

30 January 2026

The Hon Jim Chalmers MP
Treasurer
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

Submitted via Consultation Hub

Cc: The Hon Tanya Plibersek MP
The Hon Ged Kearney MP

Dear Treasurer

Safe Steps is pleased to provide a submission as part of the government's 2026-27 Pre-Budget Submission process.

Safe Steps is Victoria's statewide 24/7 crisis response for family and domestic violence. We also operate part of the 1800RESPECT national domestic, family and sexual violence counselling, information and support service. We provide family violence information and support, safety planning and risk assessment, and provide crisis accommodation every day of the year.

In response to overwhelming evidence about the lack of a nationwide pathway for young people worried about family and domestic violence, we have developed a proposal to undertake a youth-led co-design process to develop a digital platform for young people.

The detail of our proposal is in the attached submission.

As part of the process of developing this submission we have received and taken on feedback from three individual members of the national Lived Experience Advisory Council alongside engagement with key sector stakeholders to ensure there is first-stage support for this proposal.

We welcome the opportunity to discuss our proposal further with you.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Sonia D'Urbano".

Sonia D'Urbano
Transitional Director
Safe Steps Family Violence Response Centre

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Paul McDonald".

Paul McDonald
Chief Executive Officer
Anglicare Victoria

How Young People Seek Help: Co-Designing Australia's Digital Front Door for FDV/IPV

Safe Steps Family Violence Response Centre
2026

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Executive Summary

In 2024, Prime Minister Albanese declared that Australia faced a ‘national crisis’ of violence against women, with one woman killed in acts of gender-based violence every four days. The Prime Minister brought together a panel of experts to review prevention initiatives. That panel declared that children and young people’s experiences of violence was “its own national emergency”.¹

The policy environment is set, the problem well-articulated and the need is clear:

- I. Together, our community must **recognise children and young people as victim-survivors** in their own right. Australia’s National Plan to End Violence Against Women and Children establishes the national policy imperative² and meaningful steps to do this are outlined in the Domestic, Family and Sexual Violence Commission’s *Yearly Report to Parliament*³ and the Prime Minister’s Rapid Review Panel report.⁴
- II. **Digital resources have been identified as an essential component of a contemporary system response**, not an optional add-on. Recent Australian research and inquiries⁵ including Kate Fitz-Gibbon’s research for the South Australian Royal Commission have identified:
“Digital support must be seen not as a supplement to existing service models, but as a core component of any contemporary system response to violence against children and young people.”⁶
- III. **Systems for young people must be built by and with them.** As identified in the Domestic, Family and Sexual Violence Commission’s *Yearly Report to Parliament*:
“Most importantly, children and young people must have a genuine voice in shaping the responses that affect them. Embedding their

¹ Prime Minister’s Rapid Review Panel. Unlocking the Prevention Potential: accelerating action to end domestic, family and sexual violence [Internet]. PM&C. 2024. Available from: <https://www.pmc.gov.au/resources/unlocking-the-prevention-potential>. P. 47.

² Department of Social Services. The National Plan to End Violence against Women and Children 2022–2032 [Internet]. Department of Social Services. 2025. Available from: <https://www.dss.gov.au/national-plan-end-violence-against-women-and-children>

³ Domestic, Family and Sexual Violence Commission. Yearly Report to Parliament [Internet]. Domestic, Family and Sexual Violence Commission. 2025. Available from: <https://www.dfsvc.gov.au/sites/default/files/2025-12/DFSVC-2025-YearlyReport.pdf>

⁴ Prime Minister’s Rapid Review Panel. Ref 1.

⁵ See Fitz-Gibbon K. Seeking help in their own right Young victim-survivors’ experiences of family violence crisis responses in Victoria [Internet]. Safe Steps Family Violence Response Centre. Available from: <https://safesteps.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2025/09/Seeking-help-in-their-own-right-web-view.pdf>; Gillfeather-Spetere S and Watson A. In their own right: Actions to improve children and young people’s safety from domestic, family and sexual violence [Internet]. Fitz-Gibbon K. Silence and Inaction Report [Internet]. Royal Commission into Domestic, Family and Sexual Violence. 2025. Available from: <https://www.royalcommissiondfsv.sa.gov.au/publications/silence-and-inaction-paper>. ANROWS - Australia’s National Research Organisation for Women’s Safety. 2024. Available from: <https://www.anrows.org.au/publication/children-young-peoples-safety/>; Australian Human Rights Commission. Do things with the information we tell you [Internet]. Australian Human Rights Commission. 2024 [cited 2025 Dec 18]. Available from https://humanrights.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0024/19428/20240419_supporting_quality_engagement_with_children_2023_fin_al_report_0-3.pdf.

⁶ Fitz-Gibbon K. Silence and Inaction Report. Ref 5. Page 69.

perspectives through mechanisms such as a DFSV Youth Advisory Council will ensure that reforms are accountable, inclusive and effective in meeting their needs.”⁷

Treating young people with respect and acknowledging their strength, resilience and needs, actually models what healthy relationships look like and creates opportunities to hear firsthand their own potential solutions.⁸ Co-design ensures solutions are relevant to the target audience, unique perspectives of those who will use a new platform are garnered, and there are opportunities to explore new and innovative ideas.⁹

Safe Steps’ experience as a statewide, 24/7 frontline service with a specialisation in providing support to victim survivors of FDV, means that we, like other specialist organisations, see the impact when there is **no national, accessible, youth-appropriate pathway** for consistent and accurate information, safety guidance, or support for family, domestic or intimate partner violence (FDV/IPV).

Young people who have experienced FDV or IPV consistently report barriers to getting help, exclusion from decision-making about outcomes that affect them, missed opportunities for support following disclosure and limited language to be able to articulate that what is happening to them is FDV/IPV (see Sutherland and Lee 2025,¹⁰ Fitz-Gibbon *Seeking help in their own right*,¹¹ and Fitz-Gibbon *Silence and inaction*¹²). These authors report young people falling through service delivery gaps and being invisible or silenced in a system designed by and for adults.

These combined factors have life-long consequences for young people.

⁷ Domestic, Family and Sexual Violence Commission. Ref 3. Page 90.

⁸ ANROWS. The power of prevention: listening to young voices can reduce the risk of future violence. [Internet] 2025. [Cited 2026 Jan 21]. Available from <https://www.anrows.org.au/children-young-people/the-power-of-prevention/>.

⁹ VicHealth. Leading the Way – Engaging young voices for change. [Internet] 2021. [Cited 2026 Jan 21]. Available from https://www.vichealth.vic.gov.au/sites/default/files/2023-08/2FM_Leading-the-Way-Engaging-young-voices-for-change.pdf.

¹⁰ Sutherland G and Lee M. The ACCESS project: children and young people seeking safety from family violence. 2025. At the time of writing this report is in draft and unpublished. As Safe Steps were involved in the research, we have been provided with a confidential draft.

¹¹ Fitz-Gibbon K. Seeking help in their own right: Young victim-survivors’ experiences of family violence crisis responses in Victoria. Ref 5.

¹² Fitz-Gibbon K. Silence and Inaction Report. Ref 5.

There are significant costs and consequences when help does not reach young people experiencing FDV

Without intervention, harms are entrenched and the costs associated with family, domestic and intimate partner violence will continue to rise.

Exposure to FDV/IPV in childhood or adolescence is strongly associated with:

- lifelong mental health impacts
- poor educational outcomes
- housing instability
- unemployment and long-term income insecurity
- increased health service use
- increased likelihood of entering out-of-home care
- higher interactions with child protection and youth justice.

The economic impact is significant and includes:

- Up to \$10.4 billion annually in costs associated with violence against women and children.
- 43% of women and 31% of men abused as children rely on government income support.
- Child maltreatment drives higher hospital admissions and mental health service use.

When young people do reach out for safety, systems often misunderstand or misidentify their experiences, entrenching harm rather than alleviating it.¹³

Safe Steps' federal budget submission is informed by consistent and compelling insights from young people about their experiences, Australian evidence and research, and extensive global insights obtained through Dr Chelsea Tobin's (former Safe Steps CEO) 2024 Churchill Fellowship.¹⁴

¹³ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. Family, domestic and sexual violence: Economic and financial impacts. [Internet] 2024. [cited 2026 Jan 21]. Available from <https://www.aihw.gov.au/family-domestic-and-sexual-violence/responses-and-outcomes/economic-financial-impacts>.

¹⁴ See: Tobin C. To investigate family violence crisis response for children as victim survivors in their own right - Churchill Fellows Association of VIC [Internet]. Churchilltrust.com.au. 2025 [cited 2025 Dec 18]. Available from:

Our Ask

This submission proposes that the Federal Government invests in a youth-led co-design process to develop an Australia-specific, nation-wide **digital front door concept for FDV and IPV help-seeking**. It is intended that it will align and consolidate evidence-based information, tools, and pathways for young people experiencing or worried about FDV/IPV. This is necessary even with the introduction of the social media ban to ensure that young people (including those under 16) have access to digitally based and timely information, if and when they need help.

Safe Steps is seeking **\$1 million** to deliver a comprehensive national youth-led co-design process that will work with young people to articulate a digital front door concept that meets their needs and make digital help-seeking easier, relevant and accessible. Depending on the outcomes of the co-design process, recommendations may include minimum viable product requirements, content framework, youth language findings, accessibility principles, safety settings, and help-seeking pathways.

Safe Steps envisages the co-design process as the first part of a potentially larger project to build and test a prototype, and consider how this could integrate with service responses for young people. The concept of a digital “front door” is not intended to replace services or conduct a system-wide digital overhaul. It is Safe Steps’ view that the recommendations developed through co-design will be realistic, targeted and evidence-based: an intervention that connects young people to the help that already exists in each state and territory, identify potential gaps and future opportunities for bolstering these services.

Proposed investment

Youth-led co-design project	Delivery Stage 1	Delivery Stage 2	Delivery Stage 3
Timeline	Months 1 - 6	Months 6 - 15	Months 15 - 18
Funding required	\$443,835	\$535,311	\$21,000

<https://www.churchilltrust.com.au/vic/project/to-investigate-family-violence-crisis-response-for-children-as-victim-survivors-in-their-own-right/>; Tobin C. Global Insights into youth-centred crisis responses - Outcomes, Practice and Evidence Network. Outcomes, Practice and Evidence Network. 2024 [cited 2025 Dec 18]. [Conference paper] Abstract available from: <https://outcomes.org.au/open-symposium-2024/program/global-insights-into-youth-centred-crisis-responses/>. See also Appendix B.

Proposed Project Snapshot

Background

As outlined in our 2025 submission A National Response for Young People, Safe Steps' long-term vision is for a comprehensive suite of national help seeking pathways and service responses for young people experiencing FDV/IVP.

Digital infrastructure has been identified as an essential component of a contemporary system response.

This project

A youth-led co-design process to develop an Australia-specific, nation-wide digital "front door" concept for FDV and IPV help-seeking.

Funding sought: \$1M

Delivery stages

Over an 18 month project period:

- **Delivery Stage 1:** Set-Up, Governance and methodology establishment
- **Delivery Stage 2:** Implementation & Youth Co-Design
- **Delivery Stage 3:** Presentations and consultation

Set-Up, Governance & Methodology establishment

Key activities

- Appoint project team
- Determine roles, authority and interfaces between key advisory and stakeholder groups
- Onboard and induct advisory and stakeholder groups that will include young people and representation from diverse communities
- Select youth-participatory co-design facilitator
- Develop youth engagement methodology and workplan

Deliverables

- Governance charter
- Participation and ethics framework
- Agreed decision-making structure
- Advisory and sector stakeholder groups established
- Youth-participatory co-design facilitator engaged

DELIVERY STAGE 1

Implementation & Youth Co-Design

Key activities

- Convene Advisory Group consultations
- Recruit youth co-design cohort and deliver induction and training
- Run staged workshops with co-design cohort
- Sector stakeholder group information sharing sessions
- Engage technical experts as appropriate to guide and provide advice regarding technical feasibility of prototypes

DELIVERY STAGE 2

Deliverables

- Youth co-design cohort established
- Co-design workshops conducted
- Increased help-seeking amongst young people, as a result of incidental awareness raising during this process
- Digital help seeking model/concept developed based on views of co-design cohort, using local and international evidence
- Youth Co-design Cohort and Advisory Group validation of concepts
- Comprehensive Report of co-design process including:
 - Activities undertaken
 - Model/concept
 - Proposed next steps for design and development phase
 - Identification of potential partnerships with technology sector experts for subsequent phases
 - Recommendations.

Presentations & Consultation

Key activities

- Reporting and briefings
- Refinement and conclusion

Outcomes

System-level outcomes:

- Blueprint for digital help-seeking concept: recommendations for a youth-focused, digital help-seeking platform.
- Evidence-based, youth-developed model: Integrates Australian expertise and research with international practice.
- Sector knowledge and integration: Enhances understanding of youth help-seeking behaviour to inform broader FDV/IPV system enhancement.
- Identifies and facilitates connections across existing supports (for example 1800 RESPECT, Kids Helpline, Ask Izzy, The Line, Reach Out, Teach Us Consent) without duplication.

Participant Outcomes:

- Skill Development: Participants gain experience in teamwork, design thinking, research and advocacy.
- Empowerment and Ownership: Young people influence national FDV/IPV initiatives on issues that affect them.
- Enhanced knowledge of services: Participants learn about support options for themselves and peers.
- Networking and capability uplift: Young people collaborate with sector experts, gaining knowledge, skills, and connections.

Additional Expected Outcomes from this Project:

- Comprehensive insights relating to current youth engagement online and future considerations for FDV/IPV support in Australia.
- Digital content guidance and realistic prototypes reflecting user needs.
- Knowledge of State and Territory privacy and child protection mechanisms, to ensure consistent user experience.
- Culturally appropriate blueprint that includes perspectives from diverse youth advisory participants.

The Challenge

There is no national, accessible, youth-appropriate pathway for consistent information, safety guidance, or help-seeking for family, domestic or intimate partner violence (FDV/IPV)

The evidence is clear across national inquiries and research: **young people are not consistently being reached by existing FDV/IPV systems**. Despite policy acknowledgement, change has been slow, fragmented, and insufficiently youth-led.

There Are Insufficient Appropriate FDV/IPV Services for Young People Seeking Help Alone

While the adult FDSV service system has expanded at different rates in each state and territory over the last decade, **young people continue to fall through structural gaps**. Young people report being:

- Turned away because services are designed for adults
- Directed into youth homelessness pathways rather than FDV/IPV support
- Misunderstood or misidentified as people using violence, including criminalisation risks
- Denied agency and excluded from decisions about their own safety.

Gillfeather-Spetere and Watson (in their research for ANROWS) noted the unique challenges faced by children and young people remain unmet. Gaps are even more pronounced for young people in regional, rural and remote parts of Australia, who may not have access to any FDV/IPV-specific service at all.¹⁵

Binary adult-centric models that cast people seeking help as either “victim survivor” or “person using violence” do not reflect the realities of young people and can dangerously misidentify them, discouraging further help-seeking and entrenching harm. As Gillfeather-Spetere and Watson argued “Binary approaches... are inadequate for children and young people” and risk criminalising young people for seeking help.¹⁶

¹⁵ Gillfeather-Spetere and Watson. Ref 5. Page 44.

¹⁶ Gillfeather-Spetere and Watson. Ref 5. Page 51.

The service system currently lacks a single, national mechanism to:

- Provide a safe entry point to accurate and consistent information
- Provide a trusted source of service access
- Bridge disconnected systems
- Encourage and enable youth self-referral
- Reach young people where they already are
- Avoid criminalisation through trauma-informed and age-appropriate responses.

The current policy environment allows us to move to aligned solutions that are evidence-informed and embedded in lived experience. These policy settings are considered in further detail below, and make clear the following: **a youth-centred digital front door is required, and co-design with young people is the only legitimate way to build it.** A summary of recent policy supportive of a digital interface can be found at Appendix A.

The Solution

Proposed Project: Youth-led co-design to conceptualise a digital front door for young people worried about FDV/IPV

Evidence from research and inquiries (see Appendix A) indicate the need for consistent and cohesive **digital mechanisms for help seeking. Digital pathways will be central to the FDV and IPV service system, as Australia seeks to grapple with responding to the national emergency of family violence as well as preventing gender-based violence within a generation.**

Safe Steps seeks to undertake a youth-led co-design process that responds to the need for a digital platform and that centres their voices and experiences and is reflective of young people's preferred modes of engagement.

The imperative for a youth-centred digital response

Evidence suggests the future of help-seeking will not be telephone-centred.

People born from the 1980s onwards are considered “digital natives”. Research has found 60% of 18- to 26-year-olds dread making or accepting a phone call and 81% of millennials get anxious before making a call.¹⁷ This is at odds with current Australian FDV help-seeking infrastructure which typically requires someone who needs help to do so via telephone or attend a service in-person.

Safe Steps’ own history - as a 45-year-old support agency for people fleeing FDV - commenced as a phone line to support women and children to access Victoria’s women’s refuges. Over time, Safe Steps, like many other phone-based supports, have evolved to include live chat and SMS options. However, we know that we need to evolve further to be able to get support to the people who need it. We view this evolution as a way to not only support young help-seekers but to serve as a prevention mechanism, stopping inter-generational FDV/IPV in its tracks.

Young people are seeking anonymity, control over disclosure, flexibility and less intimidating entry points¹⁸ all of which can be provided through digital responses to help-seeking.

Currently, the quality, accuracy and relevance of online information varies significantly, and no Australia-wide tool or mechanism exists to ensure that youth-appropriate FDV/IPV information reaches them where they are.

The absence of an FDV/IPV dedicated, coordinated digital help-seeking strategy for young people increases vulnerability. Opportunities for prevention can be missed and the risk of homelessness for young people increases. Criminalisation of young people seeking help can occur through misidentification. Young people can also experience IPV and may choose staying in an abusive relationship or “survival sex” to avoid homelessness.¹⁹

Further investment in digital support is therefore essential.

¹⁷ Narelle Hopkin (Towie). Young people hate making phone calls – could it be hurting their careers? [Internet]. The Conversation. 2024. Available from: <https://theconversation.com/young-people-hate-making-phone-calls-could-it-be-hurting-their-careers-232167>

¹⁸ Fitz-Gibbon. Silence and Inaction Report. Ref 5. Page 67-68.

¹⁹ Prime Ministers Rapid Review Panel. Ref 1. Page 50.

Why Co-Design Must Be the First Step

A technology build that does not address young people's identified concerns with the current support system will undermine safety, relevance and uptake. Youth-led co-design is required to:

- Match language to cultural, social and developmental norms
- Ensure safety and privacy expectations can be explored and met
- Build trust in the format from inception
- Identify the digital spaces where young people truly engage, including negative and damaging content
- Understand how young people transition from information seeking, to articulation of concerns, to help-seeking
- Support young people who are concerned about their own behaviour and misidentification
- Ensure accessibility for diverse cohorts – systems designed to work safely for those who experience greater barriers will function more effectively across the broader population
- Explore various modes of interaction and resource sharing. This could include chat/messaging functions, quizzes, short-form video and/or gamification, noting that this is expected to change over time and needs to be a dynamic solution reflecting the changing the online landscape.

The youth-led co-design phase is therefore essential to deliver recommendations that are technically functional, **credible and effective**.

It is essential that First Nations governance will also be embedded in the process through existing mechanisms, for example, the proposed national Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peak body to address Family, Domestic and Sexual Violence.

The What: A specialised digital front door concept for FDV and IPV help-seekers

Across a variety of evidence sources, three consistent messages emerge:

- i. **Young people must be decision-makers, not passive subjects**
Effective responses must recognise young people as experts in their own experiences.
- ii. **Digital spaces are their primary help-seeking environment**
Evidence is unequivocal that young people prefer digital pathways - yet Australia has no youth FDV/IPV digital hub. Some existing help-seeking mechanisms rely on traditional phone-based services and adult-centric service models that overlook the needs of young people. Services are active in limited ways in the digital spaces and places young people use. This leaves a critical gap between where young people naturally seek information and where the system expects them to go for help. The social media ban for under-16s emphasises the need for alternative and credible sources of information.
- iii. **Systems must be connected, youth-centric and via relevant and accessible digital entry points.**

A digital “front door” is a long-term vision for a national, youth-centred digital help-seeking entry point and pathway.

This proposal is for youth-led co-design of a digital platform and information that will adapt to young people’s diverse realities and meet them across different digital “worlds” including social media, gaming environments, search platforms, messaging apps, content channels and web-based resources.

Youth-led co-design will test the need for a purpose-built digital channel that serves both as :

- A help-seeking channel, and
- A help-seeking asset and approach that enables early intervention at scale.

i) A Help-Seeking Channel

It is anticipated that a digital “front door” will provide youth-friendly information, pathways and links to existing FDV/IPV support services in the places and spaces that young people are (for example social media, gaming platforms, online communities) on mobile devices and bridging the gap between traditional phone-based supports (including 1800 numbers) and the digital environments young people use.

Young people already turn to digital platforms for relationship advice, mental health guidance, and peer support. Fitz-Gibbon’s work for the South Australian Royal

Commission into Domestic, Family and Sexual Violence found that young people learn key concepts about relationships online, which helps them interpret their experiences and understand when something feels wrong.²⁰

Internationally, the shift toward youth-centred digital systems is already underway. For example, services in Canada, Sweden and the UK are embedding support directly into **platforms young people use** (for example, social media like TikTok, Instagram and gaming environments like Roblox). These innovations respond to the reality that young people turn to digital spaces first, well before approaching professionals. This can be opportunistic engagement – driven by content that is promoted in their social media feed. Acknowledging the social media ban has changed which young people can access some platforms, it is envisaged that age-appropriate information will be available in alternative digital forms for under-16s.

Currently, young people have to navigate the following to get help:

- Fragmented, inconsistent and written-content heavy websites
- Varied-quality social content, some of which provide destructive and misogynistic relationship advice
- Adult-centred service web-pages
- Inconsistent and confusing information
- Platforms that are not interactive, preventing early help-seeking.

The result is a **dangerous absence of a single, trusted, evidence-informed digital resource/s** where young people can safely learn, explore concerns, and seek support.

Young people told Fitz-Gibbon in her work for the South Australian Royal Commission they need:

- “More consistent, accessible and evidence-informed content tailored specifically for youth audiences”
- Visibility on platforms they actually use, such as Instagram, TikTok, YouTube and gaming environments
- Information that reflects their lived realities, language and identities
- Direct pathways to youth-specific supports
- Digital options that feel “less intimidating” than phone or face-to-face disclosure.²¹

Fitz-Gibbon concluded that digital responses must be understood as core system infrastructure, not optional add-ons stating “digital support must be seen not as a supplement...but as a core component of any contemporary system response.”²²

²⁰ Fitz-Gibbon. Ref 4. Page 67.

²¹ Fitz-Gibbon. Silence and Inaction Report. Ref 4. Page 68.

²² Fitz-Gibbon. Silence and Inaction Report. Ref 4. Page 69.

ii) A help-seeking asset and approach that enables early intervention at scale

Depending on what the youth-led co-design process reveals, we envisage the asset will increase knowledge, risk awareness, and early identification of FDV (including unhealthy patterns in family relationships) and IPV (including unhealthy relationship dynamics) through youth-appropriate digital content.

Unlike crisis services, the platform has the capacity to:

- Normalise early help-seeking,
- Increase knowledge about healthy relationships and identifying problematic behaviour
- Cultivate language to articulate concerns
- Provide non-intimidating, confidential pathways to support
- Reach young people on the digital platforms they use – providing ‘opportunistic engagement’
- Complement and support existing services.

This approach aligns with Fitz-Gibbon’s work for the South Australian Royal Commission, that awareness campaigns need to:

- Appear in youth-used platforms
- Use accessible, relatable language
- Reflect diversity
- Provide direct links to youth-relevant supports.

This project will determine how those conditions can be operationalised.

Aligning with existing services and pathways

Critically, the proposed youth-led co-design process will consider existing services (for example Kids Helpline, The Line, Teach Us Consent, Reach Out, Ask Izzy, 1800RESPECT and Safe Steps) and explore how a digital response could integrate and work alongside current infrastructure. The value of this project lies in bringing together the excellent work already being done across the sector, while addressing gaps that currently limit its impact for young people. By considering and reviewing the existing infrastructure and understanding where it meets - or falls short of - young people’s needs, we aim to create a coordinated, digital solution that connects and amplifies these efforts without duplication, making them more seamless, relevant, and accessible.

Safe Steps acknowledges the calls, and need, for dedicated crisis and support services for young people. What happens after someone reaches out for help is critical. While outside the scope of this project, linkages to crisis support and services is essential.

The How: Youth-led and co-designed by young people

The proposed project will explore, using a youth-led co-design methodology, preferred functionality and how these functions could be realised. Based on existing evidence we will explore with young people:

- Knowledge of FDV/IPV
- Information-seeking preferences
- Privacy, anonymity and safety expectations, mechanisms that build trust, including embedded safety features to prevent misuse
- Current practices around engagement with digital content
- Language and tone that build trust
- Formats and features that are youth-centric.

Backed by what Young People Themselves Are Telling Us

Safe Steps' *Unanswered Calls* impact film has brought national attention to the lived experiences of young people who are trying to seek help for family and domestic violence but are unable to access the support they need. The stories shared in the film demonstrate the emotional distress, confusion and fear young people feel when they reach out for help and receive no meaningful response. These experiences mirror what young people have consistently told researchers, services and inquiries across the country: the current system is not designed for them and often fails them at their most vulnerable moment.

Alongside *Unanswered Calls*, Safe Steps has sought to validate what we have heard anecdotally in relation to young people's thwarted attempts to seek help. Findings of Sutherland and Lee²³ and Fitz-Gibbon²⁴ align with other sources to illustrate young people:

When first experiencing FDV and IPV have limited understanding and language to describe their experiences

Young people often do not recognise their experiences as FDV or IPV, sometimes until many years later. They lack access to clear, youth-appropriate information that helps them interpret what is happening to them.

²³ Sutherland and Lee. Unpublished. Ref 5.

²⁴ Fitz-Gibbon. Seeking help in their own right: Young victim-survivors' experiences of family violence crisis responses in Victoria. Ref 5.

Experience ongoing and systemic barriers to getting help

Young people report multiple barriers, including:

- Not knowing where to go
- Fear of not being believed
- Fear of the system or statutory intervention that would result in being separated from family or siblings
- Shame and self-blame
- Concerns about getting others into trouble if they reach out to explore the other persons behaviour
- Concerns about privacy and confidentiality
- Intimidating adult-focused services.

Experience exclusion from decision-making

A major theme is the loss of agency. Young people feel decisions are:

- Made about them rather than with them
- Driven by system imperatives, not safety or wellbeing
- Confusing, disempowering and sometimes harmful.

Some young people described being removed from protective parents or moved to unfamiliar environments without their own concerns being considered. This further erodes trust and discourages future help-seeking.

Report multiple missed opportunities for early intervention

Despite early disclosures occurring in schools, health settings, youth programs and community spaces, adults often:

- Misinterpret signs of distress
- Normalise or minimise concerning behaviour
- Focus on adult experiences rather than the young person's
- Overlook disclosures entirely.

Safe Steps' *Seeking help in their own right* research highlights that young people frequently experience a system not built for them, staffed by professionals without youth-specific FDV/IPV training, and constrained by rigid service thresholds.

Additionally, some groups face additional barriers to support and amplified exclusion. Engagement with traditionally under-served young people will be critical. Engagement methodologies will specifically ensure diverse participation.

Supported by International Research and Evidence

Former Safe Steps CEO, Dr Chelsea Tobin's global expertise and Churchill Fellowship Findings

Safe Steps brings a unique national capability to this work, drawing on extensive global insights obtained through our former CEO's 2024 Churchill Fellowship, which involved consultations with over **300 experts and organisations across Canada, the US, UK, Europe and Scandinavia**. Despite diverse cultural contexts, the same themes emerged across leading youth digital support models:

1. **Relevancy**

Young people seek “helpful help” in formats, language and environments that feel natural to them. Globally, this means integrating support into social media, gaming platforms, digital peer communities and mobile-first tools.

2. **Technology as an enabler**

Best practice models use asynchronous chat, mobile platforms, interactive self-assessments, AI-assisted triage and stepped digital care - to create scalable and youth-friendly help-seeking ecosystems.

3. **Dedicated youth spaces with wrap-around support**

International systems provide both physical and digital environments where young people can access holistic, anonymous and continuous support. Digital wrap-around spaces are emerging as a critical frontier for youth FDV/IPV.

4. **Youth-led co-design**

Every leading global example centres the voices, lived experiences and design preferences of young people. Youth governance, testing and continuous feedback loops are non-negotiable.

These findings reinforce the need for Australia to establish a **youth-specific national digital front door for FDV/IPV** - a digital “front door” - beginning with a youth-led co-design process. The Churchill Fellowship has positioned Safe Steps with the global knowledge required to lead a high-quality, evidence-informed project.

A summary of international models - including SafeLives UK, Kids Help Phone Canada and Unga Relationer Sweden - is provided in Appendix B.

Appendix A – What the Evidence Says Is Needed

The current policy environment allows us to move to aligned solutions that are Evidence-Informed & embedded in lived experience. Australia has a strong evidence base describing what children and young people need in order to recognise, understand and seek support for family, domestic and intimate partner violence.

ANROWS: Eight Priorities for Children and Young People

ANROWS' *In their own right: Actions to improve children and young people's safety* identifies eight priorities for national reform. Three directly support the development of the Digital front door:

1. Centre the voices, strengths and needs of children and young people

This project is a direct response to this priority: it embeds co-design, youth governance, and lived experience into every stage.

2. Design and deliver holistic, child-centred systems, policies and supports

The Digital front door is conceived as a **holistic, youth-safe digital ecosystem**—a single, accessible, age-appropriate entry point bridging fragmented systems.

3. Collaborate across systems to respond holistically

The Digital front door will unify disparate FDV/IPV information and referral pathways, promoting **interoperability and connection**, not duplication.

ANROWS also emphasises the need for self-determination in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander approaches (p.28). Co-design structures in this project will ensure inclusive, culturally grounded participation.

Royal Commission into Domestic, Family and Sexual Violence (South Australia)

The SA Royal Commission, informed by consultations led by Dr Kate Fitz-Gibbon, offered extensive insights into youth digital help-seeking:

- Young people use digital platforms for early exploration and meaning-making
- Quality and accuracy of online content vary considerably
- Youth-friendly language, tone and formats are lacking
- Digital contact provides anonymity, privacy and control
- **Text-based and online chat pathways are experienced as less intimidating**

Dr Fitz-Gibbon also identified specific design elements that require testing through co-design, including:

- mobile-friendly interfaces
- asynchronous chat
- integration with platforms young people already use
- relatable language and diverse representation
- mechanisms to ensure privacy, autonomy and choice

This project directly responds to each of these requirements.

The National Plan and National Framework

The National Plan to End Violence Against Women and Children (2022–2032)

The Plan explicitly acknowledges that:

- children and young people are *victim-survivors in their own right*
- early intervention depends on accessible, youth-friendly supports
- digital help-seeking preferences must inform contemporary responses

The Digital front door aligns with all four pillars of the Plan:

- **Prevention:** digital help-seeking tools, relatable language and youth engagement
- **Early Intervention:** centralised information, screening tools, self-directed help-seeking
- **Response:** safer pathways to support, system navigation
- **Recovery:** education, knowledge and connection to appropriate services

The National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children (Safe and Supported)

The Framework emphasises:

- listening directly to young people
- co-design approaches
- culturally safe, developmentally appropriate support
- integrated service systems

This project operationalises these commitments.

Domestic, Family and Sexual Violence Commission – Yearly Report to Parliament (2025)

The DFV Commission’s Yearly Report highlights:

- persistent system fragmentation
- lack of youth-specific responses
- insufficient participation of children and young people in system design
- the need to embed youth voice as *routine* practice
- an explicit recommendation to establish a **Youth Advisory Council** to support action planning processes for implementation of the next national plan.

This project creates a ready-made mechanism aligned with these recommendations - youth governance, embedded voice, and system engagement.

Prime Minister’s Rapid Review – Unlocking the Prevention Potential

The Rapid Review recognises that:

- children and young people are experiencing unacceptable rates of violence
- lack of youth-appropriate supports drives higher risk
- digital engagement is essential for prevention and early intervention
- youth services do not meet FDV/IPV needs
- young people must be involved in designing solutions

It states:

“...more young people were being consulted across Australia than were receiving appropriate, youth-specific services that addressed their needs.”

(Rapid Review, p.48)

This project directly addresses this need by moving from consultation to **implementation of youth-designed tools.**

Australian Human Rights Commission — Digital Front Door Recommendation

The Human Rights Commission's 2023 report, *'Do things with the information we tell you'*, emphasises:

- young people want government to act on what they share
- safe, accessible, digital entry points for support are essential
- high-quality youth engagement must lead to actual system change

The Digital front door is an evidence-aligned response: a digital front door for youth FDV/IPV help-seeking, guided by young people themselves.

Appendix B – Global Evidence Scan & Case Studies

Australia is not alone in confronting the gaps in youth-focused family, domestic and intimate partner violence responses. Around the world, governments and service systems are grappling with the same core questions raised by Safe Steps' *Unanswered Calls* impact film:

- **Where do I go when I have a question?**
- **Who is looking out for me?**

These questions cut across the full prevention continuum - primary prevention, early intervention and crisis response. And globally, the answer is increasingly the same: **young people are digital natives, and system responses are not built for how they seek help.**

In 2024, Safe Steps' former CEO Chelsea Tobin undertook a **Churchill Fellowship**, meeting with **more than 300 organisations, researchers, technologists and practitioners** across Canada, the United States, the United Kingdom, Ireland, Europe, and Scandinavia. This fellowship has provided Safe Steps with a uniquely rich evidence base and deep understanding of the global state of best practice in youth FDV/IPV response.

Across jurisdictions, the **same four themes emerged repeatedly**:

1. Relevancy: Be in the places and spaces where young people already are

International leaders emphasised that youth safety systems must be **embedded in the digital environments young people actually use**, not in adult-designed platforms or static government websites.

Young people are not picking up a phone to dial a helpline - and even if they did, services are not consistently equipped to respond to youth-specific needs. They are also not scrolling through pages of text-based information - and if they did, that information is rarely tailored to them.

International services stress the need for:

- accessible language (e.g., “toxic”, “controlling”, “red flags” rather than “coercive control”)
- youth-centred framing
- real stories, peer content, and interactive formats
- FDV/IPV information placed *inside* the digital ecosystems young people already inhabit (social media, gaming platforms, chat services, community forums)

Relevancy is essential to answer the first core question:

Where do I go when something feels wrong?

2. Technology: Use digital and AI capability to reach young people at scale

Global leaders are rapidly adopting digital tools - including asynchronous chat, immersive online experiences, interactive self-assessments, mobile-first websites, and AI-backed triage - to meet young people where they are.

Examples observed through the Fellowship include:

- natural language processing systems that identify distress in real time
- stepped-care platforms that enable young people to choose their own help-seeking pathway
- data lakes containing millions of real language data points
- digital outreach embedded inside platforms like Snapchat, Roblox, TikTok and Instagram
- chat-based support that feels less intimidating than phone calls

These capabilities directly align with the needs identified by young people in Australia and reinforce why the Digital front door must be built *as a help-seeking platform situated in youth digital environments*, not as another static government website.

Technology answers the question:

How do I get help in a way that makes sense to me?

3. Dedicated spaces with wrap-around support - including digital equivalents

International providers have invested in **physical and digital dedicated youth spaces**, recognising that safety, continuity, and wrap-around care are vital for sustained engagement. Some jurisdictions provide youth-only drop-ins, 24/7 hubs or trauma-informed digital ecosystems that mimic wrap-around environments online.

The Fellowship highlighted opportunities for Australia to explore:

- what a *digital* wrap-around space for FDV/IPV help-seeking could look like
- how stepped care can be digitised, from light-touch information to deeper personalised support
- how digital spaces can provide safety, anonymity and control - attributes young people consistently value

This theme speaks to the second core question:

Who is looking out for me?

4. Youth-led co-design: The universal foundation of effective models

Every leading organisation emphasised that contemporary youth responses must be:

- youth-designed
- youth-tested
- youth-governed
- iteratively improved based on young people's evaluation

This aligns strongly with ANROWS, the Australian Human Rights Commission and the Domestic, Family and Sexual Violence Commissioner's annual report recommendations.

Globally, co-design takes many forms - youth advisory boards, peer moderators, lived experience councils, youth-driven creative design, prototype testing and ongoing evaluation loops. Despite different structures, the principle is constant:

Nothing for young people without young people.

This reinforces the importance of Safe Steps' current proposal: a national co-design process with young people to shape the Digital front door.

Case Studies: Global Innovations Demonstrating What Works

The Churchill Fellowship also documented concrete examples of successful youth digital responses that Australia can learn from.

(a) SafeLives UK – “Draw the Line” and the “Your Best Friend” Hub

SafeLives' youth work addresses the critical gap in non-crisis support for young people.

Key learnings:

- language that resonates (e.g., toxic, manipulative)
- interactive tools where young users “draw a line” at the moment behaviour becomes unhealthy
- peer-to-peer insights (users compare their line to peers and experts)
- anonymity and ease of use
- a comprehensive resource hub designed for “best friends”—because **66% of young people seek help from peers first**

SafeLives demonstrates how co-design, creative digital methods, and youth voice can drive both prevention and early intervention.

(b) Kids Help Phone (Canada) – A world-leading digital stepped-care system

Kids Help Phone (KHP) reaches 4.7 million young people annually through:

- chat, text, forum and phone counselling
- self-guided digital tools
- an AI-driven triage system based on a **45 million data point data lake**
- peer-to-peer communities moderated and co-designed with youth
- integration into platforms like Snapchat and Roblox

KHP exemplifies scalable digital care, combining AI with youth voice to deliver rapid, relevant support.

(c) Unga Relationer (Sweden) – Digital outreach at scale

Unga Relationer provides:

- knowledge banks
- anonymous chat
- long-term digital support relationships
- social media self-assessments (e.g., TikTok relationship quizzes)

Their model was co-designed with over 200 young people aged 14–21 and reflects:

- youth language
- interactive assessment tools
- recognition that young people fall into distinct groups (victims, those using violence, peers supporting friends)

This shows how early intervention and help-seeking can be embedded inside social platforms.