



ANROWS Second Action Plan Australian Department of Social Services

Submission of the
Australian Veterinary Association Ltd
July 2026

About the Australian Veterinary Association (AVA)

The AVA is the peak professional body representing veterinary professionals and students across Australia. For more than 100 years we have been the united voice of the veterinary profession.

Veterinarians are among Australia's most trusted and respected professionals, dedicated to safeguarding animal health and welfare and supporting the communities they live in.

Our vision and purpose

Vision *A thriving veterinary profession*

Purpose *Building a vibrant future for veterinary professionals.*

At the AVA we champion the veterinary community, advance professional excellence, foster connectivity, and deliver exceptional member experiences to achieve our vision of a thriving profession.

Essential role of the veterinary profession

Veterinary services are essential to Australia's animal health, food security, and economy. They help secure Australia's animal health and livestock supply chain, protecting hundreds of thousands of jobs and easing cost of living pressures through a safe and reliable food supply.

Beyond agriculture, veterinarians support companion animals and their owners, strengthening the human-animal bond and promoting the associated mental and physical health benefits of pet ownership. Animals are not just a part of the Australian way of life; they are deeply embedded in it - socially, culturally, environmentally, and economically, and veterinarians are an essential part of every vibrant Australian community.

Veterinarians play a pivotal role in maintaining the social licence of animal industries, ensuring animal health and welfare meets community expectations. Like human healthcare and education, veterinary services provide both private benefits to individuals and critical public benefits to society, in areas like biosecurity surveillance, wildlife treatment and health and emergency animal disease management.

Recognised among Australia's most ethical and trusted professionals, veterinarians are highly respected and trusted members of their communities. The Governance Institute of Australia's 2025 Ethics Index ranked veterinarians among the nation's top 5 ethical occupations¹.

¹[Governance Institute 2025](#)



Executive Summary

The Australian Veterinary Association (AVA) is thankful for this opportunity to make a submission regarding the *Second Action Plan to End Violence Against Women and Children 2022 – 2032*. The AVA would like to use this opportunity to elevate an important but currently under-recognised aspect of domestic and family violence (DFV): the role of animals in coercive control, the contribution of veterinary professionals to early identification and response, and the need for integrated human-animal safety planning.

Veterinary professionals are an essential healthcare workforce and a significant but under-recognised frontline component of Australia's DFV response system. Veterinarians frequently encounter indicators of abuse affecting both animals and people, often before victim-survivors engage with specialist services. This creates a public good through early identification and intervention opportunities; however, this also generates workforce burdens that require recognition, training, referral pathways, and wellbeing support.

Recommendations presented in this submission align with AVA policies on:

- [Animal Abuse](#) (NB – currently under review)
- [Animal Welfare and Human Wellbeing – Vulnerability of Clients and Veterinary Staff](#)
- [Enhancing Veterinary Care Through Veterinary Social Services](#)
- [Unpaid Veterinary Services Performed for Public Good](#)
- [Great Veterinary Workplaces](#)
- [Equality, diversity and inclusion](#)

Discussion

The consultation paper identifies significant evidence gaps regarding coercive control, early intervention, integrated workforces, and victim-survivor recovery; the paper in its current form is entirely silent on animal issues, despite the large impact human-animal bonds have on DFV scenarios. The AVA strongly believes that animal-related abuse and veterinary interfaces sit within all of the identified gaps.

Unpublished research² (provided to the AVA by the study author for the purposes of this submission) provides particularly strong Australian evidence that reinforces and quantifies many of the AVA's key messages.

This evidence demonstrates that animals are frequently used as instruments of coercive control within violent households. Australian research involving more than 1,100 animal owners found that among respondents who had experienced DFV, over 70% reported that the

² Marwood, LJ (2015) [Families, Pets, and Abuse an Australia-wide study, unpublished data.] University of Sydney School of Veterinary Science. *Not for public access without author's consent*



perpetrator had also abused animals, while the rate of animal abuse in non-DFV households was less than 6%. The study also found that child abuse and animal abuse commonly co-occurred, highlighting the importance of recognising animal welfare concerns as potential indicators of broader family violence.

The impacts of animal-related coercive control extend beyond the abuse of animals themselves. Concern for the safety of animals can directly affect victim-survivors' help-seeking behaviours and ability to escape violence. Australian respondents reported delaying access to refuges, delaying reporting violence to police, and in some cases returning to violent homes because of concerns for their animals. When accommodation could not be secured for animals, victim-survivors, children and animals were all exposed to further abuse. These findings reinforce the urgent need for animal-inclusive crisis accommodation, emergency fostering options, and integrated human-animal safety planning.

Veterinarians occupy a unique frontline position within the broader DFV response system. Veterinary professionals may encounter injured or neglected animals that are victims of abuse, while also interacting with victim-survivors who may have limited contact with other professionals. Australian survey participants expressed strong support for veterinarians playing a role in responding to animal abuse and family violence, including assistance with reporting concerns, connecting clients to support services, and helping identify pathways to safety.

To effectively support victim-survivors, veterinary teams require recognition, training, referral pathways and wellbeing supports. As an essential healthcare profession delivering significant public good through early identification of abuse and opportunities for intervention, veterinarians should be recognised within national DFV workforce planning and supported accordingly. This includes access to trauma-informed training, mechanisms for collaboration with specialist DFV services, veterinary social services models, and supports to address the psychological impacts and moral distress associated with responding to abuse. Consistent with a One Welfare approach, improving outcomes for people and animals requires integrated policy responses that acknowledge the interconnected nature of animal welfare, human wellbeing and family safety.

The AVA further recommends that the Second Action Plan support improved national data collection on the prevalence and impacts of animal abuse within DFV contexts, including the use of animals in coercive control, barriers created by lack of animal-inclusive accommodation, outcomes for victim-survivors and children, and the experiences of veterinarians responding to these cases. The available evidence suggests these factors are materially influencing both safety outcomes and the effectiveness of violence prevention and response systems in Australia.

The following statistics provided by the Marwood study are particularly compelling:

- 70.3% of respondents experiencing DFV reported associated animal abuse by the perpetrator.



- Animal physical abuse occurred at a rate 43 times higher in DFV homes than non-DFV homes.
- 84.1% of households where child abuse occurred also involved animal abuse.
- 21% delayed going to a refuge or safe place because of concern for their animals.
- 15% delayed reporting DFV to police because of concern for their animals.
- 15% returned to a violent home because of concern for their animals.
- 92% of respondents who attempted to access a DFV refuge with animals were turned away.
- 74% would want help from a veterinarian to find shelter or safety.
- 95% believed veterinarians should be taught how to respond to animal abuse and family violence.
- 98% believed there should be more accommodation options for people escaping violence with their animals.

The AVA also notes that consideration of animals within domestic and family violence policy and service responses should extend beyond traditional companion animals. While dogs and cats are commonly recognised in discussions of animal-related coercive control, many Australians have significant emotional, cultural, social, therapeutic and economic relationships with a broad range of animals, including non-traditional companion animals, horses and other larger animals, livestock, assistance animals and wildlife undergoing care or rehabilitation.

Perpetrators may exploit these attachments and responsibilities in a variety of ways to exert coercive control, including threats of harm, neglect, disposal, withholding access to animals, interference with animal care, or threats to livelihoods and economic security associated with livestock and production animals. For people with disability, threats or harm directed towards an assistance animal may have profound impacts on independence, mobility, personal safety and community participation.

Responses to DFV should therefore adopt a broad and inclusive understanding of the human-animal bond and recognise that risks associated with animal-related coercive control vary depending on the role the animal plays in a person's life. Safety planning, emergency accommodation, fostering programs, recovery services and data collection initiatives should be designed to account for the diverse range of animals that may be affected by DFV.

Particular consideration should also be given to rural and regional communities, where attachment to larger animals and livestock may create additional barriers to leaving violent situations. In these circumstances, concerns for animal welfare, ongoing care responsibilities, financial loss and threats to livelihoods may significantly influence the decisions of victim-survivors and their ability to access safety.



An effective and animal-inclusive DFV system must therefore recognise that the impacts of animal-related abuse extend across companion animals, assistance animals, larger animals, livestock and wildlife, and that responses should be sufficiently flexible to address the diverse circumstances in which animals are used as a means of coercion and control.

Priority Area 1: Victim-Survivors

What service or system responses would make the biggest difference to victim-survivors' safety, wellbeing, healing and recovery?

- Recognise the established link between animal abuse and domestic and family violence within national policy, service design, risk assessment and safety planning. *(70.3% of respondents experiencing DFV reported the perpetrator was also inflicting physical, sexual, emotional violence or intentional neglect on their animals - Marwood unpublished)*
- Require DFV risk assessment frameworks to include routine consideration of:
 - threats to animals (across all types of animals: companion, assistance, livestock, wildlife)
 - harm to animals
 - neglect of animals
 - use of animals in coercive control.
- Ensuring there are safe, cost-effective avenues for victim-survivors to leave people who use violence (or be supported to stay in the home if this is their choosing) with their animals. *(Those that had tried to leave a DFV home with their animals reported high rates of being turned away from alternative accommodation options. 92% were turned away from a DFV refuge, 77% from government rental properties, 60% from private rental properties, 34% from friends and 31% from family - Marwood unpublished)*
- Facilitate this by increasing investment in animal-inclusive crisis responses, including:
 - co-accommodation of people and their animals in refuges;
 - pet-friendly crisis accommodation;
 - emergency fostering programs;
 - veterinary support services for animals escaping DFV situations.
- Recognise that victim-survivors commonly delay leaving violence because they fear harm to their animals or cannot secure safe accommodation for them and may choose not to enter refuge accommodation if it requires them to be separated from their



animals. *(For those that could not find alternative accommodation with their animals, 40% experienced further abuse – Marwood unpublished)*

- Ensure recovery frameworks acknowledge
 - the importance of animals to victim-survivors for:
 - emotional support;
 - trauma recovery;
 - social connection;
 - safety and wellbeing following violence;
 - the welfare of affected animals, who may also be victim-survivors in their own right.

What helps people access support earlier?

- Veterinary services provide an often-overlooked pathway for early disclosure. *(59% said they would want to discuss abuse with their vet – Marwood unpublished)*
- Many victim-survivors maintain contact with veterinary services even when isolated from other supports.
- Veterinarians and veterinary teams may be among the first professionals to observe:
 - non-accidental injury to animals;
 - concerning client behaviour;
 - signs of coercive control;
 - fear, distress or intimidation affecting clients
 - evidence of financial abuse regarding veterinary care.
- Earlier support could be facilitated through:
 - DFV training for veterinary teams; *(56% of DFV victim-survivors believed their vet would know how to handle a case of animal abuse and 95% thought that vets should be taught how to deal with animal abuse and family violence – Marwood unpublished)*
 - referral pathways between veterinary practices and DFV services;
 - education resources for veterinary clinics;
 - increased development of veterinary social work training and supported delivery of veterinary social services.



Barriers to seeking help

- Fear of animals being harmed, killed or abandoned.
- Lack of accommodation options that allow animals.
- Financial barriers to veterinary care for animals affected by DFV.
- Lack of awareness among DFV services of the importance of animals in safety planning; victim-survivor concerns that their animals may not be deemed worthy of inclusion in their safety plan.
- Privacy concerns: for example, the location of the animal and victim-survivor may be reported to the perpetrator via microchip details that are in the perpetrator's name, and the details are unable to be changed without alerting the perpetrator.

Emerging issues

The consultation paper specifically highlights coercive control as an area requiring improved recognition.

The AVA emphasises:

- Animals are frequently used as tools of coercive control.
- Perpetrators may:
 - injure animals;
 - threaten animals;
 - kill animals;
 - withhold food or care;
 - force victim-survivors to witness animal abuse;
 - use veterinary expenses as financial abuse.
- National DFV policy should explicitly recognise animal abuse as a coercive control mechanism.
- Veterinary workforce shortages particularly in rural areas means less frontline ability for early intervention, prevention and crisis responses to animal abuse.

Gaps in diverse community responses

- Rural and regional communities face additional barriers:
 - fewer refuges accepting animals, with few to none taking large animals;
 - fewer emergency accommodation options;
 - geographic isolation;



- potentially stronger human-animal dependency;
- generally smaller communities where privacy is more difficult to maintain for victim-survivors.
- Animal-inclusive responses should be available regardless of location.

Priority Area 2: Prevention and Early Intervention

What would make the biggest difference in preventing and ultimately ending violence?

- Include animal abuse as an early warning indicator for violence within prevention frameworks.
- Recognise that animal abuse can precede, coexist with, or escalate alongside violence against people; acknowledge that animals are often the first to experience violence from a perpetrator that then goes on to harm women and children in the household.
- Improve cross-sector collaboration between:
 - veterinary services;
 - animal welfare agencies;
 - DFV services;
 - police;
 - local councils;
 - health services;
 - legislators.
- Primary prevention of intersectional gendered violence may prevent animal abuse and reduce DFV overall.

Strengthening existing efforts

- Develop veterinary-specific DFV education and referral resources nationally.
- Include veterinarians within community awareness campaigns aimed at early identification.
- Include veterinarians in funded intersectional gender equality education.
- Include veterinarians in advocacy efforts that prevent gendered violence.
- Pets and People training for all primary aged school children to prevent violence and abuse of animals.

Promising prevention approaches



- One Welfare approaches recognising the interconnected wellbeing of humans, animals and environments.
- Veterinary social services models that integrate social work and veterinary care.
- Cross-reporting and referral pathways between animal welfare and human services.
- Promoting and normalising intersectional gender equality in public and private life by updating and adopting diversity, equity and inclusion policies to build safe, fair and equitable organisations.
- Challenge the condoning of violence against women and violence in general (including to animals).
- Education programs that foster respectful relationships and promote prosocial behaviours at schools, workplaces and organisations.
- Reduce the long-term impacts of exposure to violence and prevent further exposure. Trauma-informed workplace education to support veterinary professionals to mitigate the psychosocial hazards related to witnessing animal abuse, such as funding of [THRIVE's Cultivating Safe Teams](#) program.
- Strengthen women's economic security, independence and social, political and economic participation in public life, including representation by women in veterinary leadership. Establish, maintain and report publicly on processes to assess all public policy for its impact on women and gender equality.
- Strengthen support for gender equality in both public and private contexts.
- Fund programs such as THRIVE's Cultivating Safe Teams program that enable whole-of-organisation approaches to the prevention of violence against women, in line with the Workplace Equality and Respect standards.
- Build organisational and institutional cultures that promote and demonstrate the importance of equality, respect, safety and fairness in professional contexts through initiatives like the [Great Veterinary Workplaces](#) and Cultivating Safe Teams.
- Apply a gender lens to disaster planning and animal emergency management in the context of disasters and crises, to proactively address the increased risk of violence against women and increase community resilience over the long term.

Emerging issues

- Lack of national data around:
 - animal abuse in DFV contexts;
 - animals used in coercive control;
 - victim-survivors prevented from leaving because of concerns for animals;
 - outcomes associated with animal-inclusive accommodation.



The AVA recommends a national research agenda to address these evidence gaps.

Priority Area 3: Children and Young People

What would make the biggest difference to improving safety, recovery and wellbeing outcomes for children and young people?

- Recognise that children experiencing DFV often witness animal abuse.
- Witnessing cruelty to animals can have significant impacts on:
 - trauma;
 - anxiety;
 - grief;
 - emotional development;
 - perceptions of violence and relationships, including likelihood of using violence against animals or people into the future.
- Responses for children should include assessment of:
 - attachment to animals;
 - exposure to threats or violence involving animals.

Emerging harms

- Children can experience profound distress when forced to leave animals behind.
- Safety planning for children should include arrangements for protection of animals and maintaining connection wherever possible.

Priority Area 4: People Who Use Violence

What would make the biggest difference in preventing and responding earlier to the use of violence?

- Recognise animal abuse as a risk factor and indicator of family violence.
- Include behaviours involving animals within perpetrator risk assessment frameworks.
- Support research examining the relationship between:
 - animal abuse;
 - coercive control;
 - escalation of violence;



- lethality risk.
- Education for veterinary professionals to identify coercive control behaviours such as financial abuse, so they can look for and prevent animal (and subsequent human) abuse.
- Education for veterinary professionals to understand predicted pathways of gendered violence.

Recognising people using violence

- Animal abuse may provide an observable indicator of coercive and controlling behaviours.
- Perpetrator interventions should examine attitudes toward animals as well as attitudes toward family members.

Evidence gaps

The consultation paper highlights gaps in understanding perpetration pathways.

The AVA recommends research into:

- prevalence of animal abuse in DFV contexts;
- patterns of animal-directed coercive control;
- predictive value of animal abuse in DFV risk assessment;
- the impacts of animal outcomes on victim-survivor decisions to leave or remain.

Priority Area 5: System Integration and Workforce

What would make the biggest difference in creating a more coordinated and connected system response?

The consultation paper emphasises the importance of universal workforces, health-sector responses and integrated service systems.

Veterinary professionals should be recognised as part of this universal workforce.

Recommendations include:

- Formal inclusion of veterinary expertise within DFV workforce planning.
- National referral pathways linking veterinary clinics with DFV and social support services.
- Training resources for veterinary teams.
- Mechanisms for veterinary professionals' consultation with specialist DFV services.
- Inclusion of veterinary representation in relevant policy and system-design processes.



Workforce capability and support

What supports are needed?

Veterinary professionals frequently experience:

- secondary exposure to trauma;
- moral distress;
- ethical dilemmas;
- concerns about client and animal safety;
- uncertainty regarding reporting and referral options.

Support should include:

- DFV-specific veterinary training.
- trauma-informed practice resources.
- referral frameworks.
- professional wellbeing supports to manage the effects of exposure to violence and moral distress related to coercive control and financial abuse.

Mental health and wellbeing

The consultation paper identifies risks of vicarious trauma across workforces.

The AVA emphasises that:

- Veterinary teams are increasingly exposed to complex social issues including DFV.
- Repeated exposure to abuse-related cases contributes to psychological burden.
- Workforce wellbeing measures should explicitly include veterinary professionals who are involved with DFV-related matters.
- Moral distress occurs where financial abuse is executed through control of animal treatments and veterinarians are not able to provide appropriate professional care.
- Moral distress is a risk factor for veterinary professionals' mental health and contributes to workforce shortages.
- Attrition from the veterinary profession, particularly in rural and regional areas, due to mental health challenges poses risks to resources to respond to DFV.



Key Recommendation on Data Collection

The Second Action Plan should support national collection of data regarding:

- animal abuse associated with DFV;
- animals used in coercive control;
- victim-survivors delaying leaving due to concerns for animals;
- inability to access accommodation because of animals;
- outcomes from pet-inclusive accommodation models;
- demand for emergency animal fostering, including costs incurred by veterinary practices, animal shelters and other charities;
- impacts on children of witnessing animal abuse within DFV contexts;
- presentations of DFV-related animal abuse to veterinary practices;
- veterinary workforce experiences responding to DFV-related cases;
- impacts of DFV on veterinary professional's mental health and wellbeing.

Without these data, the true impact of animal-related coercive control remains invisible within policy and service planning.

Conclusion

The Australian Veterinary Association recommends that the *Second Action Plan* explicitly recognise the interconnected safety and wellbeing of people and animals. Animal abuse is both an indicator of domestic and family violence and a mechanism of coercive control.

Veterinarians occupy a unique frontline position in DFV related matters. As an essential healthcare profession delivering significant public good through these activities, the veterinary profession requires appropriate recognition, training, referral pathways, workforce support, funded wellbeing support and inclusion within integrated DFV policy and service responses. The National Plan should also prioritise animal-inclusive safety planning, accommodation options and data collection to ensure that no victim-survivor is forced to choose between their personal safety and the safety of their animals.

The AVA is happy to provide further guidance on these critical matters and would like to be positioned as a key stakeholder in further development of the *Second Action Plan*.

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