

Living Free Project Evaluation Report 2023

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The evaluation of the Living Free Project, and this report, have been delivered in collaboration between:

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Executive Summary

In December 2017, an innovative partnership project commenced in response to a local identified need and acknowledgement that improvement could be made across the service system to respond to our most vulnerable girls and women. The Living Free Project commenced direct service delivery in April 2018 with a preliminary evaluation completed in December 2019 that demonstrated key outcomes in reduced recidivism, engagement with specialist services and education/employment and improved health and wellbeing.

The complex funding model underpinning the project has seen instability for the project with seven different funders over a six year period, all with slightly different funding priorities and outcomes to be achieved. This has created challenges for longitudinal evaluation and resulted in significant energy being directed into obtaining funding to support the continuation of program delivery, despite the evident outcomes being achieved over a diverse range of impact areas, including reduced recidivism and improved health and wellbeing.

Despite the complexity in funding, the project has maintained a consistent, multi-component, approach that sees a flexible model of care and utilises practice wisdom and lived experience of the participants to inform advocacy efforts and influence broad systemic change. The model of care underpinning direct participant support embraces the principals of strengths based, consumer centred, and collaboration with service users as well as external services. The project meets participants where they are at, focusing on safety and stability as a fundamental foundation for girls and women and connection to specialist services to address their complex needs.

The level of complexity within the participants appears to have shifted slightly from the preliminary evaluation period due to addition of funding to support prevention/early intervention in vulnerable girls. Notably Covid also hampered efforts to engage with complex women. With Courts closed to the public and limited opportunity to assertively engage with the women, they continued to fall through the gaps. The participants who were able to access support from the project continued to present with high rates of complexity, with 45% of participants presenting with alcohol and drug, mental health and family violence concerns and 61% having at least two of these presenting needs. Despite participant's complexity of needs, engagement with specialist services continued to be a challenge for the women, supporting the notion that many fall through the gaps of the service system and into the justice system.

Not only are the systemic barriers for these population groups apparent through the evaluation, the impact on the familial units and children of the women are also of significance. A unique aspect of the project sees engagement across childhood, adolescent and adulthood, with participants ages ranging from 10-30. Working with this diversity of ages, the project gives a unique insight into intergenerational trauma, with 36% of younger participants having parents who present with needs related to alcohol and drugs, mental health or justice involvement and twenty of the women having thirty four children between them, and in only four circumstances were the children in the care of their mothers. These confronting statistics evidence the intergenerational impact for girls whose parents have unmet complex needs and for women who have the unmet needs whose children are removed from their care.

A breadth of evidence exists around the trajectory for women into the justice system in particular the trauma that features in their histories from childhood which is compounded by numerous adverse events throughout adolescence and into adulthood. The needs of our vulnerable women are often visible from adolescence and is remarkably observed in the young girls supported by the project. High rates of early school disengagement, teen pregnancies, poor mental health and early onset alcohol and other drug use are common features for the 10-17 year old girls supported by the project..

With significant trauma and presenting complex needs, the expectation of our mainstream service system for both young girls and women to self-identify needs, navigate the complex service system and then be subjected to a myriad of intake and screening processes sounds absurd however it is the reality. The girls, women and their families end up in a cycle of crisis presentations only to then enter the justice system, generally with offending that is linked to their welfare needs.

This evaluation demonstrates the outcomes that can be achieved when a community based service can respond based on the readiness of the consumer and is not bound by inflexible eligibility and process of engagement. With positive impacts demonstrates across a range of outcomes for participants, The Living Free Project is successfully contributing to positive outcomes in reducing participants involvement in the justice system, and likelihood of involvement, increasing engagement with specialist support, stabilising living situations and improving the health, wellbeing and safety of participants. Through addressing the presenting criminogenic needs and building protective factors, girls and women have a higher likelihood to move away from justice involvement and ongoing victimisation and live fulfilling and meaningful lives.

The model of care, as well as having flexible and assertive engagement processes, allows participants to step up and down in their care and extensive pathways established by the team support sustainable community-based connection alongside and then after the participant exits the project. The project co-ordination aspect of the project increases impact through the facilitation of platforms for collaboration, not only strengthening resources for Living Free participants, however also improving pathways and outcomes for vulnerable girls and women connected to other services. The evaluation demonstrates the positive reputation built by Living Free with the project being held in high regard across sector agencies, particularly in the areas of reducing risk factors and engaging participants with specialist services.

Broader than the direct programmatic impacts for girls and women, the evaluation reported positive impacts on increased stakeholder awareness and understanding in relation to the needs, risks and pathways of girls and women in the justice system, stronger partnerships and collaboration among stakeholders seeking to improve outcomes for girls and women, and improved referral pathways among agencies, enabling girls and women to receive the services and support they need in a more timely way. Together, these service system changes have contributed to more coordinated cross-agency responses to participants, and a stronger continuum of care, with less likelihood of vulnerable girls and women 'falling through the cracks' of the service system and becoming embedded in the justice system.

Although the project is in its sixth year of operation and evaluations demonstrate significant outcomes across a myriad of areas, the complex and unstable funding underpinning the model provides a risk to program sustainability. With multiple reporting requirements, the management of the project is intensive and requires investment from lead agency TaskForce as well as in-kind support from a number of stakeholders supporting the steering committee to ensure the project succeeds.

The quality of evaluation has also been impacted by the diverse and unstable funding structure. Whilst a strong Theory of Change has guided the project and robust evaluation framework underpins the model, measuring complex circumstances and outcomes in a standardised and quantifiable manner has some significant barriers. The evaluation recognises that project provides value for money however a cost-benefit analysis would be invaluable to explore the benefit of investing in a gendered justice re-investment response.

Notwithstanding this, there is a clear indication that investing in long term, holistic support for vulnerable women can improve integration in the community is key to disrupting a woman's pathway to entrenchment in the justice system. Furthermore, strengthening partnerships across sectors through a multi-component model involving project co-ordination leads to sustainable change on a systemic level.

With the increasing number of women in the justice system and the significant impact of legislative reform on those most vulnerable, there is an urgency to look at innovative models that work. The evidence supports the value that that the Living Free Project brings to demonstrating a gendered justice re-investment model.



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1 Introduction

This report presents the findings of a collaborative evaluation of the Living Free Project, conducted in partnership between TaskForce Community Agency and Lirata Consulting in 2022-23.

1.1 Introducing TaskForce

TaskForce plays an important role in communities across the south-east metropolitan Melbourne region, helping individuals and families experiencing challenges with alcohol and other drugs or family violence, and enabling people through education, training, and employment. TaskForce operates with the foundational value of partnership and engages in extensive formal and informal service delivery collaborations across sectors to increase reach and impact.

1.2 Introducing the Living Free Project

The Living Free Project commenced in 2017 in the Frankston Mornington Peninsula catchment, and expanded in 2022 with Federal Government funding to operate across the Southern Metropolitan region of Melbourne. The project works with two main cohorts of participants:

- **Girls aged 10-17, who have been reported missing, at risk of justice involvement or at risk of sexual exploitation.** With this group, the Living Free Project works at the early intervention end of the continuum to increase safety, manage risks and address dynamic criminogenic risk factors that may bring these girls into contact with the justice system as a victim or offender. The project leverages long standing partnerships with local services to connect young girls and their families with the right specialist support at the earliest possible time.
- **Women aged 18-30 in early contact with the justice system.** The Living Free Project supports these women to address the often multiple and complex needs that have contributed to their contact with the justice system. The project provides advocacy for women to improve their justice outcomes, whilst simultaneously working to reduce their likelihood of further contact with the justice system. The project provides flexible long-term outreach support and links women to specialist services and supports.

The Living Free Project offers a range of **direct service delivery modalities** guided by a tiered response model, including brief intervention, service coordination, intensive case management, group-based psycho-social activities, and family work. The project has a strong place-based and partnership-focused service model which fosters integrated care. In addition to its multi-sectoral Steering Committee, the project has specific service delivery partnerships with Peninsula Community Legal Centre (PCLC), Women and Mentoring (WAM), and St Kilda Gatehouse.

Enhancing its direct service delivery elements, the Living Free Project has a strong emphasis on **service system capacity building and reform**. The project has provided education and awareness raising to police, the justice system, education, child and family services, maternal and child health and more. The Living Free Project is represented on a range of committees and networks which aim to improve collaboration, referral pathways and targeted service responses for vulnerable girls and women. Supported by Taskforce's Lived Experience Advocate, the project advocates strongly for policy and systems changes in areas that most impact vulnerable girls and young women.

For further detail on the Living Free Program and its context, please see Chapter 3.

1.3 Evaluation purpose, scope and context

This evaluation had two main purposes: to assess the effectiveness of the Living Free Project in achieving outcomes at participant and systems levels; and to identify the elements required within a model of care to support sustainable outcomes for girls and women at risk of, or in the early stages of, justice system involvement.

This evaluation was undertaken in partnership between **TaskForce Community Agency** and **Lirata Consulting** (www.lirata.com), an independent not-for-profit organisation providing specialist consultancy and capacity building for social purpose organisations. TaskForce undertook the bulk of data collection including ongoing program data collection, surveys and participant interviews, and undertook quantitative data analysis. Lirata assisted with evaluation design, undertook a small number of key stakeholder interviews, and analysed qualitative data. This evaluation report has been collaboratively written by staff of TaskForce and Lirata.

This evaluation focuses mainly on the period March 2021 – November 2022, during which the Living Free Project was auspiced and operated by TaskForce. (Prior to March 2021, the project was operated by the Stepping Up Consortium, of which Taskforce was a member.) Quantitative analysis of participant outcomes in this report relates to the March 2021 – November 2022 period. Qualitative findings and analysis of service system outcomes may relate partly to the period before March 2021.

A 2019 evaluation of the Living Free Project by the Frankston Mornington Peninsula Primary Care Partnership (FMPPCP), in partnership with TaskForce, focused on the project's initial 18 months. Program changes since that evaluation include different funding arrangements, broader eligibility criteria, and COVID-19 adaptations.

1.4 Guide to this report

This report is the key output of the 2022-23 evaluation process and presents the full findings of the evaluation. The report is structured as follows:

- Chapter 2 outlines the evaluation focus and methods
- Chapter 3 describes the Living Free Project and its activities
- Chapter 4 presents findings on outcomes for women and girls, across multiple domains
- Chapter 5 presents findings on outcomes relating to service system capacity and processes
- Chapter 6 highlights key model elements supporting positive outcomes, and potential opportunities for improvement
- Chapter 7 briefly discusses value for money
- Chapter 8 summarises overall findings against the Key Evaluation Questions.

2 Evaluation design

Evaluation design for the Living Free Project has evolved over time in response to changing funding arrangements and associated reporting priorities. The design underlying the findings in this report was refined in October 2022 in consultation between TaskForce and Lirata, and drew partly on existing data collected by Taskforce, and partly on new data collection through interviews and surveys.

Evaluation resourcing was very limited, and this contributed to a “light touch” approach. In particular, although TaskForce had an interest in understanding the level of value for money offered by the Living Free Project, exploration of this topic in this round of evaluation was minimal. It remains an important area for future analysis.

2.1 Key evaluation questions

This evaluation was guided by five key questions.

Key evaluation questions

- 1. To what extent has Living Free achieved its intended outcomes for the women and girls whom it supports?**
 - a. What outcomes have been observed for young women aged 10 – 17 years supported by Living Free?
 - b. What outcomes have been observed for women aged 18 – 30 years supported by Living Free?
- 2. To what extent has Living Free improved the capacity of the local service system to respond effectively to the needs of women and girls at risk?**
 - a. To what extent has stakeholder awareness and understanding changed?
 - b. What changes have occurred in service system relationships, processes and approaches?
- 3. What are the key elements of the Living Free model that contribute to positive outcomes?**
- 4. What opportunities are there for improvement and further development of Living Free?**
- 5. What level of value for money is provided by Living Free?**

Indicators were developed under questions 1 and 2 for a range of participant and service system outcomes.

2.2 Evaluation approach, stakeholders and methods

This evaluation took a utilisation-focused approach, generating findings aligned with areas of interest for key stakeholders. TaskForce and its program partners have an interest in using the evidence gathered through this evaluation to seek future funding for the Living Free Project, enabling more women and girls to benefit from the program. This has shaped the evaluation’s effectiveness lens.

This evaluation is primarily summative in its approach, assessing the achievements of the Living Free Project during the period March 2021 – November 2022.

Key evaluation stakeholders included:

- TaskForce management – input gathered through meetings and interviews
- Living Free Project staff – input gathered through a group interview
- Participants, and family members of participants – input gathered through interviews, case studies, and informal feedback
- Other stakeholders including Victoria Police, Victoria Legal Aid and Child Protection – input gathered through interviews and surveys.

Methods

The evaluation used a mixed methods approach, analysing qualitative and quantitative data from a range of sources. Key methods/data sources are summarised in the following table.

Table 1: Key methods and data sources

METHOD/ DATA SOURCE	DESCRIPTION	SCOPE
Document review	Review of a range of program-related documents including funding agreements, referral guidelines, reports to funders and other items.	
Case studies	Review of a range of case studies authored by Living Free Project staff.	23 case studies
Interviews with TaskForce staff and other professionals	Online interviews conducted by Lirata Consulting: 2 group interviews with TaskForce staff / management; 2 individual interviews with external stakeholders. One additional interview available from earlier round of data collection by TaskForce.	5 interviews, 11 participants
Interviews with participants & family members	Interviews conducted by Lived Experience representative supported by another TaskForce staff member. Several interviews were also included from an earlier round of data collection by TaskForce.	11 interviews, 11 participants (8 participants, 3 family members)
Key stakeholder survey	Anonymous online survey conducted in late 2022.	29 responses
Participant pre-post survey	Psychometric measures – 12 scaled items, each rated pre and post service delivery.	9 responses
Living Free data spreadsheet	Excel spreadsheet compiled by Living Free Project staff during service delivery, containing a range of demographic, needs and service provision data, plus staff-reported pre & post participant outcome measures relating to housing status, service engagement, offending rates, engagement in education, training or employment.	120 cases

Evaluation delivery

The evaluation was planned and undertaken by TaskForce Executive Manager, Social Impact and Growth, Lisa Abbott; Lirata Research Officer, Dr. Athar Shafaei; and Lirata CEO, Mark Planigale. Program data collection occurred between March 2021 – November 2022, while interviews and surveys for this evaluation were conducted between November – December 2022. Analysis and report writing occurred between November 2022

– April 2023. Quantitative analysis was conducted by Taskforce and qualitative analysis was conducted by Lirata and Taskforce.

2.3 Evaluation limitations

The evaluation methodology was subject to a number of limitations which reduced the level of rigour of analysis. These included:

- Unequal pre- and post-intervention periods for some measures in the Living Free data spreadsheet, which meant that some quantitative fields were unable to be analysed for outcomes.
- Lack of availability of attribution data for outcomes calculated from the Living Free data spreadsheet. Although case studies and participant and staff interviews clearly indicate that service delivery through the Living Free Project contributes substantially to outcomes in some cases, lack of unit record attribution data in the spreadsheet means that the extent to which quantitative outcomes findings can be attributed to Living Free is unknown.
- Very small number of responses to the participant pre-post survey compared to the number of participants accessing the program, and likely sample bias towards participants whose engagement with the Living Free Project was more successful, meaning that results from this data source cannot be considered indicative of results for the overall Living Free Project participant group.
- Relatively small number of participant interviews conducted relative to overall number of participants accessing the program; although the interview data provides important evidence of participant experiences and outcomes, it cannot necessarily be considered representative of overall participant perceptions of the project.
- Participant and family members interviews were conducted by TaskForce staff. Although steps were taken to mitigate participant bias (by ensuring that interviews were not conducted directly by Living Free Project team members), it is possible that some responses may have been more positive than if interviews were conducted by independent data collectors.

Overall, the strength of qualitative evidence in this evaluation is assessed as moderate, including responses from a substantial number of people with different roles in relation to the Living Free Project. The strength of quantitative evidence from the Living Free data spreadsheet is assessed as moderate for the indicators included in this report, while the strength of evidence of findings from the psychometric measures is assessed as weak.

3 Overview of the Living Free Project

The Living Free Project is a multi-modal, place-based response to support girls at risk of justice involvement and young women in early contact with the justice system. The project encompasses direct service delivery, advocacy, capacity building and collaboration with an objective to create sustainable improvements for vulnerable girls and women to access the right support at the earliest possible time.

3.1 The importance of tailored responses for women and girls involved with the justice system

Distinct needs and pathways of women in the justice system

In recent decades, both in Australia and internationally, the number of women in contact with the criminal justice system has increased dramatically. Whilst this trend moderated during the COVID pandemic years in Victoria, the impact of the Bail reforms implemented in 2018 has seen disproportionate impacts on women, with over half the women in custody on Remand for offences they are unlikely to receive custodial sentences for.¹ There is extensive evidence that the causal factors underpinning women's offending, and the needs and trajectories of women involved with the justice system, are significantly different to those of men

Women's marginalisation in society contributes to economic insecurity, meaning that women have insufficient resources to meet their material needs, let alone respond to unforeseen financial demands. Only 14% of female prisoners completed high school, and 45% of female prisoners are unemployed at the time they enter prison. Women are also more likely to be carers and are 83% more likely to head single parent families. Poverty, when combined with other marginalising factors such as race, disability, mental illness and/or alcohol and other drug (AOD) use, substantially increases the likelihood of women coming into contact with the justice system.²

Women's pathways into the justice system are frequently characterised by histories of trauma, and relationships marked with violence and abuse. Between 57% and 90% of female prisoners have experienced child sexual abuse and other forms of victimisation, 89% have a history of sexual abuse, and as many as 98% have experienced violence.³ However, women are more likely than men to be incarcerated for non-violent crimes. These factors contribute to the blurred status of women in the justice system as both victims and offenders.

A 2017 review of Victoria's youth justice system identified that the needs of women in the justice system are significantly different to those of men, with women often requiring more holistic support to address multiple

¹ Federation of Community Legal Centers, Smart Justice for Women Policy Platform 2023

² Caruana, C., Campbell, E., Bissett, T & Ogilvie, K. (2021) *Leaving custody behind: Foundations for safer communities and a gender-informed criminal justice systems* Centre for Innovative Justice, RMIT University, Melbourne

³ Stathopoulos, M. et al. (2012). Addressing women's victimisation histories in custodial settings. Australian Institute of Family Studies; Kilroy, D. *When will they see the real us? Women in prisons*. Paper presented at the Women in Corrections: Staff and Clients Conference, Adelaide, 2000, <http://www.sistersinside.com.au/media/whenwillyouseetherealus.pdf>;

issues including those related to housing, parenting, mental health, social isolation, unemployment and AOD use.⁴ There has been a paucity of support available to women to address the myriad of complexities which contribute to their offending behaviour, in order to reduce the likelihood of recidivist offending.

Almost one third of these women who are incarcerated will re-offend and return to prison within two years of release. The impact of imprisonment on women is substantially different to men. With many women in prison having histories of trauma or abusive relationships, imprisonment can often lead to re-traumatisation which contributes further to poor psychological functioning post-release. Imprisonment also increases the likelihood of family breakdown. Up to 85% of females in custody in Australia are parents of dependent children; the impact on children of the incarceration of their primary care-giver is considerable and can often lead to the disintegration of the family unit and result in the children entering the Child Protection system, starting a further cycle of trauma.

Responding effectively to women in the justice system requires a unique, multi-level approach. Significant reform is needed in legislation, policy and practice to achieve better outcomes, including providing sentencing options that recognise women's needs and pathways, and improvement of custodial facilities, post-release support and custodial rehabilitation programs.

It is also essential to develop programs that divert women from becoming entrenched in the justice system, by dealing with the factors that contribute to their offending behaviour. These programs work best when they provide integrated responses that address multiple areas of need at the same time. These programs can have positive effects not only for individual women, but for their families and the community as a whole. The Living Free Project provides a model of one such program.

Need for a targeted response to girls at risk of justice involvement

In addition to improved responses for women already involved with the justice system, there is an urgent need to support young females who are at risk of justice involvement as victims and offenders, including those reported missing.

Many of the criminogenic needs identified in research on women's offending are evident in girls from childhood including childhood trauma, early school disengagement, alcohol and drug use and social isolation. Whilst there is little formal research regarding the trajectory from a young girl reported missing to their engagement in the justice system as a victim or offender, anecdotal reports from Victoria Police highlight that this is a common occurrence, particularly when the presenting needs go unaddressed. Whilst these girls may not yet be engaging in offending behaviour, their potential risk of sexual exploitation, exposure to abuse and older criminalised males increases their vulnerability to engaging in offending behaviour into adulthood. In 2021, localised Victoria Police data identified that 33% of girls who had been reported missing already had some contact with the police via a police caution or formal charges.

Each missing person's report provides an opportunity to intervene with the girl and their family to address any issues that may present as risk factors for justice involvement as victims and/or offenders. An internal policy in Victoria Police Division Four (Frankston Mornington Peninsula) requires that every young person reported missing be 'flagged' with the Pro-Active Policing Unit (PPU) for follow up and support. The Pro-Active Policing Operatives

⁴ Armytage, P. & Ogloff, J. 2017. *Youth justice review and strategy: Meeting needs and reducing offending*. Melbourne: Victorian Government.

within the PPU attempt to engage the family and young person reported missing, in order to support them to gain assistance to address the root causes of them going missing. Resourcing this response continues to be an issue and a fragmented service system also makes referral pathways difficult to navigate for police. The Living Free Project, which provides flexible engagement and support for girls and families in this cohort, therefore forms a vital part of this early intervention response.

Specific needs in Melbourne's south-east

The Living Free Project operates in the Frankston Mornington Peninsula (FMP) catchment and surrounding areas of Bayside, Casey and Greater Dandenong. This catchment is over 700km² in size and contains significant diversity, with community from over 150 different ethnic backgrounds and above-average rates of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community. Socio-economic profiles vary across the region with exceptionally affluent areas neighbouring communities with entrenched poverty and disadvantage. Socio-Economic Indexes for Areas (SEIFA) data show that two areas within the catchment (Frankston North and Doveton) are in the 5% of most disadvantaged postcodes in Victoria, and Greater Dandenong, Cranbourne, Capel Sound, Hastings and Pakenham rank in the 15% of most disadvantaged postcodes in the state.

Rates of mental illness and AOD concerns are greater than the Victorian average in many areas of the catchment, with above average figures in alcohol and drug treatment episodes for community treatment and in ambulance call outs related to alcohol and other drugs. Child Protection notification rates in some areas of the catchment are double the Victorian average. Family violence is also prevalent in the catchment. Rates of family violence are double the Victorian average in the City of Frankston, which is ranked top of all metropolitan Local Government Areas (LGAs) in the Southern Metropolitan Region (SMR) for incidences of family violence.

Victoria Police shows a total of 4,549 alleged female offenders in FMP, Bayside, Casey and Dandenong in 2022. Casey, Frankston and Dandenong are all ranked in the top five suburbs of Metropolitan Melbourne for female offenders. In the FMP alone from November 2021-October 2022 there were 706 missing persons reports relating to 94 individual girls aged 10-17, this number nearly tripling in six years from 280 missing persons reports for females in 2016. Whilst policy related to young people reported missing from Out of Home Care may contribute to the rapid increase in numbers of reports, this overwhelming increase demonstrates an urgency for a targeted response for both those in care and those still residing with family.

3.2 Project aims and key beneficiary groups

At its heart, the Living Free Project aims to **divert girls and women from justice system involvement**, by addressing the needs and risk factors that contribute to their (potential) contact with the justice system. The project supports women's ability to be engaged and empowered, free from the justice system, and to take healing and long-term positive pathways for themselves and their families.

As noted above, the **primary intended beneficiary groups** are:

- **Girls aged 10-17, who have been reported missing**, and are at risk of involvement with the justice system
- **Women aged 18-30 in early contact with the justice system.**

Girls and women supported by the Living Free Project often have multiple and complex needs and risks.

In terms of complexity, a lot of our girls are very high risk, very complex. Our referral eligibility has to encompass that increasing criminogenic need, risk of sexual exploitation, or history of sexual exploitation or trauma, missing persons, family violence, substance use, mental health, disengagement from services or education ... A lot of them have got all of those intersecting needs.
(Living Free staff member)

Through achieving intended outcomes with these key beneficiaries, the Living Free Project aims to create positive outcomes and impacts for:

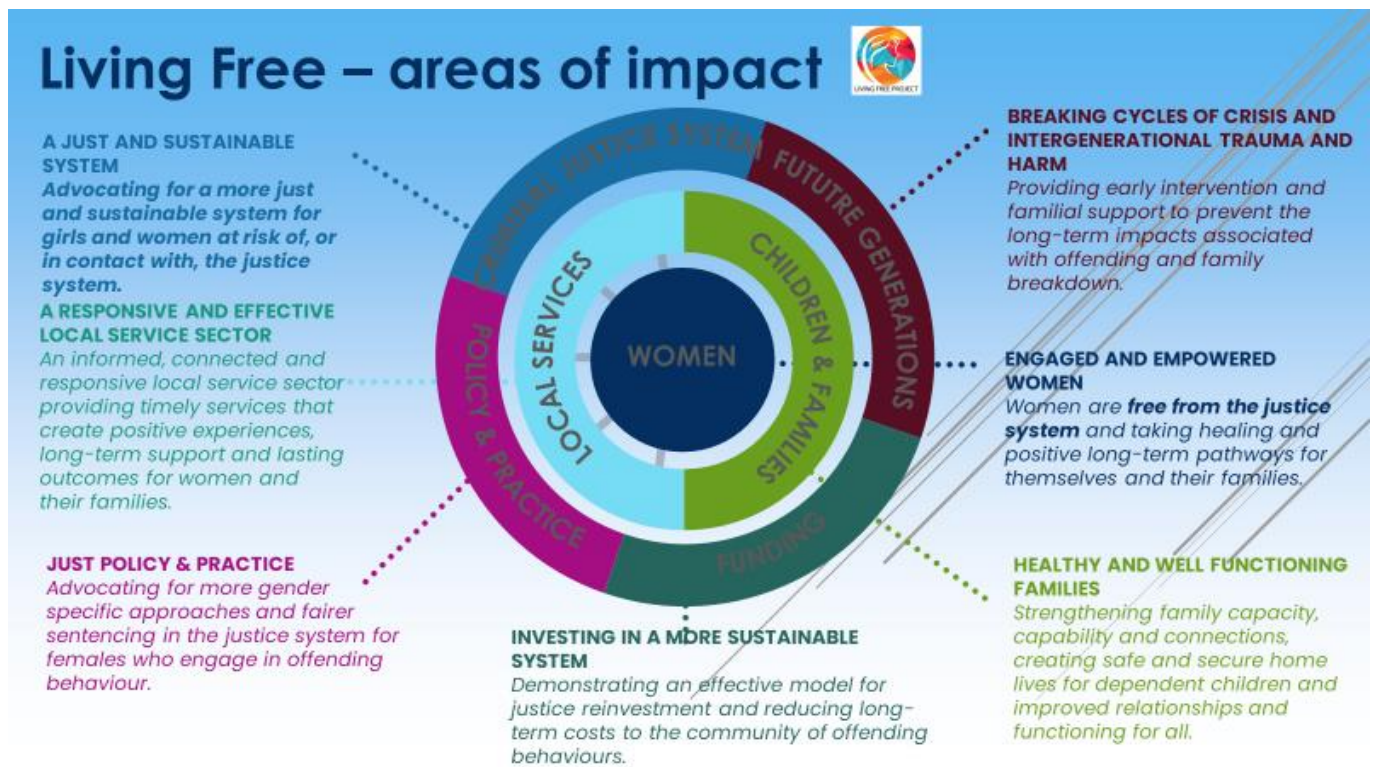
- **Children and families** of those receiving support – through strengthening family capacity, improving relationships and family functioning, and creating more safe and secure home lives for dependent children
- **The broader community and future generations**, through breaking cycles of offending, incarceration, family breakdown and intergenerational trauma.

The Living Free Project recognises that achieving these changes for women, families and communities will require significant system level changes, as well as direct support provision. Additional aims therefore include:

- **Policy and practice reform** to create more just, sustainable, equitable and gender-specific responses to women and girls in the justice system
- **Service system reform** to develop a more informed, connected and responsive local service sector which provides more timely, positive and effective services for girls and women
- **Moving investment** towards a more just and sustainable system to reduce long-term costs to the community of offending behaviours.

Figure 1 summarises Living Free’s intended impacts across individual, family, community and systems levels. Further information on intended outcomes is included in the project’s Theory of Change (cf. Appendix A).

Figure 1: Intended areas of impact for the Living Free Project



3.3 Key project activities

The Living Free Project's activities fall into two main streams: direct service delivery, and service system capacity building and reform.

Direct service delivery

The Living Free Project provides a **person-centred** model of service delivery, understanding and responding to each participant's strengths, challenges and goals. Responses are individualised and tailored based on participants' presenting needs. Support is provided primarily on an outreach basis and the duration of assistance can range from a few weeks to a year or more. This flexible model is underpinned by foundational principles of assertive engagement, holistic support, supported care coordination and family inclusive practice.

The Living Free Project has a **No Wrong Door** approach, which involves potential participants being engaged initially at intake with the Living Free Project team leader, who determines the most suitable pathway of support. A **tiered service delivery model** is then applied, enabling the level of intervention to be increased or decreased as required. The tiered response is based on presenting needs and services already engaged. Where acute needs present and the potential participant has capacity to engage, a supported referral is made to the most appropriate service. If there are other agencies already involved, the Living Free Project engages with the participant and services to gain a deeper understanding of gaps in existing service delivery. The Living Free team may provide support directly, or assist to coordinate the care team or identify the supports necessary to fill any gaps. This tiered approach allows for the most efficient use of the resources of the Living Free Project and other community based services, and ensures that participants are not under or over-served.

The key direct service modalities used within the Living Free Project include:

- Brief intervention to coordinate care and link participants to support
- Intensive outreach-based case management for in-depth support
- Group-based psycho-social activities such as soft-skills for work readiness, boxing, creative arts, sexual and interpersonal health, alcohol and drug harm reduction
- Family work
- Advocacy for women to improve justice outcomes and service access
- Mentoring (delivered through Living Free's partnership with WAM)
- Legal assistance and legal health checks (delivered through Living Free's partnership with PCLC).

Best practice service co-ordination and integrated care is embedded in the project at all levels. In this context, integrated care means *the provision of well-connected, effective and efficient care that takes account of and is organised around a person's health and social needs*. The Living Free team builds cohesive care teams and co-ordinates these, supporting participants' involvement, and driving **better connected care** across sectors.

Service system capacity building and reform

Complementing its direct service delivery activities, the Living Free Project undertakes a strong set of activities aimed at creating systems level change. An important part of this is stakeholder **capacity building**, raising awareness and building knowledge across multiple sectors about the unique needs of females in the justice system and the importance of gender-specific responses.

In recognition of the multiple needs faced by women across the justice system, the Living Free Project has a robust **partnership-based approach**. These partnerships are evident in the Living Free Project's multi-sectoral **Steering Committee** who have been invaluable in shaping the project and sharing its messaging across their networks. In addition to TaskForce, key agencies represented on the Steering Committee include Monash Health Public Health Unit, Peninsula Health, YSAS, Mentis Assist, Victoria Police, Frankston Magistrates' Court, Victoria Legal Aid Frankston, Peninsula Community Legal Centre, Women and Mentoring, St Kilda Gatehouse, and previously Frankston Mornington Peninsula Primary Care Partnership.

Through these strategic relationships as well as through frontline work implementing its No Wrong Door referral model, the Living Free Project has developed and operationalised a broad range of partnerships with local health and community services, police, and other agencies and professionals. These partnerships contribute to the development of **integrated referral pathways** for women and girls in Melbourne's South-East. The Living Free Project also contributes to developing broader platforms for inter-agency and inter-sector **collaboration** in the region, through facilitation of a range of mechanisms that bring stakeholders together to discuss issues and develop joint solutions.

The Living Free Project **advocates** on the policy and systems changes needed to achieve better outcomes for vulnerable girls and women, through active involvement in a range of strategic committees, raising public awareness and communicating with decision-makers. Voices of lived experience play a significant role in this advocacy.

3.4 History, funding and staffing

The Living Free Project commenced in 2017 with two years funding from Victorian Legal Services Board (VLSB) Grants Program. Initial funding supported two part-time Outreach Workers and a Project Coordinator. In 2018, the Ian Potter Foundation provided one year funding to establish an Intake/Service Navigation role and Gandel Philanthropy provided additional resources to respond to young girls reported missing. VLSB continued and expanded their support for a further three years, ceasing in November 2022.

After several years of operation, COVID-19 highlighted significant needs for vulnerable girls in the Westernport area who were disengaging from school and presenting with risk factors. In response, with funding from The Ross Trust, a dedicated part-time role was established to co-locate at Westernport Community Support in Hastings to work in collaboration with the Westernport Learning Guarantee Project.

In November 2021 Westpac Community Foundation funded three years for a targeted response to young girls at risk of sexual exploitation, and Equity Trustees funded three years to support young girls reported missing in the Bayside Peninsula. In May 2022, an enhanced model of the Living Free Project was funded through the Federal Government. This involved the expansion of the project across the Southern Metropolitan region of Melbourne, and formalised partnerships with:

- PCLC for a Young Women's Lawyer, enabling direct referrals for legal health checks and guidance
- WAM for a Young Women's Program Coordinator, extending WAM's mentoring support to girls 12+.

As of early 2023, the Living Free Project team is based in Frankston and provides outreach across Frankston Mornington Peninsula, Bayside, Casey and Greater Dandenong. Living Free staff employed by TaskForce include the Project Coordinator, Team Leader/Intake role, three Young Women's Outreach Workers, and a Group Facilitator. The roles based at PCLC and WAM provide additional specialist resourcing.

3.5 Impact of COVID-19 on the Living Free Project

The COVID-19 pandemic and associated restrictions had a significant impact on the operations of the service. The Living Free Project is specifically designed for assertive engagement and connecting with individuals not readily accessing services. During lockdown periods there were very limited opportunities to identify and connect with girls and young women requiring support. Courts were not in operation and with the majority of Victoria Police staff redeployed for COVID response, those who typically could identify potential referrals were also not connecting.

In order to continue providing the greatest value possible during this period, the project broadened its eligibility criteria to enable it to support a wider range of participants, and explored new ways of connecting with girls and women who might need support. For those who the team could connect with, geographical boundaries were no longer an issue with remote support able to be maintained for those living outside the catchment and in areas that would previously have been challenging to service. Service support related to service navigation, psycho-education, harm reduction and provision of material aid.

For younger girls, who were no longer being identified through the Pro-Active Policing Unit, a decision was made to re-direct support to young girls disengaging from remote education. The Living Free team provided COVID-safe outreach support to connect the girls with technology and be a bridge to the school. Where girls or families presented with additional needs, they were able to use the longer term resources of the project. Material aid was

also supplied to families as well as activities for the girls and any siblings such as art and cooking. This approach strengthened the project's relationship with primary schools in the high-needs area of Hastings, and commenced the relationship that is currently funded through The Ross Trust for a more prevention/early intervention approach.

As the pandemic progressed, levels of need increased in the community and demand outweighed capacity across many areas of the service system. This impacted the capacity of the Living Free Project to make supported referrals to more suitable services and impeded the project's No Wrong Door policy for a period of time, as the team were unable to service everyone who connected with the project in a comprehensive way.

Despite being a positive during the lock-down periods, the project's flexibility with location and loose service criteria had to be wound back once pandemic restrictions were over and normal service delivery resumed. This process has required careful communication with external agencies.

We were a lot looser during COVID. The numbers weren't coming in, so anybody that needed anything we would jump in. And it was a challenging transition to go from all these services who think that we can just come in to now being like, "Actually [participants] have to meet our criteria." (Living Free staff member)

3.6 Service snapshot: March 2021 – October 2022

Living Free Project service delivery data was analysed for the period March 2021-October 2022. During this period, **141 individual referrals** were received from a wide variety of sources. These resulted in intervention in **120 cases** (85% rate of engagement), consisting of:

- 9% brief intervention (less than 6 weeks)
- 80% outreach support
- 11% service co-ordination.

At the time of evaluation, 43% of cases remained open with Living Free and 33% had been closed with goals met or re-located with support. Disengagement rates were high at 24%, however nearly a third of those who disengaged had been engaged for over three months with some improving or re-locating, and others losing contact.

Between March 2021-October 2022, the project had **4,044 contacts** with participants. **A quarter of participants (25%) were engaged for 6-12 months**, 21% for 3-6 months, 29% engaged for less than 3 months and 14% engaged for over 12 months. 4% were newly referred to the project and data was missing for the remaining 7% on length of time.

57% of participants were aged 10-17 years at time of referral. Participants were overwhelmingly Anglo-Australian with less than 1% from a culturally or linguistically diverse background. The girls and women supported by the project had complex presentations and a lack of professional supports.

- **83% had known history of trauma**; 16% unknown and only one was reported to have no history of trauma.
- **20 were mothers**, with a total of 34 children. In only four cases the child/children were in the care of their mother; the majority were in kinship or Out of Home Care.
- **Over one third were homeless or in unstable accommodation** at time of referral.

In 36% of cases, participants' parents also presented with some needs related to mental health, AOD or justice, indicating patterns of intergenerational need.

Figure 2: Living Free cases March 2021-October 2022 by referral source

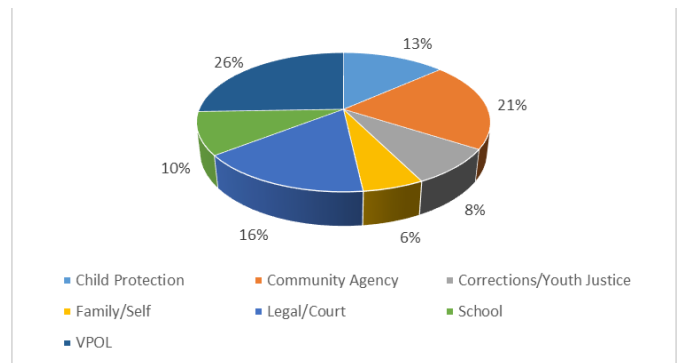


Figure 3: Living Free cases March 2021-October 2022 by age of participants at referral

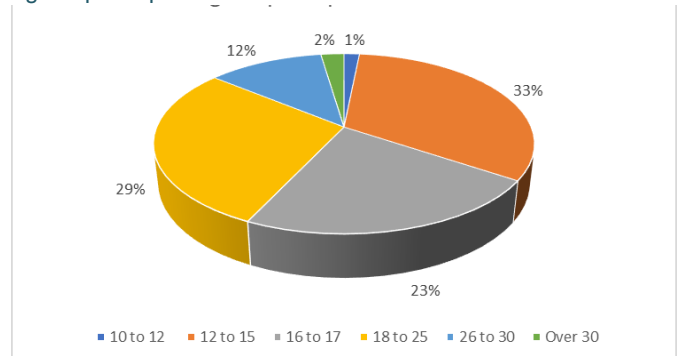
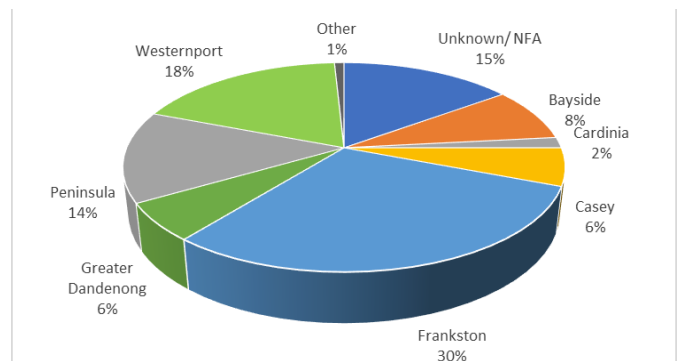


Figure 4: Living Free cases March 2021-October 2022 by suburb of participants at referral



4 Findings: Participant outcomes

This chapter presents findings about outcomes experienced by the girls and women receiving assistance from the Living Free Project.

These results draw on data from a range of sources including interviews with participants, staff and stakeholders; the stakeholder survey; structured outcomes data from the Living Free spreadsheet for 120 cases in the period March 2021-October 2022; and participant-rated psychometric measures for 9 cases. It is important to note that:

- Quantitative findings based on the Living Free spreadsheet represent aggregated 'distance travelled' figures for participants, however attribution data is not available for these figures. In other words, while we can see that changes have occurred for participants, from this data it is not possible to say what proportion of these changes were attributable to the work of Living Free, as opposed to other factors.
- The sample size for psychometric measures is very small, and results from these measures therefore cannot be generalised to the broader Living Free participant group.

4.1 Overview of participant outcome areas

The Living Free Project has a holistic service delivery lens and works to address the presenting needs of girls and women across a range of areas. For the purposes of this evaluation, participant outcomes were conceptualised under 6 areas, summarised in the following table. These areas also provide the structure for this chapter.

Table 2: Key participant outcome areas for the Living Free Project

OUTCOME AREA	KEY OUTCOMES OF INTEREST	NOTES
1. Justice system	• Reduced involvement in offending behaviour	Self-reports of reduced recidivism
	• Improved court outcomes	E.g. reduction in custodial sentences; increased ability to access bail
2. Service access and specialist supports	• Engagement with services and specialist supports relevant to needs	Mental health, AOD and family violence needs are common among the participant group and access to these services is particularly emphasised
3. Housing and living situation	• Access to safe long-term accommodation	
	• Increased stability of living situation	For 10-17 year old cohort, may be indicated by reduction in missing persons reports
4. Employment, education and training	• (Re-)engagement in education	Particular focus for 10-17 year old cohort, who may be disengaged or at risk of disengagement from school
	• Participation in employment	
5. Social connection	• Increased pro-social connections	Including, but not limited to positive experiences of trusting support relationships, and positive peer relationships
	• Strengthened family connections and functioning	

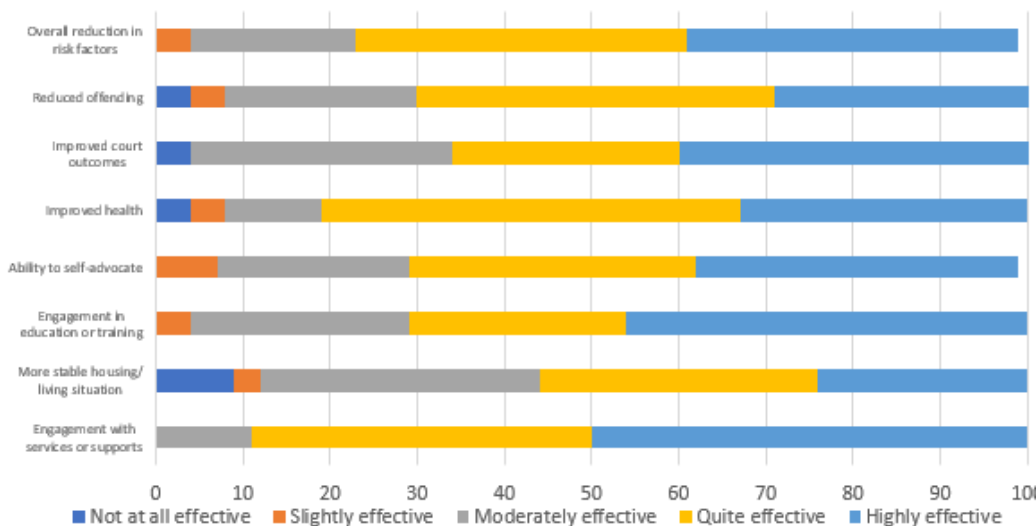
OUTCOME AREA	KEY OUTCOMES OF INTEREST	NOTES
6. Health, wellbeing and risk	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Improved mental health and more positive self-perception 	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Improved emotional and behavioural regulation 	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Reduced problematic AOD use 	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Increased safety 	Includes a particular focus on safety from family violence and from sexual exploitation

For additional information on intended outcomes, refer to Theory of Change (cf. Appendix A).

Sector stakeholders surveyed for the evaluation (n = 29) were asked to rate the effectiveness of Living Free in enabling a set of participant outcomes, broadly aligned with the outcome areas above. Figure 5 provides an overview of the results. While there is a range of opinion among stakeholders, **over 90% of responses on each item fell in the range of 'Moderately' to 'Highly' Effective**, showing a high regard among sector agencies for Living Free's contribution to positive outcomes for participants.

- The items highest rated on average were *Engagement with services or support relevant to needs* (4.39/5.0), *Overall reduction in risk factors* (4.12/5.0), and *Engagement in education or training* (4.11/5.0)
- The items lowest rated on average were *More stable housing/living situation* (3.70/5.0), and *Reduced offending* (3.89/5.0).

Figure 5: Stakeholder ratings of Living Free's effectiveness in enabling participant outcomes



4.2 Justice system

One of the core goals of the Living Free Project is to divert women and girls from justice system involvement. There is qualitative evidence that Living Free is achieving successes in this area with at least some participants. Quantitative evidence is currently insufficient to draw a conclusion.

Two main justice system outcome areas are discussed here: reduction in offending behaviour by participants, and improvements in court outcomes experienced by participants.

Reduced involvement in offending behaviour

The Living Free Project works in a range of ways to reduce the engagement of participants in activities that would bring them into contact with the justice system. Most importantly, through holistic support the project seeks to address the underlying needs of women and girls that may contribute to offending behaviour.

The project's approach is informed by the Risks, Needs, Responsivity model developed in response to offender risk assessment and management (Figure 6).⁵ The project focuses on a number of major risks/needs often linked to recidivism, in particular the need to build pro-social connections; reduce substance use and improving emotional regulation; enhance familial connection; increase employability and connection to the community through pro-social activities. Subsequent sections of this chapter explore outcomes in these areas.

Figure 6: Focus areas for support within the Living Free Project which reduce the risk of offending



Living Free participants have different levels of prior engagement with the justice system. 55% of participants had prior offending on referral to the project, with the main offence category being assault-related. **Only 8% of participants are known to have offended** during program involvement. Due to gaps in the data, limited sample size and differing lengths of time to which offending data relates, it is not currently possible to draw a conclusion on changes in offending rates for participants. A focus for future evaluation of the Living Free Project should be to develop appropriate indicators and data collection methods to enable quantitative assessment of justice system outcomes for participants.

⁵ Andrews, D. A., Bonta, J., & Hoge, R. D. (1990). Classification for effective rehabilitation: Rediscovering psychology. *Criminal Justice and Behavior*, 17.

There is qualitative evidence that **participants, family members and Living Free staff perceived a reduction in risk-taking and offending behaviour by at least some participants.**

I'm not really like being a menace to society anymore. I'm not getting in trouble as much. (Living Free participant)

I've had a client who has counts and counts and counts and counts of aggressive behaviours, and recently has just decided – she's changed her whole life around. She's now someone who's going to stop people from getting into arguments. She's made these changes which I think in part has to do with the services that I put into play to be able to help her manage all of those things. (Living Free staff member)

The preventative measures taken with participants to abstain from reoffending through offering a mentoring relationship, goal setting and ongoing support provides evidence of the success of Living Free in our community. (Stakeholder)

While some of these changes related to accessing services for specific needs, participants and parents/guardians also highlighted that engagement with the Living Free team had provided a chance for participants to reflect on their behaviour and its consequences. For some this had led to a different perspective and the ability to make different choices about their behaviour, which reduced their risk of justice system engagement.

I think being able to talk about all the things has [given me] a bigger understanding of things, so - I know what not to do and stuff. (Living Free participant)

I think [being involved with Living Free] is helping her to make better decisions now, and circumstances sort of change a little bit, like she's sort of broken away from the friend group if that's what you wanted to call it ... I mean she's still doing some risky behaviours, but not so much ... I definitely think that ... the program's helping her with that stuff. (Parent/guardian of Living Free participant)

Consistent with this, a **psychometric pre- and post- measure pertaining to attitudes towards offending saw a positive improvement with a 0.33 increase on average in participants considering the impact of their offending on others**, on a 5 point scale. Sample size is small (n=9) so this finding cannot be generalised to the broader Living Free participant cohort.

Successful Bail applications

An unintended outcome for the project related to the number of women able to access Bail with the support of the Living Free Project. Over the course of the project **100% of women who were on Remand at the time of referral received Bail**. The strong relationships with legal practitioners operating in Frankston Magistrates' Court and the responsive element of the project, enabled prioritised response for women on Remand which then translated to Court based advocacy and support by way of in-person attendance or letters of support. Women were supported with material aid upon release, co-ordinated engagement to relevant specialist services and case management where required.

Case example: Improved Bail Outcomes

Penny, a 23 year old Indigenous young woman who was being held on Remand for assault-related offending when referred to Living Free by her legal representative. Penny presented with a history of severe family violence, parental incarceration, mental health and substance use, in addition to prior involvement in the justice system. Living Free provided a letter of support indicating the support accessible through the project and attended Court for the Bail hearing. Penny was released and was supported by the project for over 18 months following. During this period she was sentenced to a community based order with Corrections for her offending, which she successfully completed, and also secured housing, engaged with specialist mental health services, reduced her substance use and engaged with Aboriginal health services.

Improved court outcomes

There is clear qualitative evidence that **support from the Living Free Project has led to improved court outcomes for individual participants**. The two most significant types of improvements have been that Living Free has assisted women to access bail and to minimise time in custody; and has assisted women to receive reduced sentencing outcomes.

... the Bail Act looks at things like do you have housing, do you have support services, have you missed your court dates. So without something like the Living Free program, that can be the difference between getting out or not. And if you think, "I'm not going to get out so I'll just plead", that's the difference between having a criminal record or not. And once someone has a criminal record, the stigma really lingers. (Stakeholder)

I've had clients receive undertakings where they might have expected a community corrections order. I've had women receive fines when they would have received a corrections order. So less involvement in the justice system long term ... because they do the work outside court with the Living Free program that pays off inside the courtroom. And it's something that I've used to advocate for bail, I've used to advocate for a reduced sentence because they've done the work outside the courtroom. (Stakeholder)

Aspects of the Living Free team's work that contribute to these positive outcomes include:

- Assisting women to remember court dates and to attend court – this has a substantial effect on women's ability to access success bail and to remain in the community rather than in custody
- Accompanying women as a support person at court – assisting women to feel that they can get through the court process
- Writing support letters that confirm that the participant is accessing support and that describe the steps the participant is taking to address issues connected with their offending – this can be taken into account by courts during sentencing
- Encouraging and empowering women to self-advocate – this enables women to more clearly explain their circumstances and the changes they are making in their lives, to magistrates and other professionals.

... [my Living Free worker] has written a few support letters that has ended up being read by the judge... the support letter that she wrote because of her involvement with me actually made a significant difference and a very positive difference ... the fact that I am now working full time and I'm in a [house] and I'm self-sufficient, like a lot of that I can attribute to [my Living Free worker] and her help and support... she advocated for me really well and she did a brilliant job. And without her support, life would have been really hard, like I probably would have a [criminal] record I reckon ... that kind of screws you up for the rest of your life you know ... So yeah, I think that if I wasn't involved in the Living Free program, I would be in a much worse position in almost every aspect of life. (Living Free participant)

In the longer term, improved court outcomes can make the difference between women being trapped in, or breaking free of cycles of trauma and offending.

So if a client is able to engage and address the drivers of their offending with Living Free, then they can avoid custody, they can avoid the cycle that they can find themselves in and they can stay in the community and improve themselves rather than continuing to offend and escalating in their offending and finding themselves spending time in custody being further traumatised... (Stakeholder)

Case example: Improved Court outcomes

Janice, a 22 year old young woman, was referred to the Living Free Project by her legal representative upon presenting to Court for family violence related offending, with her mother as the victim. Janice presented with complex trauma, homelessness, family violence as victim and perpetrator, mental health and alcoholism, the latter significantly contributing to her involvement in the justice system. Janice was facing the reality of a custodial sentence due to ongoing breaches of Family Violence Intervention Orders however the Magistrate Deferred Sentencing to enable Janice to engage in alcohol and drug residential withdrawal as an alternative to custody. Due to Janice's complex presentation, her anxiety around engaging in a rehabilitation was significant. Janice's Living Free Project worker supported her for over twelve months preparing her for a residential withdrawal program, managing crisis presentations, providing psycho-education to reduce harms associated with her ongoing alcohol consumption, and providing material aid, the whole time working with both Janice and her mother in an effort to improve this relationship. After Janice was unable to engage in the initial attempt at a withdrawal (due to trigger occurring on admission), Living Free continued supporting Janice until she successfully completed a residential withdrawal several months later. Upon sentencing, Janice received a Good Behaviour Bond with the Magistrate acknowledging that the lengthy involvement with the Living Free Project and her engagement in a residential alcohol withdrawal program was the significant factor in her avoiding a custodial disposition.

4.3 Complexity, service access and specialist supports

Participants of the Living Free Project typically have complex histories and multiple presenting needs. During the period March 2021-October 2022, **98% of participants presented with at least one need related to AOD, mental health or family violence**. 61% of participants had two of these needs co-occurring, and 45% presented with needs in all three areas. 13% of participants presented with all three of these needs plus unstable or unsafe housing; of these, 75% also had justice involvement. A previous snapshot of girls reported missing who were supported by the project highlighted that 100% of them had been exposed to family violence as a child.

These underlying needs have a significant effect on women's health and wellbeing, as well as contributing to offending behaviour. The Living Free Project is designed to support girls and women with this level of complexity who are finding barriers to accessing mainstream specialist services. Working from Blue Knot Foundation's evidence base related to complex trauma⁶, the project prioritises the relationship and supporting participants to create some level of stability in their lives. The relationship is therapeutic in nature and interventions such as a behaviour change, harm reduction, safety planning and pro-social modelling are core components of the interactions.

Along with these elements, Living Free always maintains a focus on connecting participants and their support networks to community supports and specialist services that can help address these needs. Despite their significant levels of complexity, the level of engagement of participants in specialist services to address these needs is low on referral to Living Free. This is therefore an important intermediate outcome area for the project.

There is clear evidence that **the Living Free team works actively and effectively to connect participants with needed supports**. The following table summarises levels of need, external service engagement at time of referral to Living Free, and external service engagement following Living Free support, for all participants and for 10-17 year old participants. These figures focus on AOD, mental health and family violence services, however Living Free also assists participants to access a wide range of other services including housing and homelessness support, legal services, medical services, family support and more.

Table 3: Living Free participants March 2021-October 2022 – change in service access

SERVICE TYPE	ALL PARTICIPANTS		
	% with needs	% engaged pre-LF	% engaged post-LF
AOD	63%	10%	16%
Mental health	83%	26%	38%
Family violence	67%	18%	18%

The data indicates that Living Free increased levels of AOD and mental health service access across the whole participant cohort, and especially made significant gains in access to specialist services for 10-17 year old girls. Despite the level of need related to family violence, only 18% of Living Free Project participants had been

⁶ Blue Knot Foundation (2012) 'The Last Frontier' Practice Guidelines for the Treatment of Complex Trauma and Trauma Informed Service Delivery and Care

engaged with specialist family violence services and this did not increase through project support. However, the Living Free team provides support and safety planning that assists to improve the safety of girls and women (cf. Section 4.7).

Participants, staff and external professionals all spoke about the importance of Living Free's role in linking participants to services that they otherwise would be unlikely to access.

We got lots of services which was really good. At one point it felt a little like I was getting too many services ... I think it was just because you sort of have to say your story each time and sometimes that can feel a little confronting ... But it was really good, we didn't have any barriers. (Living Free participant)

So I've had clients who were linked in with drug and alcohol support through the Living Free program ... the client I'm thinking of was also assisted to enrol in an education program by the Living Free program and she was also referred for family violence counselling ... they also funded her to engage with a gym, so she could have positive social interactions and have something to occupy her that was going to provide her with a positive outlet ... otherwise this client would have had to make those individual referrals herself ... And for women who have low self-esteem and who have been victims of family violence, that can be really tricky to achieve. If you don't feel like you're worth anything, how are you going to fight for yourself to get a spot in a rehab? ... how are you going to have the confidence to enrol in an education course? (Stakeholder)

Case example: Service access for an isolated young woman

A vulnerable young woman had been abused by her father for 10 years. Her mother was isolating her from the community and not allowing her to contact services. An external professional made a referral to Living Free, who were able to reach out to the young person, build rapport and facilitate contact with legal assistance to help her through the criminal justice system. A sector stakeholder commented that Living Free is "the first and only support service that has ever been able to engage this young person and her family. They have been able to assist her in transitioning out of home, purchasing essential items, studies etc."

Process of facilitating service access

Key aspects of Living Free's approach which enable access to specialist services and supports include: ongoing work to develop and maintain local service partnerships; active referral; advocacy to services on behalf of women who need support; and where appropriate, care team coordination. The Living Free Project also assists participants to obtain funding and assessments required for service access. Psychiatric assessments are vital for acquired brain injury assessments, issues with cognitive functioning and where co-occurring alcohol and drug and mental health concerns are causing participants to fall through gaps in treatment. The project team leverage existing networks to access these and brokerage funding to support payment. Outcomes often direct further service engagement through recommendations, or aid advocacy efforts in the justice system.

I've had clients engaged with Living Free for over 12 months and they don't have to be pleading guilty to get that level of support, they don't have to have a significant diagnosis in terms of their mental health and had that already put in writing by a consultant psychiatrist. [The Living Free team] can help them get those diagnoses; they can help them decide what they're going to do with their

criminal matters. They can help them get to a point where they can access some of those other services. (Stakeholder)

[The participants] now have money and funding so that they can go and see a specialised psychologist to address that trauma if they're ready for it. (Living Free staff member)

A young woman, 13, lots of big trauma background, a bit of an extensive Child Protection history ... [the Living Free worker] would be the chair of the care team for that family, because there was a lot of strengths around I think their engagement, she was getting really good rapport with the young person. She was very good at coordinating ... it's really, really beneficial keeping them out of my system. (Stakeholder)

The Living Free Project recognises that engagement with specialist services is most effective when it is offered at a time that participants are ready to engage with it, and built on the foundation of a trusting relationship. This means that the process cannot be rushed, and it may sometimes take months to link a participant with services.

You might find a service gap, but they don't want that service. That's not our job to push a service onto someone that they don't see it as a requirement even if we know that that could be really beneficial. And maybe it's that something that two weeks in you notice that, but they're not willing to come round to that for two months. If that means you're consistently working away with them and then it gets to the point where they're like, "I'm now ready for that," then so be it. (Living Free staff member)

It's important to note that participants who choose not to access external services, or for whom there is a delay in access, still receive valuable support via the Living Free team. For example, with the Living Free team also skilled in AOD interventions, all participants with drug and alcohol concerns receive harm reduction, psycho-education and strategies throughout their engagement, regardless of whether they access specialist AOD services.

The **mental health** system presents particular barriers to access and service continuity. Where acute mental health needs are present, advocacy by the Living Free team therefore plays a significant role. Due to their complex trauma and often co-occurring needs, participants can present with challenging behaviours in times of acute mental distress and not receive appropriate intervention.

Where participants are reluctant to engage with mental health services, project networks are leveraged for rapid assessment and/or secondary consultation.

Case example: Accessing targeted mental health support

A 22-year-old participant, referred by her legal representative for multiple charges, had been hospitalised four times in the prior eight months in psychiatric facilities, yet there was no ongoing service involvement. Within a week of intake to Living Free, an appointment had been secured for an assessment with an Addiction Psychiatrist where she attended with support of her Living Free Project worker.

4.4 Housing and living situation

The need for a safe and stable living situation is a key concern for many of the girls and women accessing the Living Free Project. During the period March 2021-October 2022, **36% of project participants were homeless or**

in unstable accommodation at the time of referral. When looking at women aged 18 and over, this increases to 50%.

There are a number of key reasons why participants lack stable, safe housing. These include:

- Poverty, in the context of a housing system with a severe lack of safe affordable housing
- Family violence – a major cause of homelessness for women; some participants have already fled family violence and others may be living in active family violence situations, with potential to escalate at any time
- Relationship breakdown and/or family conflict, including conflict between young women and other family members
- Disruptions to stable living situations including through time in custody, which can lead to the loss of long-term housing.

Homelessness and unstable housing have major effects on the lives of women and girls, including negative health effects, difficulty engaging in education or employment, difficulty in accessing services, and disruption to the basics of life such as the ability to receive mail.

When someone doesn't have stable housing, it's very hard to them to link in with services because they might be bouncing around different catchment areas ... it can be a service barrier in terms of blocking people from having alcohol and drug support, having area mental health support because they move between catchments and everyone just goes, "Oh, not in my catchment. They can go elsewhere." (Stakeholder)

The Living Free Project uses a range of strategies to assist participants to exit homelessness and gain safe, stable housing. The project advocates for girls and women to access the housing system, though this is challenging due to the complexity of the system, the high cost and limited availability of private rental, and often long waiting times for public or community housing. The project supports women to find temporary and crisis accommodation, such as motels, and to access interim and longer-term housing such as transitional housing. Referral to specialist housing and homelessness services is often important in this process.

It can be anything from support in looking for a house and applying for private rentals, because that can be also an issue for people. But also crisis accommodation and finding any form of accommodation can also be a really significant barrier. (Living Free staff member)

In the context of a difficult housing market, one of the strategies available to support housing outcomes especially for younger participants is to stabilise family environments, making it possible for participants to remain at home in an environment that is more supportive of their wellbeing. Family inclusive practice is an important part of Living Free's 'toolkit' for achieving outcomes of this type.

There is evidence that **the Living Free Project is successful in assisting a substantial number of participants with housing difficulties to improve their housing situation.** The proportion of participants for the March 2021-October 2022 period who are homeless or in unstable accommodation dropped by more than half, from 36% at referral to 15% at closure. Comments from some participants and stakeholders interviewed provided examples of positive housing outcomes.

[Living Free have] helped with a lot, actually. Again, like I've got my own little house out of it... More independent. Yeah, it's been awesome. (Living Free participant)

Despite the best efforts of participants and the Living Free Project and other services, not all participants experience positive housing outcomes. Girls with an unsafe or conflictual home environment or Out of Home Care environment remain at particular risk of homelessness. Finding pathways to safe temporary and long-term housing remains a high priority for the Living Free Project.

4.5 Employment, education and training

Engagement in employment, education and/or training can be protective for participants in multiple ways, strengthening social connection and opening opportunities for social and economic participation that reduce poverty. These factors reduce the risk of offending and increase broader wellbeing.

(Re-)engagement in education

Educational disengagement is linked with long-term negative outcomes for individuals and society, ranging from reduced labour market opportunities and financial insecurity to worse health outcomes, lost tax revenue and increased crime.⁷ Many girls aged 10-17 accessing the Living Free Project are at high risk of educational disengagement, with **77% either disengaged from education or presenting with significant engagement issues on referral**. 45% of these young people had re-engaged in some form of education, or training or secured employment whilst involved with the Living Free Project.

With many care givers feeling overwhelmed dealing with the education system, the Living Free team regularly undertake advocacy to re-engage participants back into school, on a timetable that fits their needs and with the support they require. Living Free staff recognise that school wellbeing and teaching staff are often very busy, juggling multiple demands. At times the information and perspectives that Living Free can provide make a substantial difference in informing more flexible and inclusive responses by schools. For example, the Living Free Project (with a participant's consent) can provide information and advocacy to a school about the needs and complexities that young person is experiencing, which can help the school to develop a more individualised and trauma-informed approach to engaging them.

Yes, [the participant is] acting out, but I'm now telling you that seven things are going on behind the scenes... I understand that you're frustrated in a school setting that that person isn't making everyone's job easy, but this is an individual with an extensive trauma history, you need to change the approach. It needs to be more individualised. (Living Free staff member)

Another important element of Living Free's work that supports young people's education engagement is work to address underlying need and risks that can make participation in education difficult, such as homelessness, mental health issues or substance use. Care teams are often convened and the participant's needs and goals positioned at the centre, with recognition that engagement in education is a pivotal protective factor. The relationship of trust built between Living Free staff and participants is a key enabler for these outcomes to occur.

⁷ See e.g. Deloitte Access Economics. 2012. "The Socio-Economic Benefits of Investing in the Prevention of Early School Leaving." Barton, ACT; Lamb, S. and Huo, S. 2017. "Counting the Costs of Lost Opportunity in Australian Education." Melbourne: Mitchell Institute; Centre for International Research on Education Systems (CIRES).

[The Living Free worker] was a great support as well. She's been fantastic in that she's always gone to the team meetings with the school, she actually runs them as well, so I couldn't say a bad thing about it. (Family member of Living Free participant)

There is qualitative evidence that **the Living Free Project has enabled at least some participants to re-engage, or more strongly engage in school and other forms of education.**

We have seen students engage more at school and be happier in themselves. (Stakeholder)

... it's definitely happened where girls will go back to school, they might not go back full-time, they might change schools and go to a different school, but they get back involved with the education system ... we're still talking girls that are probably still only 16 now. (Stakeholder)

There are also examples of Living Free assisting older participants, and those for whom school is no longer a viable option, to access other educational pathways such as TAFE courses. These outcomes not only enhance future employment opportunities, but also increase self-confidence.

[My Living Free worker] helped me get into studying at the time because obviously with the [COVID] lockdown and no one was working, so she helped me get into studying. I was studying a certificate 3 or 4 ... in cyber security. (Living Free participant)

[My Living Free worker] helped me sign up to do a TAFE course after this ... next year I'm doing a TAFE course in drug and alcohol support. Because it's something I can relate to and I think I'd be good at... helping people. (Living Free participant)

The Living Free Project continues to work with schools and other educational providers to increase access and to negotiate roles and support arrangements that will assist participants to succeed in education.

Participation in employment

In addition to education, where appropriate Living Free supports participants to increase their participation in employment. The project undertakes this work through a variety of modalities, including:

- One-on-one employment support to assist participants to find and maintain work
- Group programs which strengthen participants' general employment readiness
- Training in specific topics relevant to industries in which participants may be able to find work, such as hospitality.

This year [we ran a group] called Skills for Work, and that was getting ready for work, interviewing, writing a cover letter and all that sort thing. That led into some one-on-one ongoing employment support. (Living Free staff member)

... there's another partnership in the process of being formalised at the Frankston North Salvation Army... We got a coffee machine installed there recently, to run Introduction to Hospitality training for young people. (Living Free staff member)

Participation in employment is also strengthened through the Living Free Project's wider work to build empowerment and engage participants in envisioning their future and developing goals. The Project offers a

valuable opportunity for participants to broaden their aspirations, an important predictor of greater economic participation.

When you've got these clients that have grown up in chaos and grown up not being able to trust people. They've grown up in poverty and with all these things out of their control, sometimes they don't even realise they actually have control over their future and they can dream and they can envision something positive. Because they've kind of got these automatic negative thinking patterns as well that are happening which are preventing them from going like, "I don't just have to be on government support payments. I can actually go and get a job and I deserve to dream big." They don't often have that opportunity to do that. (P15)

The employment by TaskForce of a former Living Free participant in an advocacy role has also been an important step, modelling positive employment outcomes and providing inspiration for other participants.

4.6 Social connection

Positive social connections are important for participants' wellbeing, as well as for reducing risks of justice system involvement. Living Free works to strengthen relationships and support connection at several levels, including between participants and workers; among participants as peers; and within participants' families.

Increased pro-social connections

Many participants of the Living Free Project have histories of trauma, including experiences of unhealthy or abusive relationships. Qualitative evaluation evidence indicates that **Living Free staff effectively build positive, trusting support relationships with participants, which are highly valued by participants**. Staff are accessible, respectful and nonjudgmental, which positively impacts participants' engagement, behaviour and mental health.

I've never actually had a lot of trust for people because everyone I've trusted leaves. Yeah, so I've like a bit more trust in them like [my Living Free worker], because I know she won't go back and tell anyone and stuff like that. (Living Free participant)

Sometimes [the participant would] come home and she'd be really happy and we are happy too. From the visit with [the Living Free worker]. So, she has actually said, I like [my worker]. Which, to us, is a big thing because she doesn't like too many people. Our experience with Living Free is ... very positive because of a connection that was made. (Family member of Living Free participant)

... a big part of it for me is just holding that space for that young person, that they've likely never had before. To just talk about whatever it is that's important to them, have their needs met, have their needs heard even. And it could be just having those conversations, but there's so much therapeutic benefit from that, from just listening to them. Just time. No one really ever gives them time. (Living Free staff member)

The experience of a healthy, supportive and respectful pro-social relationship with a worker can be important in a variety of ways. It can build self-esteem, model healthy relationships, provide a therapeutic space to address trauma, provide a safe space in which other needs and risks can be discussed and actioned, and rebuild trust in service and supports.

In addition to positive relationships with staff, the Living Free Project provides **opportunities for development of pro-social peer relationships**. These particularly occur through Living Free's groupwork programs, which run over time, provide meaningful activity and allow relationships to form.

These kids have had severe trauma, or have got intellectual disabilities, or mental health issues. It's difficult just to say, well, if we take them out for lunch a few times then they'll be fine. It's not the case. It's a protracted involvement over a long period of time, and that's why I like things like the boxing group. It's just something positive for them to do, because a lot of them don't go to school, they don't have jobs, so they don't really have anything to do. That's what they need, something to look forward to. (Stakeholder)

Where friendships emerge in groups Living Free at times has capacity to facilitate further engagement, recognising the importance of these support networks for participants trying to create changes in their lives.

I have two clients who were at a group together and really got along and very socially isolated. So we're going to set up a group where it's just the two of them and [a Living Free worker] ... They were the ones that wanted it, which is very exciting. And the ability to be able to do that and give them their own support network of girls who are similar to them who have been through stuff but are trying to make those changes is massive. (Living Free staff member)

Strengthened family connections and functioning

Another key aspect of social connection is improved connections and relationships among family members. While this is not always possible or appropriate, where it can be achieved it can be an important enabling factor for other outcomes including stability of living situation, educational engagement, health, and reduction of a range of risks.

The Living Free Project has a **family inclusive practice model** which engages with participants within the context of their broader family system. This approach considers the needs and complexities affecting other family members, how these impact on participants, and how they could be addressed. At times, it is also clear that other people within a participant's support network could benefit from assistance, and they are also supported to access these supports. Living Free can inform family members of available supports and services, link people to these supports, and coordinate other services around the family to ensure collaboration.

Whilst family inclusive practice is prioritised in the project, there are often carers who present with complex needs and require additional support to connect to services. This subsequently creates pressure on the resources of the project. However, the benefit of establishing supports for significant others can be considerable, as it can help to improve family relationships and to create a context in which participants can be better and more stably supported, enabling sustainable change.

Case example: Assisting a care-giver to access support

A 14 year old girl referred to Living Free had significant conflict with her mother and was facing the prospect of the Child Protection system. On this occasion it was evident that the young person was well supported with professionals, however the mother had no mental health support. Living Free leveraged referral pathways, undertook a supported referral and then co-ordinated a care team for the mother and family to ensure open and consistent communication. This intervention was six weeks in total and resulted in significant progress

and increased stability. The mother reaching out after closure to report: “That care team saved us. She never wants to leave home now.”

In addition to putting in place supports for other family members, there is also evidence that Living Free can have effects on improving family relationships in other ways. This can include enhancing participants’ abilities to moderate their behaviour or manage their anger; assisting participants to see their family relationships in new ways; and playing an informal mediation role to assist with resolution of issues that may be affecting relationships between participants and other family members.

I guess the relationship between me and my mum. That’s gotten a lot better. (Living Free participant)

She’s got a strong personality and an attitude, [Living Free] was something else that was really good that came in, that stood between her and us. So, we were not getting all the difficulties. (Family member of Living Free participant)

4.7 Health, wellbeing and risk

The Living Free project seeks to improve participants’ health, wellbeing and safety across a range of areas. The project pursues this through the provision of therapeutic support directly by Living Free staff, through addressing contextual factors impacting on participants, and through linking participants with external specialist services. This section briefly comments on outcomes from Living Free across four areas:

- Improved mental health and self-perception
- Improved emotional and behavioural regulation
- Reduced problematic AOD use
- Increased safety, with specific reference to family violence, sexual health and risk of sexual exploitation.

I have seen participants build their functional capacity to manage their disabilities, and increase their social and economic independence. Participants feeling connected and accepted. (Stakeholder)

Improved mental health and more positive self-perception

The level of mental health need varies considerably across participants. Living Free seeks to link participants with clinical mental health needs to specialist services. For participants with lower impact mental health conditions, needs can be managed through project participation. A substantial number present with complex trauma, and Living Free provides a pivotal support in recovery.

Due to high levels of acuity and clinical need, a robust clinical governance framework supports the Living Free Project. Weekly clinical review and risk register meetings support management of high risk participants. Workers are appropriately trained and supervised to enable them to undertake mental health safety planning, de-escalation and crisis response.

Psychometric pre- and post- measures relating to mental health saw positive change, with **increases in level of mood (+1.64) and decreases in problem severity (-1.74)**, on a 5 point scale. Sample size is small (n=9) so this finding cannot be generalised to the broader Living Free participant cohort.

Qualitative evidence from a range of perspectives highlights that **support from the Living Free Project has benefits for positive self-perception, increased confidence, improved mood and a range of other indicators of positive mental health.**

Slowed down on self-harm like a lot. Learnt different ways of mindfulness and stuff like that. I did have a really good sleep pattern for a bit there ... [Living Free] just had a big impact in a really good way, like with just making myself feel like a better person. And I actually have a lot more confidence. (Living Free participant)

Having conversations with someone who's obviously a good role model and going out and just being able to freely talk about things that are troubling her and also just knowing that she's going to be getting good advice ... I think it's really changed her that now she's starting to feel more positive and starting to plan more about what she would like to do that would make her feel good again. Yeah, just very positive. (Family member of Living Free participant)

The ability for participants to talk safely and openly to their worker about their concerns, to be heard, validated and to receive non-judgmental advice has been important in these outcomes. Meaningful activity and exercise through groups has also played a role.

[My Living Free worker] made me comfortable to talk about anything and everything that has been going on those last few years before that. She helped me just feel more confident in myself. (Living Free participant)

The boxing has been fantastic. It took a little bit to get [the participant] there, but once she got there, now she's been there every week and she's really enjoying it ... it's given her confidence again, as well as exercise ... She was hospitalised and everything ... she had no confidence, like low self esteem ... she just basically sat around depressed for months ... and now she actually looks forward to going each week, so that's been great. (Family member of Living Free participant)

Improved emotional and behavioural regulation

Another area where many participants and family members note outcomes through participation in the Living Free Project is emotional and behavioural regulation. Outcomes reported include **participants having more awareness of their emotional state and more ability to manage emotions and related behaviours**, especially anxiety and anger. These are important foundational capabilities which make outcomes possible in other areas including social connection, service access, economic participation and reduced justice system involvement.

Even when I am just feeling a bit overwhelmed, could be just needing advice or there's actually a problem, like [my Living Free worker has] always been there to help me sort it out. More in terms of like making sure I'm like just chill and not freaking out ... They've been extremely helpful. (Living Free participant)

Well I haven't actually been doing this for that long. I guess I'm like handling the anger and my emotions a bit better. And identifying my emotions better as well. That's really good. (Living Free participant)

Part of Living Free's approach in this area is assisting participants to develop more constructive strategies for dealing with anger and other challenging emotions. This often involves supporting participants to learn to use verbal communication in place of physical aggression.

Before [the participant] was just really angry and negative and it was really hard to get up a conversation going with her but now she's just more cooperative and just a bit more open to chatting about more sensitive topics than she was before ... [The Living Free worker] has definitely been a positive and has definitely helped her get on track. (Family member of Living Free participant)

When they grow up in a culture where ... that's what happens when someone gets angry, you punch someone. And to have someone outside be like, "There's so many other ways that we can go about that," in a way that's not telling them off. And a way that's acknowledging that like, "Of course you felt like this." Explain to them, "You've only ever seen it like this obviously, but there are other ways." Coming at it to be on their side... (Living Free staff member)

Reduced problematic AOD use

On referral, around two thirds of Living Free participants have needs in relation to problematic alcohol and/or other drug use. The project undertakes substantial work to assist participants to reduce AOD-related harm and to gain greater control over their AOD use. AOD intervention is provided directly by Living Free staff, as well as via referral of participants to external specialist services.

Qualitative evidence indicates that **Living Free successfully assists at least some participants to better manage problematic AOD use and related harms**. Reduction in participants' AOD use by was reported by participants themselves, and by family members of participants.

I stopped drinking. I've stopped smoking marijuana and drug usage, nicotine usage. (Living Free participant)

[Living Free are] just amazing people... real helpful, even with the recovery they've like referred me to like ResetLife [a free abstinence-based AOD treatment program]. So I do meetings weekly so it's like social ... They've helped heaps, yeah. (Living Free participant)

The project also provides guidance and education to family members of young participants to assist them to respond more effectively to AOD use by young people in their care.

[The Living Free worker has] been great with me too. She'll send me emails of like seminars that are on ... because [the participant was] obviously dabbling in like using marijuana and stuff ... [the worker has] sort of been helping me kind of deal with ... those behaviours. (Family member of Living Free participant)

Consistent with these observations, a **psychometric pre- and post- measure "My alcohol or drug use is impacting negatively on my relationships and life" saw an improvement of 1.3 on average**, on a 5 point scale. Sample size is small (n=9) so this finding cannot be generalised to the broader Living Free participant cohort.

Increased safety

Many participants of the Living Free Project experience elevated risks across a range of areas, including health and wellbeing risks, risks of violence or abuse from others, and risks of self-harm or suicide. The project has sophisticated frameworks and processes for assessing and managing risk.

I've got a client who appears really high risk, really complex, extensive and significant childhood sexual abuse. It's all going through court at the moment, really hectic stuff going on. But she's actually one of my lowest risk clients because of everything else, she's quite independent, she's got a job ... engages well ... we've got our [own] risk spectrum. (Living Free staff member)

We have a risk review meeting every Thursday morning, which is a space where we can bring [discussions about] those really complex clients to. We all share that risk in a sense, because we are all across it. We can share ideas about what we need to do and what we need to prioritise and what next steps are. (Living Free staff member)

Many of Living Free's important outcomes fall in the risk reduction space. While it can be difficult to definitively measure some of these outcomes for individual participants (as it may be difficult to demonstrate that a certain risk would have materialised had intervention not occurred), there may be evidence of increased safety at cohort level. This section discusses the following risk areas in which there is evidence of Living Free improving participants' safety: family violence, and sexual health and risk of sexual exploitation.

Family violence

As noted above (Table 3), around two-thirds of Living Free participants are known to have needs related to family violence at the time of referral. Family violence can be a driver of other issues and needs including unstable housing, poverty, problematic AOD use, and offending. Two thirds of women incarcerated in Victoria have been a victim of family violence⁸, and if family violence is present but not addressed as an underlying cause of offending, this can result in a cycle of re-incarceration that can be difficult to break. Family violence can also make it difficult for women to engage with services and to address other issues that they may be experiencing.

An important aspect of Living Free's model is the ability to develop relationships of trust with participants, through which underlying needs and issues can be identified, including those relating to family violence. This then opens up opportunities to respond to these drivers of offending in effective ways.

When you consider the ways in which family violence can infect someone's life, it can be a driver of offending. And once you're in the system, it's very hard to get out, particularly if you don't have someone who's going to take the time to sit down and listen to you and let you tell your whole story ... So that's one of the things I think is best about the Living Free program, because they take the time to ask those deeper questions. They don't just say, "Oh you've got to shop lift – well you were just broke at the time" ... They'll say, "Okay, well what's going on in the background here? What's concerning you?" And those are the questions that really need asking if you're going to change this type of pattern. (Stakeholder)

Where possible, Living Free links participants experiencing family violence risk to specialist family violence response services. Significant work is also done directly through the Living Free team in relation to secondary consultation, safety planning and supporting women to leave violent situations.

Living Free has also provided support to women misidentified as perpetrator's of family violence.

⁸ Corrections Victoria, 2023

Case example Misidentification

A 27 year old woman was referred to the project for serious offending related to family violence. Upon entering the project it became evident that the matter was misidentification. Legal representatives were able to have all charges dropped however the impact was still seen in the loss of the woman's Working with Children Card, allowing her to volunteer at her children's school, and also impacted ongoing Family Law matters. Her Living Free Project worker undertook advocacy with the authorising body to see her WWC reinstated and also provided practical support for her Family Law matters, ensuring she was safe and articulating the high level of risk for the woman and her children. Consultations were undertaken with the Risk Assessment and Management Panels (RAMP) due to her disclosures and serious ongoing risk her ex partner was for her and her children. As a result, the participant was supported into a specialist FV service who re-located her and her children immediately.

There is qualitative evidence that **Living Free has successfully assisted some participants to become safer through reducing their exposure to family violence**, and that this has been a factor which has supported the achievement of other outcomes such as engagement in education and employment.

You can see the trauma she has experienced in her physical demeanour, in the way that she looks and talks and won't make eye contact at the start, apologises ... having her be ready to close because she has now ... [been] removed from family violence, entered a safe house, worked collaboratively with other services, [from being] really service resistant, to the point that you now see that she is engaging with services that aren't essential ... employment, engaging in education ... Somebody who left school but having all of those to the point that she no longer needs you is the best feeling in the world.
(Living Free staff member)

Sexual health and risk of sexual exploitation

Another important area of risk and trauma for Living Free participants, especially girls in the 10-17 years age group, is sexual health and potential for sexual exploitation. Living Free Project staff and Victoria Police stakeholders described a range of risks in this area for participants including risks of non-consensual sexual activity/sexual assault, exposure to sexually transmitted diseases, and unplanned pregnancy. Girls reported missing, including those living in residential care, were noted as being at particularly high risk for sexual exploitation and sexual trauma.

Most of them [at high risk of sexual exploitation] are unfortunately in resi care where they may be drug users or have mental health issues, and the easiest way to get money for drugs, or to get drugs alone, is to go out and sleep with an older person. It's a very, very common thing. But the issues are that'd be too difficult to stop ... but we need to educate them about the risks of sexually transmitted diseases, unplanned pregnancy ... and what they can do if they are sexually assaulted and so on.
(Living Free staff member)

... that's a huge issue, obviously, is young girls getting pregnant at 15, 14 years old, and not really knowing what to do. (Stakeholder)

Within the context of a trusted support relationship, Living Free Project staff are able to have **frank conversations with participants about a range of issues connected with sexual health** including consent, safety, contraception,

unplanned pregnancies and more. These conversations are aided by the fact that Living Free staff are not in a position of authority with respect to participants, and take an open and non-shaming approach to conversations about sexuality. This provides participants with a safe space to explore issues, discuss traumatic situations, and identify strategies that may assist them to reduce risk.

They may not often have adults to be able to have quite candid conversations where you talk about not only consent means yes, I'm agreeing, but what are you agreeing to, and what's safe, and how to have those conversations that can be really difficult. And how to enjoy being a sexual person rather than feel like you're doing it for the validation, which is like a lot of the girls are doing as well. Or forced. (Living Free staff member)

... a lot of the time when they bring it up with parents they're either completely shut down or shamed. So being able to say, "It's okay, but there's some risks," and doing safety planning around that ... "Why am I choosing to do that? ... What does a healthy relationship look like? ... How do you know when you're being exploited? ... What to do if you get into a situation that you feel uncomfortable in? What are your options then?" (Living Free staff member)

[Many participants] have had sexual trauma ... A lot of the time we'll be the first person that they'll disclose things like that to, so it's managing that and making them feel, like not shamed or anything – just providing the safe space for them to share a very traumatic situation, whilst also being like, "So what are some things that we can learn from that to know that if we're in a situation again how can we protect ourselves?" (Living Free staff member)

Complementing individual support, Living Free's groupwork program around respectful and healthy relationships is delivered to local schools and offers a prevention-based approach to issues of safety within relationships. This group work has supported over 50 young girls to improve peer based connections and school engagement.

4.8 Summary of participant outcomes

The Living Free Project works to support positive participant outcomes across six main areas: reduced justice system involvement; access to specialist supports; improved housing and living situation; increased engagement with employment, education and training; strengthened social and family connections; and improved health and safety. There is qualitative evidence that the project is successful in achieving outcomes in each of these areas.

I had a young woman earlier this year, we got her out on bail and part of the bail conditions was to engage with Living Free program. She then found stable housing with the Living Free program, she reduced her drug and alcohol use, she got into an education course, and I think she also joined a gym so she also improved her fitness as well. (Stakeholder)

Areas where there is evidence of positive outcomes for a substantial number of participants with relevant needs include:

- Linkage with AOD and mental health support services
- Improvement in housing situation
- Increased pro-social and/or family connections
- Improved mental health and self-perception and increased confidence.

These findings are consistent with the views of sector stakeholders, of whom over 90% rated Living Free as Moderately to Highly Effective across a range of participant outcome areas. The Project's service model, which focuses on building trusting, person-centred relationships with participants, is key to these outcomes. This approach provides a safe space in which a range of needs can be recognised and integrated responses put in place to address them.

5 Findings: Service system capacity building

Positive outcomes for women and girls on trajectories into offending are strongly dependent on the extent to which stakeholders understand the need for gender-specific responses in the justice system, are able to work together in coordinated and effective ways, and are backed by legislative and policy frameworks that support diversionary, person-centred responses. Therefore, in addition to seeking positive change for individual participants through direct service delivery, the Living Free Project aims to create change at service system level through capacity building, collaboration and advocacy.

This chapter presents findings about outcomes for stakeholders and the broader service system, to which the Living Free Project has contributed. These results draw on data from the stakeholder survey and from interviews with stakeholders, staff and participants.

For additional information on intended system-level outcomes, refer to the Living Free Project Theory of Change (cf. Appendix A).

5.1 Service system gaps and barriers

As discussed in Section 4.3, women and girls at risk of justice system involvement often have multiple needs across different areas. The service system includes a wide range of agencies and programs which have the potential to address many of these needs. However, in practice service system responses often fall short of what is required, meaning that some young women in need ‘fall through the cracks’ or face barriers in accessing the support they need.

In a large and complex service system, it is essential that there are accessible entry points to support with a No Wrong Door approach, which assist people in need to connect with the services that can assist them. The Living Free Project has played an important role in the Frankston Mornington Peninsula catchment as an entry point of this type. The project’s ability to flexibly engage with participants where and when needed, in a safe and non-threatening way, has meant that it is able to link girls and women with support who otherwise would remain isolated. If the project was discontinued this would leave a significant gap in this service system function in this catchment.

Outreach is the only way to support most young girls in the justice system and no other agency provides this other than Living Free. (Stakeholder)

Living Free staff and stakeholders noted a variety of service system gaps or shortfalls that impact on outcomes for participants. Examples include:

- An absence of collaborative, early intervention programs working with Victoria Police for young people in early contact
- **Insufficient diversionary programs** in the adult justice system
- Major difficulties in accessing **safe affordable housing**, linked to overall housing market conditions and insufficient supply of social housing
- Difficulty in accessing **mental health services**, especially assessments and clinical mental health support

- Significant barriers in access **family violence services** where alcohol and other drug use may be a co-occurring need
- A **paucity of early intervention responses** for young girls presenting with ‘risk factors’ including problematic school engagement
- Limited, if any, **gender responsive community-based specialist services** that account for the unique needs of women requiring support
- Authentic trauma informed services that respond in the evidence based manner required for complex trauma⁹

Case examples: Insufficient access to crisis medical/mental health support

An 18-year-old participant sought out her Living Free worker after being released from emergency the day prior with suicidal ideation and days of significant alcohol intoxication. Whilst managing the intoxication and suicidal ideation, her worker was still required to travel to emergency and wait with the young woman when an ambulance would not be sent.

A 28-year-old participant called her Living Free worker disclosing she had taken an overdose of pharmaceuticals. After calling an ambulance the worker met them at emergency, briefed the necessary professionals on the severity of the situation and advocated for a short stay. Despite this advocacy, the participant was discharged to homelessness later that evening.

Insufficient resourcing and limited service capacity are two important factors that make it difficult for participants to access the services they need. These pressures lead to delays in assistance being available, and to prioritisation of support to those assessed to be at highest risk. However, inflexible policy frameworks and overly narrow eligibility criteria can also present barriers to access, potentially resulting in escalation of risk and complexity for participants.

There's still a lot of red tape in the mental health system and that means that as much as we can try and push and advocate, girls are still getting blocked from accessing the service that they need ... in the voluntary service systems, it's a lot easier for girls to get put onboard, there's more of that 'no wrong door' approach whereas from my experience with a lot of the statutory services whether it be Youth Justice, or the mental health system or Child Protection, it's really hard to break that red tape. It's dependent on who's within the care team, what the risk is like for the young person, where they most need to go... (Living Free staff member)

Given these service system challenges, the Living Free Project's work on strengthening service system capacity and coordination remains vital.

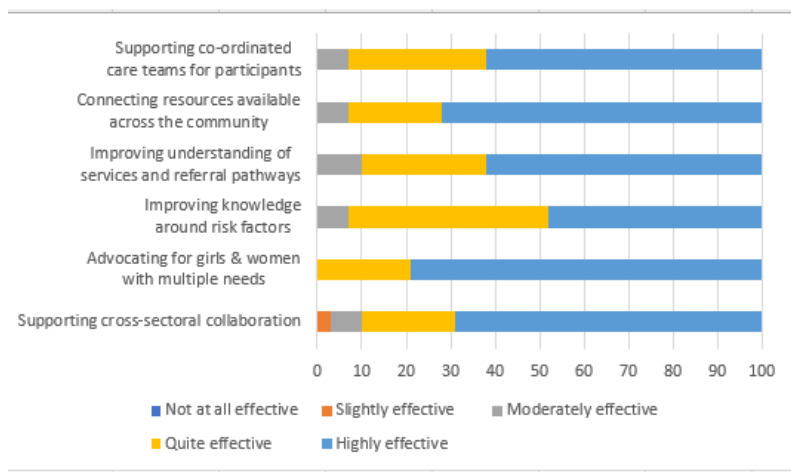
⁹ BlueKnot Foundation (2012)

5.2 Stakeholder perceptions of Living Free’s capacity building

Sector stakeholders surveyed for the evaluation were asked to rate the effectiveness of Living Free’s service system capacity building across a number of outcome areas. Figure 7 indicates that stakeholders strongly endorsed Living Free’s achievements in this area. **Across five of the six outcomes, Living Free was rated as Highly Effective by over 60% of respondents**, while only one rating below ‘Somewhat Effective’ was received for any of these items.

- The items highest rated on average were *Advocating for young girls and women with multiple needs* (4.79/5.0) and *Connecting resources available across the community* (4.66/5.0)
- The items lowest rated on average – although still rated very positively – were *Improving knowledge across sectors around risk factors for girls and young women* (4.41/5.0), and *Improving agencies’ understanding of services available and referral pathways for vulnerable women and girls* (4.55/5.0).

Figure 7: Stakeholder ratings of Living Free’s effectiveness in creating service system change (%)



5.3 Stakeholder awareness and understanding

The Living Free Project raises awareness and builds the knowledge of stakeholders across multiple sectors which have contact with vulnerable girls and women, including police, the justice system, education, and key services (e.g. child and family services, maternal and child health). This capacity building educates professionals about the unique needs of females in the justice system, the importance of responses which address the drivers of offending behaviour, and how to assist women to navigate the local service system to access support.

The project’s activities to build awareness and understanding have included:

- Delivery of forums and conference presentations
- Provision of organisational training to professionals working with vulnerable girls and women
- Presentations to specific audiences, for example to the Victoria Police Divisional Leadership Group, reaching key agency leaders and decision-makers

- Engagement with Members of Parliament, several of whom have become familiar with the project and are supportive of related system changes
- A specific partnership with St Kilda Gatehouse which focuses on developing and co-delivering tools and workshops to those working in the education sector, to better identify and respond to girls at risk of sexual exploitation
- A podcast established over the COVID period that saw eleven episodes developed with a reach to over 1000 listeners. Content varied from professionals and academics discussing women in the justice system to those with lived experience sharing their stories.

Service delivery activities such as provision of information within court proceedings also play a role in educating stakeholders involved with specific cases. **In addition to positive ratings to relevant items on the stakeholder survey, there is qualitative evidence from sector stakeholders of increased understanding.**

... support letters are written by [Living Free] workers which outline a lot of the background information that clients might not otherwise be comfortable giving, and I think that that has provided real insight with the Magistrate into what some of these women are experiencing. (Stakeholder)

I think that there is a growing understanding of the long-term outcomes for people in the justice system or on the radar for Vic Pol, to provide wrap around support that addresses the bio/psychosocial needs of the person. (Stakeholder)

Living Free staff frequently engage in case-related discussions with external agencies and professionals, as well as providing secondary consultations. Stakeholders also highlighted these practices as very helpful for building knowledge of how to respond effectively to vulnerable girls and women.

I certainly have become aware of issues that my clients are experiencing that I probably wouldn't have otherwise. Purely because the [Living Free] workers sometimes will just be able to provide an insight that I haven't been able to get from the client. (Stakeholder)

Secondary consults have been extremely valuable. (Stakeholder)

5.4 Collaboration

As discussed in Section 3.3, the Living Free Project has a very strong focus on fostering collaboration within the service system. This is clear in the structure of Living Free itself, including the multi-sectoral Steering Committee which includes representation from many key agencies in the catchment. It is also evident in the strongly partnership-based approach to service delivery, which involves close collaboration between Living Free staff and professionals from other agencies, through care teams and more informal working relationships. Living Free's trusted relationships with participants make them a natural fit for the role of care team convenor.

We work very collaboratively and we're a lot of the time being the ones who pull in the care teams. And also a lot of the time are the point of contact for the client who feels a lot more comfortable with us than any other service. So we're doing that kind of middleman of, "Yes, I know they haven't attended all their appointments, but this is what's going on behind the scenes." (Living Free staff member)

Living Free is exceptional at service coordination. They open up relationships with other specialist services – creating coordinated, holistic response to improve the lives of vulnerable young women. (Stakeholder)

Collaborative service delivery relationships that are of particular importance to Living Free include those with Women and Mentoring, Peninsula Community Legal Centre, St Kilda Gatehouse and Monash University. Another example of a partnership in the process of being formalised is with Frankston North Salvation Army. The collaboration includes use of Salvation Army premises for Living Free’s group programs, installation of a coffee machine at the premises to enable Living Free to run Introduction to Hospitality training for young women, and access to private areas on premises for provision of 1:1 support. **These well-rounded partnerships enable effective joint work to achieve positive participant outcomes.**

One of our [staff] in the office here ... 95% of her work is working with young girls, that’s her portfolio, so she works hand-in-hand with Living Free. They’ll work very well together and it just creates almost a partnership with us. (Stakeholder)

Living Free, they don’t try to do it alone ... if they can’t do it, they know who can and they are very quick to reach out to that group, which is why they work so well here ... [TaskForce are] not afraid to ask for help from other groups that have been doing it just as well, which is why they’re an excellent go-to organisation. They’re really well connected and well respected. (Stakeholder)

Another key aspect of Living Free’s work to increase service system collaboration and coordination is **facilitation of regional forums and panels**, including four key platforms:

- *Health Justice Community of Practice* – 23 agencies across legal, health, community and justice convened to discuss emerging needs and trends related to health justice in Frankston Mornington Peninsula
- *Bayside Peninsula Women’s Secondary Consult Panel* – 13 advanced clinicians meeting six weekly to consult on women 18+ who have complex needs and are experiencing systemic barriers to their recovery
- *Bayside Peninsula Missing Girl’s Panel* – 10 agencies meeting to identify emerging needs/trends for young girls, consult on cases brought by Victoria Police, and explore collaboration opportunities
- *Empowering Girls Across the South forum* – Over 40 agencies represented at operational and advocacy levels, meeting quarterly to drive collaboration, effective use of resources and improve coordinated responses to vulnerable girls across the South.

These forums bring agencies together to identify needs and issues and to develop joint solutions. This results in more effective support to individual participants, but also enables improvements in the way agencies work together, and informs policy and advocacy initiatives supporting community-wide outcomes.

... somebody that's really feeling stuck, and they're not sure what the next best steps are, or what services are out there to support. They can come to that panel, present their client and then all of those services who are sitting there listening can give input on how they could be involved, how they can support, different suggestions and different lenses. It's really amazing. (Living Free staff member)

...it's getting together services across health, legal, and justice sectors to come together and discuss what some of the gaps in the community are. They're from all across the South. And we'll also have people with lived experience coming to that group ... And then work together to discuss how, as a community, we're going to fill some of those gaps. And as a community how we're going to advocate for ... the funding or the policy things that we need changed to fill those gaps. (Living Free staff member)

Of stakeholder survey respondents, around 70% believed that Living Free had led to new partnerships, and around 55% believed that Living Free had strengthened existing partnerships. Only one respondent (3%) felt that Living Free had had no positive impact on partnerships. The available evidence strongly indicates that **the Living Free Project has been very successful in strengthening service system collaboration and coordination in the Frankston Morning Peninsula catchment.**

5.5 Referral pathways and timely responses

Given the importance of coordinated care in achieving outcomes for this participant group, the Living Free Project places a strong emphasis on establishing integrated referral pathways for girls, women and their families with multiple needs. These include pathways into the Living Free Project, and from Living Free to other services. As part of this, the Living Free team is represented on a number of operational network meetings to strengthen referral pathways, including DFFH's Child Protection High Risk Adolescent Panel, Southern Metropolitan Region Alcohol and Other Drug Manager's Meeting, Project Y with Frankston City Council, and the Mornington Peninsula Youth Network.

The Living Free Project has a place-based approach, seeking to ensure that local resources are being accessed to improve sustainable outcomes and sustainable connection to community. Living Free deliberately invests in building inter-agency relationships that act as referral sources and enable smooth referral processes. Priority outgoing referral pathways include alcohol and other drug services, mental health services, family services and others as identified by need. Formal referral partnerships are in place with a range of agencies, including co-located services such as Women in Mentoring and Peninsula Community Legal Centre.

The large majority of sector stakeholders described their referral relationships with Living Free as positive, efficient and effective. They commented on the high quality of communication provided to them or their staff by Living Free staff, including provision of thorough information and prompt responses.

A very warm and smooth referral process with clear goals and expectations of the service requested/provided. Collaborative and inclusive process. (Stakeholder)

As a [referring professional] I have always been provided with exceptionally thorough information in a very timely manner, including after hours. (Stakeholder)

Two stakeholder survey respondents mentioned the potential to strengthen referral arrangements; one commented on the scope for more "feedback to referring party about progress / uptake / engagement". In addition, a stakeholder commented on challenges with Victoria Police's centralised referral system, which sometimes presents barriers to timely engagement of girls and women at risk. Difficulties include referrals being sent to inappropriate organisations, and lack of assertive follow-up by some agencies receiving referrals. The strong relationship that has been built between Living Free and the Pro-Active Policing Unit within Victoria Police Division Four has been important in working around these systemic barriers.

Four respondents to the stakeholder survey commented that **Living Free provides more timely responses to vulnerable girls and women compared to other available services.** Living Free is often able to engage with a newly referred participant within days, rather than the weeks or months that may be the case through some other programs. This ability to engage with participants quickly during a period when intervention will be most helpful is a major benefit of Living Free's flexible service model. In addition to managing risk, it can sometimes be the key factor in any support being able to be provided. While these comments refer primarily to prompt

engagement following referrals, at a higher level it is likely that this responsiveness also enables earlier intervention within the course of harmful pathways for at least some participants.

I have seen changes in engagement of young people that would have otherwise 'fallen through the gaps', referral processes minimised and intake/waiting list time periods reduced. (Stakeholder)

Living Free has been able to provide timely (within hours or days) supports compared to traditional service routes. They have helped schools to navigate/streamline the complex web of services in Southeast Melbourne, whilst providing desperately needed support and preventative measures for vulnerable young women. (Stakeholder)

We are firm believers in early and assertive intervention which is exactly what we have experienced with Living Free. All other referral options for this cohort are not acted upon for many weeks whereas Living Free can respond directly and quickly which is so important when [young people] are in crisis situations and in ... rapidly changing circumstances. (Stakeholder)

Overall, the evidence indicates that **the Living Free Project plays an important role in developing effective referral pathways that connect girls, women and families with specialist support in a timely way**, to address the needs that contribute to their contact with the justice system.

5.6 Changes in policy and institutional responses

The Living Free Project seeks to change the narrative relating to women involved in the justice system, leveraging cross-sector relationships to refocus investment, policy and practice on addressing the underlying causal factors of female offending through a client-centred recovery framework. To advocate for the necessary policy and system changes, and to provide a voice of advocacy for project participants, the Living Free Project actively takes part in a number of strategic committees including Smart Justice for Women; the Smart Justice for Women Service System Reform Working Group; Smart Justice for Young People; Keeping Women Out of the Justice System; and the Pregnant and Homeless Co-ordinating Committee. Several of the regional forums and panels described above also play a role in identifying needed policy and legislative changes, and advocating for reform.

TaskForce's Lived Experience Advocate supports the work of Living Free in advocating for policy and legislative reform in areas most impacting women, including AOD policy, justice and bail reform. The person filling this role at the time of the evaluation is a former participant of the Living Free Project. This position also supports the Living Free Project team in creating opportunities to enable other participants to share their journey for impact.

Examples of Living Free's work to change policy and institutional responses to vulnerable girls and women include:

- Contribution to Smart Justice for Women's Policy Platform and to the associated Service System Re-design Working Group
- Success in attaining funding for a multi-state research project on the trajectory for young girls reported missing to criminalised women (current)
- Collaboration with Corrections Victoria to strengthen the role and capacity of their Dedicated Women's Case Manager

Comments from several stakeholders suggest that Living Free has contributed to the willingness of Victoria Police upper management and Magistrates in the Frankston Mornington Peninsula region to pursue diversionary

responses for young women becoming involved with the justice system. Further research is needed to investigate these effects, and changes in individual perspectives do not necessarily translate into systemic changes within institutions. However, this is a promising sign that Living Free's approach is well regarded by key decision makers within these systems.

5.7 Summary of service system outcomes

In addition to its direct service delivery work, the Living Free Project has a strong focus on creating change at service system level through capacity building, collaboration and advocacy. This helps to address service system gaps and barriers, provide more integrated and coordinated supports, and to change overarching policy frameworks to better enable diversionary, person-centred responses.

Most sector stakeholders regard Living Free as quite to very effective in creating positive change at service system level. There is strong evidence that Living Free has enabled:

- **Increased stakeholder awareness and understanding** in relation to the needs, risks and pathways of girls and women in the justice system
- **Strengthened partnerships and collaboration** among stakeholders seeking to improve outcomes for these girls and women
- **Improved referral pathways among agencies**, enabling girls and women to receive the services and support they need in a more timely way.

While Living Free actively works on advocacy for changes in policy and legislation, this is a complex and long-term goal. Clear evidence was not available to the evaluation of success in this area. A longer timeframe and deeper analysis would be needed to assess Living Free's effectiveness in creating policy change.

6 Findings: Key model elements and opportunities for further development

Chapters 4 and 5 outline positive outcomes to which the Living Free Project has contributed at participant and service system level. This chapter explores some of the underpinning factors that enable these positive outcomes to occur, including key elements of the service model, and quality of service delivery. Although the model is assessed as very strong, stakeholders suggested some potential areas for further development or expansion, which are also noted here.

These results draw on data from document review, the stakeholder survey and interviews with stakeholders, staff and participants.

6.1 Key model elements enabling outcomes

Analysis of the structures and processes through which the Living Free Project operates has identified eight key elements of the project model. Each of these elements makes an important contribution to the project's ability to achieve positive outcomes, and removal of any of these elements would compromise its success. Each of the elements is discussed briefly below.

Key elements of Living Free project model

1. Gender lens
2. Partnerships and service coordination
3. Open, streamlined referral process
4. Assertive and persistent engagement
5. Relationship-based support
6. Accessible service delivery
7. Flexible person-centred model including intensive case management
8. Combination of individual support, groupwork and systemic change work

Gender lens

The Living Free Project focuses on girls and women between the ages of 10 and 30, at risk of entrenchment in the justice system. The model is shaped by an intersectional feminist perspective and by the evidence base on the women's pathways into, and experiences in, the justice system. This strong gender lens has a range of benefits for effective delivery of the model. It supports the development of specialist skills and expertise within the Living Free team for working with this participant group, provides a shared agenda for partnership development, and a sharp focus for advocacy and system reform efforts to support positive outcomes.

*Many agencies try to encompass every demographic and every age group and it just becomes impossible. [Living Free] have a small, dedicated team that work really well with the girls.
(Stakeholder)*

Partnerships and service coordination

As discussed in Chapters 3 and 5, the Living Free Project is built on a platform of robust partnerships across organisations and sectors. This collaborative structure leverages the knowledge, resources and services of many different agencies to achieve outcomes. At operational level, these partnerships support connection and coordination of services across the catchment, enabling the provision of integrated responses to meet participant needs. At strategic level, they bring together key players to identify community and service system challenges, develop solutions and advocate for change.

Living Free have successfully brought agencies together so that they know each other and effectively work together to fill gaps for young women. (Stakeholder)

Open, streamlined referral process

One of the key features that stakeholders value about the Living Free Project is its flexible and accessible referral process. Living Free's No Wrong Door approach and openness to secondary consultations minimise barriers to referral, and avoid at-risk girls and women 'falling through the cracks' due to eligibility hurdles. If Living Free is not the most appropriate service, the project works to actively link people to other supports. The streamlined referral process and relatively broad eligibility criteria are important enablers for earlier intervention, as well as for ongoing support to those with higher needs.

I've had clients engaged with Living Free for over 12 months and they don't have to be pleading guilty to get that level of support, they don't have to have a significant diagnosis in terms of their mental health and had that already put in writing by a consultant psychiatrist... (Stakeholder)

Assertive and persistent engagement

Living Free's intended participant group often experience chaotic, complex and/or unsafe life circumstances. Many are also wary of services and may be cautious about support when initially offered. These factors can create barriers to service engagement. The Living Free Project model includes an emphasis on assertive engagement, with staff proactively following up and making repeated attempts to connect with those in need. Living Free is able to provide a consistent medium- to long-term presence for participants, and is also tenacious in assisting participants to navigate the service system. This approach assists with stability and access to support for women who would otherwise be isolated.

They're very supportive ... I've never had that much support from people I've never met before. It's different. I reckon if I didn't meet them, I would be in a pretty bad situation still. [My Living Free worker] always checked up on me all the time. It was just good to know that someone was there. She asked if I was okay all the time, if I need anything. When I was ready to catch up, I could... I didn't feel rushed. (Living Free participant)

Relationship-based support

The Living Free Project's support model is relational rather than transactional. This approach means that workers are there for the participant, not with any other agenda. Staff build relationships and rapport with participants over time, and model a warm, patient and non-judgmental style that strengthens trust. With 10-17 year olds,

there is a focus on creating spaces in which young people can talk candidly and be heard, rather than a space in which adults are laying down rules or expectations. The fact that Living Free workers tend to be younger also assists with rapport. This approach creates an experience of genuine care and a safe context in which participants can have honest conversations with workers about what is going on in their lives. These factors make positive outcomes possible.

It's really helpful to have someone who cares, and it feels very personal rather than just like other services. (Living Free participant)

The level of care shown by [Living Free] staff is really effective. It's really hard to build rapport with some of these women, but the fact that the workers are really genuine in their concern and really take the time to sit down and hear from the person about what they think that they need support the most with, I think that that really helps them build rapport and be more effective. And the fact that they don't place any blame on the women; they don't judge them. (Stakeholder)

Accessible service delivery

The Living Free Project has a flexible approach to service delivery which helps make support accessible to participants where and when they need it. Participants are located in a wide range of areas across the catchment and many face time, transport or other barriers in accessing office-based support. Living Free helps to overcome these barriers through providing predominantly outreach based support, offering phone/online/messaging support where appropriate, and through providing groups in schools and other community locations. Flexibility in contact times helps to fit support around other commitments or concerns. For many participants, this flexibility in time and location of support is key to receiving support.

Flexibility with outreach and engagement with young women to meet them where they are at. (Stakeholder)

Flexible person-centred model including intensive case management

The Living Free Project has a tiered model with the ability to step up or step down support as needed. Some participants may require comprehensive assistance due to complex circumstances, while others may only need access to a single service offered by the program. A key element of Living Free's service mix is the ability to provide intensive case management support when required, to make progress on core issues or respond to crisis or high-risk situations. The project also offers service coordination, practical support (e.g. helping participants book and attend appointments or court hearings), financial support (e.g. payment for courses, phone credit), advocacy, mentoring, access to legal assistance, family work, and more. The duration of assistance can range from a few weeks to a year or more, providing consistent engagement where needed to manage complex issues. The ability to draw on this suite of options and tailor service responses to the needs of individual participants is an important strength of Living Free.

... the way that we work with [participants] is very much dependent on what the individual needs. We can do case management, we can do therapeutic conversations, we can just be that consistent person for them. But we're also able to make those referrals to other organisations and services that are able to give that more intensive specific support. (Living Free staff member)

Combination of individual support, groupwork and systemic change work

The Living Free Project has a sophisticated design which combines provision of individual support with groupwork and system reform work. These three components are complementary and reinforce each other. Individual support is vital in achieving outcomes with girls and women at risk. Groups provide a more prevention-based response, enabling pro-social connections and enabling engagement with girls who are not (yet) at high enough risk to need individual support. Systems change activities facilitate a collective impact approach in which key agencies work together to address the underlying needs of this cohort, and to divert women and girls from the justice system. Each of these elements is valuable in achieving the overall goals of the project.

6.2 Quality of service delivery

The evidence available to the evaluation consistently indicates that **the quality of service delivery by the Living Free team is high**. Participants and family members appreciated the “positivity and manner of the support workers”, the reliability and consistency of support, and the level of genuine care shown by staff.

It has just been a wonderful opportunity for [my daughter] to just get back on track... She's starting to think more about her behaviour and I just feel like it's really helped her a lot. I think it's been a really great support for her. (Family member of Living Free participant)

One point of dissatisfaction identified in a family member interview related to changes in key support worker for a participant. The family member noted that the participant's support worker had changed twice, causing anxiety and uncertainty for the participant. These changes were unavoidable on the part of Living Free (one related to maternity leave and the other to funding for a component of the program ending). However, these comments underscore the importance of consistency in staffing and funding in a relationally-based program such as this.

The large majority of external stakeholders expressed a very positive view of Living Free's work. Stakeholder survey respondents were asked to rate “the quality of the activities undertaken by the Living Free project” on a 100-point scale, with 100 being the highest quality. The median rating was 95, with two thirds of respondents rating the quality at 90 or above. The lowest rating received was 71.

Stakeholders commented positively on the flexibility and openness of Living Free's approach, as well as the high level of commitment, accountability, reliability and follow-through displayed.

Living Free is the only service I can rely on when referring vulnerable young women who require consistent, holistic and assertive supports. Living Free commits to helping these girls and never lets them down like other organisations who may be struggling with resource allocation etc. The quality of their service is always a priority and I feel confident referring my most vulnerable clients to them. (Stakeholder)

Stakeholders also saw Living Free's local knowledge and experienced, skilled and dedicated staff, including staff with lived experience, as major strengths.

Vital project staffed by passionate and inspiring women to help advocate for our most vulnerable and at risk women. The creativity, expertise and knowledge of these staff helps reduce the chance of

people falling through the cracks and makes a challenging system easier to navigate with this support. (Stakeholder)

6.3 Opportunities for improvement and further development

As discussed above, the evidence reviewed by the evaluation indicates that the Living Free Project has a sound model which has been implemented effectively and is supporting positive individual and system level outcomes. While no major shortcomings were identified, two significant challenges were identified that need ongoing attention: consistency of funding, and ability to sustainably service a large geographic catchment. The evaluation also observed opportunities to strengthen project data collection, Monitoring and Evaluation. Staff and stakeholders also had suggestions for program expansion or replication, and other minor suggestions for improvement.

Consistent and sufficient funding

Funding for the Living Free Project has been generated from a variety of sources with different durations, and service components and roles within the team are tied to these funding sources. This funding mosaic has been beneficial in establishing and growing the project, however it also presents challenges to continuity of staffing and service delivery. A commitment from a suitable funding body to long-term core funding for the Living Free Project would make a major difference to the overall sustainability of the program, allowing the team to develop and implement the model with certainty. It is important that core funding be provided at a level that supports a sustainable staffing structure.

Comments from participants, family members, stakeholders and staff echoed these points. Stakeholder survey respondents highlighted the importance of:

Appropriate level of long term funding. (Stakeholder)

Funding for more outreach workers. (Stakeholder)

A team large enough to spread the load to prevent burnout for the important work they are doing. (Stakeholder)

Coverage of large geographical catchment

The Living Free Project covers a large catchment which contains significant socio-economic variation. Understanding and responding effectively to the needs of girls and women across this area, including finding an appropriate balance of service and outreach across the different sub-catchments, can be a challenging task.

There's a lot of different needs, even between just Frankston and the Mornington Peninsula, there's a massively different demographic in Hastings, so to speak, and Westernport than there is Mount Eliza. (Stakeholder)

Given Living Free's predominantly outreach-based service delivery, travel time is a significant consideration for team coordination and scheduling: "I can only drive so far in a day". This can also create barriers to assertive

outreach as staff weigh up the time required for an extended trip, which may not result in participant contact, against other service delivery activities:

With my role [previously] ... I would text my clients for confirmation, but if they didn't respond I still had time to still knock at their door. Whereas with here - If you don't answer the text I can't come and see because I have to drive from Frankston to Drouin, which is an hour, when I could be spending that time doing more case coordination, which is really unfortunate. (Living Free staff member)

It would in theory be possible to allocate Living Free workers to specific sub-catchments, to minimise travel time and mileage. (For example, one worker could focus on Frankston while another could focus on Hastings.) While this would increase efficiency, with the current size of the Living Free team it may not be feasible as it would limit the flexibility of workload allocation and ability of workers to pick up new cases quickly.

... having a specific, "That is your area," might be more helpful. But we don't have enough staff in Living Free to coordinate that. You have to take, "Oh, you've got 10 [participants], I've got eight. You need to take that one." But realistically having specific areas if you had a bigger team would allow you to do less driving, less k's on fleet cars, all those things that add up... [minimising] hours in the car that aren't necessary. (Living Free staff member)

It is recommended that Taskforce (in consultation with other stakeholders) continue to monitor these issues, and seek service delivery approaches that provide the best balance between coverage, service quality and efficiency.

Strengthening data collection, Monitoring & Evaluation

The evaluation observed that the Living Free Project's data collection occurs regularly and is seen as important by the team. However, the change in auspice of the project in 2021 led to some adjustments to data collection which have made it difficult to calculate consistent metrics for project performance across the full period 2017-22. It has been challenging to collect psychometric outcome measures across more than a small subset of participants. The design of the project's outcomes indicators and associated data fields has also had some shortcomings, which limit their usefulness for outcome measurement. Together, these factors have meant that this evaluation has had very limited ability to reach quantitative outcomes findings.

If robust evaluation is seen as valuable for the project in future, it is recommended that Taskforce:

- Redevelop the project's Monitoring & Evaluation Framework to focus on high-priority evidence
- Revise data collection tools and fields to collect more rigorous outcomes data
- Develop a tool for easy collation and analysis of monitoring data, to enable efficient and consistent reporting on outcomes and other indicators in future.

Potential to expand or replicate the model

The Living Free Project has shown considerable success in responding to its intended participant group within its current catchment. Staff and stakeholders commented that there are major needs in other areas and for other participant groups, and suggested a number of options to expand or replicate the model, including:

- Expanding the current project with additional staffing, enabling service delivery to more participants, more schools and more areas
- Expanding the model to other cohorts / vulnerable populations, especially:

- Women in their 30s and 40s
- Non-binary or gender diverse people
- Young men – stakeholders noted a service gap in the ‘pre-justice’ space for boys, but also noted that worker safety considerations might be more substantial with this cohort
- Replicating the model in other catchments.

If I could clone [Living Free] and apply them to all my client demographics, that would be my ideal scenario. (Stakeholder)

Successful expansion or replication require suitable levels of resourcing, management and project development capacity, and training, partnership development and practice development processes to respond effectively to the needs of new cohorts and regions. Community demographics and cultural profile, community needs and service system mindsets can vary notably from area to area. The place-based and collective impact ethos of Living Free suggests that to be productive in a new region, implementation should be driven locally and respond to local conditions, rather than be imposed from outside.

...the wonderful thing about Living Free is that it is so place-based and different communities do have different needs, different communities have different service networks and culture amongst service providers. And building those networks at a local level I think, is really valid and important. So I guess even more than us expanding and expanding as well, I'd love to see it replicated. (Living Free staff member)

In the end you're talking about an organisation that targets a specific group of very vulnerable kids. That issue's not just isolated to my area at all. It's a matter of capacity, honestly. You need to have the right amount of outreach workers, you need to have the right people running it to get the response, and you need to have uptake, not only from new staff at a new Living Free program, but you need to have uptake from [local agencies]. (Stakeholder)

Other suggestions for improvement

Other suggestions for improvement or development from staff and stakeholders included:

- Strengthen processes for referral to Living Free, including more feedback to referring parties about engagement
- Provide a drop-in space staffed by a Living Free worker, with activities and opportunities to strengthen social connection and engagement
- Explore ways to access more social housing properties for participants, via additional partnerships with housing providers
- Develop “accommodation / farm / women’s house” where women can go to feel safe and supported
- Increase collaboration with other crime prevention services
- Further develop Living Free’s communication strategy and better promote/communicate the service, for example through more regular external email updates, externally shared impact reports, or an information session for local primary/secondary schools about possible offerings for the year.

7 Value for money

Value for money evaluation assesses the value of what is produced or provided by a program, in relation to the investment required. Value for money analysis typically combines considerations of cost, efficiency in use of resources, effectiveness (i.e. extent and value of outcomes produced), and may also consider equity (fair distribution of benefits).

Stakeholders have an interest in understanding the level of value for money offered by the Living Free Project, in order to assess the potential for – and make a case for – continuing and additional resourcing. However, there is currently insufficient evidence for a rigorous value for money analysis. This section therefore provides brief preliminary notes and recommends gathering further evidence to support future analysis.

To date, **investment** in the Living Free Project has averaged \$400k per annum. Cost breakdown indicates that 65% of funds are spent on wages and oncosts for the Living Free team, 10% on service development, partnership development and evaluation, 10% on vehicles and other operating costs, 5% on brokerage, and 10% on corporate and management overheads. These rates are broadly on par with cost expectations in the sector, however notably the project is delivered at lower rate for corporate and management overheads, with TaskForce prioritising the impact of the project and presenting with a willingness to provide a significant amount of management and corporate oversight in-kind.

The Living Free Project has used these funds to delivery a broad suite of **activities and outputs**:

- Direct individual service delivery to an average of 70 participants per year and an additional 50 groupwork participants per year (at an average cost of \$3.3k per participant)
- Partnership development and service coordination involving 34 agencies across multiple platforms/panels.

Living Free has also leveraged in-kind involvement from a wide range of partner agencies. The evidence available indicates that the quality of Living Free's work across each of these areas is very high. There is no evidence of wasteful use of resources. In the view of the evaluators, **Living Free has used its resources reasonably efficiently to produce substantial, high quality outputs from a small team.**

There is evidence that Living Free is contributing to improved service system functioning for at-risk girls and women in its catchment. There is also qualitative evidence that Living Free is successful in achieving positive outcomes for participants across multiple areas including reduced justice system involvement; access to specialist supports; improved housing and living situation; increased engagement with employment, education and training; strengthened social and family connections; and improved health and safety. However, currently quantitative evidence of the scale of outcomes achieved at individual and cohort levels is insufficient to support a quantitative analysis of cost-effectiveness.

Based on the literature regarding reduction of offending risk and life-course effects of early intervention in addressing risk factors, it is plausible to hypothesise that the Living Free Project is contributing to longer-term avoided costs for government in areas including the justice system, health system and emergency services. However, outcomes evidence from the project is insufficient to draw firm conclusions on this topic at present.

The Living Free Project is highly regarded by stakeholders in the region, and many of the ingredients are in place for a strong value for money result. The Project partners are encouraged to strengthen the Monitoring and Evaluation design for the project to enable more rigorous assessment of outcomes and value for money in future.

8 Conclusion

This evaluation has examined the operation of the Living Free Project in Melbourne's South since 2017. The project has been ably led by Taskforce Community Agency, and its successful implementation and growth has been supported by the contributions of a wide range of local partner agencies. The following sections provide answers to the five key evaluation questions, illustrating the project's substantial achievements as well as challenges and areas for further development.

8.1 To what extent has Living Free achieved its intended outcomes for the women and girls whom it supports?

The Living Free Project is successfully contributing to positive outcomes in each of the following life areas:

- **Reduced justice system involvement** and reduced engagement in risk-taking/offending behaviour
- **Access to specialist supports** – including a substantial number of participants with AOD and/or mental health needs being linked to relevant services
- **Improved housing and living situation** – including a drop of over 50% in the proportion of participants who are homeless or in unstable accommodation at closure compared to referral
- **Increased engagement with employment, education and training**, including young women re-engaging or engaging more strongly in school
- **Strengthened social and family connections**, including through the family inclusive practice model
- **Improved health, wellbeing and safety**, including improvements in mental health, emotional and behavioural regulation, reduced problematic AOD use, and interventions addressing family violence and sexual health risks.

Over 90% of stakeholder survey respondents rated Living Free as Moderately to Highly Effective across a range of participant outcome areas. A small set of psychometric (participant-rated) pre-post outcomes data also shows positive changes on outcome indicators, however sample size is too small to extrapolate to the broader cohort. These are promising signs that Living Free is achieving important positive outcomes for at least some of its participant group, but stronger quantitative evidence is needed to scale these outcomes and identify how widespread they are across the participant group.

Oh, 100%, it's literally changed my life... I hope that [Living Free] always received funding because it has literally changed my life and I know it can do the same for others. (Living Free participant)

8.2 To what extent has Living Free improved the capacity of the local service system to respond effectively to the needs of women and girls at risk?

The Living Free Project has had substantial positive effects on the local service system's ability to respond effectively to the needs of at-risk girls and women. Almost all stakeholders surveyed rated Living Free as Effective or Highly Effective in service system capacity building. There is strong evidence that Living Free has enabled:

- **Increased stakeholder awareness and understanding** in relation to the needs, risks and pathways of girls and women in the justice system; examples include stronger understanding among police, magistrates, school staff, and staff of child and family services and maternal and child health services.
- **Strengthened partnerships and collaboration** among stakeholders seeking to improve outcomes for girls and women, through platforms including the Living Free Project Steering Committee, regional panels and forums, integrated service delivery relationships and convening of care teams.
- **Improved referral pathways among agencies**, enabling girls and women to receive the services and support they need in a more timely way.

Together, these service system changes have **contributed to more coordinated cross-agency responses to participants, and a stronger continuum of care**, with less likelihood of vulnerable girls and women ‘falling through the cracks’ of the service system and becoming embedded in the justice system. Living Free also actively advocates for changes in policy and legislation, however this is a complex and long-term goal and clear evidence of outcomes in this area is not available at this point.

8.3 What are the key elements of the Living Free model that contribute to positive outcomes?

Elements of the Living Free model that are most important to achieving positive outcomes include:

1. **Gender lens** – evidence-based lens on girls and women supports the development of the team’s specialist skills and expertise, and provides a focus for partnership development and advocacy
2. **Partnerships and service coordination** – leverages the knowledge, resources and services of many different agencies to deliver integrated services and address community needs
3. **Open, streamlined referral process** – flexible and accessible No Wrong Door approach provides maximum opportunity to engage with girls and women in need, in a timely manner
4. **Assertive and persistent engagement** – proactive, persistent engagement and ability to provide consistent presence over time, reaches girls and women who would otherwise lack support
5. **Relationship-based support** – non-judgmental relationships and rapport create an experience of genuine care and a safe context in which underlying needs and issues can be addressed
6. **Accessible service delivery** – flexible outreach-based approach to service delivery helps make support accessible to participants where and when they need it
7. **Flexible person-centred model including intensive case management** – tiered model able to offer a variety of service components enables support to be tailored to participants’ individual needs
8. **Combination of individual support, groupwork and systemic change work** – complementary streams of work reinforce each other to create long-term change.

8.4 What opportunities are there for improvement and further development of Living Free?

Feedback from participants, family members and stakeholders indicates overall strong satisfaction with the delivery of the Living Free Project. No major shortcomings were identified in the model, although staff and stakeholders suggested various ideas for improvement or further development. Challenges were identified in

regard to the project attracting sufficient, consistent long-term funding for sustainable operation; finding the appropriate balance in use of resources and staff time across the large geographical region which the projects services; and collecting the evidence needed for robust monitoring and evaluation of the project's outcomes. With these points in mind, it is recommended that Taskforce and its partner agencies:

- Continue to **explore funding options** and seek a commitment from a suitable funding body to long-term core funding for the Living Free Project
- Continue to monitor **efficiency of outreach service delivery** and to develop service approaches that provide the best balance between catchment coverage, service quality and efficiency
- Redevelop the Living Free **Monitoring & Evaluation Framework** and associated data collection tools and processes, to enable more rigorous outcome and value for money evaluation in future
- Review other opportunities for improvement suggested by stakeholders.

There is clearly potential to **extend or replicate** the Living Free model for other participant groups or in other regions. Any expansion would require careful consideration of resourcing requirements and local context.

8.5 What level of value for money is provided by Living Free?

The available evidence indicates that the Living Free Project has used moderate resourcing in a reasonably efficiently manner, with a small team producing substantial, high quality outputs. It is clear that Living Free is contributing to positive service system and participant outcomes. These findings point toward a positive value for money result, however stronger quantitative evidence on outcomes and avoided costs would be needed for a sound economic evaluation of the model.

8.6 Final words

Overall, the evaluation findings reflect very positively on the work of the Living Free Project. The project has been implemented at high quality and is well regarded by stakeholders across the region. Living Free's sophisticated model combines individual support, groupwork, and service system capacity building and reform. Through these streams of work, the project has made substantial steps towards its goals of diverting girls and women from justice system involvement by addressing underlying needs and risk factors, and improving system responses.

Quantitative evidence is currently insufficient to provide a rigorous analysis of the scale of participant outcomes, or the project's value for money. However, it is clear that the Living Free Project fills a unique and important service system role in the Frankston Mornington Peninsula catchment. There would be negative consequences for at-risk girls and women in the region if it was discontinued. The project partners are encouraged to continue seeking sustainable funding, refining service provision processes, and strengthening Monitoring and Evaluation in order to support the ongoing delivery and expansion of the model.

There still remains no other quality alternative for vulnerable females in our area. There is no other program with the depth and quality of Living Free. (Stakeholder)

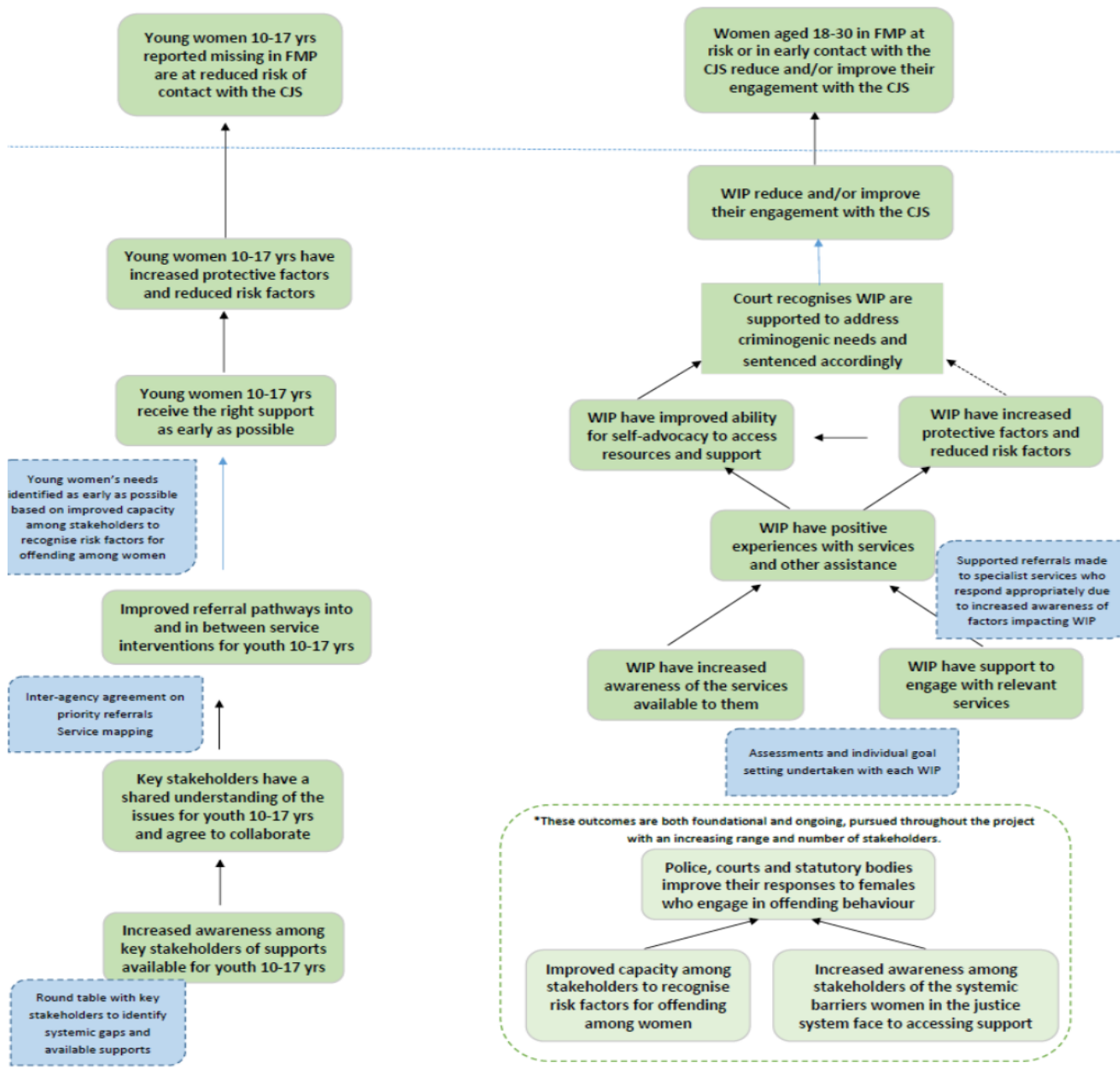
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Appendix A: Living Free Project – Theory of Change

Government & stakeholders recognise the value of funding long-term case management model as justice reinvestment (early intervention)

Improved cross-sectoral systemic responses earlier in the continuum for young women in FMP through more informed and collaborative service responses.



Appendix B:

