

17 October 2025

Office of the Victims' Commissioner
GPO Box 149,
Brisbane, Qld 4001

Submission: Review of the Queensland Charter of Victims' Rights

To whom it may concern,

We thank you for the opportunity to a submission in relation to the Review of the Queensland Charter of Victims' Rights.

As an agency dedicated to the prevention of sexual harm against children and young people, Bravehearts is committed not only to creating safer environments but also to ensuring that the voices, rights, and wellbeing of victims are recognised and upheld. Central to our mission is the belief that robust, well-informed systems are essential for protecting children and young people from harm. In this context, we strongly support this comprehensive review of the Charter of Victims' Rights. Such a review provides a crucial opportunity to strengthen the frameworks that safeguard victims, ensuring that their rights are clearly defined, respected, and actively promoted. By enhancing these protections, the review can help ensure that victims of sexual harm, particularly children and young people, are treated with dignity, supported through their recovery, and empowered to participate in the justice system in a way that prioritises their safety and wellbeing.

General Statement

Victims' rights are a fundamental aspect of contemporary justice systems, ensuring that individuals harmed by crime are recognised, supported, and protected. Traditionally, legal frameworks emphasised the prosecution of offenders, often neglecting the needs and experiences of victims. Modern approaches highlight that respecting victims' rights, such as the right to information, participation, and protection enhances the fairness, legitimacy, and effectiveness of justice processes.

The rights of victims of child sexual abuse and exploitation are particularly urgent. Children, young people and adult survivors are uniquely vulnerable, and abuse can have profound and enduring psychological, emotional, and social impacts. Specialised protections are essential for supporting recovery and well-being; including access to age-appropriate, trauma-informed, culturally appropriate information, participation in proceedings sensitive to individual needs, and safeguards against re-traumatisation; survivors of sexual abuse also require support, therapeutic or advocate, while the inclusion and support of family members can play a critical role in facilitating healing and resilience.

In Queensland and across Australia, significant steps have been made in recent years to enhance the rights and protections for victims of sexual abuse. These reforms encompass

legislative changes, victim support services, and institutional accountability measures, aiming to create a more responsive and supportive environment for survivors.

Review of the Charter of Victims' Rights

The recognition of victims' rights is integral to fostering a just and compassionate criminal justice system in Australia. Historically, the focus of the justice system has predominantly been on the rights of the accused, often sidelining the needs and entitlements of those who have suffered harm. This imbalance has prompted significant reforms aimed at ensuring victims are treated with dignity and respect throughout the justice process.

The enactment of these charters represents a shift towards a more victim-centred approach, acknowledging that the criminal justice system must not only prosecute offenders but also support and empower victims. This approach aims to reduce secondary victimisation, which occurs when victims experience further harm due to their involvement in the justice process.

Furthermore, recognising victims' rights aligns with international human rights standards, reinforcing Australia's commitment to upholding the dignity and rights of all individuals. It also enhances public confidence in the justice system by demonstrating a commitment to fairness and accountability.

Regularly reviewing charters of victims' rights is essential to ensure that legal frameworks remain responsive to the evolving needs of victims and align with contemporary standards of justice. As societal awareness of victimisation grows and legal precedents shift, charters must be periodically assessed and updated to address emerging challenges and gaps in protection (Holder, Kirchengast & Cassell, 2021).

Equally important is the inclusion of individuals with lived experience in the development and review of victims' rights charters. Their direct encounters with victimisation and the systems that should support them, provide invaluable insights that can inform more effective and empathetic approaches to ensuring rights are upheld. Consulting with victims and survivors ensures that charters are practically applicable, addressing the real-world challenges faced by victims. Furthermore, such inclusion fosters a sense of agency among victims, empowering them to contribute to the creation of solutions that directly affect their lives.

Experiences of victims and their needs

Child sexual abuse remains a significant public health and social issue in Australia, with profound implications for individuals and communities:

- The Australian Child Maltreatment Study (ACMS) indicates that approximately 28.5% of Australians aged 16 years and over have experienced CSA, with females reporting victimisation at twice the rate of males (37.3% compared to 18.8%) (Mathews et.al., 2023).
- A study of reporting rates in Australian Indigenous communities showed that the reporting rate for child sexual abuse of Indigenous children was between two and four times that of non-Indigenous children. Further, this study showed that reporting rates differed by jurisdiction, which may be caused by higher levels of under-reporting in particular communities rather than actual rates of child sexual abuse (Bailey, Powell & Brubacher, 2017).
- Children with disabilities are particularly vulnerable to child sexual abuse due to a combination of physical, cognitive, and social factor (Fang et.al., 2022)

- The prevalence of child sexual abuse experienced by sexuality diverse Australians was found to be significantly higher compared to heterosexuals (51.9% cf. 20.1%) (Higgins et.al., 2025)
- A 2019 Griffith University report (Sawrikar, 2019) identified several key vulnerabilities faced by CALD communities regarding child sexual abuse. These vulnerabilities stem from cultural, systemic, and structural factors that impede awareness, disclosure, and access to support services.

Disclosure

It is commonly understood that child victims of sexual abuse frequently show reluctance in disclosing, with research findings suggest that a notable percentage of these individuals may postpone revealing their abuse until they are adults, if they choose to disclose at all (Allard-Gaudreau, Poirier & Cyr, 2024). The existence of significant barriers to disclosure and the discrepancy between official data and self-reported experiences underscore the critical importance of enshrining and upholding victims' rights in Australia.

Victims of child sexual abuse often face systemic obstacles when attempting to report their experiences, including fear of not being believed, re-traumatisation through formal processes, and limited access to support services (Mathews et.al., 2025). Ensuring that victims have clearly defined rights (such as the right to be informed, the right to support, and the right to participate in decisions affecting them) can mitigate these barriers by providing formal avenues for recognition and protection.

Victims' rights also address the gap between official statistics and lived experiences. While self-reported data suggest that a substantial proportion of Australians have experienced child sexual abuse, many cases remain unrecorded in formal systems due to underreporting (Mathews et.al., 2023). Embedding victims' rights within legislation and institutional policies can foster an environment where survivors feel empowered to disclose abuse safely and confidentially, thereby improving the accuracy of data collection and ensuring that interventions and resources are appropriately targeted.

Healing

Access to justice and effective remedies is a critical component of the healing journey for survivors. ECPAT International (2024) emphasises that survivors have the right to seek just and timely remedies for violations of their rights, which includes not only fair legal proceedings but also access to support services aimed at aiding recovery and reintegration. This holistic approach to rights ensures that survivors are not re-victimised by the very systems meant to protect them.

Moreover, victims' rights can serve a restorative function by acknowledging the harm experienced, promoting accountability for perpetrators, and offering access to therapeutic and legal support. Ultimately, the recognition and enforcement of victims' rights are essential for both individual healing and the broader societal imperative of preventing further abuse.

System Experiences

Victims and survivors of sexual violence, domestic and family violence (DFV), and child abuse often report that engagement with the criminal justice system is traumatising, disempowering, and unpredictable.

In criminal justice proceedings, victims are relegated to the role of 'witness' to the offence perpetrated against them. Within the criminal justice process, this framing effectively reduces their involvement to providing evidence in service of the state's case against the accused, rather than acknowledging their central role as the person most harmed (Victims of Crime Commissioner, 2023). By positioning victims as peripheral to proceedings, the system

denies them meaningful participation, recognition, and agency in processes that deeply concern their own lives. The Victims of Crime Commissioner (2023) report found a worrying disconnect “between the entitlements of victims ‘on paper’ and their actual experiences of victim participation in the justice system.”

This structural marginalisation not only compounds the trauma of the original offence but also limits opportunities for healing, truth-telling, and validation. Reimagining justice to centre the voices and needs of victims requires moving beyond this narrow legal construct toward approaches that recognise their right to be active participants in the pursuit of accountability and repair.

In Queensland specifically, there has been attention to gaps in how the justice system treats survivors of childhood sexual abuse. A submission to the Women’s Safety and Justice Taskforce by knowmore argued that existing court and jury procedures still reflect myths and misconceptions about abuse, such as beliefs about victim behaviour or credibility, which can undermine survivors’ trust and potentially discourage reporting or participation in trials (knowmore, 2022). The submission calls for "educative jury directions" to correct those myths and better reflect research on trauma and disclosure. Survivors in Queensland often experience delays, lack of clear information about how their case is progressing, and sometimes inconsistent support services depending on locality (knowmore, 2022).

Moreover, ‘being informed’ about the justice process is repeatedly identified by survivors as a central need, yet many report that communication about process, judicial decision-making, delays, and outcomes is insufficient or unclear (knowmore, 2022).

Purpose of the Charter

The current purpose of the Queensland Charter of Victims’ Rights (section 42 of the *Victims of Crime Assistance Act 2009 (Qld)*) is largely procedural and institutional: it focuses on how ‘prescribed persons’ (e.g. police, prosecutors, corrective services) must behave toward victims and how victims should be informed of their rights.

However, it doesn’t necessarily capture the deeper expectations that victims themselves tend to hold, such as being treated with empathy, having a meaningful voice in justice processes, receiving timely information, and having their harm genuinely acknowledged.

To better align the Charter’s purpose with these expectations, it is recommended that the statement of purpose be revised to explicitly affirm the Charter’s role in promoting the dignity, safety, and wellbeing of victims. The purpose should highlight that victims are to be treated with compassion, respect, and fairness at all stages of the justice process, and that they should have meaningful opportunities to participate and be heard. It should also emphasise the importance of providing timely and accessible information, supporting victims’ recovery, and fostering confidence in the justice system. Finally, the revised purpose should include a commitment to accountability, ensuring that prescribed persons uphold these rights in a manner that contributes to a responsive, transparent, and restorative system of justice.

Such a reframing would move the Charter beyond a procedural instrument toward a statement of values that recognises victims as central participants in the justice process and reflects community expectations for a humane, victim-centred approach.

Preamble Recommendations

A preamble to a Charter of Victims’ Rights should clearly express the overall intention and guiding principles of the Charter. It should begin by recognising that victims of crime suffer harm that affects their safety, dignity, and wellbeing. The preamble should commit to ensuring that justice processes do not further traumatise victims but instead uphold

fairness, sensitivity, and humanity. It should acknowledge that victims have not always been adequately supported or heard within the justice system and affirm a shared commitment to reform and improvement. Emphasis should be placed on victims' rights to information, participation, and voice, as well as on timely and culturally appropriate support for recovery and reintegration. The preamble should also reflect a commitment to equity and inclusion, ensuring that the Charter applies fairly to all victims, including those from vulnerable or marginalised groups. Finally, it should articulate a vision of partnership and accountability across all justice and community agencies, and an overarching aspiration to build a justice system that restores dignity, fosters healing, and strengthens public confidence in a fair and compassionate society.

Scope and Application of the Charter

Victims Covered by the Charter

The Charter of Victims' Rights currently limits its coverage to persons harmed by violent crime and their immediate family or dependants. While the term 'violent crime' is broadly construed to include domestic violence, sexual violence, and homicide, this framing excludes victims of offences lacking a physical violence element, such as fraud, theft, property offences, or cybercrime. This distinction risks leaving unprotected a significant group of individuals who experience material, emotional, or psychological harm.

While Bravehearts is specifically focused on the prevention and intervention of child sexual abuse and exploitation, we believe that expanding the Charter to include all victims of crime, regardless of whether the offence involved physical violence, would reflect principles of justice, equality, and respect for human dignity. Victimological research highlights that harm need not be physical to be profound; financial exploitation, cyber harassment, and property crime can inflict psychological distress, anxiety, and social isolation comparable to the impacts of violent crime (Shapland & Hall, 2007). Excluding non-violent crime victims from legislative protections perpetuates inequities and undermines access to justice, particularly for vulnerable populations such as the elderly and those from disadvantaged backgrounds. A more inclusive Charter would align Queensland's framework with contemporary human rights standards and the evolving understanding of victimhood in criminological scholarship.

While we note that the Charter currently includes the recognition of secondary victims (where an individual has suffered harm because a member of their immediate family or someone they are dependent on has been harmed, or where an individual has been harmed while helping someone else who was being harmed), we would like to emphasise the importance of this. The inclusion of secondary victims, particularly family members affected by child sexual abuse and homicide, is equally vital for a comprehensive system of justice. The effects of child sexual abuse extend far beyond the primary victim. Research shows that non-offending parents, siblings, and caregivers frequently experience depression, anxiety, guilt, and relational breakdowns in the aftermath of abuse disclosure (Fuller, 2016; Cook & McManus, 2024). The Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse (2017) documented that family distress, stigma, and economic hardship are common secondary harms. Recognising these individuals as victims, in their own right, would enable them to access information, participation rights, privacy protections, and therapeutic supports under the Charter.

Entities and Prescribed Persons Obligated to Uphold the Charter

The definition of the entities and prescribed persons obliged to uphold the Queensland Charter of Victim's Rights should be interpreted broadly to ensure that all organisations involved in supporting victims of crime and their families are held accountable to the same standards of respect, fairness, and dignity.

This inclusive approach recognises that the responsibility for upholding victims' rights extends beyond traditional law enforcement and justice agencies to encompass a wide range of agencies, including government departments, statutory bodies, and non-government organisations that provide advocacy, counselling, housing, or legal assistance to victims. By adopting a broad definition, the Charter ensures consistent protection and treatment of victims across all points of contact within the system, preventing gaps in service delivery or accountability and reinforcing a unified, victim-centred approach to justice and recovery.

Existing Rights

Every victim of crime deserves to be treated with respect, courtesy, compassion and dignity, as outlined in the current Charter. The Queensland Charter of Victim's Rights must recognise the profound and lasting impacts of crime and ensure that victims are supported, heard, and empowered throughout their interactions with the justice system and in their safety and healing.

Protecting victims' rights means more than procedural fairness, it means upholding their safety, privacy, and emotional wellbeing, and ensuring that their voices carry genuine weight in decisions that affect them. Embedding these principles in practice is essential to promoting healing, rebuilding trust in the justice process, and affirming that victim's matter: not only as witnesses to crime, but as individuals deserving of care, justice, and respect.

Recognising the personal circumstances and diverse needs of victims is essential to ensuring that the Charter of Victims' Rights delivers justice that is equitable, accessible, and trauma-informed. Victims' experiences of crime are shaped by intersecting factors such as age, disability, gender identity, race, religion, sexuality, and cultural and linguistic diversity, which can influence both vulnerability to harm and engagement with justice processes (Walklate, 2007). In Australia, this recognition must include a commitment to culturally safe and responsive approaches for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander victims, who are disproportionately affected by violence yet often experience systemic barriers to justice and support (Cunneen & Tauri, 2018; Standing Committee of Attorneys-General Working Group on Indigenous Justice, 2010; Willis, 2011).

A Charter that embeds intersectionality and inclusivity aligns with national frameworks such as the National Plan to End Violence against Women and Children 2022–2032 (Department of Social Services, 2022) and the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Action Plan 2023–2025 (Department of Social Services, 2023), which emphasises addressing structural inequality, improving accessibility, and strengthening responses for those at greatest risk. Embedding recognition of diversity within victims' rights ensures that all victims, particularly those from marginalised communities, are treated with dignity, respect, and cultural sensitivity, enhancing both procedural fairness and public confidence in the justice system.

Rights Specific to Investigations and Court Proceedings

Victims of crime should be recognised as participants with legitimate interests in the criminal justice process, not merely as witnesses or complainants.

During the investigative phase, victims have the fundamental right to be treated with respect, courtesy, compassion and dignity, and to have their personal circumstances and needs acknowledged. This includes recognition of factors such as age, disability, gender identity, race, religion, sexuality, and cultural or linguistic background. Police and investigative authorities must adopt a trauma-informed approach, ensuring that contact with victims minimises re-traumatisation and supports their wellbeing (Birch, 2024). Victims should be kept informed about the progress of investigations, including whether suspects have been identified or charged, while also being told when information cannot be disclosed due to operational reasons. Respect for privacy and safety is also paramount, victims should be

consulted about bail conditions, informed about the accused's release where relevant, and protected from unnecessary contact or exposure.

At the prosecution stage, victims should have the right to information, participation, and recognition (Holder & Englezos, 2024; Victims of Crime Commissioner, 2023). Prosecutors, including the Directors of Public Prosecutions (DPPs), should inform victims of significant decisions such as whether charges will be laid, altered, or discontinued, and explain the reasons behind these decisions where possible. Victims should be able to express their views, particularly regarding plea negotiations, bail conditions, and potential safety implications. Victims must also be provided access to support services and information to help them understand the legal process and their entitlements. Dedicated victim liaison officers can play an essential role in maintaining communication between victims and the DPP, ensuring that victims feel heard and included in the justice process.

During court proceedings, victims should be afforded respectful and protective treatment to reduce trauma and encourage participation (Blanco et.al., 2024; Massidda, Akwenyu & Moffett, 2024). This includes the use of special measures such as giving evidence remotely, using pre-recorded testimony, or testifying behind screens. Courts and prosecution agencies should ensure victims are not subjected to unnecessary or intimidating cross-examination, and that proceedings take account of their emotional and psychological safety. Victims should have access to interpreters, support persons, and separate waiting areas to prevent contact with the accused (George et.al., 2024). They must also have the opportunity to deliver a Victim Impact Statement (and choice to deliver this in oral or written format), outlining the harm suffered and the consequences of the offence, with assurance that their voice is treated seriously in sentencing decisions. Furthermore, victims should be kept informed of outcomes, including verdicts, sentencing results, and appeals, and be offered continuing support after proceedings conclude.

Complaint Process

Victims' rights to make a complaint rest at the core of procedural justice, serving both as a protection for individuals harmed and as a mechanism for institutional accountability. A complaint right requires that victims are explicitly able to raise concerns when their rights are violated.

Transparency in complaint processes is essential for making the right to complain meaningful. Transparency includes clarity about the process (what will happen once a complaint is lodged), the criteria for assessing complaints, the potential outcomes, and the duties of the agency receiving the complaint. It also requires that decisions or final determinations are accompanied by reasons; that is, victims should be informed of not just what decision was made, but why.

Timeliness is similarly fundamental. Delayed responses to complaints can compound the harms already suffered by the victim: re-traumatisation, prolonged uncertainty, emotional or psychological distress, and a perception that the institution does not take their concerns seriously. Many good-practice frameworks (e.g., NSW Ombudsman, 2024; Queensland Government, 2023) require that complaints be acknowledged quickly (often within a few business days), that complainants be kept regularly informed about progress and stated timeframes for resolution (often within 30 days from receiving the complaint).

Proposed New Rights

Bravehearts strongly supports the inclusion of each of the additional rights listed in the detailed paper, to strengthen the recognition, protection, and participation of victims within the criminal justice system. These proposed rights reflect contemporary understandings of trauma-informed and victim-centred practice and align with international human rights standards and best practice frameworks across Australia and comparable jurisdictions.

Embedding these rights would help ensure that victims are treated with dignity, respect, and fairness throughout their engagement with justice and support systems.

In particular, Bravehearts' advocates for the introduction of a positive obligation on agencies to provide information to victims about their Charter rights and their right to make a complaint when those rights are not upheld. This includes: Queensland Government entities/departments, funded non-government agencies, courts/tribunals, health services, mental health services, and NGOs not currently government-funded/partially funded that support victims of crime. Too often, victims remain unaware of the protections available to them or the mechanisms for redress. A proactive duty on agencies to inform victims ensures that rights are meaningful in practice rather than symbolic.

Second, Bravehearts endorses the inclusion of a right for criminal justice proceedings to be free from unreasonable delay, and for inconvenience to victims to be minimised. Timeliness is critical to victims' wellbeing and recovery; lengthy or poorly managed proceedings can exacerbate trauma, undermine confidence in justice institutions, and delay healing.

Bravehearts also supports the right for victims to request that interviews be conducted by officials of a particular gender, with that request to be accommodated wherever possible. This right acknowledges the sensitivities involved in disclosing traumatic or intimate offences and reinforces trauma-informed practice principles. Allowing victims this degree of agency helps to reduce distress, improve the quality of evidence provided, and promote trust between victims and investigators.

Summary

A victims' rights charter should ensure that victims are recognised as central participants in the justice system and treated with dignity, respect, and sensitivity. It should guarantee access to clear, timely and accessible information about legal processes, rights, and support services, enabling victims to make informed decisions and reduce uncertainty. The charter should support meaningful participation, including opportunities to provide impact statements and engage in sentencing or parole processes.

Prioritising safety, voice, and access to appropriate support enhances the humaneness and efficacy of justice, aligns with international human rights standards, and underscores society's responsibility to protect the most vulnerable while ensuring accountability for offenders.

Please contact us on research@bravehearts.org.au should you have any questions relating to our submission.

Kind Regards,



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