

ADVOCACY



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NATIONAL EXCELLENCE AWARDS



The AASW National Excellence Awards celebrate social workers, researchers and students who exemplify the best of the profession's values, achievements and accomplishments.

Winners will be announced at the Lyra Taylor Social Work Impact Summit cocktail reception, being held 20 November 2025 in Sydney. Tickets for the cocktail reception are included in all summit registrations.

Celebrate with us in-person

Get your ticket today

Categories

Social Worker
of the Year

Aboriginal or Torres Strait
Islander Social Worker of the Year

Social Work Student
of the Year

Senior Social Work
Researcher of the Year

Early Career/Practitioner
Researcher of the Year

What previous winners had to say

“There's a lot of great social work research happening without recognition – and this is one way to highlight that impact.
Dr Gerard Jefferies, Social Work Researcher of the Year 2023

“There's so much incredible work being done out there. I reckon we should shout it from the rooftops!
Assoc Prof Caroline Atkinson, Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander Social Worker of the Year 2024

“Even just the nomination can be such a beautiful way of saying to someone: I see you, I hear you, I think the world needs more of your work.
Mishma Kumar-Jonson, Social Worker of the Year 2024

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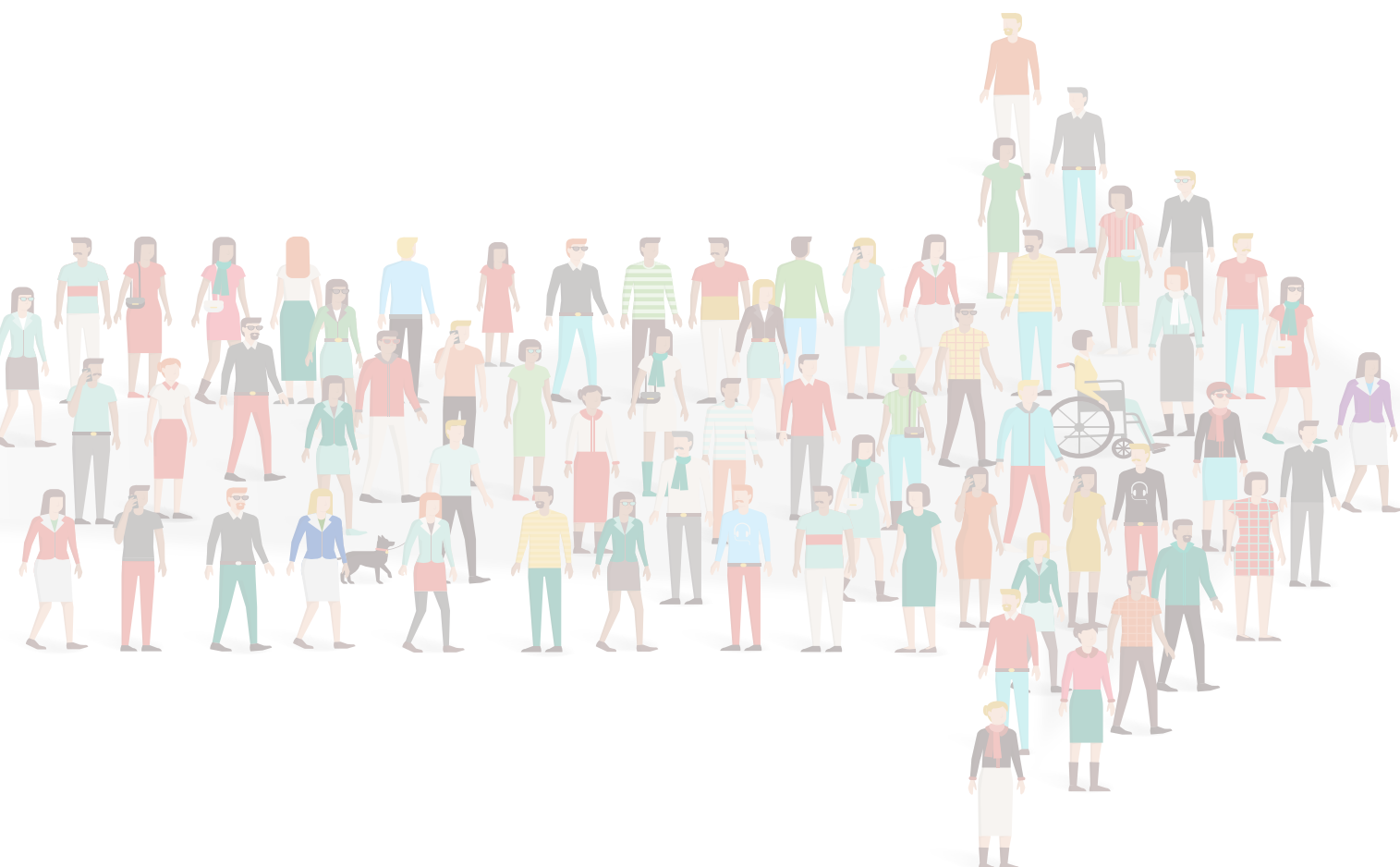
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NEXT EDITION

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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.

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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: advocacy today, building on the past, shaping our future



JULIANNE WHYTE OAM

AASW National President

Advocacy is central to social work. Every day, Australian social workers bring advocacy to life, drawing on their professional expertise and lived experience to stand beside the people and communities they serve.

For 79 years, the Australian Association of Social Workers has carried that commitment. We have advocated for our members and the profession. We have worked to shape national policy, addressed legislative issues, upheld ethical standards, and listened to our members. Every step of this work is made possible by your membership.

That deep thread of advocacy winds through our history. It is seen in the campaigns AASW has led, from pushing for child safety reforms to defending the integrity of social work qualifications. It is present in every submission we make to the government, every policy position we publish, and every time we defend the rights and dignity of those we serve.

In community centres, hospitals, schools, aged care homes, correctional settings, and crisis services, social workers are advocating every day, through your profession. You do it when you work with the community through an appeals process, when you speak up in meetings, when you push for inclusive policies or trauma-informed services. That same spirit drives the advocacy AASW leads nationally. Each member strengthens our ability to be heard in the places where decisions are made. The AASW reflects this focus in the advocacy we build on from our members.

Our recent Extraordinary General Meeting on 31 July is one example of members shaping the future of the profession. With more than 82 per cent support from voting members, we amended our Constitution to create a dedicated Torres Strait Islander Director position on the AASW Board. This change means the role previously shared will now be two distinct and culturally specific positions, one for an Aboriginal member and one for a Torres Strait Islander member.

This decision is about more than the structure of the Board. It acknowledges the importance of recognising diverse cultural identities and their histories, perspectives and leadership. It reflects a commitment to equity, respect and inclusion within the profession, while also affirming that all Directors act collectively on behalf of the organisation and its members as a whole. In this way, the decision demonstrates our values in action, ensuring that different voices inform and strengthen the organisation without assigning representational roles to individual Directors.

This outcome was made possible by the advocacy of members, Directors, Elders and leaders, including former Directors. It is the result of many conversations, ideas and commitments brought forward by members who wanted to see the profession live its values.

As we prepare to welcome our new Torres Strait Islander Director, we carry forward the same principle that guides all our work: change happens when we act together.

Thank you for the work you do each day to strengthen the profession, promote social justice and advance human rights. You are the reason our collective voice continues to grow in strength and impact.

Warm regards,

Julianne Whyte OAM
National President and
Chair of the Board

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CEO's report: strength in numbers, how members are shaping the future of social work



CINDY SMITH

Chief Executive Officer

At the AASW, our strength lies in the deep expertise and lived realities of our members. In the past year, our collective voice has delivered powerful, measurable outcomes that are shaping the future of social work in Australia.

These advocacy wins didn't happen by chance. They are the result of extensive member input, strategic partnerships, and ongoing engagement across the sector. Through national consultations, working groups, surveys, and policy submissions, your insights have sharpened our advocacy and delivered results. This is advocacy on behalf of members, often by members, driven by your frontline experience and vision for a stronger profession.

Thanks to your membership, we've been able to take action on key issues. Here's how your support is influencing change:

Recognition of Accredited Mental Health Social Workers (AMHSWs) by Medibank, ARHG and GMHBA

Accredited Mental Health Social Workers are now formally recognised by the country's largest private health insurers, giving members access to new funding pathways, greater referrals, and long-awaited parity with other mental health professionals.

Inclusion in WorkCover WA provider schedules

AMHSWs are now eligible to provide mental health treatment services under Western Australia's workers' compensation scheme, with remuneration set at levels comparable to other mental health professionals. This development strengthens the role of AMHSWs in supporting the recovery and wellbeing of injured workers.

AMHSW workforce and practice survey

Information collected from the survey will assist in compiling a comprehensive picture of AMHSWs' scope of practice across diverse settings and client needs, supporting efforts to promote, resource, and recognise the full value of their work.

Expanded access in NSW Work Development Orders (WDOs)

Social workers are now eligible to sponsor or support individuals who apply to reduce their fines through therapeutic work, extending capacity to support people in justice-related settings.

This path to change is built on consistent, behind-the-scenes work crafting detailed submissions, developing policy resources, and engaging directly with ministers, departmental leaders, and key stakeholders to ensure social work is represented where decisions are made. This advocacy reflects the expertise, values, and commitment of our members.

In this advocacy-focused edition of *Social Work Focus*, you'll find member-led insights, including an interview with Kate Incerti, who draws on 30 years of work in homelessness to show how lived experience can reshape services. We also feature Amy Swindon's exploration of "crossover kids" at the intersection of child protection and youth justice, and *Australian Social Work* journal highlights on culturally safe trauma practice and new reviews of key texts. These articles show the breadth of our profession and why your voice must remain central in policy, research, and public discourse.

Thank you for your ongoing membership. Because of you we can continue to advocate on your behalf and for our profession.

Warm regards,

Cindy Smith
Chief Executive Officer

AASW advocacy leads to GMHBA recognising AMHSWs as mental health service providers: a win for social workers in Australia

The Australian Association of Social Workers' (AASW) sustained advocacy has delivered another significant win for the profession: from 1 September 2025, GMHBA officially recognises Accredited Mental Health Social Workers (AMHSWs) as eligible mental health service providers.

This means GMHBA members will be able to claim benefits for services delivered by AMHSWs under their SmartCare Extras policy. For social workers it represents a long-fought milestone in professional recognition, one that expands opportunities for members of the community to access high-quality, social work-led mental health support.

GMHBA is a not-for-profit Australian health insurance and care company serving communities for nearly 90 years. With over 370,000 members, GMHBA provides private health insurance, dental, and eye care services, with a focus on accessible, member-first health solutions. Their recognition of AMHSWs adds strength to the momentum toward equitable access to mental health services across the insurance sector.

Accredited Mental Health Social Workers are recognised as experienced practitioners with advanced training in mental health. They provide evidence-based assessment, counselling, and therapeutic services for people experiencing complex mental health issues. AMHSWs work closely with GPs, psychiatrists, and other health professionals, bringing a holistic, person-centred approach that reflects the social and environmental factors influencing mental wellbeing.

This achievement follows on from another landmark success earlier this year. In April 2025, Medibank Private began recognising AMHSWs as mental health service providers, enabling Medibank members to claim benefits for AMHSW-led services. Together,



these outcomes mark a turning point: the profession's standing is being embedded within Australia's largest health funds.

This recognition is not only a victory for the social work profession but also for Australians seeking accessible mental health care. It:

- Strengthens the professional status of AMHSWs
- Expands client choice in mental health care providers, and
- Supports broader access to holistic, evidence-based care.

The AASW will continue to advocate across the health and insurance landscape to ensure AMHSWs are recognised for their essential role in mental health care.

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Highlights from the Australian Social Work Journal



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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

Special issue: navigating trauma with children, youth and families

The *Australian Social Work* journal's latest Special Issue explores the complex and urgent theme of Navigating Trauma with Children, Youth and Families.

This collection brings together innovative tools, critical reflections, and practice-based insights that deepen our understanding of trauma and its implications for social work practice. AASW members receive free access to this journal via MyAASW, a valuable resource for anyone working across child protection, justice, health, and community sectors.

FEATURED ARTICLES

Trauma-Informed Social Work Practice with Children, Youth, and Families (Guest Editorial)

Zalia Powell & Trevor G. Gates

This guest editorial frames the special issue, calling for a stronger translation of trauma-informed care into trauma-informed practice. It highlights the inclusion of trauma knowledge in the 2024 ASWEAS and critiques systemic and fiscal barriers to implementation. The editors emphasise the need for approaches that not only support children and families but also protect practitioners from secondary traumatisation

Now.See.Hear!: A Visual Conversation Tool for Trauma-Informed Practice with Justice-Involved Youth

Tamara Blakemore, Susan Rayment-McHugh, Karen Menzies, Elsie Randall, Louise Rak, Meaghan Katrak Harris & Shaun McCarthy

This article introduces *Now.See.Hear! (NSH!)*, a visual conversation tool co-designed with young people, practitioners, and researchers to support trauma-informed engagement in youth justice settings. Combining photo cards, conversation prompts, and a reflective conversation map, NSH! creates culturally safe, developmentally appropriate opportunities for disclosure.

Jilya: How One Indigenous Woman from the Remote Pilbara Transformed Psychology (Book Review)

Lorraine Muller reviewing Tracy Westerman's memoir

Dr Tracy Westerman, the first Aboriginal person in Australia to earn a PhD in Clinical Psychology, blends memoir and case studies to highlight culturally grounded responses to Aboriginal youth suicide. Her book challenges deficit-based narratives and underscores the need for systemic change in justice and mental health responses. Central to her work is the creation of the *Jilya scholarships*, which aim to "raise an army" of Indigenous psychologists

What Happened to You? Conversations on Trauma, Resilience, and Healing (Book Review)

Cindy Davis reviewing Oprah Winfrey & Bruce D. Perry

This widely read text translates neuroscience into practical insights for social workers. By shifting the focus from "What's wrong with you?" to "What happened to you?", the book reframes trauma through a lens of resilience and recovery.

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.

Horizon Career Centre



**Dedicated jobs website
for social workers**

Through the AASW's national jobs portal you can:

Search for jobs

Search the Horizon Career Centre job database for job vacancies across a range of human services disciplines and locations across Australia.

Subscribe to job alerts

Members can create an alert based on job category, location or job type and elect to receive notifications either weekly or daily.

Create a locum profile

The Horizon Locum Service is a free member-only searchable directory of AASW social worker members available to provide short or long-term locum or sessional services. The locum database is a resource for employers seeking social work professionals that are available on a locum basis.

Advertise social work jobs

If you require locum, contract or permanent staff, the Horizon Career Centre is the place to reach qualified social workers.

Advertise consulting rooms for hire

Advertise your spare consulting space, or find a room for hire.

Benefits of advertising on Horizon Career Centre:

- Direct exposure to your target audience for 30 days
- Flexible options, including package discounts
- Opportunity for cross-promotion in AASW communications
- Not-for-profit pricing rates

**Head to horizonemployment.com.au
to get started today.**





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.

Advocacy update

The AASW continues to actively represent the profession across a broad range of policy, workforce, and funding issues, ensuring the voice of social workers is heard in critical national and state/territory forums. From advocating for pay parity to shaping reforms in the NDIS and mental health systems, our focus remains on high-quality, person-centred care and our focus remains on empowering social workers to make a difference in Australia.

Our current advocacy priorities include:

Advancing national registration of social workers via NRAS: ongoing advocacy with government and other influential stakeholders to progress our submission for social work to be considered for inclusion into the National Registration and Accreditation Scheme (NRAS).

NDIS communications campaign: to raise the profile of social workers within the NDIS/disability sector and create awareness with participants, NDIS planners and Local Area Coordinators about the unique value social workers bring. The campaign includes case studies and a range of resources.

QLD Commission of Inquiry into Child Safety System: establishment of an AASW Advisory Group to guide AASW input into the systemic issues within the state's child safety system and recommend reforms to better protect vulnerable children.

NSW Victims Support Scheme: direct advocacy with the Department of Justice and Community Safety. AASW met with the NSW Attorney-General's office to present member feedback and highlight key issues with the scheme that provides counselling and financial assistance to victims of violent crime.

National Maternity Workforce Strategy (2026-36): providing input into government consultations on the strategy to ensure an adequate pipeline of social workers in the maternity workforce for the decade ahead.

Chronic Disease Management (CDM): participating in the review of MBS allied health items in CDM and advocating to government on the role of AMHSWs and social workers who work with people with chronic disease in primary care sector. Engaging in research to support this review.

Advancing the role of social work in primary health care: engaging with pilot programs that connect social workers in GP settings to address the social determinants of health, aligning with government strategic priorities and future funding reform.

Parkinsons resources: AASW has collaborated with members and Parkinson's Australia to develop a resource on role of social workers supporting a person living with Parkinson's.

Autism identification, assessment, and diagnosis processes: conducted member consultation and contributed to the Department of Social Services review of autism including the availability of training and professional development opportunities.

National Mental Health Workforce Sector Advisory Group: provide feedback into the implementation of the National Mental Health Workforce Strategy (2022-32) and ensure social work roles, qualifications and future workforce needs are part of the rollout of the national plan.

Targeted Foundational Supports: developing a position paper with members to champion the role of social work in psychosocial and early childhood within and outside the NDIS.

The AASW is driving reform with impact. Our advocacy is shaping the future of social work in Australia, protecting the integrity of services, elevating the profession, and ensuring communities receive the support they deserve.

This is bold, ambitious work. In just the past few months, our small but dedicated team has led national campaigns, built coalitions for change, and delivered a 229-page landmark submission, all while continuing to champion reforms that matter to you and people you work with. These efforts are not just behind the scenes; they are changing the way social work is recognised and valued across the country.

And we want you with us. Join a working group. Share your priorities. Add your voice to our policy submissions. Together, we can amplify the influence of social work and secure the recognition the profession deserves.

Your contribution is powerful, and we'll support you every step of the way, including with resources and guidance for writing and shaping submissions.

Find out how you can take part: log in to [MyAASW](#) or connect with the Social Policy and Advocacy Team at socialpolicy@asw.asn.au

-

Changing laws, shaping lives

Being a member means you are part of the collective voice influencing legislative reform.

Behind each success is the power of membership.

The more members who share expertise, respond to consultations, and stand with us, the stronger our influence becomes – and the more we can achieve.

Advancing national registration: where we stand

CINDY SMITH, CEO, AASW

The Australian Association of Social Workers continues to advocate strongly for the inclusion of social work in the National Registration and Accreditation Scheme administered by the Australian Health Practitioner Regulation Agency (Ahpra). I'd like to update you on where things stand and why this work remains vital for our profession and the public.

Our vision is clear: registration through Ahpra would bring consistency, protection, and greater accountability for social workers across the country.

FIVE REASONS WHY SOCIAL WORK SHOULD BE REGISTERED

Here are the top five reasons we believe social work must be included in the NRAS framework:

1. Consistency across professions

Ahpra currently regulates 16 other professions and has done so for over a decade. Including social work would align us with established standards and processes already in place for comparable fields.

2. Social work is an allied health profession

Social work is a recognised allied health profession. Ahpra already oversees other allied health roles, and adding social work would reflect the integral role we play in the multidisciplinary health and human services workforce.

3. Public protection

Registration through Ahpra ensures standardised mechanisms for public safety and complaint resolution. For over a decade, Ahpra has effectively protected the public in other fields including psychology. A national regulatory framework ensures consistency of approach for the public, social workers and employers.

4. Qualifications-based registration

Under a national scheme, only those with accredited social work qualifications would be eligible for registration. A standardised and accredited degree provides the public and employers reassurance that those who hold the social work title have demonstrated that they have the competencies to practice safely and hold social work values and ethics. This is a critical step in raising professional standards and public trust.

5. Title protection

Registration would legally protect the title 'social worker'. Only qualified, registered professionals would be able to use this title, ensuring clarity and trust for employers, services users, colleagues, and communities.

Every day, we hear from members who rank national registration as a top priority. You've told us of the importance of ensuring that social workers have the skills and knowledge to practise safely, and we agree.

Our advocacy is ongoing, and we will continue to push for social work to be recognised within the Ahpra framework. It's about ensuring the safety and wellbeing of the people we serve.

Together, we can secure the recognition and regulation that social work and Australia needs to protect the public.

•

Watch Cindy Smith speaking about the AASW's position in this video:



The top five reasons social workers should be registered with Ahpra: AASW CEO Cindy Smith

The top 5 reasons social workers should be registered with Ahpra.

1. Consistency
2. Allied Health
3. Protection of the public
4. The qualification
5. Title protection.



The AASW has developed a comprehensive study of the risk and regulatory requirements of the profession that includes strong evidence for the case to include social work in the National Registration and Accreditation Scheme (NRAS).

This submission has now been forwarded to state, territory and federal government ministers calling for action.

Check out the new national registration campaign hub featuring detailed information, summaries and resources.

Registration of social work in Australia

Home » Registration of social work in Australia

National registration for social workers through Ahpra

Protect the public. Title protection for the qualification. Uphold professional standards.

Social work is one of the few health professions in Australia that is not nationally registered through the Australian Health Practitioner Regulation Agency (Ahpra). Without National Registration and Accreditation Scheme (NRAS) registration, anyone can call themselves a social worker.

This regulatory failure leaves vulnerable people at risk, creates inconsistencies between jurisdictions and undermines trust.

By joining the existing NRAS already regulating 16 other professions:

1. The public will be better protected from harm
2. Professional standards will be upheld and
3. Only those who hold a social work qualification can use the title 'social worker'.

For government decision makers, our message is clear: **national registration through NRAS is overdue.** The AASW has submitted its response addressing the criteria for entry to the Scheme to the relevant Ministers, and we continue to strongly advocate for the changes required.

[Read our submission](#) [Take action](#) [It's time - Join the AASW](#)

National registration explained

National registration under the NRAS brings professions under a single, nationally consistent system of regulation. For social work, this would mean that the title 'social worker' is legally protected, and only those who meet agreed standards of education, practice, and ethics can use it.

The inclusion of social work within NRAS would create one clear standard across the country, replacing the current patchwork of regulatory systems. This Scheme has been in place since 2010 and is well established and widely regarded as a trusted system of professional regulation across Australia.

Social work national registration myths and facts

Myth
Social workers practice in many areas beyond health, which is sometimes used to argue that they would not be regulated by a health body such as the Australian Health Practitioner Regulation Agency.

Fact
In 2018, the AASW requested that social work be included as a regulated health profession under NRAS. But health ministers rejected the request, saying it would be too costly. Social work is recognised as a health profession under the Australian Health Practitioner Regulation Agency (Ahpra) and is regulated under the Australian Occupational Standard Classification (OSCs). Like psychology and occupational therapy – both regulated under NRAS – most social workers work in health and mental health.

Myth
Regulation isn't necessary because social work practice is low risk and self-regulation is already working just fine.

Fact
Social work is not a low risk profession, with practitioners working alone and unaccountable with highly vulnerable people experiencing crisis, trauma, addiction, violence, and mental health challenges. Substantive evidence reports, legal interventions, and parliamentary inquiries have documented numerous failures in social work practice. Many of these failures could be prevented through proper regulation of social work education and practice.

Transforming health professions regulation in Australia - a summary

Overview and background

The *Transforming Health Professions Regulation in Australia: Final Report* explores how Australia can modernise the way health and social care professions are regulated under the National Registration and Accreditation Scheme (NRAS).

This is the Final Report of the *Independent review of our health in the 2010s* by Sue Dwyer (the 'Complexity Review').

The review explored how the NRAS can expand to grow and meet future needs. The aim of the review is to reduce complexity, make regulation more flexible and proportionate, and maintain the central focus on protecting the public.

The Complexity Review did not assess whether or not social work should be included in the NRAS. That is the role of Health Ministers. Its recommendations align with the strong case for social work to be included in the NRAS.

The review is clear that:

1. Health Ministers can decide that it is appropriate to regulate social work through NRAS as a health and social care profession.
2. A more contemporary understanding of risk to the public is required within the NRAS. The AASW has already collected evidence of the high-risk nature of

"What! ...social workers are NOT registered...?"

A submission to government seeking the inclusion of the social work profession in the National Registration and Accreditation Scheme for health professions

August 2025

AASW advocacy and standards: equipping social work students to learn, integrate, and advocate

MARYANNE LITCHFIELD



Master of Social Work student, Charles Sturt University, and human services professional with over 10 years' experience, specialising in supporting women in the justice system.

Looking back, my years of study, filled with personal sacrifices, hurdles, and moments of professional growth, have been underpinned by the guidance these standards provide. My placement with Amovita International offered diverse opportunities: learning counselling modalities such as transactional analysis, systems theory, solution-focused interventions, and motivational interviewing; carrying a case load and delivering brief interventions; and contributing to research, program content, and community engagement resources. Yet, what tied all these experiences together was the deliberate integration of the AASW standards into every goal and reflection point.

From the outset of my social work journey, the Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW) standards and advocacy have shaped my learning, practice, and professional identity. The AASW's commitment to upholding them has not only set clear professional expectations but also empowered me, as a student, to begin developing my own voice as an advocate for social justice.

Having had little prior exposure to counselling, I was impressed to see how systems theory is used to complement other modalities in group supervision within an organisational context (Healy, 2014). Completing my Integrated Learning Framework early in placement meant aligning each university learning plan goal directly with the AASW Practice Standards (2023), Code of Ethics (2020), and Graduate Attributes (2014). This clarity allowed me to see the direct link between academic theory and ethical, accountable practice. It also gave me a framework to evidence my professional growth, particularly during

my mid-placement presentation, and to demonstrate alignment with the values and expectations of the profession.

Through this guidance, I have been encouraged to engage deeply with self-reflection, particularly around themes of privilege and oppression. It is crucial to understand how privilege can exist to oppress and to use this insight as a basis for advocacy to alleviate systemic inequalities (Avant, 2022). Understanding how my personal experiences, as both a beneficiary of privilege and a survivor of oppression, shape my professional values has strengthened my capacity to advocate for systemic change.

My belief and values system, grounded in equality, empathy, compassion, respect, reliability, and integrity, has influenced my research into factors impacting women, including the development of a women's program. In working within patriarchal systems, I have experienced the urgency of advocating for the diverse needs of women in environments where male-focused norms are prioritised (Girardi, 2024).

I am grateful that the AASW has these standards and continues to uphold them through ongoing advocacy. These standards are not just checklists; they are guides that shape competent, compassionate, and courageous practitioners.

Looking ahead, I aim to create a meaningful impact in the lives of those who experience marginalisation, using the very standards that have guided me as a student to inform and strengthen my voice as a professional, while challenging discriminatory practices and promoting social justice (Dominelli, 1996).

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AASW Social Policy and Advocacy's work: a voice for social work

The work of the Social Policy and Advocacy (SPA) team is critical in ensuring that the voice, expertise, and contribution of social workers are recognised and embedded across national and state policy agendas.

By influencing reforms in areas such as child protection, family violence, mental health, aged care, disability services, digital health, and workforce development, the SPA team helps shape systems that support both the profession and the people it serves.



The SPA team applies a structured approach to advocacy by aligning with AASW's strategic and operational goals. The team's work spans federal and state/territory policy areas and is guided by member input and environmental analysis. It includes member engagement, coalition-building, policy influence, and strategic resource allocation.

STRATEGIC APPROACH:

- Alignment with AASW's strategic priority *"Championing the profession and creating a better future"*
- Ongoing environmental scanning to identify policy windows
- Regular feedback loops through member surveys, working groups, and direct submissions to inquiries, consultations and Royal Commissions
- Strong stakeholder relationships across peak bodies, government, and civil society organisations
- Key Work Areas and Selected Activities (non-submission-based).



The following is an overview of the SPA team's policy areas and work undertaken over the last 12 months:

AGED CARE:

- Input into National Dementia Clinical Guidelines
- Representation in AHPA Aged Care Working Group, the AASW is formally participating in that group's meetings, discussions, and decision-making processes
- Collaboration with Parkinson's Australia and the Australian Stroke Coalition to define the role of social workers in multidisciplinary teams
- Made a submission to the Department of Health and Aged Care on the *New Aged Care Act Rules consultation - Release 1 - Service list*.

CHILD PROTECTION:

- Member of the National Centre Against Child Sexual Abuse Expert Reference Group to provide advice on the development of nationally consistent sexual violence and child sexual abuse resources for primary care workforces
- Provided input into Early Childhood Interventions group on best practice early intervention with children
- Submitted to Select Committee on Foundational and Disability Supports Available for Children and Young People in New South Wales and provided in-person follow up to MPs
- Submissions on the Framework for Assessing Children's Functional Strengths & Support Needs, and membership of the Reference Group to develop the Framework and supporting documents.
- Participation in DSS Foundational Supports Consultation.
- Establishment of AASW advisory group for QLD Commission of Inquiry into Child Safety System.

COMPENSABLE SCHEMES:

- Advocacy to multiple state-based insurance regulators and authorities (e.g. WorkSafe Victoria, icare NSW, Motor Accident Insurance Commission QLD) for AMHSW fee parity, recognition, and inclusion in reform consultations
- Participation in provider advisory forums and policy review discussions
- Victims of Crime - new Financial Assistance Scheme (FAS) - advocated for reform of payment process for providers and other issues impacting members and the victim/survivors they are working with
- icare Lifetime Care and Support Scheme (NSW). Provided member input into the review of the Lifetime Care Social Supports Policy
- Victims Support Scheme NSW - provided an additional submission to the Review of the Victims Rights and Support Act 2013. Met with the Attorney-General's office and established relationships with the Department of Communities and Justice to discuss issues raised by members.

DIGITAL HEALTH:

- Representation in AHPA Digital Health Working Group and Services Australia Healthcare Provider Identifier (HPI-I) project
- Contributions to national projects on Fast Healthcare Interoperability Resources (FHIR) data standards and digital service type mapping
- Recommendations to improve My Health Record data inclusivity for allied health
- Submission to the National Allied Health Digital Uplift Plan
- Finalised service type mapping to ensure social work services are accurately represented in the Health Direct directory

FAMILY AND DOMESTIC VIOLENCE:

- Input into the WA Family and Domestic Violence Workforce Capability Framework
- Continuing advocacy for standards and accountability for Family Report Writers
- Submission to SA Royal Commission into Domestic, Family and Sexual Violence.

HUMAN RIGHTS:

- Participation in policy discussion on voluntary assisted dying via the Go Gentle campaign
- Objected to proposed amendments to state-based laws that facilitate the imprisonment of children
- Submission to the Review of Queensland's Human Rights Charter
- Submission to Tasmania government on Ending Bullying in Tasmanian schools.

MENTAL HEALTH:

- Work with MHA, AIHW and state agencies to advocate for recognition of the full scope of social work practice, recognition in EBA negotiations, and data collection frameworks
- Input to the Mental Health Curriculum Framework and Better Access reform group



- Ongoing feedback to DVA and stakeholders on AMHSW service inclusion and recognition
- Supported proposal to expand and strengthen mental health services for young people
- Collaborative advocacy with MHA and AHPA to advocate for quality and quantity of proposed foundational supports
- Submission to the Productivity Commission's interim report on the Review of the Mental Health and Suicide Prevention Agreement
- Mental health system reform by contributing to government forums and developing submissions on priorities for children, young people, people with a psychosocial disability, and stepped models of care
- Submissions into the National Early Intervention Service - Draft Service Delivery Model.

NDIS:

- Coordination of member working group
- Evidence building through literature reviews and data collection
- Publications and tools including the "Social Workers and the NDIS" flyer
- Regular dialogue with NDIA on operational guidance, navigator roles, registration models, and pay parity
- Promoted AASW members' expertise to consultations to revise Guidelines for Diagnosing Autism.

PRIMARY CARE:

- Participation in PHN-led pilot projects and advisory groups
- Ongoing engagement and relationship building to support Social Work in GP Practice pilots
- Review of MBS allied health chronic disease management services.

PRIVATE HEALTH INSURANCE:

- Advocacy to private health insurers to recognise and include AMHSWs as providers of mental health services for members with extra's cover. Recognition achieved for providers Medibank Private, ARHG and GMHBA.

RECONCILIATION:

- Engagement with SNAICC research on Aboriginal Child Placement Principle
- Submission objecting to Making Queensland Safer Bill.

REGISTRATION:

- Monitoring of South Australia's Social Work Registration Scheme
- Development and delivery of a national member webinar on registration
- Stakeholder engagement across all jurisdictions including coronial inquests analysis and advocacy to Health Ministers.
- Lodged evidence-based submission with Health Ministers to include social work in NRAS.

WORKFORCE:

- Advocacy for pay parity and classification equity in education and school sectors
- Representation in consultations regarding Work Development Orders and competency frameworks
- Representation on the National Mental Health Workforce Sector Advisory Group.

This advocacy ensures that social workers are not only included in emerging models of care and service delivery, but also valued through appropriate recognition, regulation, remuneration, and role clarity. It also contributes to building an environment where social workers can practise to their full scope and have greater capacity to deliver high-quality, person-centred support across complex systems.

At its core, this work strengthens the profession's standing, protects its integrity, and demonstrates its dedication to achieving human rights and social justice for vulnerable and marginalised people.

-



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FEATURE ARTICLES

Advocacy for lived experience: a conversation with Kate Incerti

ANGELA SCARFE

Drawing on Kate's work with people experiencing homelessness in Melbourne, this conversation explores the realities of stigma, power imbalances, and tokenistic engagement, and calls for genuine inclusion and co-design - highlighting the importance of lived experience in the design and delivery of social services.



Angela Scarfe is a respected and long-standing AASW member and staff member of the AASW team, recognised for her deep commitment to social work values and ethical practice. With a warm and collaborative approach, Angela has consistently demonstrated leadership through compassion, integrity, and support for both the community and colleagues. Her contributions have had a lasting impact across the organisation, where she is known not only as a dedicated professional, but also as a generous mentor and valued team member. Angela retired from AASW in September 2025 and we're looking back on the impact she made. This interview is taken from her excellent podcast and was previously published as part of that series.



Kate Incerti is the Team Leader for Housing and Homelessness Services at the City of Port Phillip in Melbourne. With a background in social work and community services, she leads initiatives aimed at supporting people experiencing homelessness across the municipality.

Grounded in insight and compassion, this dialogue invites reflection on how the social work profession can listen more deeply and act more justly. Kate has now retired from this role, but this interview was recorded when she was still active in this space.

AS:

Kate, in your work supporting people who've experienced homelessness in Melbourne, what themes come up most often when they talk about their interactions with services?

KI:

Often, people describe feeling unheard. They sense that decisions are made about them, rather than with them. Even services with the best intentions can feel impersonal, people say, "I wasn't asked what I needed. I was told." When someone feels judged from the start, trust breaks down before it can even form.

AS:

That resonates with the powerful phrase we've heard: "nothing about us without us." What does that mean in practice?

KI:

It means more than consultation—it means genuine partnership. In a recent storytelling project, many participants shared experiences where their voices

had been sidelined. Far from seeking pity, they demanded respect, dignity, and that their insights be valued as expertise. They framed their lived experience as a resource, not a deficit.

AS:

How do power dynamics surface in service settings?

KI:

At every level. Small things, a judgmental form, a dismissive tone, can signal that someone is "less than." Many have shared that unless you've lived poverty or housing insecurity, you simply don't understand. That's a challenge for us as professionals: to check our own assumptions and listen with humility.

AS:

What does real inclusion of lived experience look like in social services?

KI:

It starts from the very beginning, not after a program is designed. Co-design means people are involved in governance, staffing, evaluation, not just giving feedback at the end. One participant said, "We don't see ourselves in the system. That's why it doesn't work for us." Representation matters across all levels of organisations.

AS:

Stigma seems to be a recurring theme. Can you reflect on that?

KI:

Absolutely. Many people feel labelled or shamed, especially if they've experienced mental health challenges, substance use, or contact with the justice system. The system often sees them as "risky" or "broken," not as survivors of structural inequality. For Aboriginal, migrant, and LGBTQIA+ communities, there's an additional layer when identity is ignored—cultural safety is not optional; it's foundational.

AS:

Was there anything from that storytelling project that stayed with you most?

KI:

One person said, "For years I've been told what's wrong with me. No one asked what's strong about me." That really stayed with me. So much of lived experience is about strength, they didn't just survive; they adapted and persisted. And when people shared in a safe space and were truly listened to, it was healing. That was a reminder of why this work matters.

AS:

What final message would you offer to social workers?

KI:

Learn to listen differently. Create space and then be willing to let what you hear change your practice. Power needs to be shared. Not lost. But redistributed so that services actually work, relationships become equitable, and the system begins to feel humane.

Learn more about the City of Port Phillip support services [here](#)

Get involved in AASW advocacy

We're calling on all AASW members to help drive positive change in our profession

[Log in to MyAASW](#) to lend your voice and support these current campaigns. There are many ways to get involved.

Current opportunities for members to provide input into consultations:

- **Registration of social work in Australia** – help us secure national statutory registration for social workers through the National Registration and Accreditation Scheme
- **QLD Commission of Inquiry into Child Safety System** – join the working group and provide your expertise to the key issues being raised in this Inquiry
- **National Disability Insurance Scheme** – provide your input into major changes taking place in the NDIS and participate in the working group
- **Victoria's Victims of Crime Financial Assistance Scheme Advisory Group** – contribute your expertise to strengthen victim support
- **Early Childhood Supports Working Group** – shape our advocacy for better early childhood services
- **Leaving Violence Program** – provide input about how this program is operating both for participants and social work providers
- **Psychosocial supports reform** – provide your feedback on psychosocial policy reforms – including unmet need outside the NDIS, foundational support, and NDIS changes—to strengthen our advocacy to government
- **Social workers in GP settings** – help inform our advocacy on the value of social work practice in primary healthcare, and strengthen the professional identity of social work, to ultimately enhance patient outcomes by addressing the social determinants of health
- **Digital health champions** – help shape upcoming Australian Digital Health Agency initiatives and ensure the social work profession is represented in policy reform
- **Australian Stroke Coalition** – provide input about social work in stroke care across hospitals, primary care, NDIS, aged care or rehabilitation to strengthen our advocacy and representation in this field

Your perspective matters. Together we can make a real difference. [Log in to MyAASW](#) today and get started.

Your voice in action: member insights driving change

Every submission we make is more than a policy document; it's a reflection of your experiences, concerns, and professional insight. This section spotlights how AASW members continue to shape the social policy landscape through active engagement, expert input, and shared values.

From advisory forums to targeted surveys, your contributions guide the work of our Social Policy and Advocacy (SPA) team, ensuring our advocacy isn't just about the profession but powered by it. The recent submissions summarised below are grounded in member-led feedback and developed through collaborative processes that prioritise your voice in every stage of policy development.

SOCIAL WORK LEADERSHIP VITAL TO EFFECTIVE SUICIDE PREVENTION STRATEGY ARGUES AASW

The submission **AASW Submission to the National Suicide Prevention Strategy Consultation** was prepared by the AASW Social Policy and Advocacy team for the National Suicide Prevention Office's draft strategy on reducing suicide. The strategy sought national input to guide a coordinated response that reduces suicide rates and addresses the drivers of distress.

The AASW strongly endorses the human rights framework of the strategy but stresses that effective prevention requires embedding social work practice at its centre. Social workers are often the ones who build trusted relationships with people in crisis, working across mental health, housing, justice, child protection, and aged care. They bring skills in risk assessment, trauma-informed care, and systems navigation that are indispensable for suicide prevention.

In our submission, the AASW emphasised that good physical and mental health are fundamental rights and advocated for stronger alignment between the National Suicide Prevention Strategy and Australia's Primary Health Care 10 Year Plan to leverage existing reforms, particularly



in allied health. We also highlighted the critical role of Accredited Mental Health Social Workers in delivering accessible mental health care through Better Access, raising member concerns about low MBS rebates, inequities compared to other professions, and the financial pressures this creates. To address these issues, we strongly recommended MBS rebate equity across mental health professionals and reforms to ensure affordability, sustainability, and timely access to care.

Social workers understand the complex interplay of personal history, environment, and systemic barriers, and are uniquely positioned to spot these risks early and intervene

appropriately. The AASW notes that suicide prevention must account for intersecting vulnerabilities such as racism, poverty, homelessness, family violence and disability, all of which shape a person's level of distress and access to support.

The AASW also highlighted that social workers regularly practise in high-risk environments where poor practice can have serious consequences. We therefore advocated for the national registration of social workers under the National Registration and Accreditation Scheme (NRAS) to ensure consistent standards, accountability, and public safety.

The submission also points to the importance of continuity and follow-up, highlighting that many people who die by suicide have had fragmented or short-lived contact with services. Social workers already deliver aftercare, safety planning and long-term advocacy, yet their roles are often under-recognised or underfunded. The AASW calls for proper investment in social work-led aftercare models, greater integration of social work into suicide prevention programs, and reforms that guarantee culturally safe and trauma-informed practice across the system.

UNLOCKING THE POTENTIAL OF SOCIAL WORK IN PRIMARY HEALTH REQUIRES FULL SCOPE PRACTICE SAYS AASW

The submission **Unleashing the Potential of Social Work in Primary Health** was provided by the AASW Social Policy and Advocacy team to the Commonwealth Government's Scope of Practice Review. The review sought input on how to ensure health professionals can work to their full scope in primary health care.

The AASW's submission highlights that social workers are uniquely placed to deliver holistic, person-centred care that addresses both health needs and social determinants. Social workers use bio-psycho-social assessments that consider income, housing, discrimination and trauma alongside physical health. This enables them to build care plans that are comprehensive, strengths-based and grounded in lived experience.

The submission expands on how existing commissioning models often limit social workers to narrow roles, such as delivering discrete psychological strategies under Medicare's Better Access initiative, while ignoring the wider context of people's lives. AASW argues that enabling social workers to operate at full scope would ensure that interventions do not stop at

symptom management but also address housing, financial stress, and family dynamics that affect recovery. Evidence from pilots embedding social workers in GP clinics shows benefits such as reduced missed appointments, more coordinated referrals, and better outcomes for people with chronic and complex needs.

A central barrier identified is the lack of national registration of social work under the Australian Health Practitioner Regulation Agency (Ahpra). Without registration, social workers are often excluded from programs that would benefit from their skills, while less qualified staff are sometimes employed instead. The submission outlines how registration would not only improve public safety and professional accountability but also allow governments and commissioners to properly recognise the scope of social work in funding and workforce planning. By addressing these systemic issues, the AASW argues, Australia can unlock the full contribution of social workers in primary health and improve outcomes across the system.

CULTURAL SAFETY AND SELF-DETERMINATION MUST UNDERPIN FAMILY SAFETY REFORMS AASW TELLS SNAICC

The submission **Our Ways - Strong Ways - Our Voices** was prepared by the AASW Social Policy and Advocacy team for SNAICC's national consultation on the Family Safety Plan. The consultation sought input on how to design policies and programs to strengthen Aboriginal and Torres Strait islander families, ensuring all family members live free from violence. The SPA team consulted with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander members, and members working in Family, domestic and sexual violence to inform our submission.

The AASW submission begins by acknowledging the harm caused by past actions of non-Indigenous social workers and commits to supporting genuine self-determination for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. It affirms that family safety initiatives must be developed in partnership between communities, government and the community sector; and grounded in cultural authority.

The submission elaborates on key priorities identified by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander members, including the urgent need for adequate, affordable housing and safe places for women and children. It stresses that many existing government responses are transactional and short-term. When pilot programs are continually allowed to lapse and

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The wins you see, whether pay parity, inclusion in national schemes, or legislative reform, are only the tip of the iceberg. Beneath them is the sustained, collective advocacy powered by your membership. Every submission to government, every policy paper, every meeting with ministers and departmental leaders is made possible because members stand with us.

This behind-the-scenes work doesn't make headlines, but it drives long-term change. It's proof that when our membership is strong, our voice is stronger - and that strength is what will carry us to the next milestone: national registration.

existing programs are subjected to competitive tendering processes, continuity and trust are undermined. By contrast, investment in locally designed, place-based solutions led by Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations are more effective because they are grounded in relationships, community strengths and cultural knowledge.

AASW members also raised concerns about the intersection of family violence with child protection and justice systems. Women can be reluctant to disclose violence for fear of child removal, while young men in detention frequently have untreated trauma and cognitive or neurological conditions linked to family violence. The submission calls for culturally congruent responses that keep families together safely, reform child protection practices, and provide therapeutic rather than punitive responses in justice systems. It also highlights the importance of embedding Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander social workers in mainstream services to provide culturally safe contact for families at the first point of engagement.

The AASW concludes that ending harm and creating safety depends on embedding self-determination, investing in communities for the long-term, and ensuring culturally safe practice. It points out that social workers can play a key role in this important work.

SOCIAL WORK EXPERTISE CENTRAL TO STRENGTHENING CHRONIC DISEASE MANAGEMENT PROGRAMS SAYS AASW

The submission **AASW Submission to the Department of Health and Aged Care Consultation on Private Health Insurance Chronic Disease Management Programs** was developed by the AASW Social Policy and Advocacy team in response to the Department's consultation on how private health insurers can improve support for chronic illness. The consultation aimed to explore reforms that ensure more effective and equitable management of chronic conditions through prevention and care planning.

In its response, the AASW makes clear that social workers are critical to

chronic disease management because of their ability to see beyond clinical indicators and address the social and structural conditions that shape health outcomes. From poverty and housing insecurity to cultural safety and trauma histories, social workers bring a holistic lens that ensures care planning is grounded in real lives rather than abstract service models.

The submission highlights specific gaps in the current system, such as the underutilisation of Accredited Mental Health Social Workers (AMHSWs) despite their recognition under Medicare and other schemes. The AASW stresses that many professionals are unaware that AMHSWs are approved providers, largely because they are labelled generically as "mental health workers." This lack of visibility has contributed to chronic disease programs being inconsistently implemented and poorly integrated with psychosocial care. The submission also notes concerns about the proliferation of services delivered by unqualified staff, which risks undermining safety and outcomes.

To address these issues, the AASW proposes a comprehensive review of current programs, greater recognition of AMHSWs and Accredited Social Workers, and the co-design of new models that embed social work practice. It highlights evidence from pilots such as social prescribing initiatives and GP-based social work programs, which have shown improvements in patient engagement, reduced hospitalisations, and stronger links with community supports. By recognising social work expertise in care coordination and psychosocial support, the submission argues, CDMPs can become a meaningful part of Australia's chronic disease response rather than a fragmented add-on.





SOCIAL WORK VALUES ESSENTIAL TO DIGITAL HEALTH UPLIFT ARGUES AASW

The submission **AASW Response to the National Allied Health Digital Uplift Plan Consultation** was prepared by the AASW Social Policy and Advocacy team for the Department of Health, Disability and Ageing in partnership with the Australian Digital Health Agency and Allied Health Professions Australia. The consultation sought sector input on how to improve the digital maturity and capability of allied health professions, ensuring they are better connected, better supported, and able to participate fully in the national digital health strategy.

The AASW stresses that social workers must be explicitly included in digital health reforms. Social workers

provide frontline support across health, disability, aged care, family violence and mental health, yet digital initiatives often overlook their roles because of the lack of statutory registration. The submission makes clear that uplifting the digital capability of social workers is not a technical exercise, but a question of equity, safety and professional recognition. Social work's rights-based and person-in-environment framework must inform the design of digital tools if they are to serve vulnerable people effectively.

The submission details how digital health tools can enhance social work practice when they align with professional values. For example, shared care planning platforms can strengthen continuity of care, interoperable clinical information systems can protect dignity and confidentiality, and secure messaging

can support trauma-informed case coordination. But the AASW warns that poorly designed tools, or tools imposed without consultation, risk undermining trust, fragmenting care, and increasing digital exclusion, particularly for people in rural and remote communities.

The AASW also raises specific concerns about access and affordability. Many social workers work in small practices, non-profits, or as sole traders, without the IT infrastructure of large providers. The submission calls for targeted funding to support private practitioners and community organisations with cybersecurity training, software subsidies, and access to secure digital platforms. It notes that digital inequity is already evident: fewer than two-thirds of social workers use interoperable clinical systems, and uptake of healthcare provider identifiers remains below the allied health average. Without structural support, digital uplift risks reinforcing existing gaps rather than closing them.

The submission proposes a suite of solutions, including government-funded training tailored to social work practice, financial incentives for secure use of My Health Record, and the inclusion of social workers in the codesign of digital infrastructure from the outset. It also recommends embedding social work expertise in national pilots and reforms such as Health Connect Australia and suicide prevention aftercare models, where digital coordination can play a life-saving role.

The AASW concludes that digital health cannot be treated as a neutral layer applied across professions. Instead, it must be shaped by the values and ethics of those using it. For social workers, this means trauma-informed, culturally safe, person-centred digital practice that upholds dignity and rights. With appropriate investment and recognition, the digital uplift plan can ensure that social workers are not only included but positioned as leaders in building a safe, inclusive and connected health system.

The benefits of critical reflection to progress climate action:

a qualitative study by Johanna Donkers and Kim Robinson (extract)

ABSTRACT

In this article, the authors address a critical tension between the urgent need for climate action and the challenges of embedding eco-social work across the profession. Qualitative findings from a PhD study conducted in Victoria, Australia, highlight six participants' engagement with climate change. The research methodology drew from critical reflection and critical ethnography. Identified themes that reinforced the construct of eco-social work as a distinct field of practice are summarised. Subsequently, through the use of Fook's critical reflection framework (2023), barriers to climate engagement are explored in partnership with participants. An example of the critical reflection process integrated into one interview series showcases collaborative strategies to overcome key barriers faced. In conclusion, we emphasised the emancipatory potential of Fook's frameworks to support climate action within mainstream social work.

Climate change presents an existential threat to humanity. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) warned that human-induced warming has reached unprecedented levels (IPCC, 2023). Addressing this crisis demands rapid, large-scale societal, economic, and political transitions (Gergis, 2024; IPCC, 2023). According to the 2024 United Nations Environment Program (UNEP) Emissions Gap Report, global emissions must be reduced by 42% by 2030 to limit warming to 1.5°C, yet current commitments have the potential to reach global warming of up to 2.6–3.1°C by the end of the century (UNEP, 2024). This crisis intensifies social injustices, necessitating a reimagining of social work theory and practice (Boetto, 2019; Dominelli, 2023;

Ife, 2021). Considering the degree of risk predicted, Australian social work needs to integrate a climate response across the profession (Boetto, 2017, 2019; Dominelli, 2023; Ife, 2021; Panagiotaros et al., 2022). Further research is required to understand the complexity of incorporating eco-social work into mainstream practice, engaging a broader cohort of practitioners into climate discussions (Bexell et al., 2018; Ramsay & Boddy, 2017). The current study provided an important response. It explores the experiences of a small sample of Australian practitioners' engagement with advanced climate change. While the data collection was completed between 2017 and 2020, the results remain relevant to the contemporary environment in which eco-social work remains marginalised (Nöjd et al., 2025).

ECO-SOCIAL WORK: THE NEED FOR CRITICAL REFLECTION

A range of frameworks engage with the existential climate risk faced, including eco-social work, green social work, deep ecological and environmental social work (Narhi & Matthies, 2016). In this article, the terminology of eco-social work recognises the need to integrate climate responses into frontline practice settings, alongside social policy, community, and international development (Boetto, 2017, 2019; Narhi & Matthies, 2016). Relevant literature calls for a critique to the anthropocentrism of contemporary practice, necessitating a transformative shift towards eco-centrism (Narhi & Matthies, 2016; Ramsay & Boddy, 2017). The centralisation of Indigenous knowledges and de-colonising frameworks is fundamental (Gray & Coates, 2016; Green, 2024; Nesmith et al., 2021). The critique of Western

constructs of social work recognises the continued dominance of "white western underpinnings" within the Australian profession (Goldingay et al., 2024, p. 33).

Critical reflection has a long history in social work and increasingly in eco-social work (Ramsay & Boddy, 2017). While structural climate action is imperative, strategies are required to challenge barriers to climate action faced at the personal, organisational, and national levels of practice (Nöjd et al., 2025). Climate action requires a deep questioning of the fundamental systems and normative behaviour that shape contemporary Western life and mainstream social work practices (Gray & Coates, 2016; Kamali & Jonsson, 2019). This includes interrogating the profession's engagement with hegemonic discourses that perpetuate climate change and limit its ability to adequately respond (Kamali & Jonsson, 2019; Narhi & Matthies, 2018). Additionally, a key aspect of climate change is the widespread tendency, especially among white Western communities, to look away from the severity of the crisis (Zaliwska & Boler, 2019). Within this (in)attention is a comfort zone, which holds significant investment, whether realised or not (Norgaard, 2012; Zaliwska & Boler, 2019). Without critical reflection, there remains limited capacity to explore the politics of this experience (Zaliwska & Boler, 2019).

You can access this study 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.



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Advocating for connection, complexity and care:

Laura Engel's reflective social work practice



Laura Engel is a social worker, psychotherapist, and educator whose career is defined by curiosity, connection, and the courage to tend to life's hard places. She currently works at The Esus Centre, where she leads integrative therapy programs, especially a day-patient treatment for binge eating disorder, drawing on her experience in schema and somatic therapies, eco-social work, and trauma-informed practice.

Laura Engel's career exemplifies the values at the heart of the Australian Association of Social Workers: respect for persons, social justice, and professional integrity. With a background in mental health social work and psychotherapy, Laura advocates for a profession that honours the complexity of people's lives and the systems they navigate.

Her practice spans hospital settings, private therapy, group work, academia, and outdoor health. She has contributed to the development of The Esus Centre, an integrative eating disorder clinic in Western Australia, where she co-designed a day program for people experiencing binge eating disorder. Laura views this as an act of advocacy in itself, challenging the systemic neglect of this widely misunderstood condition.

"Many of the people I work with have struggled to be seen or understood within existing systems," she says. "I wanted to create a space where their experiences are met with dignity and care."

Laura's work reflects a commitment to expanding the reach of social work beyond traditional models. Her grief-informed walking therapy project, Trail Tracing, developed in partnership with The Grief Centre of WA, offers a nature-based approach to bereavement support. Rooted in eco-social work principles and grounded in cultural respect, the program is a powerful example of how therapeutic innovation can emerge from personal and collective healing.

Whether supporting people, supervising students, or writing about social work's evolving role in mental health, Laura advocates for broader recognition of the profession's capacity to deliver trauma-informed, relational, and evidence-based care.

"I hope to expand understandings of social work beyond service coordination or case management," she says. "We are relational, reflective, and deeply skilled in psychological care. That should be visible."

Her ongoing dedication to supervision, interdisciplinary collaboration and reflective practice demonstrates a lived commitment to AASW's ethical framework. In a field often constrained by crisis responses and limited funding, Laura's work is a reminder that advocacy is not only political—it is also deeply personal, relational and embedded in everyday practice.





Safeguarding the integrity of social work in education

AASW plays an important role in safeguarding the standards that protect our profession and the communities we serve.

Accreditation is more than a process. It's how we preserve the integrity of the degree that every social worker relies on.

Accreditation enables eligible social workers to distinguish themselves to clients, employers and the general public as professionals with legitimate credentials - it provides a mark of quality for people who access social work services.

Because accreditation is independent and profession-led, it keeps the quality of social work education in the hands of social workers. That independence is critical - and must be preserved. Members consistently tell us they value knowing that their colleagues have met the same rigorous benchmark.

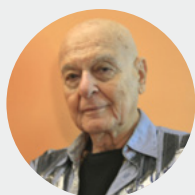
Find out more



The benefits of Gestalt Art Therapy in the social work context

YARO STARAK (2025)

ABSTRACT



Gestalt Art Therapy provides a powerful and creative lens through which social workers can support individuals and communities. It merges artistic expression with therapeutic processes, allowing clients to explore trauma, build resilience, and foster personal growth. Rooted in Gestalt principles of awareness, presence, and self-support, this approach helps clients access their inner worlds through creative mediums. This article explores the core themes and practical applications of Gestalt Art Therapy, aiming to engage readers and share valuable insights for the social work field in Australia.

INTRODUCTION: EXPLORING NEW THERAPEUTIC FRONTIERS

Gestalt Art Therapy introduces a dynamic approach to healing that transcends traditional talk therapy. It emphasises being present in the moment and encourages self-exploration through the creative process. Art serves as a powerful vehicle for expressing unspoken emotions, unlocking deep insights, and promoting holistic healing. For social workers in Australia, this approach opens new pathways for addressing mental health challenges, family conflict, and social disconnection.

THE SYNERGY BETWEEN SOCIAL WORK AND GESTALT ART THERAPY

Gestalt Art Therapy and social work share the commitment to client empowerment and holistic care. Creative expression enhances emotional exploration, particularly for those dealing with trauma or grief. In practice, this approach strengthens the therapeutic alliance by offering clients alternative ways to reflect, express, and resolve their experiences. It deepens the impact of social work interventions, helping clients feel more seen, connected and supported.

THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS: BLENDING ART WITH AWARENESS

Gestalt Art Therapy merges psychological theory with artistic practice. Influenced by pioneers like Fritz and Laura Perls, and creative

figures such as Violet Oaklander and Janie Rhyne, this method encourages clients to embrace their full experience. The Gestalt Cycle of Experience—awareness, contact, action, and withdrawal—guides therapy by helping clients address unresolved emotions through creation and reflection.

CREATIVE EXPRESSION AS A HEALING TOOL

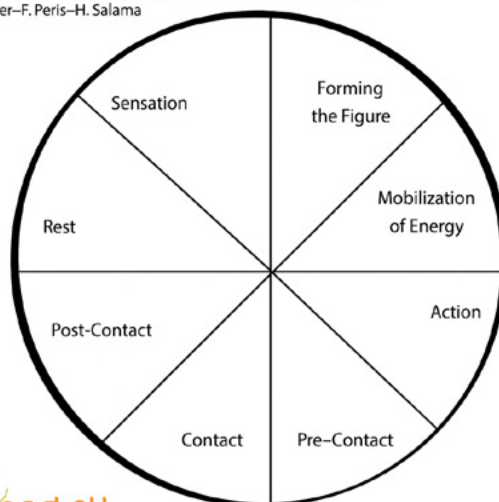
Around the world, studies affirm the healing potential of the arts. In Australia, organisations like ANZACATA highlight how creative therapies reduce anxiety and support emotional growth. Art bypasses the need for words, offering a safe space to explore

identity, manage trauma, and restore self-confidence. It helps individuals find their voice and fosters a sense of agency in their healing journey.

GESTALT VALUES THAT ECHO SOCIAL WORK PRINCIPLES

Gestalt Art Therapy promotes awareness, presence, and self-support—values that strongly align with social work. These principles support clients in taking ownership of their experiences and decisions. Gestalt Art Therapy adds creative depth to these values, offering new routes for emotional regulation, relationship repair, and resilience building.

Gestalt Cycle of Experience and Interruptions with Contact
J. Zinker—F. Perls—H. Salama



gestalt
ART THERAPY
CENTRE

www.arttherapygestalt.com

Fig. 1: Cycle of the experience Gestalt Therapy.

RESPECTING CULTURAL WISDOM: WORKING WITH INDIGENOUS COMMUNITIES

Gestalt Art Therapy respects and integrates cultural expression, making it particularly relevant when working with Indigenous Australians. Art aligns with storytelling, symbolism, and land-based identity, offering a culturally respectful path to healing. It fosters connection, breaks down communication barriers, and honours the traditions of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples while addressing intergenerational trauma.

THEME IN PRACTICE: CLIENT CASE STUDY

Note: The following case study is a fictional example created to illustrate common themes and processes encountered in practice. It is not based on a real client, and no identifying information has been used. As such, no permission to publish was required.

John, a 50-year-old man, sought support to manage his anger and reconnect with his family. Through art, he visualised his emotional state and gradually recognised its impact

on his relationships. Using tools like a self-portrait - face expressions and the "feelings thermometer," he learned to regulate his responses and express his needs constructively.

Family art-making sessions fostered trust and connection. His progress was not only visible in his artwork but also reflected in improved communication and self-esteem.

CREATIVE TECHNIQUES THAT EMPOWER CLIENTS

- Empty Chair Technique: Facilitates dialogue with unresolved emotions or relationships.
- Sandplay Therapy: Enables symbolic expression through miniature figures in a sand tray.
- Visual Art Exercises: Supports emotional regulation and personal insight through accessible activities like drawing and collage.

These techniques offer clients non-verbal paths to healing and insight, supporting diverse needs within social work settings.

TOOL OF CONNECTION: ART IN GROUP SETTINGS

Gestalt Art Therapy promotes group cohesion by using art as a shared language. In community and family settings, collaborative projects foster dialogue, empathy, and emotional safety. Shared murals or family trees, for example, create collective understanding and highlight each person's voice. This promotes a culture of mutual respect and collaboration.

DIVERSE CONTEXTS, UNIVERSAL IMPACT

Gestalt Art Therapy serves as a bridge between emotional experience and expression for individuals from all walks of life and is particularly beneficial for people from at-risk groups-including refugees, veterans, culturally and linguistically diverse populations, children and adolescents, trauma survivors, and individuals experiencing systemic disadvantage. This approach supports clients in processing grief, trauma, and identity-related challenges while enabling them to reconstruct personal narratives in a safe, creative



Fig. 2: Representation of Anger level before session.



Fig. 3: Representation of Anger level after session.

space. By affirming cultural identity and fostering emotional resilience, Gestalt Art Therapy promotes dignity, inclusion, and empowerment. Acknowledging each person's unique context, this approach reinforces self-determination and a sense of belonging.

MEASURABLE CHANGE: OUTCOMES FOR CLIENTS

Clients report and demonstrate significant improvements:

- **Reduced Anxiety:** Artmaking reduces stress and provides emotional relief.
- **Improved Self-Esteem:** Creating and completing artwork fosters self-pride.
- **Enhanced Relationships:** Families develop better communication through joint creative activities.
- **Greater Resilience:** Clients develop new ways of thinking and solving problems.
- **Lasting Growth:** Insights from therapy carry into everyday life, promoting wellbeing.

ENRICHING SOCIAL WORK THROUGH CREATIVITY

Gestalt Art Therapy offers tools that complement social work's mission. For clients facing trauma, language barriers, or complex emotions, art becomes a transformative channel. This approach makes therapy more inclusive, particularly for marginalised or non-verbal clients. Social workers gain additional tools to inspire change and facilitate healing.

CHALLENGES AND STRATEGIC OPPORTUNITIES

While promising, implementation requires resources and education. Barriers include limited training access, funding, and awareness. Sessions need adaptable materials, particularly for clients with disabilities. Addressing these challenges involves:

- Increasing awareness campaigns
- Expanding training for practitioners
- Advocating for funding
- Promoting cross-disciplinary collaboration
- Adapting therapy for different needs and cultures

LOOKING FORWARD: SCALING IMPACT

To expand its reach:

- Integrate Gestalt Art Therapy into social work education
- Use digital tools (Zoom Sessions) to deliver services in remote areas
- Share success stories to engage stakeholders
- Develop inclusive frameworks for diverse communities

These steps can embed creative therapy into mainstream practice, benefiting a wider population.

CONCLUSION: A VISION FOR HOLISTIC CARE

Gestalt Art Therapy offers a rich, engaging approach that strengthens the core values of social work. It enables clients to access healing through creativity, awareness, and connection. As the profession evolves, embracing this method will empower practitioners and enhance client outcomes. Through continued advocacy, training, and collaboration, we can make Gestalt Art Therapy a standard part of holistic, client-centred care in Australia.

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.

Over the past two years, more than 400 social workers have completed the program, with overwhelmingly positive feedback.

"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."

Award recognition



AITD Excellence Award – Best Blended Learning Solution (Finalist)



LearnX Awards – Best Learning Model (Diamond Winner)



LearnX Awards – Best Learning & Talent Development (Diamond Winner)

About the program

This immersive 8-week program is designed for experienced supervisors who are ready to deepen their knowledge, strengthen their leadership capacity, and confidently apply advanced supervision models in real-world settings.

Through a dynamic combination of live, facilitator-led online sessions, self-paced eLearning, and interactive coaching circles, participants will explore the theory, models, and ethical foundations of supervision.

[More information](#)

“Crossover Kids” and the systems that fail them

AMY SWINDON



Submitted as part of her professional placement project, this article offers a social work perspective on one of the most complex and persistent challenges in Australia’s child welfare landscape: the trajectory from child protection into the youth justice system.

In the world of child welfare and youth justice, there is a group of young people whose experiences sit at the intersection of two systems, child protection and youth detention. Commonly referred to as “crossover kids,” these young people are disproportionately affected by systemic failures that were meant to protect them.

Far too often, children who experience significant trauma early in life, grief, violence, instability, find themselves in out-of-home care. For some, that pathway continues into contact with police, the courts, and ultimately custody. In Victoria, and across the country, the pattern is clear and deeply concerning.

The literature has consistently shown that children who become involved in both the child protection and justice systems have typically experienced multiple forms of trauma. These are often described in terms of Adverse Childhood Experiences: neglect, abuse, or losing a parent. On average, crossover kids report more than five such experiences before adolescence.

What happens next often compounds their vulnerability. In particular, placement in residential out-of-home care, intended as a safety net, can unintentionally increase the likelihood of justice involvement.

For some children, especially girls, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander youth, and those with disabilities or neurodevelopmental conditions, the impact of resi care (residential care) can be particularly damaging. Residential care is a form of accommodation

and support in which people live in a staffed facility, such as a group home or aged care residence, where daily needs and personal care are provided.

The transition from care to custody is rarely straightforward, but certain dynamics recur. In some group homes, behavioural challenges are more likely to result in police involvement than therapeutic support. Behaviours that might be managed within a family environment can escalate into formal charges when staff lack the training or stability to manage crises with care rather than enforcement.

Placement instability, co-residence with justice-involved peers, and inconsistent access to therapeutic services all contribute to the risk. For many young people, police contact becomes frequent, and their entry into the youth justice system accelerates.

Once inside the justice system, crossover kids often encounter further obstacles. Bail is more likely to be denied due to a lack of suitable placements. Legal representation is often rushed and unfamiliar. Court processes can feel alienating and inaccessible,

particularly for children navigating complex trauma or cognitive challenges.

In some cases, children are remanded not due to their risk to the community, but because no appropriate care placement is available. This creates a situation where custody becomes the default, not the exception. And once in custody, experiences vary—from feelings of isolation and boredom to



incidents of mistreatment. Some young people report benefits like structure or access to support services, but this is no substitute for real, sustained care in community settings.

Upon release, young people often find themselves faced with a patchwork of services, well-intentioned but disconnected. For a teenager emerging from detention, navigating a network of case workers, psychologists, and programs can be overwhelming. What they consistently say they need is simpler: continuity, respect, and someone who stays the course with them.

These young people want to be heard. They want explanations. They want to be treated with dignity and to participate in decisions that affect

their lives. These needs are both basic and essential.

The reforms required to better support crossover kids have been widely discussed. Better training and support for care workers. More culturally safe and community-led responses for Aboriginal children. Greater availability of therapeutic placements. Legal processes that are developmentally appropriate and more responsive to the individual needs of young people.

We also need to raise the minimum age of criminal responsibility and invest in diversion programs that recognise the complexity behind young people's actions. Perhaps most importantly, we need greater collaboration between child protection, justice, health, education, and housing systems. These

are not isolated issues, and siloed responses are insufficient.

Social workers are uniquely placed to advocate for change in this space. We are often the ones supporting these children as they move between services. We see the systemic barriers that make it harder for them to thrive. And we carry a professional responsibility to work not only with individuals, but also to challenge the structures that perpetuate harm.

This is not only a policy issue. It is a question of how we value children, particularly those who have already experienced so much. Recognising the patterns that lead from care to custody is the first step. Ensuring they stop is the work ahead.

Vale: Kristen Keley

It is with great sadness that the AASW announces the passing of team member Kristen Keley, who left us suddenly in early September.

Kristen Keley had been a valued member of staff of the AASW for seven years.

She began by supporting the South Australian Branch before stepping into the role of Branch Manager. Kristen then advanced her career as Team Leader for the Professional Practice and Engagement team, a position she held for three years, before most recently moving into the role of Business Support Advisor.

She led with a collaborative spirit and was always mindful of ensuring the needs of AASW members were at the centre of her work, while supporting her colleagues and the organisation as a whole. Kristen was kind, compassionate, and deeply loyal. Kristen was known for her unwavering dedication, beautiful smile, and her cheeky, sometimes dry, sense of humour. With a laugh, she would



often say that after so many years of working alongside social workers, she had become an "honorary social worker" herself.

Kristen's generosity was legendary. She loved Christmas, and delighted in leaving treats in the staff kitchen

whenever she visited the Melbourne office and never missed an opportunity to celebrate her colleagues, whether with flowers, a small surprise gift, or a thoughtful message to brighten someone's day.

Above all else, Kristen cherished her family, her husband, her sons, and her extended family, who were the centre of her world. She spoke of them with pride, love, and joy, and it was clear that her greatest happiness was found in the time she shared with them.

Kristen's warmth, humour, and generosity of spirit touched everyone who had the privilege of knowing her. She will be deeply missed by her friends, colleagues, and the many members whose lives she impacted. Her absence leaves a space that can never truly be filled, and she will remain irreplaceable in our hearts and memories.

Emerging

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Webinar: Day in the life: behind the recovery - rehabilitation case management

What happens after the hospital stay ends?
Learn what it really takes to help someone not just recover but thrive.

11 November 2025
1:00pm - 2:00pm AEDT
Online

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Australian Association
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AASW Practitioner Research Grants

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There are two \$10,000 grants - one specifically for Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander social workers or projects - and one \$5,000 grant for members wishing to undertake a practitioner research project in an area of social work practice.

These grants can be used to support initiatives such as:

- pilot research projects focused on a particular social work practice issue
- evidence-based practice research
- a start-up project such as a desktop or scoping review which addresses a particular research question
- evaluation projects which may comprise outcome evaluations of social work practice.

Applications close 30 November 2025

[Apply today](#)



Social worker spotlight: Jack McWilliam

Championing inclusion and driving change

AS TOLD TO DR MATT LOADS

From the outset of his career, Jack has been motivated by a deep commitment to social justice and a determination to address systemic inequalities. As a queer transgender man, Jack brings a lived experience lens to his work, offering an authentic understanding of the barriers LGBTQ+SB communities often face when seeking support.

Jack values his AASW membership because of the insurance it provides, a key need as a private practitioner. He also supports AASW advocacy efforts.

Through his practice, Jack seamlessly blends direct service with advocacy, recognising that creating real change often means influencing systems as

much as supporting individuals. As the founder of Rainbow Affinity, he provides counselling for LGBTQ+SB people and delivers Affirmative Practice Training to organisations, equipping them with the skills to offer safe, respectful, and inclusive services.

Jack's advocacy extends to the national stage. He leads the PRISM Campaign, calling for community-led alcohol and other drugs (AOD) residential treatment services that meet the needs of trans, gender diverse, and non-binary people. His involvement in a Pride Foundation-supported research project is furthering understanding of how trans Australians seek AOD support and how services can better respond.

For Jack, visibility itself is advocacy. By proudly embodying his identity in his professional life, he challenges stereotypes, counters misinformation, and inspires others to stand in their truth. His work reflects the values at the heart of social work: equity, inclusion, and empowerment, and resonates with the profession's ongoing commitment to a fairer, more inclusive Australia.

[Read more](#)

Professional news & views

SOCIAL WORK REGISTRATION IN SOUTH AUSTRALIA DELAYED BY THE SOUTH AUSTRALIAN GOVERNMENT

The registration scheme, legislated under the Social Workers Registration Act 2021, was scheduled to commence on 1 July 2025. A recent Amendment Bill (2025) was passed in the South Australian Parliament to delay the commencement, meaning it will now start only when officially proclaimed, not on the fixed date previously set.

[Read more](#)

UNIVERSITY OF TASMANIA CUTS MAY IMPACT SOCIAL WORK DEGREES

The University of Tasmania has initiated a consultation process proposing staff reductions and the integration of social work and emergency management into UTAS Health. This restructuring is a response to declining student enrolments.

[Read more](#)

PAY AND CONDITIONS: NEW WEST AUSTRALIAN SOCIAL AND COMMUNITY SERVICES AWARD

On July 1, 2025, a new Social and Community Services Interim Award came into effect in WA, detailing updated pay rates, working hours, and leave entitlements for the sector.

[Read more](#)

SURGING HOMELESSNESS IN SYDNEY AND POLICY RESPONSE

Street homelessness in Sydney has jumped 67% over five years, with rising numbers of students, families, older Australians, and jobseekers among those affected. In response, the NSW government unveiled a 10-year homelessness strategy.

[Read more](#)

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2. 8% discount on Corporate covers only, includes all retail discounts and is available only when paying by direct debit. The discount is not available through brokers or comparators and excludes Overseas Visitor Cover



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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.

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

Explore our On Demand CPD catalogue: flexible, affordable, and up to date

Continuing Professional Development (CPD) is essential for social workers to maintain high standards of ethical and informed practice. It supports ongoing learning, enhances professional competence, and ensures social workers remain equipped to respond to the evolving needs of the individuals, families, and communities they serve.

Looking to grow your professional knowledge at your own pace? The AASW's On Demand Category 2 CPD catalogue offers over 200 high-quality training titles, available for purchase and access at your convenience.

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Invest in your learning, your way

"I found the webinar very useful – I'm actually liaising with my university now for a placement with one of the presenters"

Victorian social work student



Social work students and graduates, kickstart your career with direct access to some of Australia's major social work employers.

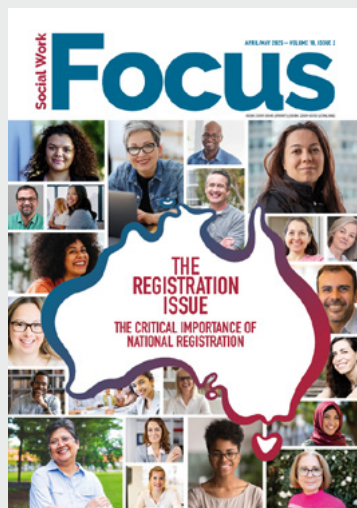
Free for AASW members, our Meet the Employer webinars include presentations, a panel discussion and a live Q&A so that you can:

- **Hear directly from industry professionals** – Learn what the role of a social worker looks like with Australia's major social work employers, including headspace, Relationships Australia, Services Australia, Anglicare Tasmania and CatholicCare Wollongong
- **Have your job application stand out** – Get expert advice on how to get short-listed, write a strong resume and cover letter, and succeed in interviews
- **Discover what employers are really looking for** – with real-life examples of dos and don'ts from recent recruitment rounds
- **Get your questions answered** – receive personalised advice on job applications, interviews, and career development from a panel of experienced employer representatives.

Register today for our next **online** national Meet the Employer webinar taking place 30 October 2025.

Learn more at: aasw.asn.au/meet-the-employer

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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

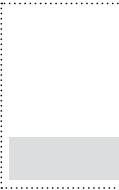
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