

Submission by the Australian Nursing and Midwifery Federation

Response to the 2025 Progress Report on Implementation of Aged Care Royal Commission Recommendations

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Australian
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Australian Nursing and Midwifery Federation - 2025 progress report on the implementation of Royal Commission Recommendations

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Introduction

1. The Australian Nursing and Midwifery Federation (ANMF) is Australia's largest national union and professional nursing and midwifery organisation. In collaboration with the ANMF's eight state and territory branches, we represent the professional, industrial and political interests of more than 345,000 nurses, midwives and care-workers across the country.
2. Our members work in the public and private health, aged care and disability sectors across a wide variety of urban, rural and remote locations. We work with them to improve their ability to deliver safe and best practice care in each and every one of these settings, fulfil their professional goals and achieve a healthy work/life balance.
3. Our strong and growing membership and integrated role as both a trade union and professional organisation provides us with a complete understanding of all aspects of the nursing and midwifery professions and see us uniquely placed to defend and advance our professions.
4. Through our work with members, we aim to strengthen the contribution of nursing and midwifery to improving Australia's health and aged care systems, and the health of our national and global communities.
5. The ANMF thanks the Office of the Inspector General of Aged Care for the opportunity to provide feedback on the 2025 Progress Report on Implementation of Aged Care Royal Commission Recommendations.



Overview

6. The ANMF has been a strong advocate for comprehensive aged care reform across many forums. In 2025, aged care remains a key priority for the ANMF and our members. While the implementation of many of the Royal Commission into Aged Care Quality and Safety's (the Royal Commission) recommendations, associated government legislation, and passage of the Aged Care Act 2024 by the Albanese Government represent key milestones toward the achievement of a truly world-class aged care system, much work remains to be done in the broader landscape of aged care transformation. The scale and complexity of the work involved in this reform is clearly not lost on the current government, which recognises that ongoing and sustained efforts are required to ensure that older Australians receive high-quality, safe, and dignified care that meets their individual needs and that workers are supported and recognised appropriately to deliver this care in a safe, effective manner.

Consultation Questions

1a. What are your impressions of overall progress with implementation of the Royal Commission's recommendations?

7. As stated in previous feedback to the Office of the Inspector General of Aged Care, the Federal Government has continued to make strong progress on the implementation of the recommendations of the Royal Commission) with a critical milestone being the passage of the new Aged Care Act (the Act). Rather than an end point, however, the beginning of the new Act should be viewed as the start of the next major implementation phase in the sector's road to reform. Indeed, as health and aged care and the needs of the Australian community evolve, this reform will require ongoing and continuous improvement and implementation.
8. It is evident that despite progress in implementing the Royal Commission's recommendations, workforce challenges in the aged care sector persist. Addressing workforce challenges through workforce planning and creating a sustainable supply should be treated as an area of urgent priority. There remains no comprehensive aged care workforce strategy to address the sector's growing labour shortages. With a projected



shortfall of 110,000 full-time equivalent positions by the end of the decade (Swerissen, 2024), addressing this must be a priority.

9. The existing Aged Care Workforce Action Plan 2022–2025 (Australian Government Department of Health, March 2022) is now outdated and a revised and robust workforce strategy is urgently needed to ensure sustainable staffing levels and quality care. Strengthening workforce planning would also help manage high-workloads, chronic understaffing, and poor workforce culture that continue to plague the sector. Without sustainable improvements these unresolved problems will hinder the effectiveness of aged care reform.

1b. What are your impressions of the state of the aged care system since the Royal Commission's final report?

10. Since the Royal Commission's final report substantial reforms have been introduced, including a new Aged Care Act, wage increases for direct care workers, 24/7 registered nurse (RN) presence, additional funding, and mandated minimum care minutes for nursing home residents. Reports from workers across the country, however, indicate that, on a day-to-day basis, this has resulted in limited change for both those providing care and those receiving it. Likewise, many reports highlight that some providers continue to perform poorly in relation to many targets that have been set by government to ensure the provision of effective, timely care including ensuring RN 24/7 and mandated minimum direct care time.
11. A key indicator of how workers are experiencing these changes is the staff turnover rate which remains high across the aged care sector. In nursing homes, turnover has been reported as high as 37.6%, while in home care, it reaches 41.9% (Sutton et al, 2022). Research by Thwaites et al. (2023) suggests that around one in four aged care workers leave their job after less than a year. Contributing factors include understaffing, heavy workloads, stress, and low job satisfaction. High turnover rates are also associated with negative outcomes, such as increased frequency of falls, infections, and low staff and resident satisfaction (Thwaites et al, 2023). To improve conditions for the workforce, and therefore to improve



the dignity, appropriateness, safety, and effectiveness of care for older people, the implementation of reforms must place greater focus and emphasis on the valuable role of aged care workers.

1c. What are your impressions of positive/negative changes to the aged care system following government reform?

12. Several positive changes to the aged care system have been observed following government reform, including:

- a. The introduction of a rights-based Act which also clearly defines the obligations of aged care providers.
- b. Strengthened regulatory oversight, with aged care regulators implementing more robust governance and compliance requirements for providers.
- c. Increased funding, with federal budget expenditure for aged care expected to reach \$36.2 billion in 2024–25 (Malbon, 2024), compared to \$28.3 billion in 2022–23 (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2025).
- d. Mandated minimum care minutes for residents in nursing homes, along with a requirement for RN coverage 24/7.
- e. A more structured approach to complaints management, including the establishment of a Complaints Commissioner within the ACQSC and dedicated whistleblower protections in the new *Aged Care Act*.
- f. An expanded performance indicator program, enhancing the granularity of performance data within broader financial, activity, and prudential reporting requirements.
- g. The adoption of a Single Assessment Service (SAS) to integrate and streamline previously fragmented aged care assessment processes.

13. While progress has been made, some concerns remain regarding the efficacy of the implementation of some of the recommendations.

- a. **Recommendation 19:** The existing Aged Care Quality Standards do not adequately



address workforce planning, skill mix, and staffing levels to meet the sector's growing complexities. Additional provisions should be introduced, mandating that registered providers must maintain sufficient numbers of qualified and experienced direct care staff to deliver high-quality nursing services. Ensuring appropriate staffing levels is fundamental to improving care outcomes, reducing workload pressures, and supporting aged care workers in providing the level of care that older Australians deserve.

- b. **Recommendation 24:** The Star Rating System has faced significant criticism, with many stakeholders questioning its effectiveness and relevance in accurately reflecting the quality of care provided to older Australians. The Commonwealth Ombudsman has particularly criticised the system, labelling it as neither meaningful nor useful in its current form. The ratings have been deemed by many to lack transparency and fail to provide a comprehensive understanding of care quality. While an independent review has been initiated (Egan, 2024), revisions are required to enhance its transparency, reliability, and relevance.
- c. **Recommendation 25:** While consolidating assessments under the Single Assessment Service could improve coordination, the involvement of private providers in the tendering process raises concerns about creeping privatisation. Public sector Aged Care Assessment Teams (ACATs) are crucial for ensuring high-quality, impartial assessments. Privatisation of this risks the overall integrity of the aged care system, as profit motives could take precedence over the quality and consistency of care need assessments.
- d. **Recommendation 40:** The increasing number of applicants and extended wait times for Home Care Packages remains a significant concern, with many older Australians facing prolonged delays in receiving the care they required. While the Government has suggested that the Support at Home program and the Single Assessment Service may reduce wait times (National Seniors, 2024), evidence suggests the situation has worsened rather than improved and greater reform efforts and funding prioritisation is required to address this.



- e. **Recommendation 86:** While the introduction of mandated care minutes has been a positive step towards improving quality aged care in Australia, several issues with its implementation remain:
- i. The role of enrolled nurses (ENs) in aged care remains undervalued. Despite being integral members of the nursing team, ENs were largely overlooked in the Royal Commission's final report and recommendations, risking the marginalisation of this vital component of the aged care workforce. Currently, providers can meet up to 10 per cent (4 minutes and 24 seconds) of the daily direct care minutes previously only able to be delivered by RNs with ENs. While EN care time contributes to overall direct care minutes, beyond that 10 per cent, this time is counted identically as through it were provided by care workers despite the two roles being distinctly different in terms of education, regulation, and scope of practice. In many nursing homes, this situation has resulted in the substitution of ENs by unregulated carers. ENs are essential to ensuring high-quality care, and their role should be explicitly recognised in care minutes mandates by establishing separate direct care time requirements.
 - ii. Despite mandated minimum care minutes, up to 60 per cent of providers fail to meet targets (COTA, 3 October 2024). This situation reflects structural issues in aged care workforce planning and utilisation with many providers appearing hesitant, unwilling, or unable to address such issues. The increased scrutiny by ACQSC and the use of enforceable undertakings is a positive step, but the regulatory body must be adequately resourced to enforce compliance effectively (ACQCS, 13 January 2025).
 - iii. The new Act continues to permit exemptions for RN 24/7 requirements in certain circumstances. However, this approach is a temporary measure that fails to address the root cause of workforce shortages. Rather than relying on exemptions, the government and regulators should focus on understanding and addressing underlying recruitment and retention issues.



iv. There is currently no plan to further increase care minutes beyond the Royal Commission's recommendations. As mandated care minutes represent a minimum requirement, there is a need for progressive increases in care minutes to ensure that aged care providers continue to meet the growing needs of an aging population.

f. **Recommendation 99:** The effectiveness of whistleblower provisions under the Aged Care Act remains uncertain. Significant barriers remain including fear of retaliation and lack of support, which could undermine confidence in the system. The removal of provisions for a Worker Voice and Quality Care Advisory Body in the Aged Care Act is a missed opportunity to integrate frontline worker insights into regulatory and operational improvements. Such a body would have enhanced transparency, accountability, and real-time risk identification and supported the work of aged care regulators.

2. Has the Government undertaken sufficient consultations in the development/ implementation of its reform agenda? Has there been sufficient transparency around the Government's reforms? Is the level of support being provided enough to ensure an effective transition to a new system?

14. Given the scale of both the Royal Commission and subsequent work flowing from the Commission's recommendations, ensuring that there has been sufficient and appropriate consultation has been a significant undertaking. While it is appreciated that the development of such a large and complex volume of detailed outputs is challenging, it remains important that opportunities for early and in-depth consideration and consultation is provided to ensure that reforms remain fit for purpose.

15. To ensure an effective transition to the new aged care system, ongoing commitment to reforms, adequate resourcing, and long-term sustainability are essential. This requires ongoing, bipartisan support from the Government, stakeholders, and regulators. Clear and consistent communication about the changes must be delivered to the public, workers, and service providers, while also providing necessary support to help providers meet their



expanded responsibilities. These actions are critical to ensuring the success of the transition and the long-term viability of the reformed system.

3. To what extent have the Government's reforms supported the establishment of a rights-based, person-centred aged care system? Will those reforms move the aged care system away from one focussed primarily on providers to one that puts older Australians and their needs first? If not, what needs to happen to facilitate that change?
16. The rights-based and person-centred approach to the new Act is a positive progression, however, given the systemic issues identified by the Royal Commission, sustained effort is required to ensure that these ideals are translated into practice. The Act will establish the new standard and expectation. It is therefore essential that the Government and regulators use the mechanisms at their disposal to drive this change and ensure provider compliance and integration of these practices into day-to-day operations.
17. To ensure the successful transition from an aged care system that focusses primarily on providers to one that puts older Australians and their needs first, several actions are required to facilitate this change, including:
- a. Implementing a sustained, adequately resourced, and funded change management process that actively rewards positive progress while enforcing sanctions for non-compliance. This process must be ongoing to ensure lasting transformation.
 - b. Acknowledging that meaningful change is impossible without a skilled, well-supported and fit-for-purpose workforce. This workforce development must also extend to strengthening the management, leadership, and governance capabilities within aged care service providers, as these areas are often underdeveloped compared to those in the healthcare sector – particularly in private for-profit aged care.
 - c. Creating, resourcing, and maintaining a robust regulatory framework that incorporates the lessons learned from past inquiries and the Royal Commission. This will help to prevent previous regulatory failures from recurring.



4. Have existing reforms been sufficient in creating an aged care system which can meet individuals' needs regardless of their backgrounds or circumstances? Alternatively, or do they continue to treat diverse populations as an 'add on' to mainstream populations?

18. It is likely too early to assess whether existing reforms have been sufficient in creating an aged care system which can meet individuals' needs regardless of their backgrounds or circumstances. The Royal Commission highlighted a sector culture that has not focused on meeting individual needs and addressing diversity. As such, the measures needed to drive sustained change will take time to fully integrate into the day-to-day operations of aged care. Continuing to treat diverse groups as an "add-on" risk perpetuating the marginalisation that these groups often experience, both in aged care and in society more broadly. For any aged care system to genuinely meet individual needs, it must, by extension, address the specific needs of diverse groups. Failing to do so may lead to the compartmentalisation of care, where some individuals receive more benefits than others.

19. While it is understood that this question is likely intended to be predominantly focussed on the population of older people receiving aged care, similar questions could be posed regarding the system's treatment and ethos towards those who work in the aged care sector. People who work in aged care are themselves a diverse population from a range of cultures, backgrounds, and education qualifications. Again, it is early to judge the degree to which current reforms have met the unique and varying needs of this population as individuals and workers but many reforms to date such as those that have improved wages and conditions for workers have paved the way to ensuring that members of the diverse workforce are considered as part of a wider community of individuals committed to working to support and enhance the delivery of care and services to older people.

5. Have new systems improved consumer understanding (e.g., star ratings) and timely access to aged care services (e.g., care finders)? Why/why not?

20. New systems, such as the Star Ratings, while well intentioned, have fallen short of their aims to improve consumer understanding and decision making. As previously mentioned, the adequacy and utility of the Start Rating System is currently under question (Jilek, 2023), with



an external review of the system being undertaken on behalf of the DoHAC by Allen and Clarke Consulting (Eagan, 2024). This criticism has centred around issues such as:

- a. A lack of correlation between the overall star rating and the actual performance of aged care services.
- b. A weak link between the Quality Measures rating and a service's ability to meet minimum standards.
- c. A minimal connection between the Resident Experience rating and the actual experiences of residents.
- d. Insufficient vetting of provider-reported staffing levels (Jilek, 2023).

21. The ANMF has highlighted many issues regarding the star rating system over the years in various submissions. Given these concerns, it is premature to adopt and promote the Star Ratings System as a definitive source of information for consumer decision-making. Further, there is widespread community concern regarding the accessibility of My Aged Care, which impedes public engagement with the star ratings and contributes to a general lack of awareness (Neeland, 2024). It is hoped that the current external review of the Star Ratings System will lead to the development of a more effective and sustainable system, ensuring it is fit for its intended purpose.

6. Do you think that intended reforms to how the system is regulated will be sufficient to uphold the vision of the Royal Commission?

22. The strengthening of the Aged Care Regulatory Framework since the completion of the Aged Care Royal Commission is a welcomed reform. Increased transparency, oversight, and accountability within the sector have long been central to the ANMF's aged care campaign, and it is encouraging to see positive progress in these areas. For regulatory mechanisms to function effectively, however, ongoing government support for a robust regulatory system must be maintained across political terms and aged care regulatory bodies must be equipped with the necessary human, material, and financial resources to carry out their legislated functions. These resources should be treated as a long-term investment. Failure to adequately resource the regulatory system risks undermining sustainable long-term reform.



Conclusion

23. While, overall, reforms occurring out of the Royal Commission have positively affected the aged care sector, improving the quality of care, and directing focus towards a person-centred and rights based approach, further work is required. Regulation and oversight of implemented reforms are required to ensure that that remain consistent with the Royal Commission's vision and the needs of older Australians and the aged care workforce.
24. The current process of aged care reform is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity for lasting change and all efforts must be made to ensure that this reform is meaningful, successful and sustainable. It would be truly disappointing if any faltering of the reform process were to lead to yet another Royal Commission at some point in the future. The ANMF looks forward to working with the Commonwealth Government, our members, and other stakeholders in the continuing efforts to reform Australia's aged care sector.



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