

20 February 2024

Department of the Premier and Cabinet
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By email: PQKFconsultation@premiers.qld.gov.au

Dear Colleagues

Putting Queensland Kids First ('the Strategy')

Thank you for the opportunity to provide feedback on the Strategy, and for inviting QCOSS to the online consultation about the Strategy ('the Consultation Session').

About QCOSS

The Queensland Council of Social Service (QCOSS) is the peak body for the social service sector in Queensland. Our vision is to achieve equality, opportunity, and wellbeing for all Queenslanders.

QCOSS' position

QCOSS welcomes the development of this Strategy, which has the potential to guide whole-of-government investment to ensure children and families in Queensland can thrive. We are pleased the Strategy takes a holistic approach to the wellbeing of children and is supported by clear priority areas of investment.

QCOSS regularly advocates about the need for comprehensive supports for children and families. This submission draws upon QCOSS member feedback gathered from multiple engagement activities. This includes a meeting of the QCOSS Human Rights Network to specifically discuss responses to the Strategy, as well as a Youth Justice Roundtable that QCOSS hosted in partnership with the Queensland Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Protection Peak and the Youth Advocacy Centre ('the Roundtable'). The Roundtable was attended by a range of stakeholders, including First Nations Elders, community sector professionals, and other key stakeholders with expertise in youth justice.

The strategy should provide clearer alignment between activities and outcomes

The Consultation Draft outlines 'core principles', 'outcome priorities', 'investment priorities', 'investment opportunities' and 'protective factors.' It would be helpful if these focus areas were structured to be more directly referable to one another, demonstrating the strategic connections between activities and initiatives, funding, and outcomes.

This will help to consolidate ideas that have been expressed throughout the Strategy. For example, both the 'outcome priorities' and 'investment opportunities' refer to the importance of housing. However, secure and affordable housing has not been listed as a protective factor (although we do note that 'safe and stable living environments' has been identified as a protective factor for adolescents). Similarly, keeping children out of court and out of detention has been listed as a protective factor. However, reducing the detention rates of children and young people has not been specifically identified as an 'outcome priority'.



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This structuring process would assist in developing and reporting on key activities under the strategy. QCOSS recommends developing an annual reporting process in line with the Strategy, similar to what is undertaken with other strategies, such as the *Queensland Women's Strategy*.

Consultation question one: What are the core principles you think should inform our early intervention and prevention approach to support children, young people and families?

QCOSS supports the core principles currently expressed within the Strategy. To ensure all children benefit from the goals and commitments made under the Strategy, we recommend the following:

1. *A commitment to human rights should be expressed as a standalone core principle*

We are pleased to see a commitment to protect the human rights of children, as highlighted in relation to the 'child and young person centric' principle. However, we recommend that a commitment to human rights is expressed as a standalone core principle. A human rights lens can provide a powerful framework to guide the design and implementation of important initiatives under the Strategy.

At the outset, the application of a human rights framework to the Strategy will require further emphasis on the value of children for their inherent worth, and not just for their future potential. The language in the Strategy should be revised to ensure the inherent value and worth of children's lives is clear.

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child ('the Convention') emphasises that "...childhood is entitled to special care and assistance...".¹ The Convention recognises "...that the child, for the full and harmonious development of his or her personality, should grow up in a family environment, in an atmosphere of happiness, love and understanding...".² The Convention outlines the importance of supporting families to ensure they can assume their fundamental role within the community.

A core principle making a commitment to human rights should not be limited to particular human rights, nor the rights of particular groups. A broad commitment to human rights should bring other important rights into focus in connection with the Strategy, such as a recognition of the significance of the right to self-determination to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples, which is acknowledged in the preamble to the *Human Rights Act 2019* (Qld) ('the Human Rights Act').

A human rights lens can be particularly helpful in identifying priority areas for investment and reform. For example, in the past year the Human Rights Act has been overridden through the passing of two pieces of legislation.³ These are the only instances where an override declaration has been engaged in Queensland. In both instances, the override was in relation to the human rights of children. These changes are time-limited, where certain provisions were introduced with a specific expiry date,⁴ and where others were supported by an override declaration that will expire after five years.^{5,6} These legislative changes must be paired with a strategic plan to guide their repeal.

Other recent moves to toughen youth justice laws should also be carefully reviewed through a human rights lens, and in line with other important principles identified in the Strategy. There are other important priority areas that can be identified by engaging a human rights lens. For example, the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child identified several priority areas in its concluding observations on the Combined Fifth and Sixth Periodic Reports of Australia. This

¹ *United Nations convention on the Rights of the Child*, November 20 1989, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/convention-rights-child>.

² Ibid.

³ *Strengthening Community Safety Act 2023* (Qld); *Child Protection (Offender Reporting and Offender Prohibition Order) and Other Legislation Amendment Act 2022* (Qld).

⁴ *Police Powers and Responsibilities Act 2000* (Qld) s 640; *Youth Justice Act 1992* (Qld) ss 56, 72, 73, 210, 262, 262A

⁵ *Human Rights Act 2019* (Qld) s 45(2).

⁶ See for example, *Bail Act 1980* (Qld) s 29; *Youth Justice Act 1992* (Qld) ss 150A, 150B, 246A.

included recommendations requiring urgent attention on several areas of concern, including a recommendation to raise the minimum age of criminal responsibility to 14.⁷

2. *In connection with the principle of prevention, greater emphasis should be placed on the need to eliminate poverty.*

The cost of living is one of the biggest challenges impacting service users of Queensland community organisations.⁸ Findings from the QCOSS *Living Affordability in Queensland 2023* report ('the Report') highlights that low-income households are grappling with huge cost-of-living increases and stagnant incomes.⁹ Modelled households with children are most severely impacted, with the 'single unemployed parent with two children' facing a weekly budget deficit of \$255.98, and the 'couple with two children, where one parent is employed full-time' facing a weekly budget deficit of \$198.84.

The Report explored the far reaching immediate and long term impacts of experiencing poverty and managing compounding cost-of-living pressures. This included difficulties for households in accessing housing and essential goods and services, such as utilities, food, healthcare, transport, and digital communications. The report highlighted impacts on financial wellbeing; mental and physical health; and enduring experiences of social isolation. Experiencing poverty can have substantial negative impacts on connection to strong social networks, participation in education and secure employment, and poses a major barrier in accessing universal services.

The Strategy must focus on providing meaningful assistance to address the cost of living and the need to eliminate poverty.

3. *Additional commitments should be made expressing the importance of universal access to public services.*

The Strategy must focus upon addressing disadvantage and discrimination with universal measures such as those aimed at providing good health care and good public education. In connection with the principle on culture, equity and inclusion, additional commitments should be incorporated expressing the importance of true universal access to public services, such as health, education and housing. This will provide critical guidance on the implementation of specific measures to meet the needs of marginalised communities, including people living in poverty.

It is important for the strategy to unpack and meaningfully engage with the many barriers to accessing supports and universal services, to ensure key programs and initiatives are delivered in a culturally safe, trauma informed, and accessible way. This should include engaging with the unique geography of Queensland and the specific barriers experienced by people living in regional and remote communities.

Consultation question two: What are the key protective factors in keeping children and young people on positive trajectories, and how can we further boost these?

The Strategy provides extensive examples of important protective factors. However, there are opportunities to highlight additional protective factors and build upon factors that have been articulated. Feedback received from QCOSS member organisations includes:

- While certain protective factors connect more to specific life stages, the Strategy should reflect that many protective factors relate to multiple life stages. For example, 'safe and secure housing' should be included as a protective factor and should be reflected at every life stage. While we are pleased to see a commitment to keeping children out of court and out of detention, this protective factor should expand across multiple life-stages, given the

⁷ United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child. (2019). Concluding observations on the combined fifth and sixth periodic reports of Australia. CRC/C/AUS/CO/5-6.

⁸ Queensland Council of Social Service. (2023). *State of the Sector 2022*, page 7.

<https://www.qcoss.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/State-of-the-Sector-Report-2022.pdf>

⁹ Queensland Council of Social Service. (2024). *Living Affordability in Queensland 2023*. ('Living Affordability Report').

<https://www.qcoss.org.au/publication/report-living-affordability-in-queensland-2023/>

evidence on early intervention and prevention in relation to better youth justice outcomes, and given the current minimum age of criminal responsibility in Queensland is just 10 years old.

- There are opportunities to further reflect how other universal supports can operate as fundamental protective factors. In particular, the importance of addressing and ending poverty as a major risk factor connected to negative outcomes in each phase of life.
- There is a need to re-frame some of the identified risk factors. Concerns have been raised that risk factors have been expressed from a deficit-based lens that connects more with individual failings. However, risk factors should be connected to social determinants of health and wellbeing, such as inter-generational poverty.
- The Strategy should highlight the need for community education on the neuroscience of nurture in infancy. This should outline the value of supporting parents in this vital period, coupled with place-based measures to ensure families have adequate supports to thrive.
- Additional protective factors should be carefully considered in line with key findings of other major reviews and strategies. For example, the Royal Commission into Violence, Abuse, Neglect and Exploitation of People with Disability Final Report includes recommendations to support positive trajectories for children, such as those regarding access to education.

The Strategy discusses opportunities to “...build on existing investments in prevention and early intervention services to better address the complex challenges facing some Queenslanders and achieve better outcomes for vulnerable children, young people, and families.”¹⁰ QCOSS supports the enhancement of programs and initiatives that are already achieving strong outcomes, such as:

- *The On Country Program* seeks to strengthen young people’s cultural and family connection and engage young people with education, training and employment through healing camps and cultural mentoring. The On Country program in Cairns, delivered by Jabalbina Yalanji Aboriginal Corporation (Jabalbina) has been praised by the Director General of Youth Justice for its positive results.¹¹
- *The Mount Isa Youth Hub* is facilitated by North West Queensland Indigenous Catholic Social Services. They provide a safe place for youth, with social, educational and cultural activities, and also provide case management referrals. Six beds are available at the hub through referral from Youth Justice and QPS.
- *The Lighthouse* is a 24-hour diversionary youth service facilitated by Townsville Aboriginal and Islander Health Service (TAIHS). Unpublished details from TAIHS show from 1 April 2023 to 30 June 2023, 241 clients attended the after-hours diversion through The Lighthouse. 72 diversionary programs were facilitated such as cooking, life skills, relationship and sexual education, cultural programs, alcohol and other drugs programs, Deadly Choices – healthy lifestyle and social activities. Unfortunately, the Lighthouse is only funded for one bed.
- *The Horse Whispering Youth Program* delivers trauma informed, equine assisted programs for young people aged 12 to 18 who are at risk of disengaging from school, engaging in anti-social behaviours and/or interacting with the youth justice system. Survey responses from young people identified:¹²
 - 40 per cent improved engagement with educational/vocational opportunities and positive social interactions

¹⁰ The State of Queensland. (2024). *Putting Queensland Kids First – giving our kids the opportunity of a lifetime - Consultation Draft*, p 8. Department of Premier and Cabinet. (*Putting Queensland Kids First Consultation Draft*).

¹¹ Gee, B. in Queensland Government. (2023). *Estimates – Education, Employment and Training Committee- Education; Industrial Relations; Racing*. (p.85). https://documents.parliament.qld.gov.au/com/EETC-797A/C20232024-1AA0/2023_08_03_Estimates%20EETC.pdf

¹² Horse Whispering Youth Program. (2023). *Horse Whispering Youth Program Impact Measurement*. (Unpublished).

- 22 per cent improved attentional focus
- 22 per cent improved emotional regulation
- 18 per cent improved communication
- 30 per cent improved trust and connection
- 35 per cent improved behaviour
- 28 per cent improved self-confidence.

These are just a handful of examples where effective programs could be successfully expanded or replicated. As discussed in the Consultation Session, there are many opportunities to expand upon existing place-based services and infrastructure such as Neighbourhood Centres, which can be vital in connecting people to essential services and fostering increased community connection.

QCOSS welcomes the commitment to strengthen investment in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Community-Controlled Organisations. Member feedback has consistently identified a need for a substantial uplift in funding for the Community Controlled sector. Concerns have been raised that smaller, short term, and ad-hoc grant funding has created a challenging operating environment in this setting. These concerns and our recommended solutions are outlined in our pre-budget submission that seeks to strengthen the sustainability of the community sector.¹³ That paper calls for a Queensland Care and Support Strategy with a specific vision for a sustainable community services system and calls for a whole-of-government policy on the procurement of community services.

Other key asks in our pre-budget submission papers,¹⁴ which would also assist in boosting protective factors under the Strategy include:

- Expanding the free kindergarten program to include all three-year-olds
- Establishing additional community-led early years hubs
- Funding to support development and growth of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander early childhood services
- Improving inclusive practices by creating schools that better reflect and help equip all young people
- Integrating child development and wellbeing into relevant services where children are presenting outside of early education and care programs
- Doubling the current investment into the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Family Wellbeing Service
- Increasing funding for domestic, family and sexual violence services
- Enhancing gender responsive budgeting and gender responsive procurement measures to advance women's economic security
- Ending Queensland's housing crisis
- Providing meaningful cost of living relief through measures such as increasing funding to financial counselling services, reducing digital disadvantage, reducing food insecurity, providing ongoing bill-relief, and helping low-income households access the energy transition.

QCOSS welcomes the commitment under the strategy to shift the balance of investment to preventative care and early intervention. However, other current areas of substantial investment include high visibility police patrols, and the construction of two additional youth detention centres,

¹³ Queensland Council of Social Service. (2023). *Queensland Budget | 2024 -2025 – Advancing the Sector*. <https://www.qcoss.org.au/publication/queensland-budget-2024-2025-our-submission/>

¹⁴ Ibid.

paired with tougher youth justice laws. When implementing the Strategy, reporting should include mechanisms to transparently demonstrate the balance of investment, and how that will shift over time.

Consultation question three: Are there any other priorities you think that *Putting Queensland Kids First* should consider?

QCOSS supports the priorities identified and reflected in the ‘core principles’, ‘outcome priorities’, ‘investment priorities’, and ‘protective factors’. Based on member feedback, we provide further suggestions on how priorities within the Strategy can be expanded and strengthened:

- The strategy should incorporate a specific focus on addressing the needs of disadvantaged communities and should include a specific focus on the needs of single parent households.
- We support comments from Play Matters at the Consultation Session on the importance of incorporating ‘play’ as a priority under the strategy.
- The recently expired Youth Justice Strategy incorporated the four pillars of ‘intervene early’, ‘keep children out of court’, ‘keep children out of custody’ and ‘reduce re-offending’.¹⁵ While the first three pillars have been incorporated into the Strategy, ‘reduce re-offending’ should also be reflected as a priority.
- There should be a clearer commitment within the strategy to move away from the damaging and punitive approaches to children and young people in contact with the justice system or at risk of contact with the justice system, and a commitment to implement an alternative to the justice system for children under the age of 14.¹⁶
- The Strategy outlines intentions to develop robust measures and indicators that contribute to Closing the Gap targets under the Strategy. We recommend expanding the identified ‘outcome priorities’ to be more closely aligned with those targets. This should include a commitment to reduce the over-representation of First Nations children in the youth justice system.

Consultation question four: How can the Queensland Government best support connection to culture and community for children, young people and families?

Alongside addressing the social determinants of health and wellbeing, the Strategy should support the expansion and implementation of community led, place-based, and co-designed programs and initiatives that are culturally safe and trauma informed. This should encompass current gaps in local service availability, and programs that provide after school hours activities.

Our members have emphasised that this will require working with place-based service providers and community groups who can help to identify the unique needs of their local area. This should include consideration of the needs identified by First Nations communities, culturally and linguistically diverse communities, and communities based in regional, rural and remote areas, alongside the needs of particular groups of people within those communities such as children with a disability. The Strategy should also explore specific opportunities to facilitate social connection and the building of social capital in communities throughout Queensland.

Consultation question five: What would it look like for us to work together as partners, all committed to improving outcomes for children and young people?

QCOSS welcomes the inclusion of a core principle to enhance integrated ways of working. We note the exploration of existing early intervention and prevention initiatives in the Strategy.¹⁷ We encourage further consideration and detail on how the Strategy will bring together and leverage key

¹⁵ State of Queensland. (2019). *Working Together Changing the Story - Youth Justice Strategy 2019-2023*. https://desbt.qld.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0022/17149/strategy.pdf

¹⁶ Queensland Council of Social Service. (2023). *Invest in Queensland's youth Services*. <https://www.qcoss.org.au/publication/queensland-budget-2024-2025-our-submission/>

¹⁷ *Putting Queensland Kids First Consultation Draft*, pp 8-9.

initiatives, other government strategies, major work areas of Queensland Government departments, and opportunities to connect with complementary work conducted at the Federal level.

To provide a select number of illustrative examples in this respect, the Strategy should identify points of intersection with the work of the Queensland Family and Child Commission; the Queensland Government First Nations Justice Office; the First Nations First Strategy; the Youth Justice Strategy; the Queensland Women's Strategy; key strategies developed by other departments, such as the Department of Education; the Growing Child Safe Organisations strategy; implementation of recommendations stemming from the Women's Safety and Justice Taskforce; the implementation of delegated authority in child protection; recommendations arising from the Queensland Residential Care Systems Review; Queensland Government responses to the final report of the Royal Commission into Violence, Abuse, Neglect and Exploitation of People with Disability; the Federal Government Early Years Strategy; and opportunities to advocate for a substantial increase to income support.

As discussed at the Consultation Session, the Strategy should also identify measures and opportunities to connect siloed points of service delivery to enable easy-to-navigate integrated supports for children and families, harnessing and expanding existing physical place-based spaces. Feedback has also emphasised the importance of choice and control for children and families in important decision-making processes.

Conclusion

Putting Queensland Kids First provides an opportunity to bring together complementary areas of work across government along with vital services and supports for children and families. The Strategy should be underpinned by a human rights framework, and structured to ensure effective implementation and monitoring of key goals, activities, initiatives and areas of investment.

QCROSS welcomes the holistic approach to wellbeing reflected in the Strategy. We look forward to supporting key areas of investment that should emerge, including measures to address the impacts of poverty, ensure genuine access to all Queenslanders, provide secure and affordable housing to all families, enhance access to health services, and support the social service sector.

Thank you again for the opportunity to provide our submission. If you have any questions, please contact Aimee McVeigh, Chief Executive Officer at aimee@qcross.org.au or 07 3004 6903.

Yours sincerely



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