

Looking to the future: Leveraging psychology to strengthen Australia's resilience

Australian Psychological Society (APS)
Pre-Budget Submission 2024–25

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Executive Summary

Pre-Budget Submission 2024–25

Integral to the cultural identity of Australia is our resilience and adaptability to change. However, we have seen this resilience come under strain recently against the backdrop of profound multiple economic, environmental, health and social challenges. Looking to the future, psychology has a crucial role in supporting all Australians to live a life that is healthy, secure, sustainable, cohesive, and contributes to the economy.

The 2024–25 Budget is an opportunity for innovative and future-facing investments that will enable the profession of psychology to enhance Australia’s resilience and wellbeing in the face of climate change and increasingly frequent disasters.

In this Pre-Budget Submission, the Australian Psychological Society (APS) calls for:

- The expansion of the APS Disaster Response Network (DRN) to enable it to proactively prepare communities for the impact of disasters.
- Continued investment in the DRN to ensure ongoing responsiveness to front line emergency workers and volunteers in communities impacted by disasters.
- The development of evidence-based school programs, delivered by school psychologists to equip students with strategies to cope with adversity and manage stress.
- The introduction of a Medicare youth mental health safety net to enable more young Australians to access mental health services in an affordable and sustainable way.
- The development of psychology-informed resources to support the transition of care between digital mental health services and professional-led mental health services.
- The provision of subsidised training and learning opportunities to help the psychology and mental health workforce to use AI to support their clinical practice.
- The establishment of a national panel of young Australians to understand the psychological and ethical impacts and needs relating to AI on our youth.

Representing the trusted profession for mental health, evidence-based research and practice, and community partnerships, the APS looks forward to working with the Government to deliver these initiatives.

About the APS

The Australian Psychological Society (APS) is the leading professional association for psychology, representing the largest number of psychologists nationally. We are dedicated to advancing the scientific discipline and ethical practice of psychology in the communities we serve, and promoting good psychological health and wellbeing for the benefit of all Australians.¹

Against the backdrop of a mental health, cost-of-living and climate crisis, our diverse profession continues to support people who need it the most. As psychology has evolved, so too the APS has expanded to meet the needs of our profession, and through it, the Australian community. Our most recent [Annual Report](#) shows how in 2022–23, the APS continued to innovate to ensure that we could be responsive to the current and future needs of the community by:

- Making more than **70 policy submissions** addressing a range of social issues facing Australians.
- Representing the psychology profession and the needs of our communities on **working groups, committees, inquiries and expert advisory groups**.
- Making almost **2,000 media appearances** across television, radio, online, and print to provide an expert psychological perspective on important community issues.
- Facilitating an extensive program of Continuing Professional Development including approximately 350 activities and **1,000+ hours of expert-led learning** for psychologists and other health and mental health professionals.
- Conducting **624 frontline and emergency workers' wellbeing checks** in the past 18 months through our Disaster Response Network (DRN). Our DRN has grown to 820+ members and we have now partnered with 10 organisations, including PHNs, health districts, local councils, community organisations and emergency service providers.
- Continuing to facilitate community access to timely and tailored psychological support via our online **Find a Psychologist service**, with over 1.7 million page views and almost 3,000 PsychEngage appointment requests in the past year.
- Developing and delivering new or updated **free resources for the public and psychologists**.

For more information about the APS, see psychology.org.au

The 2024–25 Budget

The multiplicative effects of climate change and related disasters, the cost-of-living crisis, and other ongoing social challenges mean that Australians are experiencing a high mental health burden which has placed strain on their resilience and adaptability, as well as the capacity of our healthcare system and psychology workforce.

Ahead of the 2024–25 Budget, the APS emphasises the importance of supporting our communities to develop psychological resilience to cope with future challenges and make the most of new opportunities. Consistent with the core wellbeing themes in the [Measuring What Matters statement](#),² this means an Australia that is:

1. Ready for the future and the impacts of climate change and disaster,
2. Unreservedly supporting the mental health of our young people, and
3. At the forefront of technological innovation in healthcare.

This is more important than ever with mental health and behavioural conditions being the leading chronic disease in Australia³ and governments' growing recognition of the impact of climate change and related disasters with the release of the [National Health and Climate Strategy](#)⁴ and the [National Disaster Mental Health and Wellbeing Framework](#).⁵

While our emphasis is on future-proofing the mental health of Australians, the need to take action to address the psychological impacts of climate change is an urgent imperative, with devastating fires in Western Australia, and severe storms and deadly floods occurring on the east coast as we write this submission. Unfortunately, the outlook is that these kinds of climate related events are only going to increase in both intensity and devastation on a global scale.⁶

A Budget that is truly future facing must include *immediate* measures to address climate change that recognise the role of psychology in building the resilience and wellbeing of all Australians and support psychologists to harness digital capabilities to streamline and upscale mental healthcare.

Two pillars for strengthening wellbeing and resilience

In this Pre-Budget Submission, we outline two pillars which will have significant positive and measurable wellbeing, social and economic impacts on the Australian community, both now and for the benefit of future generations:

Pillar 1. Improve

- our responsiveness to disasters and strengthen community resilience
- equity and access to psychological support and mental health care for young people

AND

Pillar 2. Innovate

- professional and digital mental health care using future-fit technology
- social and health policy by understanding the impact and opportunities of AI on young Australians

Pillar 1. Improve



Disaster preparedness and response

Australian communities need to be equipped to prepare for the future health and mental health impacts of climate change and increasing disasters. According to the [National Health and Climate Strategy](#) (p. 85):⁵

“To ensure people are adequately supported to deal with the mental health impacts of climate change – which include, but are not limited to, the impacts of climate disasters – requires action from all levels of government, health care professionals, service providers, and the wider community.

There is also a need to promote mental health and wellbeing and community psychological resilience in preparation for the ongoing climate crisis, such as by building skills for people to support each other in community settings to manage climate distress, and by increasing social connectedness.”⁷⁻¹⁰

The need to scale up the disaster-ready psychology workforce identified in the [APS Pre-Budget Submission 2023–24](#) is even more significant twelve months on with growing concerns about the impact of climate change.

Preventative actions and early interventions in response to the increasing number of severe climate-related events occurring in Australia, are critical to support our frontline emergency workers and volunteers to continue to respond when needed and to build resilience and mental fortitude in our most disaster-prone communities.

APS Disaster Response Network

The Disaster Response Network (DRN) is a network of APS psychologists who volunteer their time and expertise to provide targeted and evidence-based psychological support to frontline workers and communities following disasters. Members of the DRN have been assisting Australians through a multitude of disasters since

The DRN was first set up following the Black Saturday bushfires in 2009. The DRN has grown by approximately 17% over the past twelve months with some 820+ members who have completed the Disaster Support training now registered to support individuals and communities through deployment to areas of need.

In the past 18 months, the APS DRN provided:

- 624 wellbeing checks, and
- Escalations to support the mental health and wellbeing of frontline workers in a range of disaster situations - including floods, cyclone, bushfires and collective trauma events.

We currently have 10 Memoranda of Understanding in place with a range of organisations, including PHNs, health districts, local councils, community organisations and emergency service providers (e.g., the Victorian State Emergency Service and Australian Red Cross).

Proposed Budget initiatives

The APS is calling on the Government to expand the successful APS Disaster Response Network (DRN) to increase the psychological preparedness of communities by funding the APS to:

- Establish group-based psychosocial wellbeing workshops and community forums in disaster-impacted areas to facilitate culturally safe peer-to-peer, community-led recovery,
- Develop new co-designed psychosocial self-care resources on mental health and resilience-building for frontline workers and the wider community,
- Develop locally targeted programs to enable psychologists and other mental health professionals to proactively provide culturally safe, co-designed psychosocial support to communities in times of crisis, and
- Improve DRN deployment processes to expand its reach and impact, enabling easier access to psychological first aid and frontline worker wellbeing checks, particularly in rural, regional, and remote communities facing mental health workforce shortages.

Further, the Government needs to continue funding the DRN into the future to ensure the provision of proactive outreach and support for frontline workers in disaster-affected communities through:

- Ongoing access to a flexible, agile, and trained psychology workforce who are ready and able to reach the growing number of frontline workers requiring psychological first aid via expanded phone wellbeing checks, and
- Increased capacity for physical deployments by DRN psychologists to deliver face-to-face psychosocial support to supplement telephone wellbeing checks in higher-risk disaster impacted communities.

Psychologists are experts in trauma and its mental health impacts – from providing psychological first aid and psychosocial support following traumatic events or disasters, to treating acute stress disorder and post-traumatic stress disorder using psychological interventions such as cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT), exposure therapy, and eye movement desensitisation and reprocessing (EMDR).

Building resilient communities

Climate change has been identified as the biggest threat to global health in the 21st century and it is well established that there are both direct and indirect impacts on mental health.¹¹⁻¹³ Acute and potentially chronic health and mental health impacts resulting from climate change can include the trauma associated with surviving a disaster.¹²⁻¹⁴ The [National Disaster Mental Health and Wellbeing Framework](#) notes that “following a major disaster, a large proportion of the population will require some emotional or psychosocial support to cope with potentially traumatic events” (p. 14).⁵

Continue to invest in a disaster-ready psychology workforce to support our first responders and strengthen resilience in disaster-prone communities.

Two major challenges associated with providing emotional and psychosocial support to Australian communities are:

1. Having an appropriately trained and skilled mental health workforce, and
2. Strengthening community capabilities to prepare for and respond to disasters when they occur.

The APS DRN offers solutions to both.

Climate change and related disasters can be extensive and severe in their impact on the mental health and wellbeing of those affected.¹⁵ Evidence shows that mental ill-health affects not just those who directly experience a disaster, but also the frontline workers and first responders who care for and support them, as well as the wider community as it makes its way towards longer-term recovery.^{25,26}

More frequent and serious health crises result from climate-related disasters, including severe weather events such as those experienced in Australia over the past several years, and impact on community health and wellbeing in a number of ways, increasing the need for responsive health and mental health care. Proactive planning, including effective preparation for disasters and responsiveness when they occur is critically important.

In our Position Statement on [Psychology and Climate Change](#), we have highlighted the importance of taking preventative action to minimise disaster-related risks and intervening early to support mental health, in addition to disaster response and recovery. Yet prevention and early intervention in mental health are not being funded adequately in Australia, with the Productivity Commission finding that only 3% of taxpayer funds are allocated towards these activities.²⁷

Rural and regional communities, where there is already a disproportionate lack of an appropriately qualified mental health workforce,²⁸ tend to also have lower capacity for disaster resilience,²⁹ making it even more important for psychologists to support disaster preparedness and response readiness in these areas.

The current cost of disasters (estimated at \$38 billion p.a.) is likely to almost double to \$73 billion p.a. by 2060, even under a low-emissions scenario.^{16,17}

National investment in disaster resilience and mitigation activities is the most effective way to protect people and communities from the impacts of climate change related events. The APS commends the Government for the 2023–24 Budget measures to continue to support the significant work of the DRN – but it is not enough. Climate change impacts are increasing in frequency and destruction, calling for a growing need to be proactive. Resilience needs to be strengthened in our most vulnerable communities through prevention and early intervention to aid recovery by providing the right kinds of support – both pre- and post-disaster.

The APS acknowledges that through the National Health and Climate Change Strategy the Government “is working to reduce disaster risks and strengthen resilience across the disaster continuum – from response and recovery to overall risk reduction. The [National Health and Climate Strategy](#)⁴ will contribute to and support numerous other initiatives to optimise emergency preparedness, response, and recovery” (p. 32).⁴

The measures proposed by the APS will not only contribute to the optimisation of emergency preparedness, but they will also lead the way in terms of providing community-based psychosocial response and recovery and are consistent with the Guiding Principles of the [National Disaster Mental Health and Wellbeing Framework](#).⁵

The DRN provides a model for psychosocial support that recognises the significance of local knowledge, especially in rural and remote communities, along with the importance of cultural and environmental knowledge offered by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. The proposed workshops provide a level of flexibility and co-design that ensures that they meet local, cultural and community needs. Further, the DRN creates the opportunity for psychologists to support the mental health of other recovery partners (frontline and emergency service volunteers) when disasters occur, provides a means by which communities can strengthen their resilience to climate related events, and ensures seamless service delivery for individuals who need support to deal with traumatic experiences.

Youth Mental Health

Australia's young people need access to resilience-building resources and psychological support to maximise their ability to cope with current and future adversity. We propose a two-pronged approach:

1. To create an evidence-based APS-developed in-school resilience building program, and
2. To integrate a youth safety net into Better Access to ensure our young people have access to psychological support when they need it.

Evidence shows that building resilience and strengthening mental health early improves an individual's quality of life throughout the lifespan and results in long term healthcare savings.¹⁸ We know from the National Mental Health Commission that investing early in children's mental health and wellbeing results in a return on investment between \$1 and \$10.50 for each dollar spent.¹⁹

Not only is the cost-of-living crisis affecting our nation's mental health, it is also delaying or preventing access to mental health care. Recent survey results and media features tell us that many of our young people are forgoing psychological or other mental health support due to financial reasons.²⁰⁻²²

Increasing psychological preparedness for climate change and other challenges does not only improve mental health outcomes, it makes good economic sense.

Investing in our young people by building their resilience in the face of climate change and other challenges, is a national imperative. We want to partner with Government in two ways to give our young people the best resources to protect and improve their mental health and wellbeing in current and future challenging times.

Proposed Budget initiatives

1. Develop school-based mental resilience programs

Social and emotional wellbeing must be a core developmental and educational objective.²³ We know that significant numbers of young people are extremely or very concerned about climate change.²⁴ To help prevent this distress from developing into chronic mental ill-health, the APS will build a program to be delivered by psychologists based on the latest evidence to equip young people to cope with climate change and the potential for ongoing natural disasters. Being able to cope with adversity, manage stress, and enhance wellbeing are tools every Australian should have. Targeted school-based psychological strategies will build resilience, optimism, and confidence in our children and their parents and carers.

The in-school program will target a diverse cohort from different socio-economic backgrounds and locations and will include:

- Psychology-informed knowledge building and skills development with a broad community focus,
- Enhancing the impact of existing support structures by being delivered by school psychologists or psychologist-trained wellbeing officers,
- A thorough evaluation from the outset to determine its impact and opportunities for ongoing improvement and refinement.

School psychologists, including those with an Area of Practice Endorsement (AoPE) in educational and developmental psychology, are best placed to deliver this program or train other professionals in delivery (such as

Invest in our young people to strengthen their mental health, build resilience and minimise the longer-term impacts of climate change related disasters.

wellbeing officers). Recent inquiries including the [Review to Inform a Better and Fairer Education System](#) and [The issue of increasing disruption in Australian school classrooms](#) have highlighted the need for psychological support in schools to improve health and wellbeing, and manage disruptive behaviour. School psychologists are also well placed to help address addictive behaviours (e.g., vaping and internet addiction) by providing assessment and referral to specialised services, prevention and early intervention programs plus behavioural and emotional support.^{25,26} As outlined in our Position Statement [Psychologists in Schools](#), realising the potential of school psychologists to help create a fairer, effective, and more rounded education system has long been an advocacy focus of the APS.

In addition to delivering the program, psychologists' depth of expertise enables them to identify students, teachers, parents, and other relevant members of the school community who may need additional support. School psychologists are aware of local needs and vulnerabilities and can ensure integrated mental health services.

Schools are ideally placed to provide resources and evidence-based programs for children in a familiar and less stigmatising environment.²³ The proposed program could further address current challenges and gaps identified in schools by reducing disruption in classrooms and ensuring a fairer education system with support for all students' social, emotional, and mental health.

2. Introducing an immediate Medicare youth mental health safety net

Consistent with Recommendation 11 of the Better Access Evaluation Final Report²⁷ and our ongoing advocacy, we need to reduce the out-of-pocket expenses for 14–25 year old Australians so that they can access psychological care without financial hardship. The APS is calling on the Government to introduce an immediate 'youth mental health safety net' with the practical effect of reducing out-of-pocket expenses by providing higher Medicare rebates to subsidise Better Access sessions for young people. This, combined with

ACIL Allen's analysis for the APS Pre-Budget Submission 2023–24 showed a return on investment of \$3.45 for every dollar spent on the proposed initiatives to continue and expand the DRN and to develop a school-based program aimed at improving the resilience and wellbeing of our children.²⁷ ACIL Allen have confirmed that given the scope and budget of these proposals remains the same as those previously analysed, the ROI results remain valid for 2024–25.

an increase to 20 rebatable sessions for young people experiencing severe and complex mental health disorders, will ensure that psychological treatment can reach those who need it most.

The youth mental health safety net would immediately come into effect for any person aged 14–25 accessing Medicare psychology services. Specifically, a new Medicare Safety Net threshold of \$0 should apply to these services, drastically reducing the cost of accessing essential psychological treatment without expecting psychologists to bear the full burden of improving access. This initiative would mean that young people would be able to receive the care they need, regardless of their family's financial situation.

We need to support our young people as a national priority, with prevention and early intervention psychosocial programs to build their resilience, enhance coping strategies and provide a sense of optimism for the future. This will require removing barriers to accessing psychological care when needed.

The risks of not ensuring access to appropriate psychological resources and support for our young people include higher future health costs,¹⁸ poor mental health in childhood and lower income as an adult,^{28,29} and inequity in accessing essential psychological care.²²

Supporting youth mental health

In the context of tough cost of living pressures, the ongoing impacts of the global pandemic, and climate change and related disasters, we need widespread, proactive solutions to lessen these impacts on youth mental health and prevent distress continuing into adulthood. We need to invest in these two initiatives now because:

- Every year, **1 in 7** Australian school-aged children experience one or more **mental health or neurodevelopmental disorders**^{30,31} and nearly 40% of 16-24 year olds experience a mental health disorder.³²
- Two surveys have found that 21%²¹ and 27%²⁰ of Australians surveyed cite **cost or finances as barrier to accessing mental health support**. Another survey of over 9,000 Australians found 27% of respondents delayed mental health treatment due to cost of living pressures,²⁰ Young people are more likely to cite cost as a barrier than older adults.^{20,21}
- **Climate change** is associated with **significant anxiety** particularly in **young people**^{24,33,34} **and those living in outer regional or remote areas**.²⁴ Climate change anxiety is taking a toll on young Australians who are deeply concerned, and at times overwhelmed, by uncertainty or dread associated with the climate crisis.³³⁻³⁵
- **Natural disasters** have **short, medium and long-term detrimental effects** on mental health. A large proportion (80%) of Australians responding to a survey conducted by the Climate Council in December 2022 reported experiencing at least one natural disaster (e.g., heatwave, flooding, bushfire etc).³⁶ Shockingly, more than one-third of survey participants (37%) said there was not enough mental health support available to them.³⁶ Critically, climate change disproportionately affects people living in rural and remote areas.²⁴
- Alarming, pre-pandemic figures show that 1 in 5 **Australian children started school** showing **signs of social-emotional stress**.³⁷ Updated information demonstrates that COVID-19 has had a large negative impact on the mental health of school-aged children. Parents have reported worsening of their children's mental health as the pandemic has progressed, and almost three-quarters of adolescents reported declining mental health outcomes due to COVID-19.³⁸
- In October 2022, the APS conducted a **member survey** with **more than one thousand psychologists** responding to questions that showed an **increase in mental health issues in their young patients** compared with two years prior.
- The AIHW reports that "**suicide is the leading cause of death** among Australians aged 15-24" (p. 1).³⁹

Australia has a duty to invest in our young people to try to reduce these alarming statistics.

Pillar 2. Innovate



Psychologists and future-fit technology

Psychologists are leaders in mental health, and psychology is the largest mental health profession in Australia. Within Medicare alone, psychologists provided over 6.5 million services in 2021–22 (49% of all Medicare mental health services, and 92% of Medicare mental health services provided by allied health providers) and engaged with almost 1.3 million Australians.⁴⁰ Nonetheless, demand for psychological services continues to exceed capacity.

In preparing for the future, we must engage with both technological advances as well as the human experience and interaction with technology. Digital mental health services and artificial intelligence (AI) continue to evolve rapidly with direct effects on the mental health and wellbeing of Australians as well as the psychology workforce. In full alignment with Outcome 2 of the [Digital Health Blueprint 2023–2033](#), Australian psychologists and the APS are committed to harnessing technological innovations which improve equity, access and patient experience.^{41,42}

In this period of profound change, psychologists will find themselves at the forefront of the design, implementation and consideration of AI and technology for the wellbeing of the Australian community. The APS will be the trusted reference point for professional practice advice and innovation.

APS Initiatives in 2022–23

In 2022–23, the APS took active steps to ensure that psychology is well-positioned to make use of digital technologies and AI to strengthen the wellbeing of Australians.

- In 2023, we hosted an [AI & Psychology Members' Symposium](#). Internationally-recognised speakers from multiple disciplines explored the intersection between AI and psychology, considering topics such as the ethical considerations of AI for psychologists, the role of AI in therapeutic interventions, research and psychological practice, and skills and considerations for the psychology workforce.
- The APS made [a submission to the Department of Industry, Science and Resources consultation in 2023 on Safe and Responsible AI in Australia](#), pointing out that humans' interactions with AI systems are psychologically significant in ways which are often not recognised. Psychology and technology are intertwined. We look forward to working with the Government on the development and implementation of actions outlined in its [Interim Response](#).
- The APS continues to disseminate Australian research about digital technologies and AI to psychologists and the Australian community.
- The APS has opened up access for members to create detailed psychologist profiles on its online [Find a Psychologist](#) service, allowing potential patients to make more informed decisions about engaging in assessment or treatment.
- APS members have developed or used innovative AI-supported digital mental health systems in their practice to extend the reach of their services and to support evidence-based assessment and treatment planning.

At the same time, the APS is concerned about the potential for technology to solidify existing inequities and problems. Digital and AI-based mental health solutions that are not integrated with models of care based in human relationships and experience create serious risks of further fragmentation of services and knowledge.

Representing a profession that is deeply grounded in both science and humanity, the APS is uniquely equipped to work with government to develop our understanding of the psychological impact of technological advances and to develop psychology-informed solutions which benefit patients, health professionals, policy makers, and the Australian community.

In particular, the APS recognises our ethical and social imperative to understand what is needed to support our young people's wellbeing using technology, and to address the impacts of technology and AI on their mental health.

Proposed Budget initiatives

The 2024–25 Budget is an opportunity for forward-thinking investment in three APS initiatives which support psychologists and their patients to:

- Respond to and appropriately adopt technological innovations in their practices,
- Lead to the development of the next generation of digital and AI-supported mental health systems,
- Both build connections between the development of innovative technological solutions, as well as understand, appraise and evaluate the human and psychology impacts of technology, and
- Lead the discussion on an ethical and psychologically-informed human-AI interface in conjunction with world experts.

1. Designing innovative models of human-digital mental health service transitions

The APS calls on the Government to support the integration of professional-led and digital mental health services. The APS welcomes the Government's commitment to digital mental health services (DMHSs), including the [funding announced in the 2023–24 MYEFO update](#) for a sector-led consortium to modernise DMHS system navigation and referrals. While the APS looks forward to taking part in sector-wide initiatives, we also call for targeted funding to address looming gaps at the critical intersection between DMHSs and clinical service delivery by mental health professionals.

The full benefit of scaled-up DMHSs can only be realised if these services are integrated with the systems, relationships, clinical knowledge and place-based ecosystems in which health professionals work with their patients.⁴³

Recent Australian research published in an APS journal found that mental health professionals have a critical role in facilitating a person's informed decision to use a DMHS. That is, DMHSs cannot be considered as standalone services but are embedded within the mental health system.⁴⁴

As the Government drives uptake of DMHSs, it is therefore vital that they also support psychologists to innovate their practice to work with patients alongside different DMHSs, including:

- Patients who have previously engaged with a DMHS before seeing the psychologist,
- Patients who are finishing a course of treatment with a psychologist and may benefit from further DMHS support,
- Patients receiving adjunct support through a DMHS as part of treatment provided by the psychologist, and
- Patients who are simultaneously receiving treatment from a psychologist and support from a separate DMHS.

A common theme across these pathways is the need to ensure that there are clinically meaningful, person-centred and uncomplicated

ways in which a person can move between models of care (i.e., a digital equivalent of a 'warm' referral, and two-way information sharing between a DMHS and a psychologist). There is currently no authoritative Australian guidance, or a collation of locally-applicable clinical wisdom and evidence, to inform the design of these transition processes. Without steps to address this gap, avoidable inefficiencies, increased provider stress, administrative burden, and poor outcomes are likely, particularly within a stepped-care model.

The APS therefore seeks funding for an initiative to build the foundations for the future of a mental health system which combines the strengths of professional and digital services. The project would draw on the clinical leadership and experience of psychologists and psychological scientists, together with our collaborative relationships with other professional and lived experience organisations.

The project would include the following outcomes:

- An understanding of the technological readiness of psychologists to work effectively with DMHSs, and to identify opportunities for reform and support to minimise barriers,
- A distillation of the evidence about the intersection between DMHSs and professional-led services,
- A review of practice-based evidence about psychologists' and other mental health professionals' experiences of DMHSs,
- Resources for psychologists to help them work effectively with patients referred from a DMHS, or who would benefit from a DMHS following an episode of care,
- Guidelines and recommendations for DMHSs to facilitate a transition to professional-led support (e.g., standard handover procedures and information sharing),
- Recommendations to Government about regulatory reforms needed to facilitate interactions between a DMHS and health practitioners (e.g., privacy and information sharing considerations), and

- Sharing of key findings with psychologists, mental health practitioners and DMHS providers through resources and professional education opportunities.

Return on this investment would be achieved through the promotion of effective and appropriate use of DMHSs within the broader mental health system, which in turn increases equitable access to mental health services and reduces the impact of psychological disorders. Having psychologists and other mental health professionals accepting of, and familiar with, DMHSs also increases the efficiency and benefit of digital services alongside professional-led services. Promoting consistent processes across DMHSs reduces avoidable administrative burdens and friction points for both patients and providers, leading to benefits through a joined-up mental health ecosystem.

2. Equipping the psychology and mental health workforce for AI

The APS seeks funding through a Budget initiative to uplift the capability of the psychology and mental health workforce to use AI in the provision of services for the Australian community.

Our proposal focuses on the use of AI to enhance clinical outcomes and efficiency within psychologists' existing practices.⁴⁵ We envision a tailored and targeted model of capacity building and innovation which allows the entire workforce to be equipped, while also encouraging creative and cutting-edge innovation by leaders within the profession.

This proposal builds on the track record of the APS in engaging with the profession and community on the use of technology to innovate psychological practice, including through our 2023 [AI & Psychology Members' Symposium](#).

Specifically, we seek funding for the APS to:

- Develop and deliver fully-subsidised training targeted at psychologists' and mental health providers' level of technological familiarity and readiness for change,
- Design and disseminate resources for psychologists and mental health providers about the key technological, ethical,

professional and psychological considerations involved in AI use,

- Manage and deliver a small grant scheme for psychologists and mental health providers to develop, reflect on and showcase their use of AI and emerging technologies in their professional practice, and
- Create evidence-based guidelines for psychologists to be involved in the development of safe and responsible AI services and technologies, particularly those relating to mental health.⁴⁶⁻⁴⁸

Return on this investment would be achieved from efficiencies attained through the effective and safe use of existing AI technologies to support or complement the work of psychologists and other mental health practitioners. In particular, the use of AI to reduce administrative burdens and practice inefficiencies would increase accessibility, reduce service wait times and improve practitioner wellbeing. This initiative would also foster a mindset of innovation within the psychology and broader mental health workforce to develop contemporary, evidence-based and person-centred approaches to treatment which are supported by the responsible use of AI.

3. AI and Australia's Youth Panel

The APS calls for a Budget initiative to fund a psychology-led longitudinal project to explore AI-related mental health impacts and needs on young Australians. In the discussion and debate about the growth of AI within society, the APS has been concerned that there has been insufficient attention to the full psychological impacts of AI.

Recent research shows that exposure to AI, particularly as a substitute for human interaction, can have significant impacts on mental health, decision-making, communication, trust and engagement.⁴⁹⁻⁵⁴ However, very little is known about the AI experience of young people, and particularly young Australians, for whom the place of AI is likely to be increasingly embedded within daily experiences but in ways which are typically not well understood.⁵⁵

We propose an ambitious and innovative project to provide deep understanding, data and guidance to policy makers, health practitioners, and the community in relation to AI use and regulation. Psychologists are well-positioned to lead this work, giving their trusted status with young people and the opportunities afforded to psychologists to explore young people's experiences in depth, in the context of their broader mental health, and within a biopsychosocial context.^{56,57} This project will:

- Establish a representative and longitudinal panel of young Australians who are currently engaged with a psychologist and who have provided informed consent to take part,
- Equip psychologists to engage in routine data collection as part of their professional practice in relation to patients' AI experiences and needs,
- Reimburse psychologists for their clinical and non-clinical time involved in the project,
- Provide subsidised supervision to psychologists to reflect on and share their experiences about the impact of AI and technology on young people, and
- Facilitate appropriate connections to the panel for researchers (including psychological scientists) for direct research opportunities.

The anticipated outcomes of this project would be to provide much needed data and insights about the impact of AI on young Australian in a way which evolves over time as technology develops, rather than as a single point-in-time snapshot.

The project would provide a living source of information available to government, health professionals and other stakeholders in a way which informs social and health policy, the development of clinical interventions, and regulatory reform. The use of a representative panel would also provide segmented insights for key population groups (e.g. young Australians in rural and remote areas). Finally, this project would also provide insights which could guide the successful implementation of the [Australian Framework for Generative AI in Schools](#) and the forthcoming AI Safety Standard.⁴⁸

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