't know everything, because that's where real learning starts."

He's vocal about the ways social work is misunderstood, particularly in Aboriginal communities. "We've got a painful legacy connected to child removal, past and present. For many, that's still all social work represents. I want to show that there's more: advocacy, mentorship, education, healing."

Looking to the future, he's hoping to undertake further study and continue pushing for change. "Social work needs to be seen as equal in the health space. We are more than crisis responders. We are change-makers, educators, and therapists."

And to anyone unsure about the scope of social work, he leaves a simple message: "Don't underestimate what we do. Social workers, and especially First Nations social workers carry both professional skill and lived experience. That combination is powerful."

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AASW National Excellence Awards 2025:

celebrating outstanding achievements in social work

A highlight of the AASW calendar each year, the AASW National Excellence Awards recognise and celebrate the individuals and initiatives that exemplify the highest standards of social work practice, leadership, advocacy, and innovation across Australia.

This year's awards were announced on November 20 at the Lyra Taylor Summit in Sydney, marking another milestone in acknowledging the tireless contributions of social workers in diverse fields and communities. The recipients embody the values of social justice, respect, integrity, and professionalism that lie at the heart of the social work profession.



Social Worker of the Year

Michael Elwan

Born in Alexandria, Egypt, Elwen's path into social work began not in a classroom, but at home. As a teenager, he became his father's carer after a stroke left him blind, and later supported his mother

through years of mental illness. Her death cemented a lifelong commitment to compassion. "Social work gave that promise a home," he reflects.

After migrating to Australia alone in his twenties, Elwen rebuilt his life from the ground up, working and studying while finding belonging through service. Over time he earned postgraduate qualifications in social work, mental health, leadership, and psychology, eventually leading large-scale community programs across Western Australia. His lived experience also revealed a critical gap: the lack of cultural

frameworks and recognition for migrant practitioners and multicultural communities.

That insight inspired Lived Experience Solutions (LEXs), the independent practice he founded to transform multicultural mental health through lived experience leadership. LEXs provides supervision, therapy, consultancy, and training that centres cultural identity and wellbeing, guided by a principle Elwen champions widely: "Systems should hold, not harm."

Now completing a PhD in mental health leadership, Elwen's work continues to influence policy and practice nationally. His impact is not only in the lives he supports directly, but in those he equips to sustain others. As he says:

"Supervision, done well, is a quiet form of social justice. It sustains those who sustain others. When we care for the people holding the trauma, the cultural translation, and the hope of entire communities, we are shaping not just individual practice, but the future of our profession. That's how change begins – by holding the holders, so that hope doesn't burn out in the hands of those who light the way."



Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander of the Year

Yaleela Torrens

"Every small step someone makes is a reminder that change is possible. Healing doesn't happen all at once, it happens through trust, cultural respect, and believing in people's

strengths even when they can't see them yet." -Yaleela Torrens

The AASW proudly recognises Yaleela Torrens as the 2025 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Worker of the Year, honouring a practitioner whose work is grounded in compassion, cultural humility, and community care.

Torrens' journey into social work began with a belief in social justice and the power of the social determinants of health to improve quality of life. She built experience in community services, mental health, and child and family work before founding Yaleela Torrens Social Worker Pty Ltd, an independent practice designed to provide accessible, culturally respectful support.

Working independently, Torrens offers tailored therapeutic services that honour the strengths of each person she walks alongside. Her practice focuses on supporting people during their most vulnerable and transformative moments, witnessing resilience grow as individuals rebuild confidence and reconnect with community.

She recognises both the challenges and the rewards of the profession, working against systemic barriers such as limited services and long waitlists, while celebrating the empowerment that comes when clients reclaim agency over their lives.

Her impact reaches beyond individual sessions, contributing to healthier, more connected communities. Through trauma-informed, culturally aware advocacy and education, Torrens continues to nurture a future where healing is community-led, grounded in listening, and built on respect.

NATIONAL EXCELLENCE AWARDS



AASW Senior Researcher of the Year Dr Zalia Powell

Dr Zalia Powell, Senior Lecturer in Social Work at the University of the Sunshine Coast, has been named the AASW's 2025 Senior Researcher of the Year. Known for her deeply

compassionate and participatory research, Dr Powell amplifies the voices of marginalised individuals through innovative qualitative methods like photovoice.

Her academic work is rooted in feminist and human rights frameworks, exploring the experiences of children, youth, and families facing complex vulnerabilities, including perinatal anxiety, domestic violence, and gender diversity.

Before moving into academia, she worked in clinical social work across health services and child protection, which shapes her strengths-based and equity-driven approach.

Dr Powell's research has had real-world impact. One of her recent studies used photovoice to explore parents' experiences of raising transgender and gender-diverse children, highlighting the emotional journeys of grief, advocacy, and unconditional love.

Her work doesn't just generate knowledge, it shapes policy, strengthens practice, and uplifts the margins.



AASW Student of the Year Lisa White

Lisa is an outstanding member of the i.help.u team whose dedication, empathy, and professionalism truly set her apart. i.help.u offers services across the whole country for people aged 18-65 with disability and

complex support needs

From her very first day as a support coordinator, she has consistently demonstrated an unwavering commitment to improving the lives of the people she supports. Her presence on the team has been marked by reliability, integrity, and a genuine desire to make a positive difference.

Lisa's transition into the role of social work student was seamless, reflecting her natural ability to connect with others, advocate effectively, and empower those around her. She brings the same level of care and attentiveness to her studies as she does to her practice, strengthening the skills and principles she already demonstrates so well.

Throughout every challenge, Lisa approaches her work with compassion and a solutions-focused mindset. She listens deeply, communicates thoughtfully, and always puts the

needs of participants and their families at the forefront. Her ability to navigate complex situations with calmness and clarity continues to be a tremendous asset to the team and to the people she supports.

The AASW extends heartfelt congratulations to all nominees and award recipients. Their work reflects the diversity, resilience, and compassion that define the social work profession in Australia. Each awardee has contributed to strengthening communities, promoting equity, and advancing the principles of social justice that underpin the AASW's mission.

As we look ahead to another year of growth and collaboration, these awards remind us of the transformative power of social work and the individuals who bring that vision to life every day.

Professional news & views



ETHICAL AI AND AUTOMATION IN SOCIAL SERVICES

Services Australia has released a new AI and Automation Strategy outlining a three-year plan to use artificial intelligence and automation in a way that is "human-centric, safe, responsible, transparent, fair, ethical and legal."

The agency says automation should support, not replace, frontline workers, but unions and advocates have called for ongoing transparency and safeguards to protect clients.

[Read more](#)

QUALITY CONCERNS AMID AUTOMATION AND CONSULTANCY ERRORS

Following revelations that a major consultancy report provided to the Australian Government contained apparent AI-generated errors, Deloitte has agreed to partially refund the Commonwealth.

The incident has renewed discussion about the reliability of automated content generation and accountability standards for firms involved in social policy and program evaluation.

[Read more](#)

SOCIAL MEDIA AND YOUTH WELLBEING UNDER SCRUTINY

As debate intensifies over the impact of social media on young people, News Corp Australia chair Michael Miller described major social platforms as "true monsters" that "torment our children."

The remarks coincide with growing calls to regulate online harm, as the Online Safety Amendment (Social Media Minimum Age) Act 2024 prepares for implementation. The legislation will introduce a ban on social media access for children under 16, due to take effect from January 2026, marking one of the most significant reforms in Australia's online safety framework.

[Read more](#)



NEW CHILDREN'S COMMISSIONER TO BEGIN ROLE AMID FOCUS ON YOUTH WELLBEING

Australia's incoming Children's Commissioner will begin her term as national attention intensifies around youth wellbeing, online safety, and children's rights.

The newly appointed Commissioner, Deb Tsorbaris, commenced her role on 17 November 2025, succeeding Anne Hollonds, who has led the office since 2020. The transition comes at a pivotal time, as governments and advocacy groups push for stronger protections for children both online and in the community.

Advocates have welcomed the appointment, noting the importance of independent oversight and advocacy for young people at a time of major policy change, including the forthcoming under-16 social media restrictions.

[Read more](#)



WORKING FROM HOME NOW A PERMANENT FEATURE

Remote and hybrid work arrangements are becoming embedded across Australian industries. A recent report found that flexible work models introduced during the pandemic have largely persisted, reshaping how professional supervision, teamwork, and service delivery are organised in community services.

[Read more](#)

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Exclusive AASW member pricing:

- Students, new graduates and retired members: \$23.10
- All other members: \$51.50



SIXT Car Rental: book direct and save

From SUVs and compacts to EVs, premium cars, trucks, vans, and utes, SIXT Australia has the right vehicle for every trip. **AASW members can get up to 20% off** the best daily rate on passenger and commercial fleet bookings.*

* Terms and conditions apply.



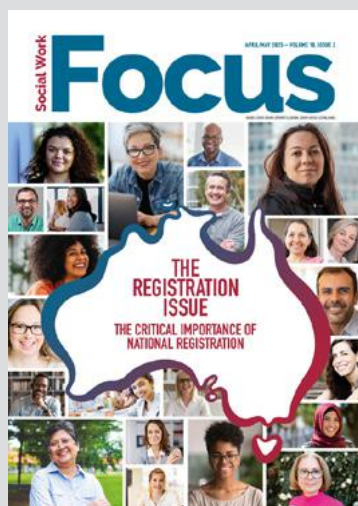
The Good Guys Commercial: member-only savings

AASW members can access exclusive commercial pricing* on thousands of products from The Good Guys range, including kitchen and laundry appliances, heating and cooling, TVs, audio, computers, tablets, gaming, phones, wearables, and more.

* Available only through The Good Guys Commercial Division. Not available in-store. Excludes agency brands such as Miele and Asko.

Log in to [MyAASW](#) and select 'My Benefits' from the left column to access your member discounts.

You can also call 1300 304 551 or email aasw@memberbenefits.com.au



Social Work Focus

ADVERTISING

Social Work Focus is the Australian Association of Social Workers' magazine. It is published quarterly (with five editions in 2025) and is accessible through aasw.asn.au

You can advertise in *Social Work Focus*.

Social Work Focus advertising rates 2025

Full Colour	Single Edition Rate	4-Edition Rate
Full page (inside covers)	\$1,320	\$3,696 (\$924 per advert)
Full page (back cover)	\$1,595	\$4,466 (\$1,116 per advert)
Full page	\$2,020	\$5,656 (\$1414 per advert)
Half page (horizontal)	\$755	\$2,114 (\$529 each)
Quarter page (horizontal)	\$440	\$1,232 (\$308 each)

Prices are inclusive of GST

Advertising Specifications (Sizes)

Full page 210 x 297mm Plus 3mm bleed	Half page horizontal 192 x 132mm Horizontal	Quarter page horizontal 192 x 74mm Horizontal

KEY:	Artwork area
	Bleed (min 3mm)
	Page trim

Note: Measurements are width x height

Supplying Artwork

AASW will only accept final art that is supplied as a print ready, high resolution PDF with minimum 3mm bleed and crop marks. Minimum of 10mm margins are recommended for full page ads. All images must be 300 dpi.

Please send your artwork to marketing@aasw.asn.au

Please check that the size of your advertisement reflects our specifications.

2026 SWF Advertising Deadline Dates

Issue	Artwork Deadline	Publication Date
Summer	25 January 2026	W/C 16 February 2026
Autumn	8 April 2026	W/C 11 May 2026
Winter	1 July 2026	W/C 17 August 2026
Spring	2 October 2026	W/C 16 November 2026

To Book Your Print Advertisement

To discuss your [advertising needs](#), email marketing@aasw.asn.au.