

## INQUIRY INTO FAMILY, DOMESTIC AND SEXUAL VIOLENCE

SUBMISSION BY:

MAYOR MARY KNOWLES, NORTHERN MIDLANDS COUNCIL, TASMANIA

### Addressing Terms of Reference:

**b) Best practice and lessons learnt from international experience, ranging from prevention to early intervention and response, that could be considered in an Australian context.**

On the 9<sup>th</sup> April 2020 António Guterres, Secretary-General of the United Nations, stated:

*“The COVID-19 pandemic affects everyone, everywhere. But it affects different groups of people differently, deepening existing inequalities.*

*Early data indicates that the mortality rates from COVID-19 may be higher for men. But the pandemic is having devastating social and economic consequences for women and girls.*

*Today we are launching a report that shows how COVID-19 could reverse the limited progress that has been made on gender equality and women’s rights – and recommends ways to put women’s leadership and contributions at the heart of resilience and recovery.*

*Nearly 60 per cent of women around the world work in the informal economy, earning less, saving less, and at greater risk of falling into poverty. As markets fall and businesses close, millions of women’s jobs have disappeared. At the same time as they are losing paid employment, women’s unpaid care work has increased exponentially as a result of school closures and the increased needs of older people.*

*These currents are combining as never before to defeat women’s rights and deny women’s opportunities. Gender equality and women’s rights are essential to getting through this pandemic together. Progress lost takes years to regain. Teenage girls out of school may never return.*

*I urge governments to put women and girls at the centre of their efforts to recover from COVID-19. That starts with women as leaders, with equal representation and decision-making power. Women’s leadership and contributions must be at the heart of #coronavirus resilience & recovery efforts.*

*Measures to protect and stimulate the economy, from cash transfers to credits and loans, must be targeted at women. Social safety nets must be expanded.*

*Unpaid care work must be recognized and valued as a vital contribution to the economy.*

*The pandemic has also led to a horrifying increase in violence against women. Nearly one in five women worldwide has experienced violence in the past year. Many of these women are now trapped at home with their abusers, struggling to access services that are suffering from cuts and restrictions.*

*This was the basis for my appeal to governments earlier this week to take urgent steps to protect women and expand support services. “*

In the Tasmanian context support for women wanting to leave violent situations is very limited in regional, rural and remote areas.

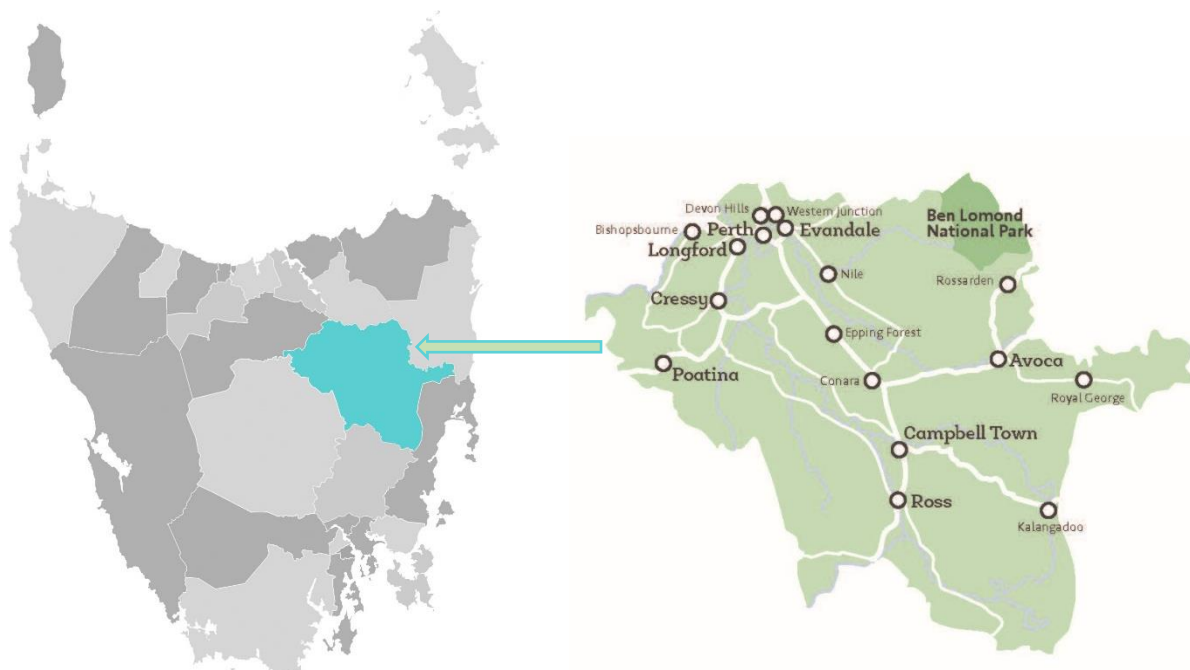
The isolation felt in family violence situations is fearful enough at any time, but the added longer isolation created by the coronavirus pandemic, coupled with no work, having to supervise children's schoolwork, lack of access to friends and family plus having to remain in close proximity to a perpetrator in a regional, rural or remote area, can leave a woman feeling helpless and unable to have any control over her life.

**In some communities intergenerational violence persists, with children growing up believing violence and disrespectful behaviour is a normal way to live and behave.** The concept of gender equality is difficult to instill in children during short hours at school if it is not reinforced in the home environment.

**One of the most important messages to women who remain in a relationship that is abusive, disrespectful and damaging is: "In staying all you are doing is teaching your boys it is OK to behave this way and your girls it is OK to put up with this behaviour"**. However, for a woman to receive this and other relevant messages from organisations such as 'Our Watch', they need to have somewhere they feel comfortable and safe to go where this message is given clearly, and they can realise its relevance to them.

Local Government can assist Agencies in dispersing relevant messages within the community, however, support is needed to make sure programs are delivered effectively and in a timely manner. The most effective way to reach vulnerable women is to have locations in the community, in the local towns where women can feel safe, know there will be someone to talk to in privacy and somewhere where they can network with friendly trusted people.

The state of Tasmania has the most decentralised population in Australia. The Northern Midlands municipal area is one of the largest and most diverse in Tasmania, covering 5,130 square kilometres and comprising seven main towns, ten smaller villages and a multitude of rural properties.



Places to go for organised activities, to have appointments with specialist services or to simply call in for a chat and a cuppa and ‘time-out’, are not easily available in our larger towns and only available in one of our smaller villages where a supportive church based community live. There is a hospital based supportive Community Health Centre at Campbell Town where regular group activities plus health-related specialist services can be accessed but nothing similar in the larger northern towns. However, none of the activities have been able to occur during the pandemic.

**Prevention and early response are essential if culture is to change.**

In other Tasmanian local government areas government-funded Neighbourhood Houses are available to cater for the community, providing safe friendly environments to seek help, friendship and support, and to run workshops and activities raising awareness, providing clear pathways to help no matter the need. This is an ideal environment to provide assistance to vulnerable women so long as all managers and volunteers are appropriately trained to recognise potential underlying abuse and that a woman needs added support, and they are not dismissive simply because the family is known in a small community and assumptions can be made.

The Northern Midlands does not have any Neighbourhood Houses and the need created by Covid-19 acutely highlighted this crucial service gap within our Northern Midlands communities. The council recently unsuccessfully applied for funding to establish ‘Pop-up’ Neighbourhood Houses in Longford and Campbell Town. Council has been informed that funding for new Neighbourhood Houses is not likely, despite the current pandemic situation.



Northern Midlands residents at Avoca can and do access the services of the Fingal Valley Neighbourhood House in the Break O’Day municipality, but this service is 28km away on a confronting windy road with log trucks, buses and large delivery vehicles. The main requirements have been for food and assistance with power costs during the pandemic and it is not known if family issues, other than lack of work and not being able to access Job Seeker, have contributed to their need.

***Sites of Neighbourhood Houses in Tasmania***

At Campbell Town the population is generally older, and many have immune issues and so are vulnerable and at higher risk should they contract Covid-19. Hence, many have literally locked themselves in their homes and when food has not been afforded, have contacted the service offered by the Anglican Church. Again, family violence issues are not being seen by

those offering this service, so it is not known if cases of family violence are hidden and women do not feel safe to seek help while in close proximity to a perpetrator.

**Historically in small rural towns issues such as family and sexual violence are often not spoken about and 'not anyone else's business', and even those who know 'something' is happening often do not speak up and claim "I wouldn't know what to say".** I have openly spoken about personally escaping family violence, changing my name and birth date in order to escape, and acknowledged that child sexual abuse was part of my experience. I know the Northern Midlands' communities well and have on occasions had community members approach asking for help for local women in more isolated locations.

**Prevention and early intervention must be provided.** Parents of pre-school children regularly attend Launching into Learning sessions in our larger towns. Liaising with schools to incorporate specialist Women's Services speakers at informal discussions at these sessions will reach young mums, sometimes dads and grandparents, in a relevant, safe environment. Older women would be more likely to access a Neighbourhood House, hence the suggestion that making these available in every municipality is a practical, relatively inexpensive and community accepted way to allow ease of access to information and services.

Specialist Women's Services, Rural Alive and Well, local sporting organisations and other relevant services can make introductions, give talks and make appointments, but more importantly have clear messages around equity and respect in a place welcoming to all community members and so capture vulnerable women who can be encouraged to speak out.

The Northern Midlands has two District High Schools where programs already occurring can be enhanced for girls by adding information regarding access to Women's Specialist Services and why these are needed, while being appropriately trained to be prepared for victims of abuse who may want to speak up.

**Women and girls from regional, rural and remote communities must be considered as deserving of these services as any women in urban environments, equity to all women regardless of where they live.**

c) The level and impact of coordination, accountability for, and access to services and policy responses across the Commonwealth, state and territory governments, local governments, non-government and community organisations, and business.

**Women and children cannot, and should not, always have to recover from the effects of family violence on their own. This is a community problem that requires a community wide response.**

Local government is uniquely placed as the closest level of government to the community. Local government can and does support, lead and partner in local events and awareness raising campaigns. Some councils have developed Family Violence Strategies that complement the National Plan to Reduce Violence against Women and their Children 2010-2022.

Many councils support White Ribbon initiatives and have placed White Ribbon family violence messages on rubbish trucks and street sweepers.

I represent the Local Government Association of Tasmania (LGAT) on the Family and Sexual Violence Consultative Group. While it is not currently possible for local government to provide or fund specialist services for women to assist in escaping or preventing family violence, **a coordinated approach, led by LGAT would seem to be the sensible approach to all councils working in a cohesive manner to support Tasmania's Action Plan for Family and Sexual Violence 2019-2022.** Such a role will need to be specifically funded.

Every council in Tasmania supported the Sexual Assault Support Service during 2019 by placing posters in public building foyers and public toilet washrooms that displayed simple straightforward messages such as: 'A short skirt doesn't mean "Yes"' and 'Groping without consent is assault'.

The Northern Midlands Council moved a successful Motion at the Local Government Association of Tasmania Meeting 6 December 2019: ***That Local Government Association of Tasmania advocate for the State Government to investigate the need for a Women's Shelter/s to be located in and to service regional Tasmania and other rural areas, to service the population across the greater part of rural Tasmania.***

Local Government knows local communities and is aware of the issues and concerns and lobbies for services where gaps occur.

**Access to services and policy responses is not equal for all women in Australia. Women in regional, rural and remote communities do not have the access provided to urban communities, and women in rural and remote areas are less likely to have affordable access to the internet and online support and there are still many areas with no mobile reception.**

The coronavirus pandemic has highlighted to the Northern Midlands Council the need for the services and community support that is provided by Neighbourhood Houses where women can call in, talk and seek all manner of assistance from mental and physical health care, food, transport or just to have a chat when feeling lonely, frightened or down. During the coronavirus lockdown the Tasmanian Government provided one-off extra funding for each Neighbourhood House to support the care they give communities.

However, the Northern Midlands does not have any Neighbourhood Houses so missed out on this extra support for our communities in terms of the funding provided but more importantly, it highlighted the fact that our municipality is not able to provide the obvious benefits that Neighbourhood Houses provide.

It is a worry that women who are isolated and find themselves in family violence situations made worse by the lockdown are not able to seek the help they need.



***Sites of Neighbourhood  
Houses in Tasmania***

To support our communities and businesses the Northern Midlands Council has adopted the 2020-21 Budget inclusive of zero rate increase, a Community Recovery and Care Package and other stimulus recovery initiatives estimated to cost around \$1.6m. This means that funding community projects such as Neighbourhood Houses and Time-Out Centres is not financially feasible. A \$29m Budget may seem large but when most of the money is government funding for specific infrastructure projects, and we are using reserves to top-up these projects, there is a limited amount left for discretionary use.

The Northern Midlands Council seeks to work in collaboration with other levels of government, non-government and community organisations to provide access to services that unfortunately statistics show to be increasingly needed by women. We put forward the proposal that Neighbourhood Houses are recognised safe environments offering confidential services and it makes sense for these houses to be the trusted community space for expanding and new services. Whatever model is decided it must be a sustainable ongoing platform that is trusted, where a woman's identity is protected and a place that will be used when a rural woman is seeking help and support.

**d) The way that health, housing, access to services, including legal services, and women's economic independence impact on the ability of women to escape domestic violence.**

The Northern Midlands Municipality is one of the largest municipal areas in Tasmania with Longford, Cressy, Perth and Evandale in the north and Campbell Town, Ross and Avoca in the south, plus ten smaller villages spread out across the municipality, from Rossarden and Royal George in the east, and Bishopsbourne and Poatina in the west. The Northern Midlands also has a multitude of rural properties.

**Access to health services and housing is increasingly limited as communities become more remote. Women living in regional, rural and remote communities or on farms are not able to easily access services without travelling to larger towns, and if not provided there, to city locations. Tasmania's terrain does not make this easy.**

Family violence is often only recognised as such when violence results in injury and police, ambulance or hospital services are needed. The build up to whatever has occurred may not even be seen by the victim as something that they should seek help for. **The shame and stigma sometimes felt when seeking help can be exacerbated by intergenerational disrespectful attitudes being normalised.** Situations are very likely to be worse during the lock-down period when there is increased fear and anxiety, women have the responsibility of teaching children, uncertain income and increased time spent in close quarters with a perpetrator. What happens 'behind closed doors' may only be seen when emergency intervention is required.

Stories, when heard, are horrific and one of the major inhibitors is the fear that "He is going to get me!" This is a very real and relevant fear and coupled with no money, no networks and no idea of what to do or where to go this can and does lead to women returning to sickeningly stressful situations. If a woman is not able to successfully seek help the first time she may be reluctant to try again.

Less interaction outside the home creates less opportunities for access to help. Residents in Northern Midlands communities have expressed concern for women who, in fear of the coronavirus, have locked themselves in their homes and had food delivered to the door by friends but have refused to open the door. Some of these women were known in the community to have mental health issues, hence the concern raised by caring community members – one of the advantages of living in a small town. However, if the risk of violence is also present, the ability to escape is extremely limited.

Helping Hand Association, an interdenominational church funded voluntary group in Longford, the Fingal Neighbourhood House in the Break-O'Day municipality and the Anglican Church in Campbell Town who offer some relief assistance have all reported providing increased food relief during the lockdown period. All the services noted numbers being down for seeking other relief such as housing and access to support and advice services. Again, it is not known if the lower numbers are due to people isolating themselves

and not venturing out into the community but it would be naive to assume that family violence issues are not present and not actually on the increase due to the current stresses.

The impacts of financial abuse and financial hardship are likely to increase in the coming months with further loss of employment and the pending roll-back of Centrelink payments.

There must be enough provision in place for women to access services when they seek support. With current limited ability to provide services it is important that all services where contact is made are trained and equipped to identify family violence, and know how and who to refer women on to.

Other than limited health services currently available at the Campbell Town Community Health Service, the Longford Medical Centre and Evandale Doctor's Surgery the Northern Midlands does not currently provide access to other services and residents, no matter how remote, have to travel to Launceston to access assistance, if they know where and how to do this. However, some Launceston services, although they claim to provide outreach assistance, have limited ability to provide for anyone other than Launceston residents.

**Women's Refuges are only available in city or large regional centres in Tasmania; there are none in regional rural locations. So, there are no places to escape to if a woman prefers a familiar rural location and prefers her children to continue attending a rural school.** The Northern Midlands Council asks that consideration be given to the establishment of a Women's Refuge in Campbell Town to cater for rural women from the Northern Midlands, Southern Midlands, Central Highlands, Break O'Day and Derwent Valley local government areas. Tasmanian councils supported the LGAT December 2019 Motion: *That LGAT advocate for the State Government to investigate the need for a Women's Shelter/s to be located in and to service regional Tasmania and other rural areas, to service the population across the greater part of rural Tasmania.*

**Also, the proposal to provide access to Women's Specialist Services in current Neighbourhood Houses and to provide for additional Neighbourhood Houses in municipalities that do not have these important facilities, is considered by the Northern Midlands Council as a vital and practical way to provide wrap-around community support to assist a rural woman to move forward in safety when she has taken the challenging move to step away from an abusive relationship.**

**Access to health, housing, services including legal services will promote and support a woman's mental health, economic independence and a better life into the future.**

However, if the woman's life is at risk, then a move to the city may be the safest option.



Alina Thomas, CEO Engender Equality, assisted the Northern Midlands Council in preparing a Discussion Paper to the Tasmanian Government to assist in the request from local government that a Women's Refuge be provided in a rural location for rural women in crisis. It is relevant to include this Discussion Paper here.

## Key Priorities for a Regional Women's Refuge in Tasmania

### Discussion paper

#### CONTEXT

Little research has investigated the impact of domestic and family violence within specific communities in Tasmania, and therefore the extent of the violence against women within regional areas is largely unknown however, we can draw on other research that describes;

- Women living in regional, rural and remote areas are more likely than women in urban areas to experience domestic and family violence (Campo & Tayton, 2015)
- Women living in regional, rural and remote areas who experience domestic and family violence face specific issues related to their geographical location and the cultural and social characteristics of living in small communities (Campo & Tayton, 2015). These include barriers to accessing service, higher rates of gun ownership, fear of stigma, shame, lack of privacy, social values and norms that suggest family violence is a 'family problem' and should not be spoken about.
- Tasmania has the most decentralised population nationally, where 'traditional gender norms in rural communities may be more narrowly defined than in urban areas' (George & Harris, 2015; Wendt et al., 2015 cited in Campo & Tayton, 2015) and act to normalise male abuse and control.
- Tasmania supports a large regional and remote population with 60% of the population living outside of the greater Hobart area. It is therefore imperative that family violence responses in Tasmania focus beyond the capital and other regional centres.

#### SUMMARY

Crisis accommodation for women who have been made homeless due to family violence is concentrated in the regional centres and cities of Tasmania (with the exception of Warrawee in Ulverstone).

The following discussion paper is a first attempt to describe a partnership between relevant stakeholders to develop a functional model that will support the establishment of a family violence refuge in regional Tasmania.

This model offers a prototype for small specialist service that might fill a service gap in support for at-risk people and the ability to deliver long-term, successful outcomes for women and their children

*Hundreds of Tasmanian women and children fleeing domestic violence are being turned away from shelters each month because of a lack of spaces, service providers say.*

*Hobart Women's Shelter chief executive Janet Saunders said demand for places had never been so high and not everyone could be helped.*

*"In 2015, we were averaging around 60 a month, that then went to 100 in 2016 and this year we are seeing over 200 a month," she said.*

*"In January alone we had 291 unassisted requests for accommodation."*

*At Hobart's two other women's shelters about 100 women and their children are being turned away each month.*

*In the north of the state, about 180 women cannot be immediately helped each month, while the north-west is only just coping with demand.*

<https://www.abc.net.au/news/2017-04-01/domestic-violence-survivors-turned-away-full-womens-shelters/8407478>

escaping domestic and family violence in rural Tasmania. The model is tailored from the “core and cluster” refuge model that has evolved in Victoria and is also used in South Australia and Western Australia.

The detail provided herein may be used to pursue funding and operational partnerships with Local, State and Federal Governments and can be utilised to inform further concept planning and service development.

## BACKGROUND

There are a number of attributes in the Northern Midlands LGA that combine to form barriers to women leaving family violence situations, including small, discrete ‘rural and remote’ population centres; a lack of affordable public transport, affordable housing, and specialist domestic violence services.

Without appropriate, long-term accommodation and support many women trying to escape the cycle will return to their abuser. Domestic and family violence has long-term and far-reaching consequences. Women who experience family violence face poor overall physical and psychological health and wellbeing outcomes, and children who witness family violence are subject to psychological and behavioural impacts, health and socioeconomic impacts, and the intergenerational transmission of violence and re-victimisation. The effects of domestic and family violence reverberate through the whole community. The lack of relevant services that respond to Tasmania’s unique population is inadequate and ineffective at affecting long-term change against a complex and pervasive social problem.

*Homeless service Shelter Tas estimated nearly one in five homeless people in Tasmania were aged 55 or older, and the organisation is seeing a stark increase in the number of women in need of help.*

<https://www.abc.net.au/news/2019-02-20/new-womens-homeless-shelter-set-to-open-in-hobart/10826930>

## COMMENT

Domestic and family violence is the most common cause of homelessness among women in Australia but the type of facility provided to victims escaping violence is just as important as having a roof overhead. Perpetrators of family violence control their victims over extended periods, affecting their autonomy, ability to make decisions, self-esteem and identity. A domestic and family violence refuge should provide an environment that helps victims develop or regain the life-skills and independence necessary to break the cycle and move past their traumatic experiences. A well-designed facility will create an environment for residents which is empowering, facilitating the development of personal life-skills and creating a strong foundation for the operational elements of domestic and family violence support services.

In respect to the opportunities that the former Ambulance site has offered, this model will allow for 2 units for families (one adult and 2 children), one unit for a single person and will also include provisions for overnight use by staff.

The priority target groups for the facility should be families with children, rural and remote women, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women and women from Cultural and Linguistically Diverse backgrounds. It is recommended that age-considerations are brought into effect in the design of the service model as older women needing crisis accommodation have specific issues which are often overlooked. While it is acknowledged that men may also be made homeless due to family violence the majority of local victims (or people need to move location) and those at greatest risk of being

subjected to violence should be the target priorities for this initiative. If the regional model proves successful it is recommended that it be replicated to support other target populations, in other locations.

The model of refuge identified as the most practical is a cluster of three self-contained, co-located units. A cluster model provides onsite support and independent accommodation for women and children experiencing family violence. A cluster model offers flexibility in a region of small, disparate populations and provides flexibility for medium term tenancies (beyond 6 weeks). The single site facility allows for privacy and independence, but still providing the support women and children need.

The Royal Commission into family violence in Victoria identified that cluster accommodation offers a viable alternative to communal living that presents its own challenges for women and children who are dealing with the trauma of family violence. The addition of care and wellbeing services offers a wrap-around approach to support women and children into safety.

#### SERVICE SUPPORT

This staffing model is based on the lowest budget that is required to support the safety and wellbeing of women and children transitioning out of family violence.

It is anticipated that proximity of the hospital will enable solid collaborative support to refuge clients including access to social work and other allied professionals. This collaborative model is an essential element to the successful running of the refuge.

This staffing structure allows for crisis intervention, prioritising safety and facilitating most successful outcome for the client.

- A staff person will be on-site between 1pm and 9pm, Monday to Friday.
- A staff person will be on call between 9pm and 1pm, Monday to Sunday.
- A staff person will be required to be on-call for weekends.

#### STAFFING AND DUTIES

##### Crisis intervention/Primary Support

- Ensure safety, risk assessment, safety planning
- Health and medical concerns addressed
- Basics – access to money, necessary identification and other documentation, children with plans to remain on return to education, food, medication, clothing

##### Secondary Support

- Case management
- Long term/transitional housing
- Management shelter dynamics between residents

##### Amenities support

- Cleaning and maintenance as required
- Building and service administration

Safety will be the priority for the service.

Rent income generated by the refuge will be allocated to support residents.

**h) The experiences of all women, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women, rural women, culturally and linguistically diverse women, LGBTQI women, women with a disability, and women on temporary visas.**

The Northern Midlands is a municipality with a wide range of rural communities from tiny mountain villages to larger rural towns servicing our extensive agricultural industry. Hundreds of seasonal workers on temporary visas are housed on-farm, in the towns or travel to work in this municipality. Many of these workers found themselves unsupported at the commencement of the pandemic and were reliant on small volunteer organisations such as Helping Hand Association in Longford, and local residents who give whatever support they could.

Unfortunately, as well as the stress of less work, very limited government assistance and no way to get back home, an increase in racial abuse has been added for some seasonal workers in Northern Midlands rural towns. This abuse has been witnessed in the street. Accommodation for many seasonal workers is a bed in a dormitory, a shared kitchen, sometimes no dedicated communal space for activities and certainly minimal privacy. They are working in order to send money back to their families so they can have a better life. It is natural that they, like anyone else, will take a walk and spend time out in the community.

Being subjected to additional abuse from local residents is an appalling experience for someone already suffering homesickness and loneliness. There has not been an opportunity during this coronavirus situation for Council to provide communal sharing events where cultures can be celebrated, and differences diminished, as would happen under normal circumstances.

Rural women, particularly those in remote or isolated locations, who find themselves in family violence situations are more likely to turn to locals and friends for help rather than to a city based service, so they can remain in a rural location. Seeking assistance from a registered service invariably means moving to a city or large town location which is often daunting and instils an even greater feeling of isolation.

The Northern Midlands strongly urges focussing on women from regional, rural and isolated communities when consideration is given to primary prevention from family violence, discrimination, disadvantage and other forms of abuse.