



Australian
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NATIONAL
SECURITY
COLLEGE

Voices from across Australia

AUSTRALIAN ATTITUDES TO
NATIONAL SECURITY, RISK
AND RESILIENCE

COMMUNITY CONSULTATIONS
ENGAGEMENT REPORT
MARCH 2026

Rory Medcalf
Tim Wilford
Henry Dixson
Aisling Philippa
Sally Bulkeley
Andrew Ramsay

Advisory Committee

Tom Rogers
Rebecca Skinner
Duncan Lewis
Carolyn Bull
Jennifer Westacott

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Contact us

ANU National Security College
national.security.college@anu.edu.au
+61 2 6125 2233

Crawford Building #132
1 Lennox Crossing
The Australian National University
Canberra ACT 2601
Australia

CRICOS Provider No. 00120C

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YOU ASKED A QUESTION:
'HOW CONCERNED ARE YOU
ABOUT NATIONAL SECURITY?'
AND 'HOW MUCH DO YOU
THINK ABOUT NATIONAL
SECURITY?'

...WELL, NOT MUCH BECAUSE
I DON'T HAVE THE
BANDWIDTH FOR IT.

BUT IF YOU'D ASKED ME
'HOW MUCH DO I THINK
ABOUT CYBER SECURITY
OR CLIMATE CHANGE
OR JUST COMMUNITY UNREST,
THEN YOU WOULD'VE GOT
A DIFFERENT ANSWER.

INTERVIEW PARTICIPANT



300+

MEETINGS

480+

AUSTRALIANS
INTERVIEWED

20,000+

SURVEY
RESPONDENTS

8

FOCUS GROUPS

40+

LOCATIONS
NATIONWIDE

100

PUBLIC
SUBMISSIONS



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INTRODUCTION

In our representative democracy, government is authorised to provide security for the nation – but in a world of rapid and disruptive change, it is more important than ever for policy to be built on genuine understanding of community attitudes.

Between May and October 2025, teams of NSC staff and affiliates travelled to every state and territory – capital cities, regional centres, country towns, and remote communities – to sit with Australians and ask what security means to them. Close to 500 participants took part in semi-structured interviews and group discussions. A further 100 written submissions were received from individuals and organisations who wanted their perspectives on the record.

This report presents what we learned.

The Community Consultations initiative was built on a core conviction: that national security policy will be more relevant and durable if it is informed by serious engagement with the communities it is designed to protect. Within the Australian Government, purposeful deliberations on defence and many other aspects of security go on all the time – and some community engagement does take place – but often these processes are compartmentalised, constrained and coded with the vocabulary of the insider.

What we discovered through our expansive engagement is that *Australians understand national security through the lens of everyday life*. Whether infrastructure keeps working. Whether information can be trusted. Whether the neighbours can be relied on when things go wrong. Many of our participants said they rarely thought about ‘national security’ as such – and then spent an hour describing their security concerns in careful detail.

The survey data presented in our companion Results Report establishes the quantitative foundation: what Australians think, how those views are distributed across the population, and how they have shifted across three survey waves. This report does something different. It asks how Australians think – the reasoning, the texture, the place-specific knowledge.

The people who agreed to meet with our teams are, by definition, more engaged than average. We do not claim these voices are statistically representative of all Australians. They are, however, grounded in genuine knowledge of the communities they live and work in.

The conversations in this report pre-date several significant security shocks, notably the December 2025 terrorist attack at Bondi and the escalation of conflict in the Middle East from the end of February 2026. Those events reinforce rather than undermine what we heard. The Australians we spoke to were not naive about risk. They were asking reasonable questions about how the place-based and people-centred vulnerabilities they experience are factored into national policy.

Professor Rory Medcalf AM

Head, ANU National Security College

Tim Wilford

Director, Community Consultations
ANU National Security College

ABOUT THIS REPORT

This report is one output of a Community Consultations initiative by the ANU National Security College (NSC), aimed at generating a comprehensive picture of what Australians think about national security. It is a qualitative companion report to our core survey-based findings, which are presented in the ‘Community Consultations Results Report’.

Between May and October 2025, NSC staff and affiliates conducted semi-structured interviews with close to 500 Australians across every Australian state and territory: all capital cities, and a range of regional centres, rural areas and remote communities. Participants included officials and leaders of all tiers of government, parliamentarians, professional and volunteer emergency services, industry representatives, civil society organisations, academics, think tank experts, and engaged citizens. These conversations, while skewed toward those more open to consultation processes and not comprehensively representative, surfaced local perspectives that quantitative methods cannot capture and helped triangulate themes emerging from the survey data. They were also a valuable way to build networks for future engagement in an inclusive national security conversation.

Why a companion report?

The Community Consultations initiative produced two main bodies of evidence: a series of nationally representative surveys and deliberative focus groups, whose findings are reported in the ‘Community Consultations Results Report’; and a program of largely face-to-face interviews combined with a call for written submissions, with key findings reported here. These two bodies of evidence are designed to complement each other. The surveys help uncover *what* Australians think, with the statistical rigour that comes from a representative sample of more than 20,000 respondents. This report helps explain *how* Australians think – the reasoning, the specificity, the place-based texture that surveys cannot capture.

The decision to produce a separate ‘Community Consultations Engagement Report’ reflects that difference in contribution, not just in method. The voices in this report are not simply data points. They are people who agreed to sit down with our visiting consultation teams and talk about what security means to them and to their communities. Presenting those conversations in their own report – rather than as a methodological appendix to the survey findings – is a recognition of their value.

What this report covers

This report presents findings from two qualitative components of the Community Consultations initiative: the program of semi-structured interviews and group discussions conducted across Australia between May and October 2025, and the written submissions received over the same period.

Part One sets out the Community Consultations initiative: why it was undertaken, how it was designed, and the timeline of activity from the initiative's launch in April 2024 through to its findings being presented in March 2026.

Part Two presents findings from the interview program. It begins with the central finding – that Australians conceptualise national security through the lens of the continuity of everyday life – before unpacking the six themes that give that finding its shape and substance. It concludes with a synthesis of what participants said they want: the practical asks that emerged consistently across locations, sectors, and backgrounds.

Part Three presents findings from the written submissions. It identifies the themes that emerged from the submissions and compares them to the interview findings, focusing on where the two datasets converge, where they diverge, and what the submissions add that the interviews could not provide.

How to read the report

This document is designed to be read alongside the 'Community Consultations Results Report'. The survey findings provide the quantitative foundation; what follows provides some qualitative depth. Where findings from both are cited together, they are more robust than either alone.

Throughout, participant quotes are attributed by state or territory. They are the words of real people who agreed to contribute to this research. They should be read as such: not as representative of all Australians, but as specific, situated, and genuine perspectives. In a small number of cases where interviews were conducted without audio recording, quotes are paraphrased and indicated as such.

It is important to note that the interviews and submissions summarised in this report pre-date some major security shocks that occurred closer to publication, notably the December 2025 terrorist attack at Bondi and the US-Israeli war against Iran that began at the end of February 2026.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In 2024 and 2025, consultation teams of NSC staff and affiliates travelled to every corner of Australia – capital cities, regional centres, country towns, and remote communities – to ask people what national security means to them. Close to 500 participants were engaged through semi-structured interviews and group discussions. One hundred written submissions were received, in response to a widely-promoted call for submissions and an Issues Paper published by the College.

This report presents what we learned.

The most important finding is also the most consistent: across every state and territory, every sector, and every community profile we engaged, Australians understand national security through the lens of everyday life. Not so much traditional threats such as invasions or espionage, although people tend to realise that security crises overseas will affect Australian in some way. But more immediately whether the power stays on, the shelves stay stocked, the information they receive can be trusted, society holds together and their neighbours can be relied on when things go wrong.

‘National security means protecting our interests and values that support our national identity in order to achieve safety, cohesion and prosperity within the region.’

Participant, ACT

That finding has implications for policy. It means that national security policies designed without reference to community experience may struggle to earn the public trust that resilience requires. And it means that investments in the fabric of ordinary life – reliable infrastructure, trusted institutions, funded emergency services, day-to-day freedom from fear – are not peripheral to national security. In the minds of most Australians we spoke to, they are central to it.

Key findings: interviews and group discussions

Six interconnected themes emerged from the interview program. They are not a ranking. They are six dimensions of the same underlying concern. These judgements are somewhat impressionistic but capture the concerns of many of our interviewees across Australia.

1. The information environment feels polluted

Participants across every state and territory described an information landscape that is noisy, manipulated, used to convey threat and increasingly vulnerable to AI-enabled tools. Mis- and disinformation are not felt as abstract risks – they are already daily experiences. Declining trust in institutions runs underneath all of it. Participants did not ask for less social media. They asked for better, more local, more trusted channels.

2. Critical systems run through chokepoints that feel inadequately protected

Australia's fuel, freight, power, water and communications networks are extraordinarily concentrated. A small number of roads, ports, sea lanes, and cables carry a disproportionate share of what the country needs to function. When one fails – through extreme weather event, accident, or hostile action – the effects cascade. Participants described this vulnerability with geographic precision. They were not asking for a national overhaul. They have asked for targeted investment in the specific points whose failure matters most.

3. The gap between willingness and capability feels wide – and growing

Australians, particularly in regional communities, say that they are willing to show up and help when things go wrong. But the systems, infrastructure, and personnel needed to manage a serious or compounding shock are widely described as inadequate. Volunteer pools are ageing. Hospitals are being built without provision to staff them. The pattern of rebuilding after a crisis to the same standard that failed is not incidental – it is described as a structural habit. Where preparedness has improved, local

government was seen to have driven it.

4. The next shock was predicted to come from interconnected, proximate systems and cascading failure

Participants described a threat landscape shaped by critical infrastructure as a potential target, digital vulnerabilities, and climate volatility. What unites all three is that they operate on and through the same fragile systems. Extreme weather, cyberattacks, sabotage or accidents can produce similar cascading failures. Participants did not primarily distinguish between intentional and unintentional threats – the vulnerability exists regardless of cause. Military threats were not ignored, but Australians were much more concerned about the flow-on effects of conflict overseas than direct attack on Australian territory.

5. Questions were common about who is in charge – and that uncertainty is itself a vulnerability

Across cybersecurity, emergency management, infrastructure investment and community communications, the same frustration surfaced: roles are unclear, responsibilities are siloed, and the gaps between levels of government are where communities fall through. Three specific friction points emerged: who leads when a crisis moves from response to recovery; who can fill the security clearance gap that excludes local authorities from classified conversations at the moments when local knowledge matters most; and who communicates risk information and policy decisions to the public in ways that build trust rather than erode it.

6. Community is seen as the country's greatest resilience asset – and a site of active strain

The same interviews that surfaced mutual aid, community solidarity, and a genuine culture of showing up also surfaced concern about the stresses on communities and leaders. People have little bandwidth for thinking about nationwide security or how they can contribute to it, when they are focused on immediate issues such as housing affordability, energy prices, job security, financial scams and what information to trust.

People tend to recognise that social policy failures are also security vulnerabilities, for themselves, their communities and ultimately the country. There was also respect for, and concern about, the civil fabric of society: the respectful and peaceful management of differences, the right for communities to live without fear. Cynicism about political representatives was combined with concern about the levels of threat and harassment against them.

Across all six themes, participants identified practical asks for government and institutions. They are not asking for new bureaucracies or strategies in the abstract. They are asking government to explain the ‘why’ behind major security decisions; to map and invest in the specific infrastructure chokepoints where failure can cascade; to publish clear, functional accounts of who does what *before* crisis strikes; to raise the baseline cyber capability across small organisations; to take seriously the everyday pressures that erode resilience; and to resource the local coordination models that already work rather than overlooking them.

Key findings: submissions

One hundred written submissions were received from individuals and organisations across Australia. They are not representative of the Australian public generally – they reflect the views of a civically engaged subset with higher-than-average familiarity with policy processes. Read alongside the interview findings, they provide a complementary perspective: more structural, more geopolitically framed, and more prescriptive in their policy proposals.

The submissions broadly converge with the interview findings on the central theme. Contributors similarly described national security as inseparable from the conditions of everyday life. But they arrived at that conclusion from a different direction – more likely to connect domestic vulnerability to international forces, and more likely to prescribe structural remedies than the practical, place-based asks that dominated interviews.

Five themes were consistent across the submissions:

The geopolitical layer

Submissions were significantly more likely than interviews to connect domestic security concerns to broader global shifts: Australia’s alliance posture, the implications of great power competition, and the state (or failure) of the international rules-based order.

Several submissions expressed concern about over-reliance on the United States alliance and raised sovereignty questions around AUKUS. This framing was largely absent from face-to-face conversations. It reflects the self-selected, policy-engaged nature of the submissions cohort.

Economic security and sovereign capability

Submissions catalogued Australia’s supply chain vulnerabilities more extensively than interviews, identifying exposure across pharmaceuticals, fertilisers, electronics, medical devices, and defence materiel. Many called for onshoring critical manufacturing and reducing single-supplier dependencies.

Social cohesion as a strategic asset

Submissions noted, more explicitly than interviews, that Australia benefits from relatively strong social cohesion by international standards – and that this is worth protecting. Several submissions also identified diaspora communities as a specific vulnerability to foreign-state disinformation campaigns, a dimension the interview program did not surface as prominently.

Information integrity and AI as interlinked threats

Submissions treated AI and disinformation as interconnected risks to sovereignty and democratic decision-making, with several specific nations named as deliberate sources of threat in a way that interview participants rarely did.

Climate change as a compounding security threat

Climate featured in submissions with urgency and specificity, connected not only to infrastructure risk but to regional stability, migration, and long-term social cohesion.

The two datasets – interviews and submissions – usefully complement each other, and together complement the comprehensive surveys at the core of our Community Consultations. The interviews provide depth, place, and the specific voices of communities across Australia. The submissions provide structural framing, policy prescription, and a geopolitical layer. Their convergence on the central theme of continuity of everyday life is the strongest finding from our engagement efforts.

PART ONE : COMMUNITY CONSULTATIONS INITIATIVE

This is not the first time views have been sought from the Australian community to inform national security policy. Over the past few decades, many academic and think tank projects have contributed to an accumulating picture of Australian public perceptions across a wide range of policy issues, including foreign affairs, social cohesion and attitudes to democracy. More specifically on defence, the expert panel convened ahead of the 2016 Defence White Paper held semi-structured consultations around the country.¹ A decade on, the threat environment has changed substantially, and the security questions facing the nation have broadened far beyond military capability. This initiative therefore builds on that precedent at greater breadth and depth.

¹ Australian Government 2015, *Guarding Against Uncertainty: Australian Attitudes to Defence*, Report of the Expert Panel on the 2015 Defence White Paper Community Consultation, Department of Defence, Canberra.

Why consult the Australian community?

There is no permanently agreed definition of 'national security'. Each elected government may develop its own definition, and has a political mandate to do so. In a liberal democracy such as ours, what national security means will keep changing over time. Yet, at a fundamental level, it is reasonable to say that national security is about the way a country protects itself. This first-principles description unearths an important truth: national security is inseparable from the unique character and identity of the nation being secured. So instead of asking 'what is national security?' a better question might be 'what is Australian national security?'

All Australians are national security stakeholders in some way. Yet we don't know enough about how our increasingly diverse society thinks about security.

Most would agree it's about protecting Australia and Australians, but views differ on what that means in practice. To some, security is synonymous with defence, intelligence, terrorism and border protection. To others, it includes protection from broader challenges like disasters, cyber-attacks, or climate change. Still others see security as linked to economic, democratic and social resilience. Many also think of it as something even larger: a sense of wanting to protect who we are, and what we value, as Australians.

There is no national-level framework or study that considers Australian perspectives across these dimensions. Existing research provides valuable insights, but we lack answers to questions of central importance to policy makers. The Community Consultations initiative aims to help fill this gap.

How were the consultations conducted?

We have used a mixed methods research design that blends quantitative and qualitative research strategies, allowing us to draw on the complementary strengths of each method and triangulate findings.

We have collected information in five ways:

1. A literature review to harvest insights from existing studies
2. three nationally representative surveys (n=20,000+), in November 2024, July 2025 and February 2026, to provide a quantitative foundation and some indication of change over time
3. eight deliberative focus groups to help explain and validate findings
4. 100 written submissions, from individuals and organisations, prompted by a widely-circulated Issues Paper released by the College
5. 480+ Australians engaged in semi-structured conversations across Australia.

TIMELINE

<p>Community Consultations initiative announced at ‘Securing our Future’ conference</p> <p>NSC Head Professor Rory Medcalf stated the College would lead an ambitious whole-of-nation consultation: “We will seek to comprehend the diversity of perspectives in today’s Australia, identifying the risks or realities of fragmentation as well as opportunities for convergence. And we will synthesise and frame that knowledge to help government and parliament as they consider policy choices into the future.”</p>	April 2024
<p>Scoping concluded</p> <p>In addition to briefing key stakeholders on the initiative, and seeking feedback, NSC also visited a range of locations including Far North Queensland, the Northern Territory and Sydney and Melbourne to meet community leaders.</p>	October 2024
<p>Survey Wave 1</p> <p>NSC commissioned the Social Research Centre (SRC) to collect a nationally representative sample of Australian attitudes to security using Life in Australia™, to provide a baseline for the study.</p>	November 2024
<p>Nationwide consultations commence</p> <p>Teams of NSC staff and affiliates commenced visiting every state and territory, including a range of metropolitan, regional and remote locations.</p>	May 2025
<p>Survey Wave 2</p> <p>A follow-up wave of survey work was conducted to build on the existing insights.</p>	July 2025
<p>Nationwide consultations conclude</p> <p>NSC had engaged close to 500 Australians by this time, from all corners of the country.</p>	October 2025
<p>Deliberative focus groups conducted and submissions close</p> <p>On behalf of NSC, SRC conducted eight focus groups to help explain key findings from the survey waves and community discussions. These were stratified by life stage and gender.</p> <p>Submissions closed, with NSC accepting 100 written submissions from the public.</p>	November 2025
<p>Survey Wave 3</p> <p>A final, more concentrated, wave of survey work was conducted following several significant shocks, notably the Bondi terrorist attack, extreme weather events, and heightened geopolitical tensions.</p>	February 2026
<p>Findings launched at ‘Securing our Future: A Ready and Resilient Australia conference</p>	March 2026

PART TWO: WHAT AUSTRALIANS TOLD US – INTERVIEW FINDINGS

Overview

Between May and October 2025, consultation teams of NSC staff and affiliates conducted semi-structured interviews and group discussions with close to 500 Australians across state and territory – all capital cities, and a range of regional centres, country towns and remote communities. Approximately 200 audio-recorded and transcribed interviews, which form the basis of this analysis, were drawn from that broader program. Explicit permission was granted for all interview recordings, under the condition that comments used in the analysis would remain non-attributable. A large portion of those we engaged preferred to speak off the record.

Participants were not a random sample of the Australian public. Locations, and therefore participants, were chosen to reflect a wide range of perspectives, but we can make no claim to be exhaustive or perfectly representative in that regard.² Although some interviews were concentrated in high-population and culturally diverse areas, such as Western Sydney, others were geographically dispersed, for instance across remote communities in northern Australia where infrastructure gaps have strategic consequences. This means that parts of this engagement report accentuate concerns in dispersed locations; it is not solely or even primarily about metropolitan perspectives. Moreover, our interviewees were not principally about foreign policy, although topics such as relations with China and the United States occasionally arose in a defence and security context. Interviews also skewed toward people with a professional relevance or personal interest in our national security outreach: local government officials, emergency service volunteers, industry representatives, community and advocacy leaders, and engaged citizens.

First Nations perspectives are presented in a third report in the current series.

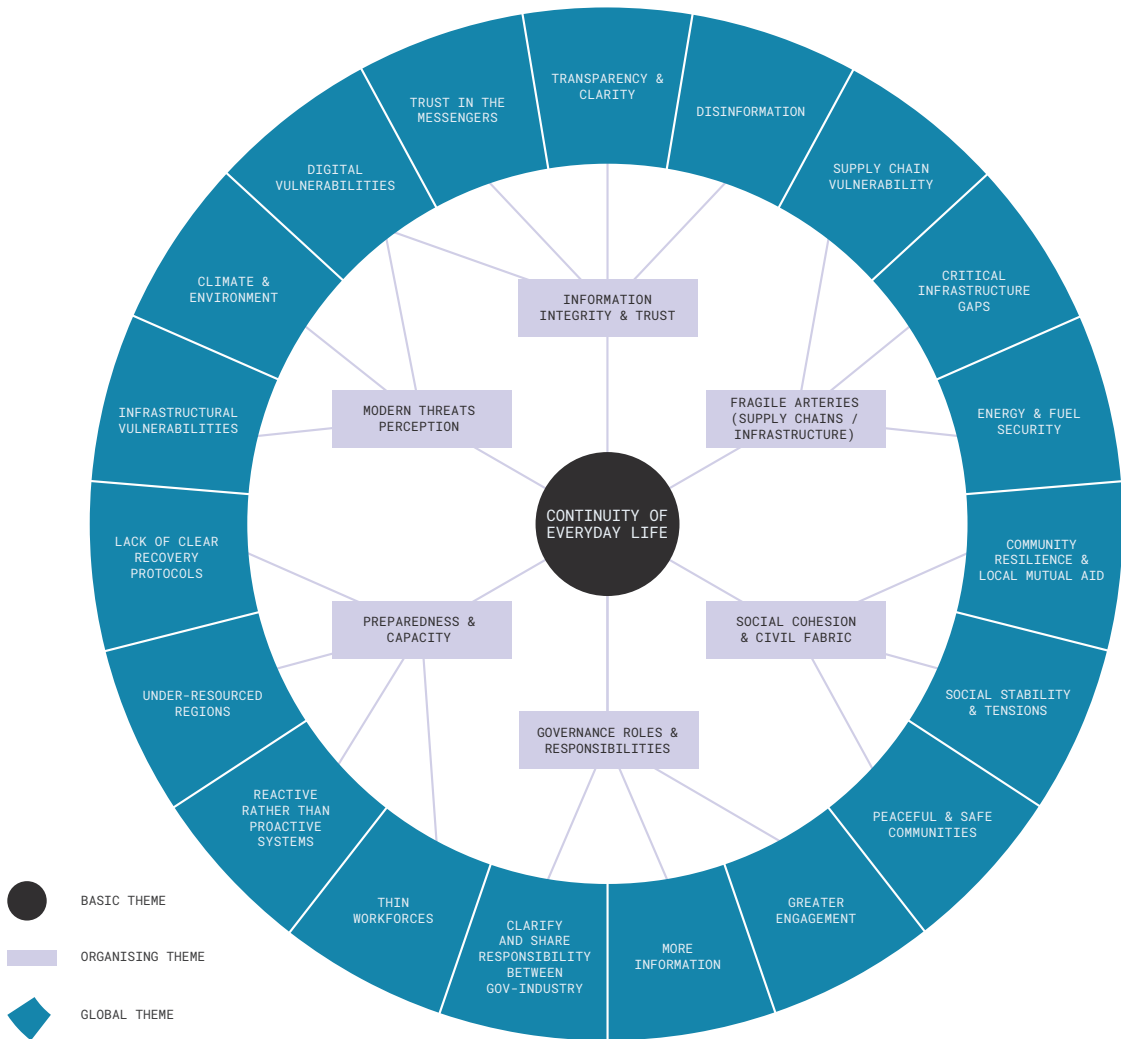
This is drawn from a specialised academic research project commissioned under our Community Consultations initiative, and provides a model for additional potential research projects concentrating more deeply on security perspectives held by various parts of the Australian community.

The views captured herein do not represent all Australians – for that, the companion ‘Community Consultations Results Report’ draws on nationally representative surveys of more than 20,000 respondents across three waves. What these conversations provide is something surveys cannot: depth, texture, place, and the lived experience of people grappling with security questions in their own communities.

Two complementary analyses are presented in this Part. The first – an inductive thematic analysis – allowed themes to emerge from the data without a predetermined frame, producing six organising themes that together describe how participants understand security. The second applies a more structured lens: what participants themselves said they want, the practical asks that emerged consistently across locations, sectors, and backgrounds. Read together, they offer both a ground-up picture of how communities think about security and a direct answer to what they are calling for.

² Further detail on sampling is available in methodology.

FIGURE 1: THEMATIC NETWORK OF CONCEPTS EMERGING FROM OUR NATIONWIDE CONSULTATIONS



This thematic network shows a set of nested themes, all leading to the central theme that captures much of the data. The easiest way to read this is to look at the mid-level themes all leading to the main, central theme (the main theme of this data being discussions that revolve around security as maintaining the continuity of everyday life). The outer, smaller themes are less abstract. They inform the mid-level themes. These mid-level themes all inform the central theme.

The central theme: security as continuity of everyday life

Across the interviews, conducted in every corner of Australia, one idea kept surfacing – in different words, from different people, in different settings. National security, as participants understood and described it, is not primarily about invasions, missiles, or espionage. It is about whether ordinary life can keep going: whether the power stays on, the shelves stay stocked, the information they receive can be trusted, people can go about their day-to-day business without fear, and their neighbours are there for them when things go wrong.

‘Families and communities have to go about their normal business. And we’ve got to keep that life cycle going.’

Participant, ACT

This finding – that Australians conceptualise national security through the lens of everyday continuity rather than in an abstract sense or through geopolitical threat – is the central and most consistent result of the interview program. It does not mean participants were unaware of conventional security concerns. The Australian Defence Force, military capabilities, China, coercion, the US alliance, AUKUS, espionage and foreign interference all emerged unprompted in some of the discussions. But these subjects occupied a different register: they were things that ‘government sorts out,’ distant from the practical decisions and vulnerabilities participants encountered in their own lives.

What participants were close to – and vocal about – were the pressures and systems that shape whether daily life holds together. Supply chains that run through a single port. Emergency services staffed by an ageing pool of volunteers. Information environments that feel designed to confuse or promote hostility. Housing costs that are locking a generation out of the communities they grew up in. These were the holistic security issues – as raised by participants – that animated the interviews. Many blurred the boundary between ideas of national security and community safety, to an extent that calls into question how meaningful those distinctions are for policymakers anymore.

This reframing of security has significant implications. It means that policies, however important, which feel abstract or grounded in

grand concepts of geopolitics and strategy may struggle to mobilise public engagement or trust. And it means that investments in the mundane infrastructure of daily life (reliable roads, trusted communications, funded emergency services, accessible housing) may not be separate from national security in the minds of Australians.

The thematic analysis that follows unpacks how this central finding expresses itself across six distinct but interconnected themes. These themes are not quantitatively equal – some captured more interview content than others – and they overlap in places. Together, they describe the different dimensions through which Australians understand what it means to keep everyday life secure.

Thematic analysis

The following six themes were identified through an inductive thematic analysis – that is, they emerged from a close, iterative reading of the interview data, without being prompted or imposed in advance.³ Each theme captures a distinct dimension of how participants described security, vulnerability, and resilience. They are presented not as separate silos but as interconnected angles on the same underlying concern: the continuity of everyday Australian life.

- **Information integrity and trust:** the information environment feels polluted – and that pollution is itself a security threat.
- **Fragile arteries:** critical systems run through chokepoints that feel inadequately protected.
- **Preparedness and capacity:** the gap between willingness and capability is perceived as wide – and growing.
- **Modern threats perception:** it’s widely felt that the next shock will much more likely come from the cascading consequences of threats to interconnected systems than from direct military attack on Australia.
- **Governance roles and responsibilities:** many people are not sure who is in charge of what – and that uncertainty is itself a vulnerability.
- **Social cohesion and civil fabric:** community is both the country’s greatest resilience asset and a site of active strain.

1. Information integrity and trust

Participants across every state and territory described an information environment that feels

3 The inductive thematic analysis is detailed further in the methodology section of this report.

broken and dangerous. Misinformation and disinformation are not abstract threats to those we spoke to – they are daily experiences. We heard that social media amplifies fear and division; sensationalism distort community realities; AI-enabled scams and voice-cloning are catching people and institutions off guard. And underneath all of this runs a more corrosive problem: declining trust in the institutions that should be providing reliable information.

‘There’s just a constant flow of disinformation... it sets up that distrust... that sort of trust in the messaging that comes from government starts to break down.’

Participant, TAS

Participants did not frame this simply as a media literacy problem to be solved by better individual choices. The information environment felt to many like a system designed to overwhelm – and one in which individual navigation was increasingly impossible. AI was raised repeatedly as the accelerant: it boosts the productivity of spreading mis- and disinformation while making authenticity harder to verify.

‘[Artificial intelligence] largely boosted the productivity of spreading misinformation... it takes a lot of effort to evaluate authenticity.’

Participant, VIC

The community-level harms described were concrete. In New South Wales, we heard of a CEO’s voice being faked, nearly resulting in major financial fraud. In Darwin, social media campaigns were described as deliberately targeting First Nations communities to create distrust and division. In Victoria, targeted disinformation campaigns and fears of violence led to active intervention orders to protect elected local government representatives. In New South Wales, we heard of dehumanising and insulting language on social media as part of a continuum with violence and terrorism. A few interviewees warned that the conspiracy messaging of the ‘sovereign citizen’ movement had the potential to become a major national security risk. A recurring and underappreciated complication described by participants was that some communities now rely on social media as their sole effective news channel – despite this also being a primary vehicle for divisive disinformation. A Queensland interviewee who said the information through Facebook was ‘really, really bad’ in the same breath acknowledged that in an emergency when the power goes out and there’s no TV, Facebook is what still works.

‘The whole community has lower trust in institutions... we have an information environment that’s very corrupted that feeds

into that... there’s a reflection and reckoning that needs to happen there and a lot of proactive trust building.’

Participant, Melbourne

What participants asked for was practical, localised, and consistent: trusted channels that feel recognisably local; resources for countering mis- and disinformation, targeted to specific demographic groups; and more timely, and locally-specific government communication – rather than generalised announcements that, as one Tasmanian participant put it, cover ‘half the state’ without meaning much to anyone.

2. Fragile arteries

Australia’s critical systems – fuel, freight, communications, power, water – were seen to be extraordinarily concentrated: a small number of roads, ports, sea lanes, pipelines, and cables that carry a disproportionate share of what the country needs to function. When one of these fails, whether through accident, weather event, or hostile action, the effects were described as cascading rapidly and broadly. Participants across the country described this vulnerability with clarity and, often, frustration.

‘Australia’s largest Navy base is accessed through a 1960s residential road network.’

Participant, WA

‘98% of Tasmania’s freight comes through TasPorts.’

Participant, TAS

‘People understand distance and what that means... if you look at the Pilbara, it’s entirely isolated... so if something happens here, power and water-wise, it has to be resolved here. There’s no redundancy that exists.’

Participant, WA

The vulnerabilities participants described are largely agnostic to cause – and this was pointed out by some people we spoke to. A flooded road, a sunk tugboat, a cyberattack, hostile action targeting fuel storage – the outcome was often seen as the same: cascading disruption to everyday life. Participants were not primarily focused on threat actors; they were focused on the structural fragility of systems that they thought should be resilient by design.

The geographic specificity of the findings here is one of the interview program’s most distinct contributions. In Tasmania, a participant described a peat fire where the gas pipeline and the communications backbone for the Northwest Coast run through the same ground – a single accident away from cutting both at once. In Darwin, the city’s connection to the south runs through a single road corridor, described as vulnerable to flooding and

without adequate redundancy. In Western Australia, the Port Hedland channel handles a volume of iron-ore exports so large that any blockage was described as economically catastrophic. In parts of New South Wales, roads that have been washed away three and four times were described as having been rebuilt identically each time, without the extra investment to raise them above flood level.

‘So if there is a flood exposed road and it gets washed away, the government will pay to rebuild that... there are roads in Sydney that have been washed out 3 or 4 times in the last 20 years that we’ve built back exactly the same as they were before... They get washed out and people will be basically isolated as a result of flood and will die.’

Participant, NSW

Participants were not calling for redundancy across every system. They were calling for something more targeted: mapping of the chokepoints, understanding of the cascading consequences of each one failing, then investment in the specific diversifications and buffers that matter most in each place. A ‘national average’ approach to infrastructure resilience, several participants argued, misses the point entirely when some regions are structurally one incident away from being cut off.

‘You see every time we have a big flood and it cuts the Great Northern Highway... suddenly food is having to be shipped through obscure routes and it takes a week longer and the shelves are bare.’

Participant, WA

3. Preparedness and capacity

A distinction that ran through the interviews – sometimes stated explicitly, often implicit – is the difference between resilience in spirit and resilience in capability. Australians, particularly in regional and rural communities, described a strong instinct to help and a culture of showing up when things go wrong. But when participants examined whether the systems, infrastructure, people, and plans were actually in place to manage a serious shock, the picture was far more troubling.

‘I don’t think we’re prepared at all. I don’t think we know half of it, to be honest, what’s coming ... I don’t think from a public perspective we’d be prepared at all.’

Participant, NSW

The structural problems appeared interconnected. Emergency services in many areas were heavily dependent on volunteers – but the volunteer pool was ageing, and recruitment from younger cohorts was falling. Hospitals were described as facing

workforce shortages so acute that brand-new facilities were being built without a clear plan to staff them. The capacity that did exist tended to assume a single event: one flood, one fire, one infrastructure failure. A compounding or cascading crisis – which is often the form that modern threats take – is a different proposition entirely.

‘We’re getting a brand-new hospital and we won’t be able to staff it – but no-one’s talking about that yet... How do we attract them and retain them in the region?’

Participant, QLD

‘Pretty much my entire workforce is volunteers. So I only have three staff and about 250 volunteers.’

Participant, TAS

Interviewees in several locations that have experienced disasters in recent years also conveyed a sense of resilience fatigue. They expressed a growing aversion to the term resilience, which they felt was being applied to local populations almost as a substitute for the material support, skilled personnel and decision-making autonomy those communities needed.

The interviews also revealed a consistent problem of reactivity. Participants often described institutional patterns of responding to shocks and then returning to the pre-shock state, rather than using each event as an impetus to learn and rebuild better. Genuine resilience involves adaptation and change. The ACT participant who described being stranded at an evacuation centre during the 2019-20 bushfires – no communications, refrigerated food going bad, no backup generator, no plan for 10,000 tourists – put it simply: ‘A good example of how unprepared we were.’ The systems were overwhelmed. And they were described as subsequently being rebuilt to roughly the same standard.

The counterpoint is real and also worth mentioning. Where preparedness has improved, local government has often been identified as the critical driving force. In Victoria, positive examples were cited of local councils investing in resilience over the past decade. The Gold Coast’s Disaster Emergency Management Centre – bringing utilities, SES, police, and health into a single room – was described as a model of coordinated local capability. Tasmania was characterised by some as ‘a case study of resilience by necessity.’ Communities that regularly have their access routes cut off in disasters reported learning how to prepare. The question is whether that learning should require disaster to occur first.

‘Preparedness has strengthened here, driven a lot by local government ... In the last 5 to

8 years, that has changed and just about all the local governments in this region are doing something around resilience preparedness.'

Participant, VIC

4. Modern threats perception

A recurring quality of these interviews is the gap between how Australia is often publicly described – as a 'lucky country', distant from the world's worst disruptions – and how participants actually perceive its vulnerability. The threats they described were not primarily distant or hypothetical. They were proximate, systemic, and in many cases already being felt.

Participants described a threat landscape shaped by three interconnected categories: critical infrastructure as a potential target, digital vulnerabilities, and climate volatility. What unites them is that all three operate on and through the same fragile systems described already in the 'Fragile arteries' cluster. An extreme weather event, a cyberattack, and a deliberate act of sabotage can all produce the same cascading failure – disrupted fuel supply, communications blackout, inability to move food.

'If we lose communication... somebody puts something in the water on the top of the River Murray... and the gas pipeline coming from Moomba to South Australia. Knock that out, bang, you've got no water... Secondly, there's no gas coming through. So... what do you do then?'

Participant, SA

Critical infrastructure as a target was not discussed with the specificity of traditional security analysis – named actors and precise scenarios were rare. Instead, participants described a general and growing awareness that the assets that keep communities functioning are also, by their nature, targets. A missile strike on a key commercial port. Fuel storage facilities shut down. The Port Hedland channel blocked. These were discussed not as remote possibilities but as scenarios whose consequences participants could trace through their communities in concrete detail.

On digital vulnerabilities, participants expressed concern across a wide spectrum – from the personal (scams intercepting email payments in Wagga Wagga) to the strategic (the cutting of undersea cables, satellite disruptions, AI-generated media manipulation). The common thread is interconnection: digital systems are so embedded in the infrastructure of everyday life that their disruption is not a separate category of threat but a force multiplier of every other vulnerability. AI featured prominently – not as a precision tool but as a 'nebulous' accelerant that is reshaping how fast

misleading content circulates and how hard it is to verify anything.

'It can make decisions about what's being fed out in media ... into community. All of that can be generated from an AI bot at this point.'

Participant, NSW

Climate and environment occupied the most consistent and widespread space in this theme. Across nearly every state and territory, participants described extreme weather not as an environmental issue removed from security, but as an active and compounding security threat. Examples included: floods knocking out bridges, fires overwhelming volunteer capacity, heat extremes that kill. And it was described as getting worse, in ways participants said are already visible – two dry winters in a row in Tasmania, flooding roads in Victoria that are rebuilt identically and flooded again. Several interviewees pointed to flood-devastated Lismore in northern New South Wales as a critical case study of whether an Australian community could adapt, prepare and unify against the certainty of repeated future shocks.

'Climate change is a massive threat nationally... It will ultimately fragment society and create unrest.'

Participant, NT

'Western Sydney is particularly exposed to extreme heat... in an area of low income where people can't afford to turn on the air conditioning ... Lots of people will die as a result of extreme heat.'

Participant, NSW

The crucial analytical point here is that participants did not primarily distinguish between intentional and unintentional threats: that is attacks from state or non-state actors as opposed to the consequences of climate change, natural disasters, accidents or system failures. This 'cause-agnostic' framing of vulnerability has an obvious implication for policy: resilience investment is about protecting systems against diverse risks.

5. Governance roles and responsibilities

One of the most consistent findings across the interviews was not a threat or a vulnerability but a structural absence: when it comes to preparedness, resilience and response across the spectrum of security risks, few could clearly or confidently articulate who is responsible for what. In discussions spanning cybersecurity, emergency management, infrastructure investment, social cohesion and community communications, the same frustration surfaced repeatedly – that roles are unclear, responsibilities are siloed, and the

gaps between levels of government are where communities fall through.

'I've yet to come across an artifact that can clearly articulate what each level of government is responsible for.'

Senior official, QLD

Three specific friction points emerged across the data:

- The first was the question of *who leads* when an event moves from response to recovery. Participants in the Northern Territory described a familiar pattern: Commonwealth and Northern Territory agencies mobilise effectively for the acute phase of a crisis, then scale back – while the community is still recovering, and continuity of local knowledge and relationships are needed most. There was a perception of no clear response and recovery handoff between authorities.
- The second friction point was *who knows* – specifically, the gaps in security knowledge and especially the clearances to access classified information across levels of government. Security clearances and authorised 'need to know' among personnel in Australia are overwhelmingly concentrated in the Federal Government. Very few officials hold such clearances at state and territory level. And, according to our interviews, the question of clearances and access to sensitive security information among local government authorities seems barely to have been considered. Local government is vital to community cohesion and often the first point of contact during a crisis. Local officials often know the communities, the infrastructure, the relationships. Yet:

'There is no mechanism for security clearance at the local level... so when we're having very necessary conversations about ... crisis situations ... the local government people have to leave the room.'

Participant, Melbourne

The issue is you find out about these things in either an abstract sort of way or after the fact, because they know you're not on the list of [cleared] people to talk to.'

Participant, TAS

- The third friction was *who communicates* – how national security decisions and risks are explained across all levels of government, to industry and ultimately to the public. Participants described a Commonwealth that often makes decisions affecting communities without adequately consulting or explaining

them to the people affected. The result described was that communities don't know the 'why' behind major decisions – examples cited were AUKUS, critical infrastructure designations, emergency protocols – and that lack of understanding was framed as eroding the trust that resilience depends on.

'You're getting your advice from... senior public servants who have never been to our region and do not understand the impact...'

Participant, SA

'Even in Canberra, it's very difficult for Western Australia to get any respect or any policy – exceptionally difficult.'

Participant, WA

What participants wanted was not more bureaucracy – it was clarity and co-design. They described models that worked: the Gold Coast's Disaster Emergency Management Centre, with all relevant agencies in one room; Tasmania's Port Security Committee, which brings together Border Force, police, Home Affairs, and port stakeholders regularly so they are not 'in the dark' when something happens; the Kimberley Regional Group, where nine councils go to Canberra speaking from the same brief. These are not large-scale institutional reforms. They are practical coordination habits that communities have built to forestall the challenge of having to improvising during crisis without prior relationships.

6. Social cohesion and civil fabric

Social cohesion is both the country's deepest resilience asset and a site of visible and growing strain. In our interviews, we frequently encountered this tension: between the remarkable mutual aid and community solidarity described in one breath, and in the next the worsening dangers of economic exclusion, political polarisation, divisive disinformation, and targeted harassment of political representatives and officials.

The positive narrative about communities and cohesion was frequent and compelling, particularly in regional and rural communities. Participants described a culture of 'showing up' when crisis loomed: East Gippsland communities rallying after the 2019-20 fires, Tasmanian communities with stocked pantries and generators, the NT's strong local networks around seasonal flooding, informal volunteer networks – including tradies and local First Nations organisations – taking a lead in the immediate response to the Lismore floods of 2022. The bonds within communities were described as genuinely strong – not aspirational, but demonstrable, in specific events and relationships.

'In rural and regional communities, people always rush in. East Gippsland ... people came from all around, you know, to help.'

Participant, VIC

But the interviews also surfaced consistent evidence of strain on what might be called 'bridging capital' – the connections across communities, across cultural groups, across political divides.⁴ Economic pressures and disinformation played a large part. We heard accounts of targeted harassment against elected representatives at all levels of Government. In one jurisdiction, active intervention orders against constituents were described; in another, rising aggression toward frontline government workers. In New South Wales, community advocates describing harassment amplified by digital technology. These are not abstract social trends – they represent the erosion of the civic and social infrastructure that resilience depends on, and also point to the risks that may discourage Australians from serving their fellow citizens in political office. Several interviewees argued that not enough attention was being paid the risks of political polarisation, fuelled by disinformation, leading to radicalisation leading to violence.

The interviews also surfaced genuine disagreement about what social cohesion means and who is threatening it. Participants came to this question from markedly different positions. In Sydney and Melbourne, we heard of Jewish communities living in fear of violence and terrorism from multiple sources of extremism. In Western Sydney, some voices described rapid demographic change as a source of anxiety about belonging. Others argued that failure to integrate migrants well was the real vulnerability. Also in Western Sydney we heard about migrant communities where initial confidence in Australia as a highly secure place was shifting to heightened concern about discrimination and personal safety. In Tasmania, one interviewee described a community that is 'friendly but not welcoming' and acknowledged both the anti-migrant sentiment and the practical need for the workforce that migration brings. A Victorian interviewee made a case for what they called assimilation – arguing that celebrating every culture in isolation had diluted a shared Australian identity.

One expert interviewee offered a working synthesis of many of these concerns with a case for more comprehensive civics education based on the 'social contract' that applies to all citizens.

These are not views that can be reconciled into a single finding. However, what can be said is that they point to the same underlying concern: the desire for social conditions under which a diverse community can sustain trust, civic participation, and collective action under pressure. That question is genuinely contested among our interviewees.

'I feel Australian way of life is defined by, first of all, the democratic ethos ... [but] often what we have is each group defining their freedoms as important and other groups' freedoms as problematic ... hijabs and bikinis, they should all have a right to coexist.'

Participant, NSW

'What's happening now is that concepts around social cohesion are becoming weaponised by different groups.'

Participant, NSW

'...as a Jewish Australian, I've never felt more threatened and more scared.'

Participant, NSW

At the same time, in describing security, many participants also implied a 'hierarchy of needs' logic: when basic needs are unmet – affordable housing, food and energy, safety from crime – people do not have much bandwidth for wider civic concerns.⁵ These are not only economic or social policy failures – they are, participants argued, security vulnerabilities, because they erode the civic fabric and institutional trust on which resilience depends.

'You can grow up in a place, you can go to school there, you can form memories there, you can do everything there, and then all of a sudden you can't afford to live here ... we've got a whole generation of young people here that are locked out of the housing market.'

Participant, QLD

'The lowest common denominator is whether you can keep yourself alive or not ... the next level of security really is whether you can continue to live in dignity and in a way that is consonant with your values.'

Participant, NSW

4 Robert Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York, Simon and Schuster, 2000).

5 Abraham Maslow's 'hierarchy of needs' has been a widely used, though contested and evolving, theory of motivation in human psychology since the 1940s. In essence, it contends that people will prioritise basic physiological and safety needs ahead of other priorities.

What communities asked for

The six themes above describe what participants said they perceive and feel. This section addresses what they said they want – the practical asks that emerged consistently across interviews, regardless of location, sector, or background.

These are not policy recommendations generated by this research. They are a synthesis of what participants themselves identified as priorities, presented here as an evidence base for policymakers to consider in their work.

Tell us the 'why'

The single most consistent ask across the interviews was for clearer, more honest explanation of national security decisions – what the risks are, what the plan is, and what it means for the specific place where people live. Participants described a Commonwealth Government that makes consequential decisions affecting communities – on defence investments, critical infrastructure designations, emergency management protocols – without adequately explaining them to the people affected.

'Nobody's talking to the why of the matter ... there's a way you can have that dialogue and explain to people and take them on a journey. But there just hasn't been.'

Participant, WA

'No one's ever said to the Australian people ... what will happen ... if Australia is attacked and cannot defend itself.'

Participant, WA

The practical corollary was equally clear: people trust messages that feel local. National communications that speak only to part of the community, or that explain decisions only in official language, were described as having little traction.

Map the chokepoints and fix them

Participants were not asking for a comprehensive national infrastructure overhaul. They were asking for something more targeted: identify the specific points where one failure cascades into many, and invest there first. The asks were concrete – Stuart Highway, Port Hedland channel, Bass Strait ferry continuity, fuel storage buffers – and participants often articulated the cascading consequence of each one failing in precise terms.

The call for co-investment from Defence where its growth depends on community infrastructure was widespread. The argument, heard especially in the Northern Territory and Western Australia, was straightforward: if the entire country's defence depends on local roads, wharves, housing, and services, then localised infrastructure investment needs to match that national requirement. Participants often used 'Defence' loosely – sometimes referring to the ADF specifically, the broader Defence Estate, or the Commonwealth Government in general. And resilience of localised national infrastructure was not described only in material terms, but also with regard to ready access to the people and skills needed to make it work.

'If you've got a highly complex multi-billion-dollar industrial plant ... do you want the technician [far away] on a surfboard, or 20 minutes down the road?'

Participant, WA

Clarify who does what – before a crisis

Participants wanted a published, accessible account of roles and responsibilities across Commonwealth, state/territory, and local governments – something plain and functional that communities and first responders can readily use in crisis or preparation for crisis.

'Why don't we have a document ... almost like a pilot book ... as soon as something goes wrong, open it?'

Participant, QLD

Related to this was a specific and underappreciated ask regarding security clearances and access to classified information across levels of government: expanding the volume of clearances for state/territory officials, and introducing clearances for local government personnel where it could make a genuine difference for security and community safety.

Raise the cyber floor

Across sectors and jurisdictions, participants described a baseline cyber capability that was widely believed to be inadequate – and a gap between awareness of the problem and the practical resources to address it. The asks were not exotic: multi-factor authentication, offline backups, role-based training, incident-response drills, minimum standards for suppliers. The frustration was that these things are known, but not consistently implemented. Small organisations – councils, charities, primary care networks – were identified as a particular vulnerability, holding significant sensitive data without the funding or expertise to protect it. Participants asked for shared infrastructure and practical support rather than compliance frameworks they lack the capacity to navigate.

Address everyday pressures

This was the broadest ask, and in some ways the most foundational. Participants consistently argued that housing scarcity, energy costs, crime, and cost-of-living pressures are not separate from national security in their minds – they consume the attention, trust, and bandwidth that resilience depends on. As broadly described, a community preoccupied with keeping the lights on and the rent or mortgages paid is not a community that can mobilise around longer-term security concerns.

'They're just trying to survive, let alone worry about what's happening in a bigger, wider environment.'

Participant, ACT

This was not framed as a request for government to solve every social problem. It was framed as a recognition that resilience and preparedness against security threats requires basic social conditions – trust, civic participation, stable communities, employment, skills, education. Security, prosperity and cohesion are mutually supporting, but this core relationship needs to be supported in consistent policy practice and more than a mantra.

Build on what already works

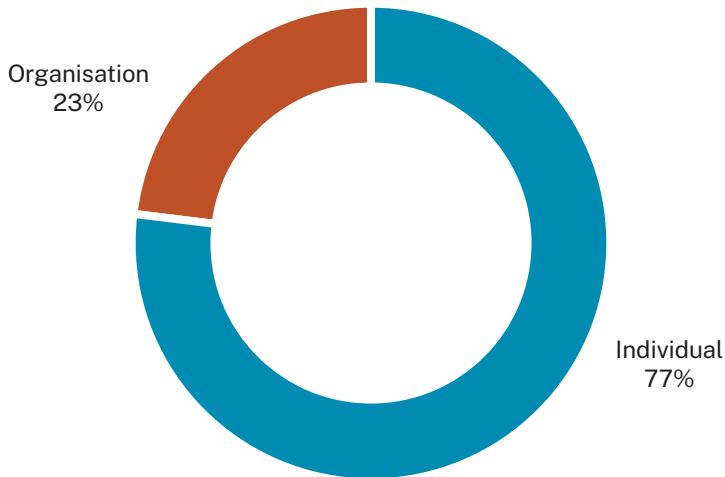
Participants pointed to models that function and asked for them to be better resourced and replicated. The Gold Coast's Disaster Emergency Management Centre, Tasmania's Port Security Committee, The Kimberley Regional Group, NSW's COMPLAN. Local indigenous recovery advisors in the NT, TAFE NSW's cybersecurity training program, Queensland's Defence Science Alliance. These are not theoretical proposals – they were cited as working examples of coordination, trust-building, and practical resilience that communities have built, often without Commonwealth support. The ask is not innovation. It is recognition, funding, and the kind of structured information-sharing that lets local capability be used when it is needed most – including as a resource for more coordinated national efforts in the future.

PART THREE: WRITTEN SUBMISSIONS

Overview

Alongside the program of nationwide conversations, our initiative involved a call for written submissions from Australian individuals and organisations. As with a formal government consultative process, or a parliamentary inquiry, our aim was to ensure the opportunity to have a say for anyone interested in contributing to the initiative. The call for submissions opened in May 2025, in coordination with the publication and active promotion of an Issues Paper, and closed in November 2025.⁶ The Issues Paper, akin to a 'green paper' in an official process, was intended to frame the issues in an objective and open-ended way. One hundred submissions were received from individuals and organisations across Australia, primarily through NSC's online portal using the Converlens submissions management platform, with a small number provided by email and post.

FIGURE 3: SUBMISSION RESPONDENTS



⁶ Medcalf, R. Bull, C. and Wilford, T. (2025) *Thinking about our national security: Community Consultations on Australian attitudes to security – Issues Paper*. Canberra: ANU National Security College.

Geopolitics was the most distinctive feature of the submissions compared to the interviews. Contributors were significantly more likely to connect domestic security concerns to broader global shifts: the state of the international rules-based order, the implications of great power competition, and Australia's alliance posture. This framing was largely absent from the face-to-face conversations.

Economic security and sovereign capability drew substantial attention. Contributors identified Australia's dependencies across a wide range of essential goods – energy, food, pharmaceuticals, fertilisers, electronics, medical devices, and defence materiel – as systemic vulnerabilities. The call for greater self-sufficiency and onshoring of critical capabilities was consistent across responses.

Social cohesion and democratic resilience featured prominently, with submissions noting the combined effect of mis- and disinformation, persistent inequality, declining institutional trust, and unregulated AI on Australia's social fabric. Some submissions noted that Australia benefits from relatively strong social cohesion by international comparison.

Information integrity and artificial intelligence were treated in many submissions as interlinked threats. AI was seen both as a tool for spreading mis- and disinformation at scale and as a risk to existing security technologies. Several submissions raised specific concerns about the vulnerability of diasporas to foreign-state disinformation campaigns – a dimension not dominant in the nationwide interviews.

Climate change as a security threat was identified consistently, with contributors connecting it not only to infrastructure and supply chain risk but to regional stability, migration, and long-term social cohesion. The impact of climate change featured in submissions with a specificity and urgency that matched, and in some respects exceeded, the nationwide interview material.

Comparing submissions and interview: areas of convergence and divergence

The most analytically useful contribution of the submissions is what they add to, or depart from, the nationwide interview findings. In broad terms, the two datasets converge on the same underlying concern – that national security is inseparable from the conditions of everyday life – but arrive at it from different directions. The interviews are grounded in place and experience; the submissions are more likely to reach for structural explanation and policy prescription. Neither is necessarily more valid than the other. Together, they provide complementary angles on the same set of concerns. The following picks up on the six themes we identified across the nationwide conversations. For each, the focus is on what submissions add or where they diverge – not on restating what the interviews already established.

Information integrity and trust

Submissions and interviews converged strongly on the corrosive effect of misinformation and AI-enabled disinformation on institutional trust. Both identified the information environment as a frontline security issue rather than a peripheral concern.

Where submissions went further was in naming the geopolitical dimension explicitly. Several contributors identified nation-state actors as deliberate sources of disinformation targeting Australia's sovereignty and decision-making capability – a framing largely absent from the interviews, where participants described the information environment as chaotic and overwhelming rather than strategically directed. Submissions also specifically identified diaspora communities within Australia as particularly vulnerable to foreign-state disinformation and interference campaigns, an issue the interview program did not surface as prominently.

On solutions, submissions were more prescriptive than interviews. Proposals included legislative measures, improved media literacy programs, diversity and inclusion initiatives to reduce the reach of disinformation, and increased information sharing between levels of government and potentially between nations. Interviewees, by contrast, focused on trusted local channels and timely government communication – practical and proximate rather than structural.

Fragile arteries

Both submissions and interviews identified Australia's supply chains, energy systems, and critical infrastructure as dangerously concentrated. The underlying concern is the same: single points of failure whose disruption cascades rapidly through everyday life.

Submissions expanded the scope of vulnerability considerably. Where interviewees named specific physical assets, submissions catalogued a broader range of essential goods whose supply chains are exposed: pharmaceuticals, fertilisers, electronics, medical devices, and defence materiel including munitions. The digital dimension was also more prominent in submissions, with specific concern about privately owned and sometimes offshore-headquartered infrastructure, the vulnerability and low redundancy of Australia's submarine cables, and reported pre-positioning of malware and sabotage capabilities by hostile state actors within critical infrastructure networks.

'[dependencies create] vulnerabilities across our critical infrastructure, including healthcare systems, power grids, and supply chains.'

Submission respondent (Response 50)

On the question of cause, both datasets converge on the same 'cause-agnostic' framing identified in interviews – that the vulnerability exists regardless of whether the disruption is accidental, climate-driven, internal, transnational, from a hostile foreign power or as a consequence of conflict elsewhere in the world. Submissions were slightly more inclined to name specific risk drivers. In particular, they identified foreign interference, AI-enabled supply chain manipulation and climate change as compounding pressures rather than standalone threats.

Proposed policy solutions outlined in the submissions included supply chain diversification, onshoring of critical manufacturing, accelerated clean energy transition, and government emergency powers to ensure infrastructure continuity during shocks – a more interventionist framing than the targeted co-investment approach that dominated interview discussions.

Preparedness and capacity

Submissions largely supported the interview findings on preparedness – that Australia's capacity to manage crises is strained and that a culture of reactivity leaves communities exposed. But the two datasets emphasise different dimensions of the problem.

Interviewees were specific and place-based. Submissions took a broader structural view, identifying poverty and inequality, climate change,

geopolitical shifts, the digital economy, and the rise of AI as systemic risk drivers eroding preparedness over time. The connection between socio-economic vulnerability and security preparedness – present in both datasets – was more explicitly theorised in the submissions.

Military preparedness featured in submissions in a way it largely did not in interviews. Several raised defence recruitment shortfalls and personnel retention as acute vulnerabilities, with one arguing that the Australian Defence Force had effectively become a 'boutique' capability designed for coalition contribution rather than continental defence.

One submission proposed a 'whole-of-society Total Defence framework, incorporating civilian preparedness, infrastructure redundancy, and coordinated crisis response planning' – a concept that synthesises several of the asks from the interview program.

Modern threats perception

Both datasets share a cause-agnostic understanding of modern threats: disruption, wherever it originates, operates on the same fragile systems. This convergence is analytically significant – it suggests the framing is not an artefact of the interview method but a genuinely held public understanding.

Submissions cast the threat landscape more widely than interviews. Where interviewees focused on the proximate – the next flood, the next cyber incident, the next supply shortage – submissions also extended to the catastrophic level of threat: conflicts escalating to the use of nuclear weapons, chemical and biological threats, risk of worsening pandemics, and the destabilising potential of mass migration driven by climate change.

'We have gone from being web-enabled, to web dependent and, in turn, web-vulnerable.'

Submission respondent (Response 40)

'The real test is whether Australia can absorb shocks without systemic breakdown: war scares; supply chain failures; climate extremes; financial crises; pandemics; cyber attacks; democratic stress; and social fragmentation.'

Submission respondent (Response 89)

Some of the submissions also ventured into proposing that Australia should become a more assertive security actor. One urged that Australia may need to act as a disruptor to forestall worsening security risks – that 'national security increasingly depends on the ability to anticipate and disrupt' (Response 9).

Notably absent from submissions, as from most of the interviews, was any sustained discussion of how Australia's international connections might ameliorate the impact of disruptions – through diplomatic cooperation, trade diversification, creative new strategic partnerships or alliance burden-sharing. Both datasets focus on domestic vulnerability rather than international opportunity.

Governance roles and responsibilities

Both datasets, submissions as well as interviews, converged on the need for clearer roles and better coordination across Commonwealth, state/territory, and local government. Public frustration with ambiguity about who is responsible for what was echoed in the submissions.

Where submissions diverged was in their predominantly Federal focus. Contributors were primarily engaged with Commonwealth government leadership: its role in defence and foreign policy, but also in climate, economic, infrastructure, health, and social policy. The granular local government dimension – which was one of the most distinctive findings of the interviews – received only limited attention in submissions. Where local government was mentioned, it was positioned as the steward of community resilience and disaster response, which aligns with the interview findings but without the specificity or urgency.

Submissions were more likely than interviews to raise Australia's actual or potential role on the international stage: identifying scope to play a larger lead on renewable energy, AI governance, diplomacy and conflict prevention or de-escalation.

Several submissions also explicitly raised the concern that Australia's national security policy environment structurally favours elite and institutional perspectives over civil society input. There were calls for broader community engagement – including greater use of transparency mechanisms, public-interest media, and dialogue with diaspora communities.

Social cohesion and civil fabric

Both datasets treated social cohesion as simultaneously a resilience asset and a vulnerability under great strain. The mechanisms described are similar: mis- and disinformation, economic inequality, declining institutional trust, and online harassment eroding the civic fabric that everyday resilience depends on.

Submissions introduced two dimensions not prominent across most interviews:

The first was an explicitly comparative framing: several contributors noted that Australia enjoys relatively strong social cohesion by international

standards, and argued that this is a strategic asset worth protecting rather than something to be taken for granted.

The second was a more developed treatment of diaspora communities – both as a source of social richness and as a specific vulnerability. Several submissions raised the risk of diasporas being targeted by foreign-state actors seeking to drive division, and called for 'diaspora diplomacy' efforts at community level to build security from within. This last point about the logic of closer diaspora engagement resonates with a few of our interviews, including with several voices from Chinese Australian communities.

Both datasets called for stronger democratic oversight, civil society participation, and trusted information channels as the practical levers of social cohesion. The submissions were more likely to propose formal institutional mechanisms – such as a National Cohesion and Resilience Strategy and a National Resilience Commissioner – while the interviews focused on existing community structures and relationships that could be better resourced and connected.

What the submissions add to the overall picture

Taken together, the submissions reinforce the central finding of the nationwide program of conversations: Australians understand national security through the conditions of everyday life, and the continuity of those conditions is what they want protected. This convergence across two very different methods gives the finding greater weight than either dataset could provide alone.

But the submissions also introduce a layer that the interviews, for the most part, do not. Where interviewees described what they see and feel in their communities – specific roads, specific ports, specific failures – submission contributors were more likely to connect those experiences to structural causes and international forces. The geopolitical dimension is the clearest example: US alliance dependency, sovereignty concerns around AUKUS, and the implications of great power competition featured frequently in submissions and rarely in interviews.

The two methods are better understood as complementary than competing. The interviews provide depth, texture, and place. The submissions provide structural framing, policy prescription, and a geopolitical layer. Together, they describe similar underlying concerns from different altitudes, and converge on the same central theme.

TEAM

Advisory Committee



Tom Rogers AO

Distinguished Advisor
ANU National Security College

Tom Rogers is the former Australian Electoral Commissioner, serving from 2014 to 2024. He is a member of the Advisory Board for the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance.



Rebecca Skinner PSM GAICD

Distinguished Advisor
ANU National Security College

Rebecca Skinner is the former CEO of Services Australia. She also served in the Department of Defence as Associate Secretary and as Deputy Secretary for Strategic Policy and Intelligence.



Professor Duncan Lewis AO, DSC, CSC

Professor in the Practice of National Security
ANU National Security College

Duncan Lewis is Professor in the Practice of National Security at NSC. He is the former Director General of ASIO, Commander of the Australian Army's Special Operations Command, Secretary of the Department of Defence, National Security Advisor to two Prime Ministers and Ambassador to Belgium, Luxembourg, the European Union and NATO.



Dr Carolyn Bull

Distinguished Advisor
ANU National Security College

Carolyn Bull is the Executive Director of RAND Australia – the Indo-Pacific arm of the world's largest policy research organisation, RAND. Carolyn previously served as the ANU National Security College's Deputy Head.



Professor Jennifer Westacott AC

Distinguished Advisor
ANU National Security College

Jennifer Westacott commenced as Chancellor of Western Sydney University in January 2023. Prior to this, she spent 12 years as Chief Executive of the Business Council of Australia.

Authors



Professor Rory Medcalf AM FAIA

Head of College
ANU National Security College

Professor Rory Medcalf AM FAIA has been Head of the College since 2015. He has led its expansion into policy impact, futures analysis, parliamentary engagement, international dialogue and community consultations, in addition to its core activity in executive development, academic education and research. This builds on a career spanning diplomacy, intelligence, think tanks and journalism.



Tim Wilford

Director, Community Consultations
ANU National Security College

Tim Wilford joined the College in January 2020, from Four Corners, the ABC's flagship investigative journalism program. He is Director of the Community Consultations initiative at NSC, leading Australia's most comprehensive study of public attitudes to national security, risk and resilience.



Dr Henry Dixson

Senior Research Officer, Community Consultations
ANU National Security College

Henry Dixson is a Postdoctoral Fellow at the ANU Research School of Social Sciences and the ARC Centre of Excellence in Synthetic Biology at Western Sydney University. He is also a Visiting Scientist at CSIRO's Responsible Innovation Future Science Platform.



Aisling Philippa

Policy Officer
ANU National Security College

Aisling Philippa joined NSC in June 2024, on secondment from the Office of Supply Chain Resilience within the Department of Industry, Science and Resources (DISR). Previously, she worked at the Australian Treasury, in the International Economics and Security Division.

Strategic engagement and research



Sally Bulkeley
Deputy Head of College
ANU National Security
College



Andrew Ramsay
Director, Program Design
and Delivery
ANU National Security
College



Isabella Zhao
Policy & Engagement
Coordinator
ANU National Security
College



Brooke Mayfield
Senior Engagement Officer
ANU National Security
College



Angus Smith
Research and Administration
Assistant
ANU National Security
College

METHODOLOGY

Semi-structured interviews and group discussions

NSC conducted semi-structured interviews and group discussions across Australia to understand what the public thinks about Australia's national security. These interviews were predominantly held in person, across all capital cities, and a range of regional centres, country towns and remote communities in each state and territory. In some instances, to assist with accessibility and/or timing constraints, we invited participants to attend virtual engagements with the team to share their views.

The primary in-scope population for the interviews were Australian residents aged 18 or older.

In total, we conducted over 480 engagements between the launch of the Community Consultations initiative in May 2025 through to October 2025.

Purpose and approach

The aim of the interviews and group discussions was to provide complementary insights to the surveys and focus groups NSC commissioned from the Social Research Centre. The goal of these engagements was to understand how individuals across the country perceive Australia's national security.

Each engagement was supported by an agenda provided to interviewers – but not interviewees – in advance of each meeting. Interviewers were briefed that they could use this structure to drive the conversation – but if interviewees divulged interest or knowledge about a particular question or relevant topic, interviewers were encouraged to investigate that line of discussion more deeply.

The agenda was as follows, with the questions drawn from NSC's Community Consultations Issues Paper:

- Interviewers were to provide an opening and introductions

- Interviewers were to provide background on NSC and Community Consultations initiative
- Participants were to be invited to share their views on national security, where interviewers could choose to ask the following questions, and:
 - What does Australia's national security mean to you?
 - What changes in the world concern you most? How do these affect Australia?
 - What are our security vulnerabilities, and what are our strengths?
 - What are Australia's strengths in protecting itself? What's missing?
 - In thinking about Australia's security, what risks or vulnerabilities concern you the most?
 - What do you consider to be Australia's most important national interest?
 - Do values and national identity matter to your idea of security?
 - What aspects of Australia's way of life should we strive to protect?
 - How do we safeguard our national security without undermining the way of life we are trying to protect?
 - What should a whole-of-nation approach to national security look like?
 - What roles should government, the private sector and civil society play in national security?
- Interviewers were to close the meeting and offer the team's contact information.

This flexible approach ensured that interviewers were steering the conversation in a direction that was consistent with the guidelines of the project – while also allowing room for new and interesting insights about national security to be shared with the team.

Who was consulted

Australian residents aged 18 or older were interviewed in the Community Consultations initiative. Where relevant, we encouraged participants to wear 'multiple hats' in their discussions with us, to share both personal and professional perspectives that shaped their experience of national security.

Teams met with people who worked across different sectors. These included volunteering organisations, media organisations, the private sector, the education sector, interest groups, health and community support centres, and government at the local, state and federal levels – including parliamentarians.

First Nations communities, across Central and Northern Australia, including the Torres Strait Islands, were consulted as part of the Community Consultations initiative under the Universities human research ethics approval for this work. Findings are presented in a companion Occasional Paper, authored by Pascal Taplin.

Coverage: states, territories and locations

The team met with individuals across Australia, including all states and territories.

To ensure a broad cross-section of Australia was covered by the consultations, locations were selected with consideration of the classifications outlined in the Australian Statistical Geography Standard (ASGS) Remoteness Structure – major cities, inner regional, outer regional, remote and very remote.⁷

The visits to each state and territory were as follows (a full list of location is supplied in the Appendix):

19 May 2025 – 25 May 2025	Tasmania
23 June 2025 – 2 July 2025	Western Australia
22 July 2025 – 23 July 2025	Wagga Wagga, New South Wales
25 July 2025 – 30 July 2025	Northern Territory
28 July 2025 – 4 August 2025	South Australia (and Broken Hill, New South Wales)
11 August 2025 – 15 August 2025	Victoria
15 September 2025 – 26 September 2025	Australian Capital Territory
22 September 2025 – 26 September 2025	Inner Sydney and Newcastle, New South Wales
29 September 2025 – 3 October 2025	Western Sydney, New South Wales
7 October 2025 – 16 October 2025	Queensland (and Lismore, New South Wales)

⁷ See Australian Statistical Geography Standard (ASGS) Edition 3 (2021), Australian Bureau of Statistics.

Data collection and analysis

Where possible, interviews were held face to face in each location the NSC consultation teams visited. NSC welcomed opportunities to consult with interviewees in private, one-on-one meetings, and in other instances, held group meetings with interviewees. This enabled a balance of conversations where some topics were able to be explored in depth with solo interviewees – or in the case of group discussions, the group would assist in stimulating questions and answers and shape the direction of the conversation. This approach enabled the collection of rich and varied insights.

Interviewers captured most interviews with an audio recorder, with explicit permission from participants. The human transcription services of Rev – an online platform – was used to transcribe interview recordings. Acknowledging that artificial intelligence is integrated into Rev's processes to maximise the efficiency and accuracy of transcription, the finished transcripts were then reviewed by NSC staff to mitigate unintended errors.

In the instances where meetings could not be captured by an audio recorder, meeting notes were supplied. Where virtual meetings were held as an accessible alternative, in-platform transcription software was used to produce a transcript. In both instances, staff were responsible for reviewing these notes to mitigate unintended errors.

Converlens, a tool commonly used by the Australian Government to support public consultation processes, was utilised to store and aggregate the interview transcripts. It, in concert with NVivo tools, were used to support in sampling content to derive a qualitative, thematic analysis of the Community Consultations conversations.

Limitations

We have interpreted the content of the interviews as a selection of views from the Australian public, rather than considering them as a representative. These conversations were necessarily skewed towards those more open to consultation processes – such as individuals who saw professional relevance or had personal interest, and available time – and are not statistically representative.

The semi-structured interview process also has some limitations – as interviewers and interviewees varied, so too would the tempo and direction of the conversation. Not every conversation was wholly consistent, which limits the ability for like-for-like interpretations of discussions.

Sampling content to derive a qualitative, thematic analysis also has some limitations. By coding the content of the interviews into themes, there is potential that some nascent lines of inquiry remain unaddressed in this report. The volume of the data collected – more than one hundred hours, from across more than 300 engagements – inherently restricted the level of detail each interview transcript could be analysed.

Nevertheless, the impacts of these limitations on the wider findings are muted by the mixed methodology employed by the Community Consultations initiative.

Written submissions: methodology

NSC sought written submissions from the public to support its nationwide consultations. This call for submissions opened in May 2025 in response to the launch of the Community Consultations Issues Paper and closed at the end of November that year. Submissions were received primarily through NSC's online portal, using the 'Converlens' submissions management platform, with a small number provided by email and post.

The primary in-scope population for the written submissions were Australian citizens and residents, aged 18 or older, and Australian organisations.

NSC received 100 submissions in total.

Purpose and approach

As with a formal government consultative process, or a parliamentary inquiry, our aim was to ensure Australians had the opportunity to have a say on what they think about Australia's national security. The call for submissions was supported by the publication and active promotion an Issues Paper⁸. This Issues Paper, akin to a 'green paper' in an official process, was intended to frame the issues in an objective and open-ended way.

Converlens was the engagement platform chosen by NSC to support with consultations processes. The team predominantly relied on Converlens' survey and data capabilities, and qualitative and data analytics to support with submissions analysis.

NSC used two approaches to assess submission material. Converlens' capabilities were harnessed to canvass the broad themes that emerged from the submissions. Then, NSC compared the submissions input to the themes that arose from the nationwide interviews and group discussions. This comparison was supported by using keywords to source the relevant subject matter in submissions. This combined approach enabled an understanding of both the views contained in the submissions, and the similarities and divergences between the views in the submissions and interviews.

Biases and limitations

Submissions content is shaped and influenced by a variety of factors, which can result in biases in the data. These include a self-selection bias, where respondents are likelier to be more engaged with the issues that the consultations are seeking to address. Such responses can also drive a confirmation bias in their submissions – respondents are incentivised to present information that exclusively supports their views. Demographic biases play a role, particularly where people with higher education levels, incomes, free time and familiarity with policy processes are more likely to engage in a public submissions process. Digital access and digital literacy biases may emerge as the submissions acceptance was mostly facilitated online. There was also a risk of duplicate content bias from people submitting repeatedly – perhaps through different organisations or social groups. Submissions were accepted through channels alternative to the online submissions portal, where requested, to mitigate digital access bias.

We have interpreted the submissions as a selection of views from the Australian public and organisations, rather than considering them representative.

Three submissions were excluded from the dataset and were not used for analysis to support the report's findings. The exclusions applied as the respondents were either not over the age of 18, an Australian citizen or permanent resident, or provided a duplicate response under a different email account.

8 Medcalf, R. Bull, C. and Wilford, T. (2025) *Thinking about our national security: Community Consultations on Australian attitudes to security – Issues Paper*. Canberra: ANU National Security College.

APPENDIX

A. Locations of interview and group discussion participants

Adelaide, South Australia	Lismore, New South Wales
Alice Springs, Northern Territory	Melbourne, Victoria
Aurukun, Queensland	Milingimbi, Northern Territory
Boigu Island, Torres Strait	Murray Bridge, South Australia
Brisbane, Queensland	Newcastle, New South Wales
Broken Hill, New South Wales	Perth, Western Australia
Broome, Western Australia	Port Augusta, South Australia
Bunbury, Western Australia	Port Hedland, Western Australia
Burnie, Tasmania	Saibai Island, Torres Strait
Cairns, Queensland	Swansea, Tasmania
Canberra, Australian Capital Territory	Sydney, New South Wales
Cooktown, Queensland	Thursday Island, Torres Strait
Dalby, Queensland	Tiwi Islands
Darwin, Northern Territory	Toowoomba, Queensland
Geraldton, Western Australia	Traralgon, Victoria
Gold Coast, Queensland	Triabunna, Tasmania
Bridgetown, Western Australia	Wagga Wagga, New South Wales
Hobart, Tasmania	Wangaratta, Victoria
Home Hill, Queensland	Wyndham, Victoria
Innisfail, Queensland	Yuelamu, Northern Territory
Launceston, Tasmania	Yuendumu, Northern Territory

B. Community Consultations interview and group discussion participants

NSC thanks all interviewees and group discussion participants – the following is a list of those who consented to public acknowledgement.

Joshua Anlezark, Meridian (ACT)

Cr Cheryl Arnol, Glamorgan Spring Bay Council (TAS)

Dr Jorge Aroche, Service for the Treatment and Rehabilitation of Torture and Trauma Survivors (STARTTS) (NSW)

Izabela Barakovska (ACT)

LTCOL Graeme Barnett RFD (Retd), Launceston RSL Sub-Branch (TAS)

Dr Jennie Barrera, Wyndham Community and Education Centre (VIC)

Dr Narelle Bedford, Bond University (QLD)

Anthony Birch, Disaster Relief Australia (QLD)

Joshua Bird, Western Sydney Community Forum (NSW)

Stuart Blackwell, Queensland Defence Science Alliance (QLD)

David Borger, Business Western Sydney (NSW)

Anthony Bosco (NSW)

Dr John Bosco Ngendakurio, Ethnic Communities Council of Queensland (QLD)

Mike Brennan, The University of Queensland (QLD)

Andrew Bridge, (NSW)

Warwick Carter (WA)

Leanne Castley MLA, ACT Government (ACT)

Cr Chris Cherry, Tweed Shire Council (QLD)

Margaret Clark, Quakers Australia (ACT)

Professor Philippa Colin, Young & Resilient Research Centre (NSW)

Renee Cremer (ACT)

Patrick Dawson, (NSW)

Tea Dietterich, 2M Language Services (QLD)

Wayne Douglass (WA)

Georgina Downer, Robert Menzies Institute, The University of Melbourne (VIC)

Anthony Dursi, Australian Public Policy Institute (NSW)

Professor Ben Eggleton, The University of Sydney (NSW)

Steven Facer, Chess Engineering (NSW)

Jorge Ferrerosa-Rojas, Multicultural NSW (NSW)

Commissioner Jeremy Fewtrell AFSM, Fire and Rescue NSW (NSW)

Professor Gordon Flake, Perth USAsia Centre (WA)

Patricia Fleming (TAS)

Professor Terry Flew, Centre for Artificial Intelligence, Trust & Governance, The University of Sydney (NSW)

Megan Foster, LCB Accounting Solutions (NSW)

Professor Michael Friend, Charles Sturt University (NSW)

Carl Graham, Department of State Growth (TAS)

Scott Gray, Wagga Wagga City Council (NSW)

Professor Emeritus Roy Green AM, University of Technology Sydney (NSW)

Claire Green, The University of Queensland (QLD)

Hugh Greenough, TAFE NSW (NSW)

Professor Peter Greste, Alliance for Journalists' Freedom (QLD)

Kelly Grigsby, Municipal Association of Victoria (VIC)

Professor Michele Grossman AM, AVERT (Addressing Violent Extremism and Radicalisation to Terrorism) Research Network

Dr Carmel Guerra OAM, Centre for Multicultural Youth (VIC)

Ricky Hall, Pilbara Ports (WA)

Anthea Hancocks, Scanlon Foundation Research Institute (VIC)

Greg Harford, Canberra Business (ACT)

Professor David Heilpern, Southern Cross University (NSW)

Reimen Hii, Bar Association of Queensland (QLD)

Simon Hiscock PSM, Department of Premier and Cabinet Tasmania (TAS)

Tracey Hodgkins, Blackwood Chamber of Commerce and Industry Inc. (WA)

Lucy Hohnen, St Vincent de Paul Society ACT (ACT)

Interviewee, ACT Government (ACT)
 Interviewee, Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (SA)
 Interviewee, Department of Transport and Planning Victoria (VIC)
 Interviewee, The Gender Centre (NSW)
 Interviewee, Grattan Institute
 Interviewee, Origin Energy (NSW)
 Interviewee, Pilbara Development Commission (WA)
 Interviewee, Port Augusta City Council (SA)
 Interviewee, Tasmania Police (TAS)
 Interviewee, The University of Newcastle (NSW)
 The Hon David Johnston, Defence and Security Institute, The University of Western Australia (WA)
 Kelvin Jones ESM, Glamorgan Spring Bay State Emergency Service (TAS)
 George Kadmos, Communities at Work (ACT)
 Rosemary Kariuki-Fyfe OAM (NSW)
 Katrina Kawaljenko, Regional Development Australia Northern Territory (NT)
 Graeme Kerridge, Australian Institute of International Affairs (QLD)
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 Shane Klintworth (QLD)
 Sandra Knowles, TAS Farm Innovation Hub (TAS)
 Paula Kruger, Media Diversity Australia (NSW)
 Rodney Latimer (ACT)
 Myles Lawrence, Business Chamber Queensland (QLD)
 Dr Georgina Lee, Australian National University (ACT)
 Martine Letts, Asialink Group, The University of Melbourne (VIC)
 Stephen Loiterton, Shire of Dardanup (WA)
 Colin MacKenzie (TAS)
 Lisa Main, Main Bureau
 Sofija Milosevic (NSW)
 Simon Molesworth AO, KC, CenvP, Landcare Broken Hill (NSW)
 Leona Moore, Toowoomba Wellcamp Airport (QLD)
 Elfa Moraitakis, Western Sydney Multicultural Services (NSW)
 Mark Morey, Unions NSW (NSW)
 Dr Stuart Murray, Bond University (QLD)
 Dr Greta Nabbs-Keller, The University of Queensland (QLD)
 Dr Toby Newstead, University of Tasmania (TAS)
 Dr Tess Newton Cain (QLD)
 Sarah Norton, Department of the Premier and Cabinet Western Australia (WA)
 Margaret O'Donovan, Karinya House (ACT)
 Dominic Ofner NSW Labor Party (NSW)
 Professor Gia Parish, The University of Western Australia (WA)
 Tom Parker, Australia-China Business Council (NSW)
 Susannah Patton (NSW)
 Simon Pengilly, The University of Queensland (QLD)
 Kieren Perkins OAM, Australian Sports Commission (ACT)
 Amanda Pickrell PSM, Department of the Premier and Cabinet (WA)
 Ian Prentice, North East Multicultural Association (VIC)
 Amy Prince, South West Sydney Primary Health Network (NSW)
 Ellen Ransley, The Courier Mail (QLD)
 Julie Rich, (NSW)
 Don Roach AM (QLD)
 Professor Emeritus, Tim Roberts AM, FRSN, Hunter Innovation and Science Hub, The University of Newcastle (NSW)
 Estella Rodighiero, GAICD, Regional Development Australia Gold Coast (QLD)
 Professor Roberta Ryan, Institute for Regional Futures, The University of Newcastle (NSW)
 Cr Robert Samuel, Willoughby Council (NSW)
 Ed Santow Human Technology Institute, University of Technology Sydney (NSW)
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 Yvette Smith
 Jason Smith, Awabakal (NSW)
 Jane Spicer, Qantas (NSW)
 Mark Tapley, Australian Broadcasting Corporation (NSW)
 Cr Tanya Taylor, Willoughby Council (NSW)
 Tracey Taylor, Association of Independent Schools ACT (ACT)
 Christine Thornton, Wyndham Health Foundation (VIC)
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C. Submission respondents

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