The Hon Amanda Rishworth MP

Minister for Social Services

The Hon Justine Elliot MP

Assistant Minister for Social Services
Assistant Minister for the Prevention of Family Violence

Ref: MC24-010261

Cr Linda Scott
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Dear ~~Councillor Scott~~ Linda

Thank you for your letter dated 12 September 2024 to the Minister for Social Services, the Hon Amanda Rishworth MP, concerning resolutions from the 2024 National General Assembly (NGA) of Local Government. As the matters raised also relate to the responsibilities of the Assistant Minister for Social Services and Assistant Minister for the Prevention of Family Violence, the Hon Justine Elliot MP, a joint response has been provided.

We appreciate receiving a copy of the NGA of Local Government's resolutions relating to the social services portfolio. We recognise the important role local government plays in delivering services and supports to local communities, and the insights and knowledge local councils hold in relation to the priorities and needs of their local communities.

2024 National General Assembly of Local Government Resolutions:

Motion number 98 Brimbank City Council VIC
This National General Assembly calls on the Federal Government to:

a. Increase the JobSeeker and Youth Allowance payments

The Australian Government (the Government) is committed to building a social security system that provides a strong safety net.

In the 2024-25 Budget, the Government invested around $2 billion to further strengthen the social safety net by:

- Increasing the maximum rates of Commonwealth Rent Assistance (CRA) by a further 10 per cent to help relieve rental cost pressures for recipient households. This represents an investment of $1.9 billion over 5 years from 2023-24 and builds on the Government's 15 per cent increase to CRA maximum rates in the last Budget. These are the first back-to-back increases in CRA in over 30 years.

- Extending the higher rate of JobSeeker Payment and Energy Supplement to single recipients with an assessed partial capacity to work of less than 15 hours per week so that those with barriers to employment who have limited or no capacity to work due to their condition receive an additional $71.20 per fortnight.

The 2024-25 Budget income support measures build on the 2023-24 Budget measures, which included increases to working age and student payments by at least $40 per fortnight, the increase to CRA maximum rates identified above, and the expansion of eligibility to Parenting Payment Single to single parents with the youngest child under 14 years.

With these increases and indexation, since May 2022, the base rate of JobSeeker Payment has increased from $642.70 to $778.00 per fortnight. This is an increase of $135.30 per fortnight, or 21 per cent, providing over $3,500 in additional support each year.

Together, the 2024-25 and 2023-24 Budget income support measures, represent an additional $11.5 billion investment in the social safety net.

The Government has committed to consider the rates of income support payments, including JobSeeker Payment, at every Budget.

Motion number 101 Break O'Day Council TAS
This National General Assembly calls on the Australian Government to:

a. *Recognise that Local Government, as the closest level of government to the community, has an important role to play in ending violence against women and children.*
b. *Support and resource Local Governments to advocate for and enact social change in their communities to end violence against women and children.*
c. *Collaborate with Local Government when discussing, developing and implementing strategies to end violence against women and children.*

Motion number 102 Adelaide Hills Council SA
This National General Assembly calls on the Australian Government to:

a. *Recognise local government plays a pivotal role in achieving the Australian Government's vision of ending gender-based violence in a generation.*
b. *Recognise councils can lead this generational change by adopting Our Watch's Prevention Toolkit for Local Government.*
c. *Fund a dedicated Domestic and Family Violence Prevention Officer in each State's local government association, this role should be jointly funded by Commonwealth and state governments. That this position be funded for a minimum of five years in line with the first stage of the National Plan to End Violence against Women and Children 2022-2032. The focus of the role should be to support councils in the implementation of Our Watch's Prevention Toolkit for Local Government.*
d. *Fund the establishment of a local government grant funding program, similar to the Victorian Government's Free from Violence Local Government program, to be administered by each LGA. That this program should be jointly funded by Commonwealth and state governments to support councils to embed gender equality and violence prevention practices into every part of their workplaces and services.*

The National Plan to End Violence against Women and Children 2022-2032 (the National Plan) is a joint Australian, state and territory government commitment that sets the national policy agenda for addressing violence against women and children in Australia for the next 10 years.

The National Plan is supported by the dedicated Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Action Plan 2023-25, the First Action Plan 2023-2027, Activities Addendum to the First Action Plan, and the Outcomes Framework, setting the roadmap for how we will work to achieve this vision.

The National Plan builds on a history of leadership and action by victim-survivors, advocates and women's and community organisations and all governments including local governments.

It is our collective commitment to a country free of gender-based violence in one generation, where all people live free from fear and violence and are safe at home, at work, at school, in the community and online.

This requires a whole of community approach where governments at all levels work together alongside businesses, schools, sports clubs and the broader community to end violence against women and children

As large local employers, with reach into communities through delivery of community services, local governments are well-placed to influence social change and drive prevention initiatives. We note and encourage the development and implementation of initiatives like Victoria's Free from Violence Local Government Program, which supports councils to embed gender equality and family violence prevention practices into their work. We also support the recommendation included in *Motion Number 102* that calls for local councils to contribute to generational change by adopting Our Watch's Prevention Toolkit for Local Government.

Under current federal funding arrangements, states and territories have primary funding responsibility for frontline service delivery. The Government supports the work of states and territories under the National Partnership on Family, Domestic and Sexual Violence Responses (FDSV National Partnership).

The Government is investing $159 million over 2 years from 2023-24 to 2024-25 in the FDSV National Partnership with state and territory governments to support frontline services. This funding builds on $270.7 million for the FDSV National Partnership over 2 years from 2021-22, $169.4 million committed over 4 years from 2022-23 for the 500 new frontline and community service workers election commitment, and the $27 million over 5 years from 2022-23 for innovative perpetrator responses to address perpetrator behaviour.

On 6 September 2024, National Cabinet agreed to negotiate a renewed 5-year FDSV National Partnership from 1 July 2025. The renewed FDSV National Partnership will deliver over $700 million in new matched investments from the Commonwealth and states and territories, with the Commonwealth contributing new funding of $351 million. Work is currently underway to finalise a multilateral agreement for the renewed FDSV National Partnership with state and territory governments by the end of the year.

States and territories are best placed to deliver local services based on need and are responsible for allocating Commonwealth funding as per the terms of the agreement.

Delegates to the NGA may wish to contact state and territory ministers responsible for FDSV prevention policy to explore whether there are any potential funding opportunities available under the FDSV National Partnership being supported by their respective state or territory governments.

Motion number 111 Hawkesbury City Council NSW
This National General Assembly calls on the Australian Government to review the current delivery and operational framework of community transport with a goal to better integrate these services to ensure all people with support needs can readily access community transport at a time that they need, to live the life that they choose.

Australia's Disability Strategy 2021-2031 (ADS) is Australia's national disability policy framework. It sets out a plan for continuing to improve the lives of people with disability in Australia. There are 7 key Outcome Areas under ADS, including the 'Inclusive Homes and Communities' Outcome Area with a focus on making sure people with disability live in inclusive, accessible and well-designed homes and communities. Policy Priority 5 of this Outcome Area ensures that transport systems are accessible for the whole community.

The National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) forms a part of the disability ecosystem, it was designed to complement, not replace, other mainstream services for which states and territories are responsible, including accessible transport. The NDIS will be responsible for funding supports for individuals that enable independent travel, including through personal transport-related aids and equipment, training to use public transport and modifications to private vehicles. State and territory governments and other parties remain responsible for community transport services.

For more information on the specific transport supports funded by the NDIS refer to www.NDIS.gov.au

Motion number 117 Tenterfield Shire Council NSW
This National General Assembly calls on the Australian Government to develop, with State Governments, programs to support essential not for profit organisations to fund and provide services in the community to meet increasing service demand for meals, housing and mental health support.

Housing
On 31 May 2024, Housing and Homelessness Ministers signed a new 5-year National Agreement on Social Housing and Homelessness (NASHH) to provide $9.3 billion to the states and territories to help people who are experiencing, or at risk of, homelessness and support the effective operation of Australia's social housing and homelessness services sectors.

The annual funding under the new agreement is around $1.8 billion per year from 2024-25. This includes a doubling of the Commonwealth homelessness funding component to $400 million a year which the states and territories are required to match.

The NASHH provides considerable flexibility and scope for states and territories to determine their spending on social housing and homelessness related activities and services based on the specific needs in their jurisdiction.

Emergency Relief and Food Relief
The Government currently provides more than $53 million per year in base funding for Emergency Relief (ER) nationally, shared among 192 providers. Food parcels and food vouchers are the most common types of support available from Commonwealth-funded ER providers. Other common supports include clothing, vouchers for fuel or medicine, part-payment of utility bills, budgeting assistance, and referrals to other services (such as financial counselling) that can assist people in addressing the underlying causes of their financial crisis.

Access to ER is free, and there are no citizenship or residency requirements to receive this support. People in need can access contact details for nearby ER providers by selecting 'Financial Crisis and Material Aid – Emergency Relief' on the Department of Social Services' Grants Service Directory at www.serviceproviders.dss.gov.au, and filtering by postcode or region.

To support the delivery of ER, the Government contributes a further $1.5 million per year in base funding for Food Relief (FR) nationally. This funding is shared among Foodbank Australia, SecondBite, and OzHarvest, so they can increase ER providers' access to a cost-effective supply of food, on a national scale.

The Government acknowledges cost of living pressures and natural disasters have increased demand for many community services across Australia. Since being elected, the Government has committed an additional $170.9 million for the Financial Wellbeing and Capability (FWC) Activity, which includes the ER and FR programs, to boost services in response to these circumstances.

Much of this funding has been committed based on the advice of the sector-led National Coordination Group (NCG). The NCG is comprised of executives from across the ER, FR, Financial Counselling, and volunteering sectors. The Government is continuing to work closely with the NCG and the Department of Social Services to ensure additional funding continues to be allocated when and where it is most needed in 2024-25.

It is important to note that the Government's investment in ER and FR is a contribution to the sector, and not the sole source of funding. State and territory governments, local councils, and philanthropy all play a key role in funding these services.

Mental Health Support

The Government supports a range of mental health supports. For example, the Government funds Primary Health Networks (PHNs) to plan and commission regionally appropriate mental health and suicide prevention services at low or no cost where appropriate.

This includes services across the stepped care continuum for people with, or at risk of, mental ill health and suicidality. To ensure these services are appropriate for their communities, they are informed by comprehensive regional needs assessments.

These assessments are developed in partnership with state health services, local providers and services, local community and consumers, and other health care providers such as Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisations to determine areas of greatest need for their region.

The needs assessment process provides PHNs with the opportunity to engage with Local Hospital Networks (or equivalents) and other key planning and funding agencies to ensure alignment of effort and investment. This approach encourages tailored solutions that meet local needs and address community priorities.

You may like to contact the Hon Mark Butler MP, Minister for Health and Aged Care, for further information about the range of services and supports being delivered by the Government to support the mental health of all Australians. The Minister can be contacted by email at minister.butler@health.gov.au.

Motion number 120 Shoalhaven City Council NSW
This National General Assembly calls on the Australian Government to provide adequate financial assistance, via Services Australia, to eligible ratepayers (Pension and Low-Income earner's) to assist with payments of council and water rates. Financial assistance should be provided at an amount, or percentage, that reflects current level of rates and should be delivered via a more efficient and cost-effective mechanism, than is currently used.

The Government provides the Pensioner Concession Card, the Health Care Card including the Low-Income Health Care Card, and the Commonwealth Seniors Health Card. These concession cards provide access to cheaper Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme (PBS) medicines, the concessional thresholds of the PBS Safety Net and Extended Medicare Safety Net, and bulk-billed visits to the GP (at the doctor's discretion).

State, territory and local governments, and some private enterprises, may provide additional concessions and discounts to concession card holders in areas such as utilities, public transport, vehicle registration fees, or rates. The Government has no jurisdiction over the provision of these concessions. The individual government or enterprise determines what additional benefits will be offered and who can receive them. Some state and territory governments also issue their own cards (for example senior's cards) that provide access to particular benefits.

In addition to concession cards and health subsidies, the Government delivers services to assist income support recipients, including Age Pension recipients, to manage their finances. For instance, Services Australia (Centrelink) offers the Centrelink Financial Information Service, which provides information on how someone's financial arrangements may impact their payment eligibility or rate of payment. This service is free, and recipients can arrange to speak to a Financial Information Service officer by telephoning Centrelink on 13 2300 for the cost of a local call (calls made from mobile phones may incur additional costs).

Services Australia also offers a free voluntary bill paying service which enables regular deductions to be made from a recipient's Centrelink payment to pay bills such as those for rent, electricity and telecommunications. This service can help recipients to smooth payment of bills and reduce or prevent 'bill shock'. Recipients can use the Centrepay bill paying service to pay any business registered to receive Centrepay payments, including chemists and veterinarian services. More information about Centrepay, including a list of registered businesses by postcode, is available at www.servicesaustralia.gov.au/centrepay.

Social security recipients may also be eligible for advance payments. Advance payment provisions allow recipients to receive a portion of their future entitlement as a lump sum. The amount of the advance is limited by minimum and maximum amounts which are determined by the type and rate of payment you receive.

Eligible property owners may also be interested in the Home Equity Access Scheme (HEAS). HEAS is a voluntary arrangement which provides a loan to people of Age Pension age (67 years and over) who meet certain residency criteria and own suitable real estate in Australia. Participants can access regular fortnightly payments, capped lump sum advance payments, or both.

Fortnightly loan payments can 'top up' any pension payment the person receives to a maximum of 150 per cent of the maximum fortnightly rate of Age Pension. Participants can also access up to 2 lump sum advances in any 26-fortnight period, to a combined total of no more than 50 per cent of the maximum annual rate of the Age Pension. Any lump sum advance will reduce the maximum fortnightly loan amount a participant can receive over the subsequent 26-fortnight period.

Any amount received under HEAS, and interest accrued, is attributed as a debt secured against real estate nominated by the participant. The loan can be paid back at any time or is recovered on the sale of the secured real estate or from the person's estate. A No Negative Equity Guarantee limits the recoverable debt to the equity in the property used to secure the loan.

We trust the information provided is of assistance and appreciate you bringing these matters to our attention.

Yours sincerely

Amanda Rishworth MP

11 / 12 / 2024

Justine Elliot

Justine Elliot MP

9 / 1 / 2024