



Relationships Australia®

CANBERRA & REGION

2023-24

ANNUAL REPORT



Acknowledgement of Country

Relationships Australia Canberra & Region acknowledges the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as the traditional owners and custodians of the land and waters on which we live, work and play. We acknowledge their ancestors who first walked on this land and pay our respects to Elder past, present and emerging, for they carry the cultural wisdom, stories, traditions and dreaming.

Our vision

For all people in our community to enjoy positive and healthy relationships and wellbeing, and to receive meaningful support at times they are in need.

Our purpose

To be a trusted provider of relationship support services, counselling, mediation, mental health support, group work, restorative practices and case coordination to enable our vision to be realised.

Values & commitments

At Relationships Australia Canberra & Region we see, hear and understand our clients and community. We live our values through:

- ▶ walking alongside people, their families and communities with **kindness & respect**;
- ▶ being **inclusive** and warmly welcoming everyone to our organisation;
- ▶ committing to the **safety** and wellbeing of all people, especially children & young people;
- ▶ utilising **relational** and restorative approaches in healing relationships;
- ▶ **bravely** championing human rights and social justice;
- ▶ committing to work towards reconciliation with Australia's First Peoples through **truth** and story-telling;
- ▶ acting with **integrity**, being **transparent** and accountable.

Chair Report

As Chair of the RACR Board, it is my privilege to report on the progress made in the 2023-24 financial year.

This year has been a significant step forward with the operationalisation of the RACR Strategic Plan for 2023 – 2028. The Strategic Plan articulates five integrated priority areas, that provide guidance for organisational efforts over the next five years.

RACR is committed to shaping policy and driving systematic change for the communities we serve. We have collaborated with partners to address issues including loneliness, social isolation, and domestic and family violence.

Importantly, RACR has been strengthening our model of care to ensure the provision of holistic and evidence-based care for those accessing support.

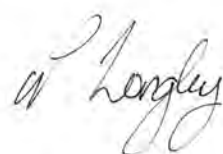
This year saw a significant milestone for our staff, with a new Enterprise Agreement (EA) endorsed with overwhelming support. The new EA brought enhanced benefits including leave options, salary alignment with the SCHADS award and a stronger commitment to cultural competence and staff wellbeing.

Investment in systems and digital capabilities have improved efficiencies, cyber security and the ability to make data-driven decisions to support individuals and families in the ACT and regions of NSW.

Significant work has been put into the optimisation of RACR's property portfolio demonstrating innovative resource sharing, service integration and extended reach.

Governance and quality improvement was a priority this year with multiple audits reviewing organisational processes. This included a formal audit of RACR's Board Governance, completion QIC Health and Community Services Standards accreditation, and headspace Wagga Wagga headspace Model Integrity Framework (hMIF) accreditation.

This has been a year of progress, innovation and growth. I am confident that we are well-positioned to build on our accomplishments and tackle new opportunities with the same energy and collaboration, building a brighter future for the individuals and communities that we serve.



Nicole Longley
Board Chair

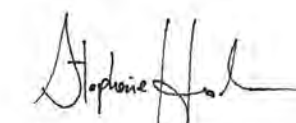
CEO Report

I am so proud of all RACR has accomplished this year. We have seen improvements across all areas of business, with the common goal of improving our clients' experience.

The commitment and expertise of RACR's Board has been instrumental this year in progressing towards our strategic goals.

This year we have seen growth in demand for counselling, family dispute resolution and gambling harm support services, as well as mental health support for young people through our headspace centres.

I want to thank our fantastic staff for this year of progress. Their dedication and resilience has been extraordinary. They respond with empathy, professionalism and innovation. Client feedback consistently highlights the life changing impact of their work.



Stephanie Hodson
Chief Executive
Officer

Our Board



Nicole Longley
Chair



Ewan Perrin
Deputy Chair



Gail Frank
Member



Paul Wyles
Member



Caitlin Stone
Member



Jodie Griffiths-Cook
Member



Ramya Balachandren
Member



Scott Ellis
Member



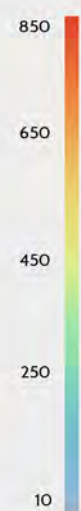
Ruby Sellings
Member



Saad Khalid
Member



Stephanie Hodson
CEO



West Wyalong

Griffith

Leeton

Narrandera

Coolamon

Temora

Junee

Wagga Wagga

Henty

Wodonga

Young

Harden

Gundagai

Tumut

Tumbarumba

Yass

Australian
Capital Territory

Goulburn

Braidwood

Batemans Bay

Moruya

Narooma

Bermagui

Bega

Merimbula

Eden

6

offices

12

outreach locations

32

programs & services

12,989

clients supported

Environment

RACR operates throughout the Australian Capital Territory, Murrumbidgee and Southern New South Wales regions. Services are delivered across metropolitan, regional, rural and remote locations through a combination of physical offices and outreach.

Our People

129

total staff members

Employment type

Full time

36.5%

Part time

63.5%

Workforce geography

Canberra

42%

Wagga Wagga

46.5%

South/Far South Coast

8.5%

Remote

1.6%

Cooma

0.7%

Goulburn

0.7%

Enterprise Agreement

In March 2024, RACR implemented a new Enterprise Agreement following a thorough bargaining process. Staff reached an agreement, with a 96% majority vote for the new EA which included improved benefits:

- paid superannuation during unpaid parental leave for up to 10 weeks
- increase of employee assistance program sessions offered from 3 to 5 sessions per year
- ability to access annual leave at half and double pay
- commitment for cultural supervision and cultural competency training of all staff
- increase of family and domestic violence leave from 10 days to 20 days
- a salary increase of 5.25% (on average) for all staff to align with the SCHADS award, plus an additional 1% increase from 1 July 2023.

“I feel great satisfaction when I can make a difference in someone’s life. Each role I have held over my 16 years with RACR has been meaningful and I have felt appreciated.”

- Staff member

Our integrated strategy

As outlined in our 2023-2028 Strategic Plan, RACR have five integrated priority areas guiding our work and contribution to our communities over the five year period.





Supporting our communities

At RACR we welcome all people, from all communities, and work appropriately and respectfully to meet their individual needs.

Our clients

272

identify as Culturally & Linguistically Diverse

934

identify as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander

932

reported living with a disability

386

identify as LGBTQIA+

Multicultural Council Wagga Wagga

In July 2023, RACR commenced service delivery from the Multicultural Council Wagga Wagga funded through a Domestic, Family & Sexual Violence Multicultural Community Grant.

Our embedded Family Relationship Worker improved access to services for Culturally and Linguistically Diverse communities as well as upskilling council staff in the area of domestic and family violence.

Service impact

A refugee health nurse provided a warm referral to our onsite Family Relationship Worker for a mother of five, Rosie* after she had disclosed experiencing abuse in the form of messages and stalking behaviour from her estranged husband.

Rosie was incredibly anxious. Her primary concern was fearing for the loss of her jointly owned home and being unable to support her children.

Through case management, Rosie was supported to put a safety plan in place and has started receiving Centrelink single parenting payments. She has an approved Staying Home Leaving Violence plan to fund updates to her home security and has connected with a financial counsellor to discuss options regarding her mortgage. Her husband has ceased his behaviour following a caution.

*pseudonym used to protect individual identity

First Nations communities

The term 'Dhunlung Yarra', meaning 'Tell, Talk' incorporates the languages of two traditional owners of country in which RACR operates. Dhunlung Yarra holds a special place at RACR as the way we support First Nations community members.

We engage with local ACCHOs & ACCOs to ensure members of the community have ample choice and access to services. Our experienced staff provide flexible, safe and culturally appropriate support for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, including options for outreach at a location where they feel most comfortable.

Living with disability

At the end of 2023, the Disability Royal Commission Counselling Service came to an end following the completion of the Royal Commission into Violence, Abuse, Neglect and Exploitation of People with Disabilities.

Throughout the three year period of the program, RACR assisted nearly 200 individuals in sharing their stories with the Royal Commission, and provided therapeutic support to approximately 300 individuals through case management, group work and counselling. Clients were not only supported to navigate the complexities of trauma, but also to heal and restore relationships.

Utilising learnings from the program, the Relationships Australia federation is committed to effective and sustained disability inclusions across mainstream services and within organisational culture.

Rural & remote communities

RACR supports people living in rural and remote areas of southern New South Wales through outreach locations in Cooma, Bega, Goulburn, Cootamundra, Culcairn, Griffith, Temora and Tumut.

Services aim to work with local communities to strengthen, connect and resource those residing in rural or remote regions to build and maintain respectful relationships. We draw on the local's resilient nature to promote connection.

650 clients accessed rural and remote support services

In partnership with the Temora Community Centre, RACR delivered a local Women: Choice and Change group program in May 2024. The program was tailored to be a flexible format with an enhanced focus on safety planning and the power of social connections.

Service impact

Mary* was referred to RACR by the Temora Community Centre following the sudden passing of one of her adult children. Mary was struggling with her grief and became isolated. Mary felt depressed and unable to navigate her emotions.

Through Cognitive Behavioural Therapy Mary was supported to process her pain and grief, and to adjust to a new way of living. Mary was also assisted to re-engage with the community through local recreational activities.

Mary maintained stable engagement and after 10 months Mary had met her goals and was able to transition out of services.

She has re-engaged with her friends and family, and shared that she no longer feels a sense of guilt for continuing to live her life. She feels that she has gained control of her emotions, giving herself space to grieve. She utilises coping mechanisms and skills to prevent the grief from overwhelming her again. Mary no longer suffers from isolation and has the resources to manage her depression effectively.

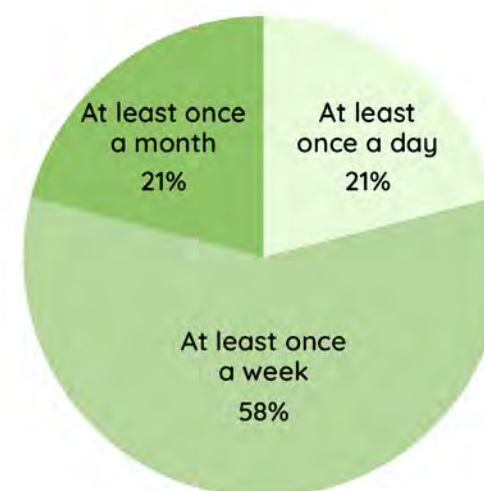
*pseudonym used to protect individual identity

Impacted by gambling harm

Through the ACT Gambling Support Service, we provide free and confidential support for people experiencing harm as a result of gambling, or are concerned for someone who may be experiencing gambling harm. Services include a 24/7 telephone support line, online and face-to-face gambling and financial counselling services, lived experience peer support, education and early intervention initiatives.

Group participants highly valued the sharing of lived experiences, which our team utilise as a way to reduce stigma and build a bridge between communities and our services.

When asked **“how often do you gamble?”** new clients responded:



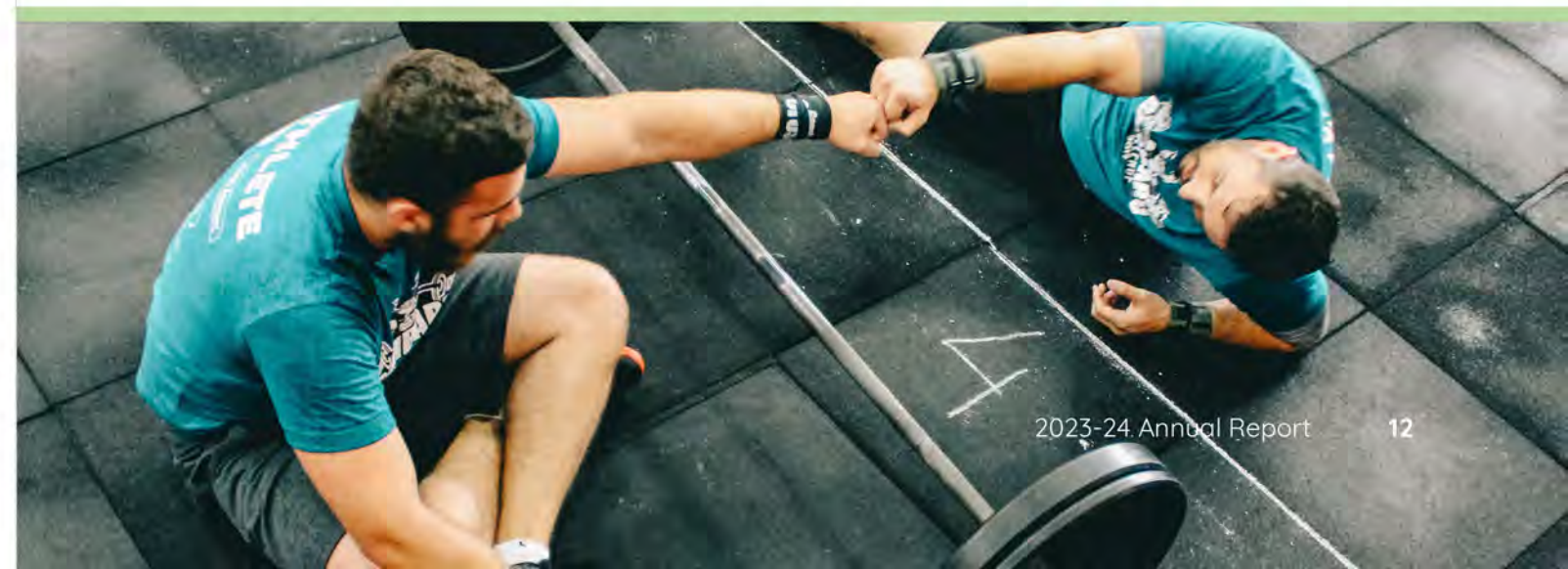
Financial problems continue to be the leading trigger for people experiencing gambling harm to seek support. Consistent with the increased pressure of the cost-of-living crisis, this year we saw 25% more financial counselling sessions than the previous year.

27% of new clients reported spending \$4,000+ per month on gambling

We have actively promoted the ACT Government Gambling and Racing Commission's annual campaign message:

“Chances are, there’s more to life.”

encouraging people to reflect on what brings joy to their life, beyond the bet. The campaign was an important reminder that while gambling might be entertaining, it can also lead to individual and social harm.



Supporting respectful relationships

We work to promote positive connections, recognising the impact that healthy and respectful relationships have on an individual's health and wellbeing. The importance of respectful relationships has become increasingly evident with the national crisis of violence against women.

Family Dispute Resolution

Our independent and impartial mediators help parties to reach agreements regarding their children's care or division of assets.

Our mediators assist parties to reduce conflict, negotiate outcomes and develop techniques to manage future disputes. Importantly, mediation supports parties to resolve disputes in a respectful way.

Through our Child Informed Practice services, parties are able to make decisions with their child's best interest as the priority. Hearing how their child is experiencing changes can help parties to come to arrangements that are the most beneficial for the child.

828

clients were supported through family dispute resolution

Children's Contact Service

The Children's Contact Service (CCS) in Wagga Wagga continues to offer a safe environment for facilitated contact between young people and their families following a separation or relationship breakdown.

The child-and-family friendly environment allows children to have meaningful interactions with their visiting family member supervised by experienced staff. It also provides a neutral venue for children to transfer safely from one family member to another.

"The staff are so supportive, without the staff I wouldn't have had the opportunity to see my child. I can't thank them enough for the effort they have put in and the care and consideration they have shown."

- CCS Client

Building Better Relationships

This year the Building Better Relationships group program recommenced delivery in the ACT. The 8-session program is designed for couples who want to improve their relationship.

The group provides practical knowledge and skills to build connection, friendship and intimacy in relationships, as well as exploring new ways to cope positively with normal life and relationship stressors.

81%

of participants felt that their family relationships were more stable

94%

of participants felt the group made a positive difference in their life

Service impact

Julie & Jake* registered for the Building Better Relationships group program with the goal of improving communication in their marriage and as parents. They were experiencing some feelings of invalidation, discomfort with partner's emotions, challenges with emotional regulation and arguments often becoming heated.

Through the group, Julie & Jake have learnt new ways to cope positively with normal life stressors. They were able to share openly with one another and come to an agreed guideline for conflict in their relationship.

The couple reported experiencing less and less gridlocked conflict through applying the healthy communication strategies they have acquired. Both Julia & Jake expressed their appreciation for the safe and supportive space the group provided, feeling that they were able to learn from other couples participating as well as the facilitators.

*pseudonym used to protect individual identity

Women: Choice & Change

Women: Choice and Change continued this year, with groups held in Canberra, Wagga Wagga and Temora.

Through the program women who have experienced family and domestic violence can develop skills and an understanding to help them move forward in their lives. It explores:

- the impact of domestic & family violence
- communication & conflict resolution
- regaining confidence, self-esteem & power
- safety planning
- equality in relationships.

The group also provided women with an opportunity to connect with others facing similar challenges. Participants were able to support, and learn from one another.

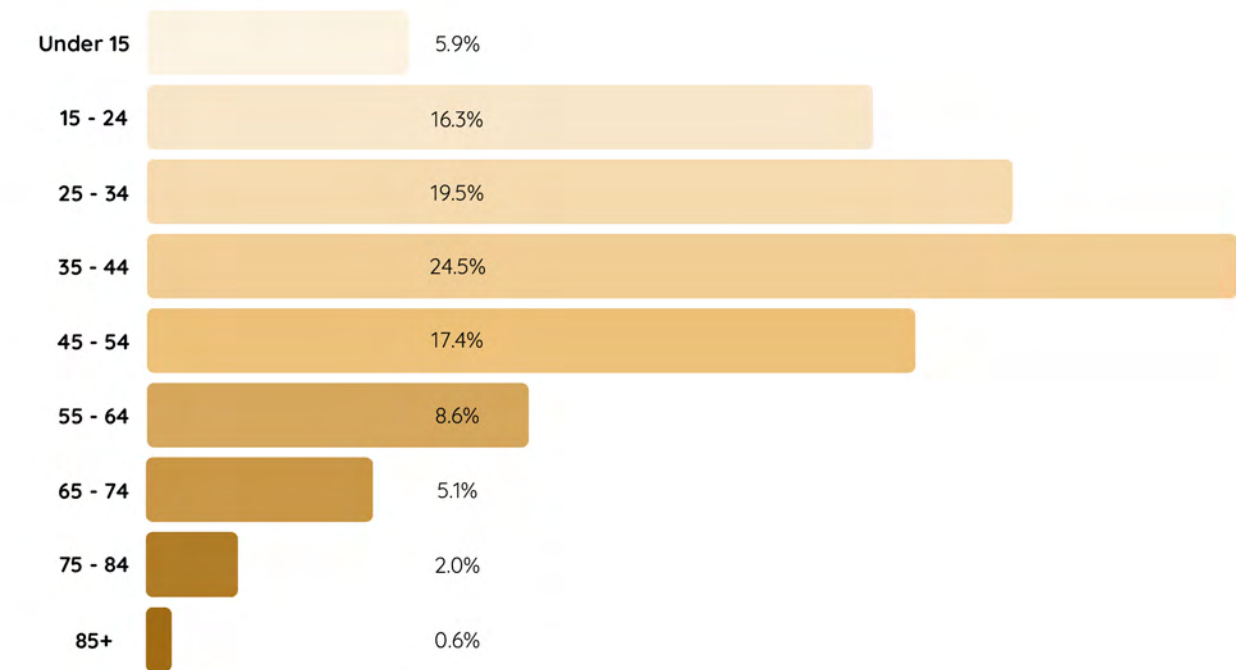
"I feel less alone and more connected to women who understand the impact of domestic violence."
- group participant



Supporting people across the lifespan

RACR is dedicated to providing an improved system of supports for people across their lifespan, meeting clients of any age with the same passion and commitment.

Clients by age



Children's Counselling

This financial year RACR has increased our capacity to provide counselling services for children and young people through the recruitment of two specialist children's counsellors in the ACT. Children's Counselling is also expanding to regions of southern NSW in the new financial year.

Children's counselling sessions are a safe space for your child to talk about any challenges they may be experiencing.

**more than
double**

the number of children and young people were supported through the ACT Therapeutics program in 2023-24 when compared with the previous financial year.

headspace

RACR is proud to be the lead agency for three headspace centres including headspace Wagga Wagga, headspace Batemans Bay and headspace Narooma.

Our headspace centres support young people aged between 12 and 25 through four core streams:

- ▶ Mental Health
- ▶ Physical Health
- ▶ Work & Study
- ▶ Alcohol & Other Drugs

headspace Wagga Wagga's annual youth mental health forum was attended by 23 schools and 245 students. As a part of the forum, young people work on a 'Take it Back' project where they plan for how they can advocate for, and address mental health in their school. We are proud to receive overwhelmingly positive feedback from the schools participating.

The Wagga Wagga centre is one of six to have achieved their headspace Model Integrity Framework accreditation. Their Work and Study team have also maintained good model fidelity for the third consecutive year.

Young Carers Connect

The Young Carers Connect online group program was a COVID Initiative funded by Carers Australia. RACR has successfully run two online groups, one for 12-17 year olds and one for 17-25 year olds, over the last four years.

The program was dedicated to young people providing unpaid care and support to family members or friends who have a disability, mental illness, chronic condition, alcohol or drug dependency, or are frail aged.

“It's not everywhere that you can find a group like this, and everything that made it really special. From advice, to an ear to share your worries with, to a simple check-up - it really does help someone get through another tough week.”
- Group participant

Gunners Place

In December 2023, Gunners Place Youth and Community Centre opened providing a hub for outreach service delivery and engagement in North Canberra.

RACR partnered with Barnados Australia, Multicultural Hub Canberra and Northside Community Services to develop the vibrant community centre. It has improved service access, allowed for collaborative approaches, strengthened referral pathways and increased awareness of RACR services in northern Canberra.

headspace Batemans Bay and **headspace Narooma** cover a 110km service area along the NSW south coastline, with staff working across both centres as well as an outpost site in Moruya. With limited transport in the area, there is an access challenge for young people seeking support.

A significant achievement this year has been the establishment of the Youth Reference Group for Batemans Bay & Narooma, a critical advisory body that actively shape services in the region, ensuring a youth-centred approach.

Max, headspace Batemans Bay's trained therapy dog, supports young people in the centres and out in the community.



Max, Therapy Dog

Senior Relationship Service

Relationships Australia has been working as a federation to advocate for increased funding for elder abuse support services. Advocacy highlights the over-stretched specialist support services that are chronically underfunded.

Despite under-resourcing, our Senior Relationship Services (SRS) staff have seen an increase of 15% in service events when compared to the previous financial year.

Service impact

Cath*, an 80-year-old mother and grandmother was in the early stages of cognitive decline and experiencing some pain and mobility issues. She was living alone with inadequate care or supports in place, before taking on a boarder with discounted rent.

Cath's adult child suspected that the boarder was taking advantage of Cath and raised concerns that she was exposed to drug use and risk of violence.

Since engagement, Cath is now accessing in-home support, the boarder has been evicted and safety measures have been put in place, Cath is also accessing legal and financial advice on her estate planning.

*pseudonym used to protect individual identity

92%

of SRS clients felt that we listened to, and understood their issues

66%

of SRS clients were better able to deal with issues they sought help with

Practice excellence and innovation

To ensure contemporary, safe and effective service delivery, we are accountable for the continuous improvement of practices. We actively engage in opportunities to partner in research and evaluation.

Safe & Together

In November 2023, more than 70 RACR practitioners across Canberra, the Riverina and South Coast of New South Wales completed Safe & Together training. The Safe & Together model is an internationally accredited, evidence-based model used to support children and families who are experiencing domestic and family violence.

The Safe & Together model is underpinned by three key principles:

- * keeping children with the protective parent - promoting safety, healing from trauma, and stability
- * partnering with the protective parent - allowing for the most efficient and effective service provision with the child/ren at the centre of every decision
- * intervening with the perpetrator to reduce risk and harm - focusing on the perpetrator's choice to use violence.

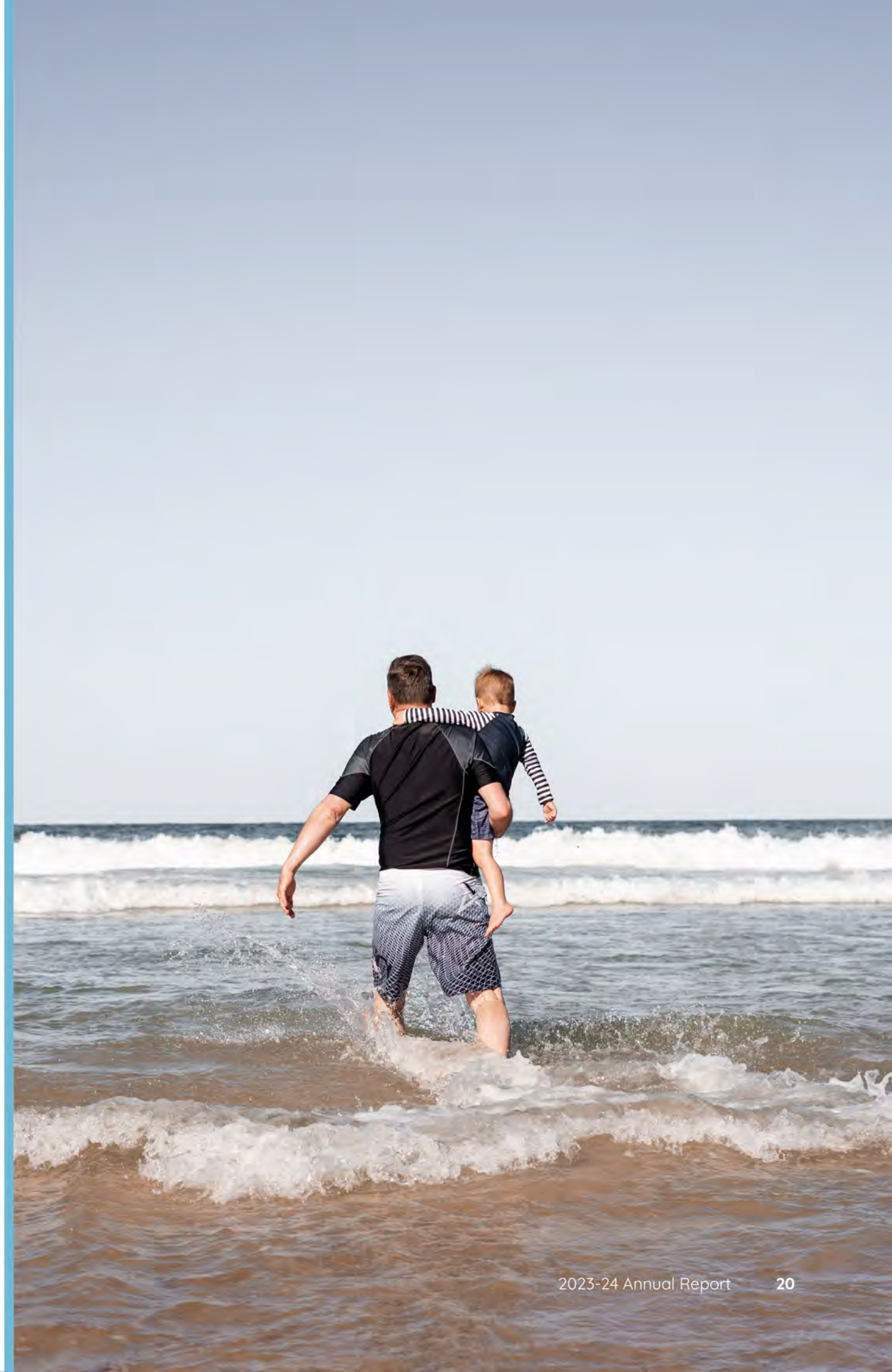
Practitioners were trained to use the Safe & Together perpetrator mapping tool in a wide variety of circumstances including when dealing with family courts or police.

ACT Loneliness Inquiry

In collaboration with Relationships Australia National, RACR provided a submission to the Inquiry into Loneliness and Social Isolation in the ACT.

The submission made several recommendations to reduce loneliness and social isolation including recognition of loneliness and social isolation as a significant public health issue, a whole-of-government approach to addressing loneliness and social isolation and utilisation of community-based interventions and support initiatives such as Neighbours Every Day.

A submission will also be submitted to the NSW based inquiry in collaboration with sister organisation Relationships Australia NSW.



Sustainable organisation

The sustainability of our organisation is critical in ensuring we can provide support services well into the future. Limited resources continue to be a challenge with a delicate balance required to meet community demand and increasingly complex needs.

Property

This year has seen changes in our property portfolio which have been beneficial for future sustainability including:

- consolidating property in Deakin ACT from two locations to one, increasing our service delivery reach by enabling more opportunities for outreach to other parts of the ACT
- purchase of building on Peters Street Wagga Wagga as the new location for headspace Wagga Wagga and future income stream
- the first Relationships Australia and headspace co-located office in Narooma NSW, sharing the financial burden of overhead cost as well as leveraging both teams to meet community needs.

Student Placements

In 2023-24, there were 14 student placements across the organisation.

headspace Wagga Wagga supported 10 student placements in social work.

Two counselling students were also supported through the re-initiation of a counselling student placement program in the ACT with the University of Canberra.

“ This placement was the best introduction to my counselling career and exceeded my expectations. I was welcomed and well supported by the other counsellors, had access to exceptional supervision, and had the opportunity to work with group programs and a variety of clients. ”

- counselling student

Staff Wellbeing

The Joint Staff Consultative Committee has had a new energy invigorating the consultation platform into a critical tool for the organisation to seek feedback from staff.

The Committee are looking at the development of a Staff Wellbeing Framework which will become instrumental for supporting staff in the workplace, particularly in relation to psychosocial hazards.

Financial Report

RACR concluded the 2023-24 financial year in good financial health with an operating surplus of \$923,000 however this was due to a capital grant of \$925,000 which will be fully expended in the new financial year.

