

RAISING QUEENSLAND

CHILD AND YOUTH POLICY PRIORITIES



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In 2024, QCOSS received funding from Hand Heart Pocket to identify key priorities for supporting vulnerable children, young people, and families in Queensland. These will underpin QCOSS' youth policy and advocacy work. QCOSS partnered with The University of Queensland (UQ) to help better understand the needs of vulnerable and disadvantaged children and families in Queensland, and to develop these policy priorities. This research report outlines the research undertaken between July 2024 and February 2025 to inform these policy priorities. This research took place before, during, and after the 2024 Queensland State Election. When the research commenced in July 2024, most seats in the Queensland Legislative Assembly were held by the Labor Party, led by Premier Steven Miles. At the time of writing the report, the Queensland Government was led by Premier David Crisafulli with the majority of seats held by the Liberal National Party of Queensland (LNP). The LNP Government has designated a portfolio for a Minister for Families, to which the Honourable Amanda Camm MP has been appointed, along with other portfolios.

The research team employed a multi-method approach to analyse the current policy context for vulnerable children and young people in Queensland. The research design involved a desktop review of 10 key, overarching Queensland Government policy documents, and interviews and focus groups with key state government policy stakeholders, community service organisations, and young Queenslanders. A Project Reference Group, consisting of representatives from a diverse range of community organisations that work with and for children and young people, was also formed to ensure that this project was informed by the expertise, knowledge, and experience of the community sector. The analysis throughout the report has been framed using The Nest Wellbeing Framework, developed by the Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY) and promulgated in Queensland

through the Thriving Queensland Kids Partnership (TQKP).

The policy analysis demonstrated that despite recognition of the need to support children and young people, they are frequently overlooked in key policies. The reviewed policies were predominantly



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community and/or adult focused and siloed, with limited consideration of children's wellbeing as holistic and connected to that of their family members. While equity, inclusion, empowerment and self-determination were commonly espoused goals within the policies reviewed, there was a notable lack of consideration regarding how disadvantage and vulnerability can negatively impact on the life chances of children, young people and their families. Where children are considered, being responsive to their needs was framed in terms of reducing future burdens on society (i.e., diverting people away from tertiary systems) or enhancing the capability and productivity of the future workforce, rather than on simply enhancing the wellbeing of children in the present.

Policy stakeholders, community service stakeholders, and youth stakeholders recognised that there are many gaps in community and social service delivery for children, young people, and their families, particularly in regional and remote regions and for those who are experiencing vulnerability and disadvantage. They suggested that this was due to a range of systemic factors, including quality workforce availability, geographical restrictions, funding silos, and lack of recognition of children and young people's voices in policy decisions. Policy and

community service stakeholders raised concerns that the resources and services available to the sector are inadequate to achieve equity of access with and for children and young people experiencing disadvantage. Stakeholders reported that supporting change to improve equity of access and outcomes for all children, young people, and their families will require investment at all levels of the social service system, including schools, local community, and government service providers alongside state-level policies and systems.

“supporting change to improve equity of access and outcomes for all children, young people, and their families will require investment at all levels of the social services system, ”

Based on this research, children and young people in Queensland require holistic systems of policy reform to enable the delivery of services that provide foundational supports to them (and their families) into adulthood. The recommendations in the report focus on the need for integrated and multisystem responses to ensure vulnerable children and families have equity of access to a range of environments, systems, resources and services needed for their social and emotional wellbeing.

Multi-dimensional responses are required to secure equity of access and positive outcomes for all children, young people, and their families, and need to include attention to the challenges of building and maintaining a skilled workforce across all agencies working with vulnerable children and families, particularly across the key domains of housing, health, and education.

The research also identified that there needs to be a strong and consistent focus on material basics, especially safe and affordable housing, alongside place-based, community-driven initiatives that include the voices of children, young people, and their families. Equity of access to health and mental health services, and education and training systems, is also vital, as is the need for these to be responsive to the needs of vulnerable children, young people, and their families. There is also a critical opportunity to strengthen the capacity of the community services sector to provide culturally safe and responsive services is critical to ensure equity of access to culturally and linguistically diverse communities and to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families.

Importantly, this research highlights that all levels of government, alongside the community services sector, have an important role to play in supporting families to care for children and young people in creating family inclusive communities.



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LIST OF ACRONYMS

Acronym	Definition
ABS	Australian Bureau of Statistics
AIFS	Australian Institute of Family Studies
AIHW	Australian Institute of Health and Welfare
ARACY	Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth
ATSICCO	Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled organisations (ATSICCO)
CALD	Culturally and Linguistically Diverse
CYMHS	Child and Youth Mental Health Service
CYP	Children and Young People
DCSSDS	Queensland Department of Child Safety, Seniors and Disability Services
DFSDSCS	Queensland Department of Families, Seniors, Disability Services and Child Safety
DFV	Domestic and Family Violence
DHPW	Queensland Department of Housing and Public Works
DoE	Queensland Department of Education
DPC	Queensland Department of Premier and Cabinet
ECEC	Early Childhood Education and Care
GP	General Practitioner
HREC	Human Research Ethics Committee
LNP	Liberal National Party of Queensland
NDIS	National Disability Insurance Scheme
NGO	Non-Government Organisation
OfY	Queensland Office for Youth
QATSICPP	Queensland Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Protection Peak
QCOSS	Queensland Council of Social Service
QFCC	Queensland Family and Child Commission
QLD	Queensland
TQKP	Thriving Queensland Kids Partnership
UQ	The University of Queensland

1. INTRODUCTION

KEY POINTS

The Queensland Council of Social Service (QCOSS) partnered with The University of Queensland (UQ) to help better understand the needs of vulnerable and disadvantaged children and families in Queensland. **QCOSS posed the research question:**

“**How can the service system be improved to achieve better outcomes for vulnerable children and families?**”

Multi-method research was undertaken by UQ between July 2024 and February 2025 to analyse the current policy context for children and young people in Queensland experiencing vulnerability and disadvantage. The focus of the research was on the key domains of health, housing, and education.

The research involved an analysis of ten contemporary, overarching policies published by the Queensland Government, semi-structured interviews with five state government policy stakeholders, 11 focus groups with community service organisations, and a focus group with six young people.

A Project Reference Group consisting of representatives from a diverse range of community organisations that work with children and young people and/or had policy expertise was formed to ensure that this project was informed by the expertise, knowledge, and experience of the community sector.

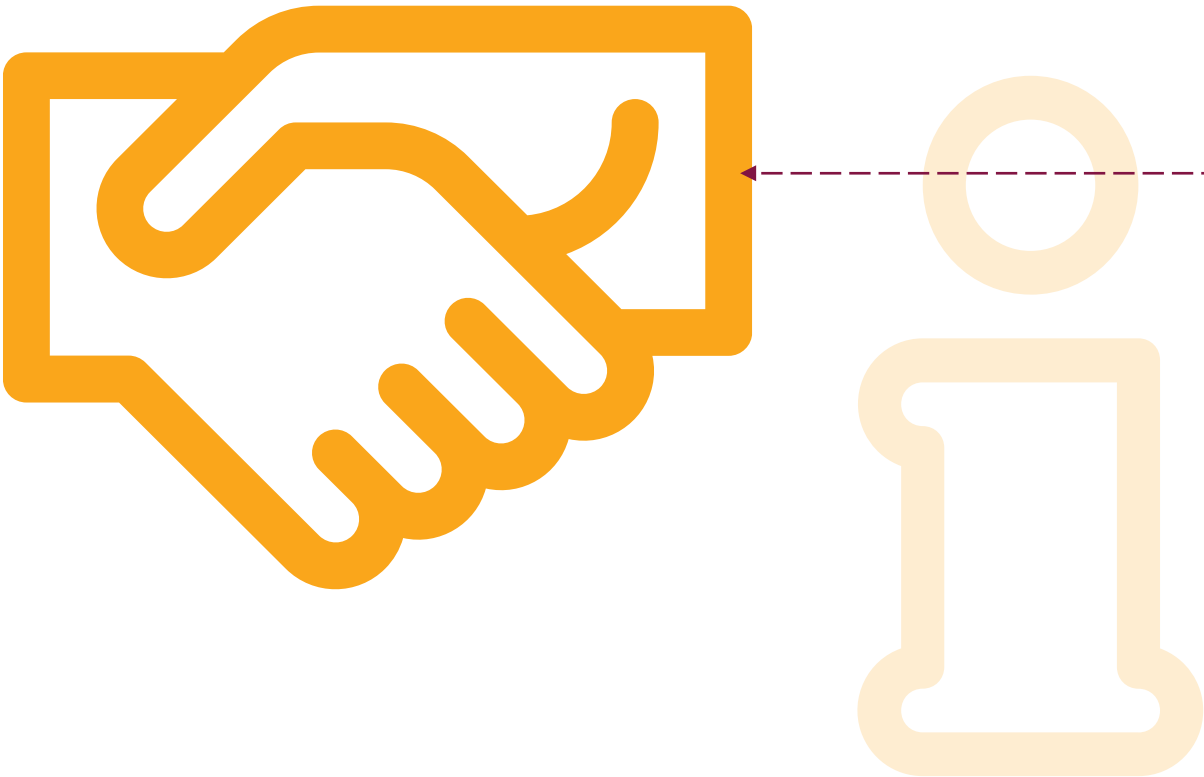
This research took place before, during, and after the 2024 Queensland State Election, in which the State Government switched from a majority Labor Government to a majority Liberal National Party (LNP) Government.

1.1 Background to the report

1.1.1 QCOSS

The Queensland Council of Social Service (QCOSS) is the peak body for community organisations in Queensland. Its work is enabled by understanding the priorities of community service organisations in Queensland, and identifying the opportunities that exist to achieve outcomes associated with these priorities. Over the past two years, QCOSS' engagement with community service organisations in Queensland has identified the need to improve support for vulnerable and disadvantaged children and families as a growing priority. QCOSS member organisations have highlighted that the needs of vulnerable and disadvantaged children and young people are not being met in Queensland, particularly by universal systems such as health, housing, and education. QCOSS members expressed a desire for more active participation from QCOSS to ensure that government policies enabled the delivery of services that ensure equity of access for the state's most vulnerable children and young people.

In 2024, QCOSS received funding from Hand Heart Pocket¹ to identify key priorities for improving systems that support vulnerable children, young people, and families in Queensland. QCOSS partnered with The University of Queensland (UQ) to help better understand the needs of vulnerable and disadvantaged children and families in Queensland, and to develop these policy priorities. This report outlines the research undertaken between July 2024 and February 2025 to inform these policy priorities. QCOSS will work with Hand Heart Pocket to develop an advocacy action plan drawing on the evidence base highlighted in this report.



¹Hand Heart Pocket is an independent philanthropic foundation established by the Freemasons of Queensland, focused on the wellbeing of Queensland's children and young people.

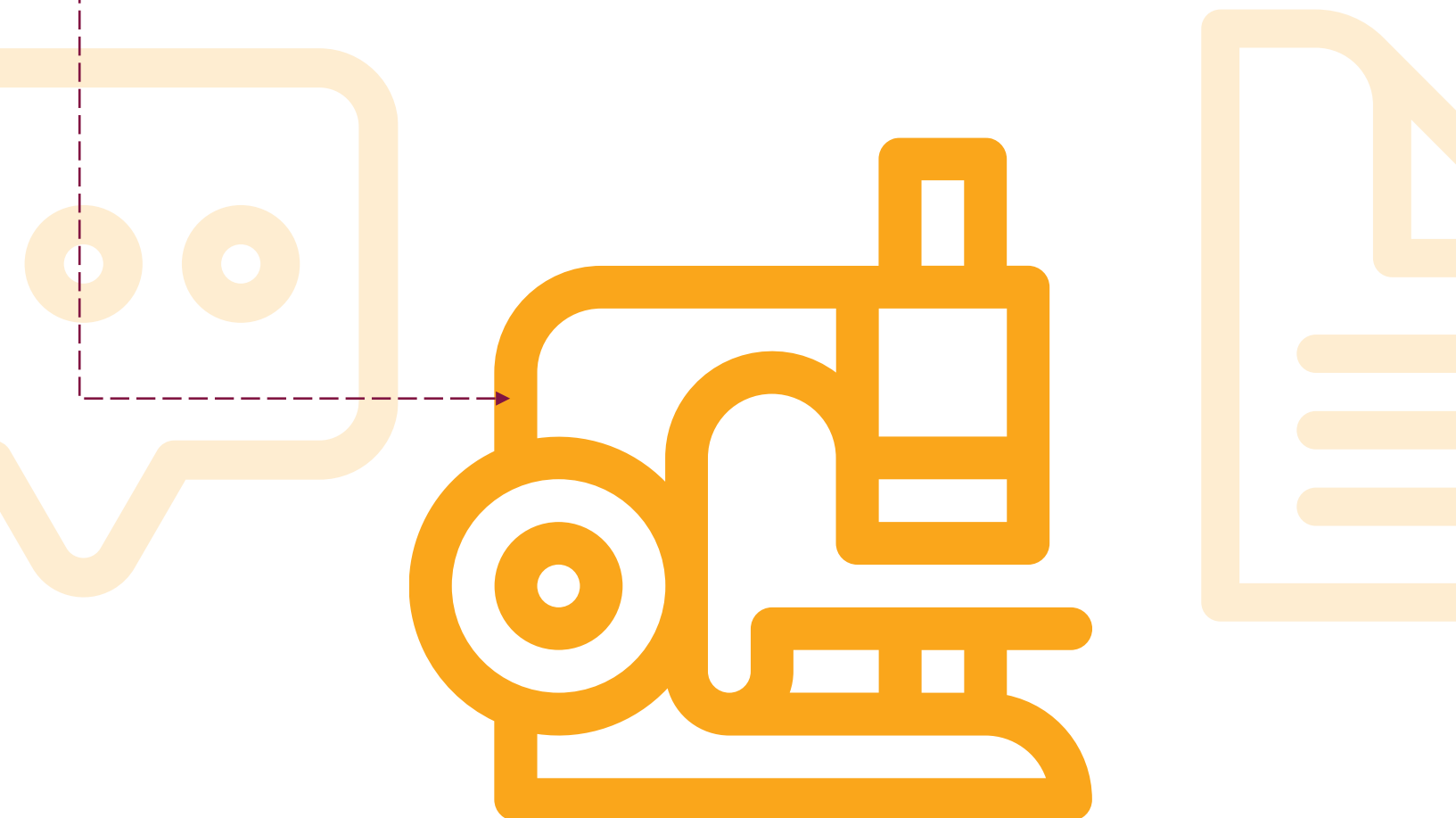
1.1.2 Research focus

This research project sought to understand the challenges currently facing children and young people (up to 18 years), their families, and their communities in Queensland, and to identify opportunities to better support them. QCOSS supports policies that promote equity of access to services for vulnerable children and families. While recognising that *all* children, young people, and their families require support throughout their lives, the prescribed focus of the research was to identify how the Queensland social service system can be improved to achieve better outcomes for vulnerable and disadvantaged children, young people, and their families. QCOSS posed the research question: *How can the service system be improved to achieve better outcomes for vulnerable children and families?* The focus of the research was on the key domains of health, housing, and education.

To help answer this question, the research team aimed to meet four objectives:

1. Understand the level and extent of unmet need for vulnerable and disadvantaged children and young people in Queensland with a particular focus on health, housing and education.
2. Identify, analyse, and critique current Queensland government policies regarding holistic responses to promote the social inclusion and wellbeing of vulnerable and disadvantaged children and young people with a particular focus on health, housing and education.
3. Gather and analyse stakeholders' understanding of the opportunities and gaps that exist within the current system, with a focus on health, housing, and education.
4. Develop recommendations for holistic systems of reform to enable the delivery of services that provide foundational supports to vulnerable and disadvantaged children and families into adulthood.

The findings of this research report will inform QCOSS' advocacy efforts in relation to children and young people over the next four years.



1.1.3 Project Reference Group

Stakeholder engagement formed a central component of the research project. The research team aimed to engage key stakeholders in the research through focus groups with QCOSS member organisations (see 1.2.3 below) and young people (see 1.2.4 below), and through the creation of the Project Reference Group. The Project Reference Group helped to ensure that this project was informed by the expertise, knowledge, and experience of the community sector. Membership consisted of representatives from a diverse range of community organisations that work with children and young people and/or had policy expertise. The Project Reference Group met four times during the research project (approximately every six weeks) to provide oversight and advice on each stage of the research (see Table 1).

Table 1:
Project Reference Group meeting discussions

Meeting (date)	Focus of discussion and feedback
Meeting One (August 2024)	Research focus and working definitions, policy analysis focus
Meeting Two (October 2024)	Preliminary policy analysis findings, focus group format
Meeting Three (November 2024)	Preliminary stakeholder engagement findings and recommendations
Meeting Four (January 2025)	Draft research report and policy recommendations

1.1.4 Queensland State Election

The research underpinning this report took place before, during, and after the 2024 Queensland State Election. When the research commenced in July 2024, most seats in the Queensland Legislative Assembly were held by the Labor Party, led by Premier Steven Miles. The Labor Government had been in power since 2015 (three terms). 26 days before polling day, on 1 October 2024, the Queensland Government caretaker period commenced. This had some implications for data collection from policy stakeholders, which we discuss in Section 1.2.2. The 2024 Queensland State Election was held on Saturday 26 October 2024 and, following the election, the Liberal National Party of Queensland (LNP)² obtained a majority of seats. At the time of writing the report, the Queensland Government was led by Premier David Crisafulli.

In the lead up to the election, the LNP released *The Right Plan for Queensland's Future* and campaigned strongly on community safety and youth crime, the cost-of-living crisis, and housing affordability (LNP, 2024). The focus on youth crime has continued into the LNP Government's term, including the enactment of the *Making Queensland Safer Act 2024* (Qld), which includes amendments to the *Youth Justice Act 1992* (Qld) meaning young offenders are subject to the same penalties as adults for certain crimes (Crisafulli et al., 2024). Other proposed legislative changes to the *Youth Justice Act 1992* (Qld) include the Youth Justice (Monitoring Devices) Amendment Bill 2025 (Qld), introduced by the Minister for Youth Justice and Victim Support and Minister for Corrective Services in February 2025. A Minister for Families, Seniors and Disability Services was announced in November 2024, whose portfolio also includes child protection and domestic and family violence (Crisafulli, 2024).

² The Queensland divisions of the Liberal Party and the National Party merged in 2008 to form the Liberal National Party of Queensland (LNP).

1.2 Methodology

The research team employed a multi-method approach to analyse the current policy context for vulnerable children and young people in Queensland. In addition to undertaking a literature review, the research design involved a desktop review of key, overarching Queensland Government policy documents; semi-structured interviews with key state government stakeholders; focus groups with non-government stakeholders; and a focus group with young people.

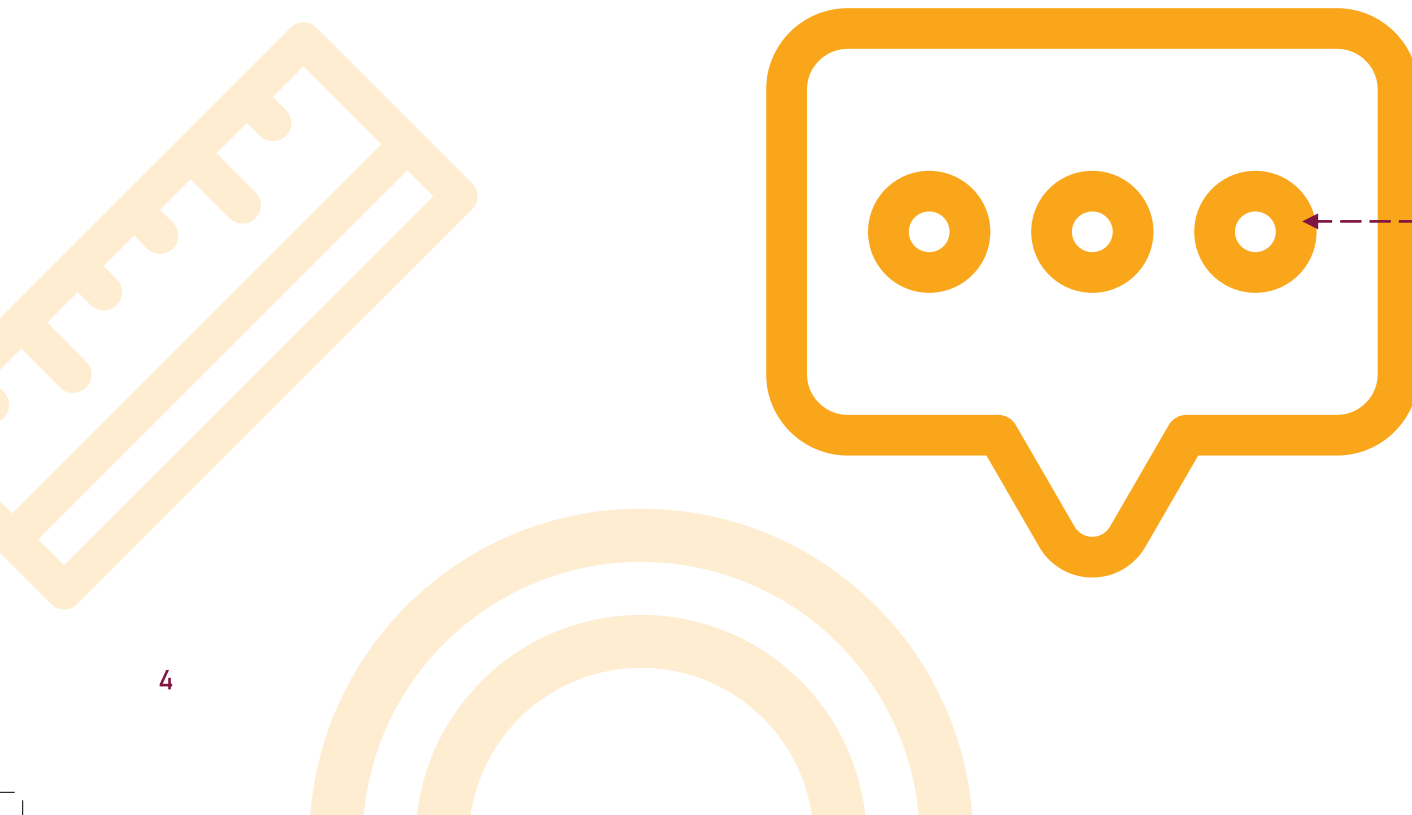
1.2.1 Desktop policy review

A wide range of government policies impact the lives of vulnerable children and families. While there is much public concern about vulnerable children and families involved with tertiary child protection and youth justice systems, the focus of this project was identifying opportunities to improve access to services and resources for vulnerable children and families. In consultation with QCOSS, a decision was made to focus on the domains of health, housing, and education due to their critical role in providing vulnerable children and families with access to resources and services needed for their wellbeing and social inclusion. Following further consultation with the Project's Reference Group (see 1.1.3 above), a decision was made to focus on ten overarching Queensland Government policies. This focus allowed for key gaps and opportunities to be highlighted, with the potential for further analysis on specific policies as part of future research.

The Queensland Government policy documents selected and reviewed are in Table 3 (see page 20). It is important to note that these Queensland Government policies were reviewed prior to the 2024 State Election; thus, these represent the policies of the previous Labor Government, rather than the current LNP Government. Where possible, we have drawn links to where there is—or is not—overlap with the policies and platforms of the current LNP Government, however we note that this is outside the scope of the project and thus is limited.

Each policy document was reviewed to identify: (a) if and how children and young people were considered; (b) if and how families were considered; (c) the type of support described (universal or targeted); (d) if priority groups were identified (e.g., Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and communities, regional/rural/remote, culturally and linguistically diverse, disability etc); and (e) which of the key life domains (i.e., housing, health, and education) were considered.

Findings from this analysis can be found in Chapter Three.



1.2.2 Semi-structured interviews with key state government stakeholders

Three semi-structured interviews were conducted with four key state government stakeholders representing four key state government departments, with a fifth state government department providing a written response. Two interviews were held in September 2024, prior to the Queensland Government moving into its caretaker period in the lead up to the state election. Interviews were unable to be held during October 2024 due to the caretaker period. The third interview, conducted jointly with two key state government stakeholders, was held in November 2024, after the state election. The fifth state department elected to provide a written response to the interview questions in December 2024. The five state departments involved were the Department of the Premier and Cabinet (DPC), Queensland Treasury, the Department of Education (DoE), the Department of Housing and Public Works (DHPW), and Queensland Health. It is worth noting that following the State Election the Department of Housing and Public Works now includes the Queensland Office for Youth (OfY), which is the Queensland Government's lead for strategic youth policy.³

All interviewees held high level positions within their departments and were responsible for large portfolios that included children and young people. Stakeholders responded to questions related to the responsibilities they had in their current role; in what ways children and young people were catered for in government policies within their portfolio; whether these policies specifically targeted the needs of vulnerable and disadvantaged children and young people; what gaps they saw in these policies; and what changes may need to happen within government systems to address these gaps.

Findings from these interviews can be found in Chapter Four.

1.2.3 Focus groups with QCOSS member organisations

Online focus groups were conducted with representatives from several QCOSS member organisations. The purpose of the focus group was to understand the opportunities and gaps within the current system; identify examples of best practice and systems failures; collect insights related to how the service system could achieve better outcomes for vulnerable children and families; and identify enablers and barriers for the community sector to provide effective services to and with vulnerable children and families. An invitation to participate in the research was circulated by QCOSS to its membership base. Eleven (11) focus groups with 56 non-government stakeholders from 47 organisations were conducted during October and November 2024. Each focus group was co-facilitated by two members of the research team, ran for approximately 60 minutes, and was held via the video conferencing software Zoom. A member of the QCOSS team observed seven of the focus groups.

Most of the focus group participants were women, had completed university-level qualifications, were aged between 35 and 54 years old, with more than 15 years' experience in the sector. Just over half of the participants were based in metropolitan areas, with the remaining participants spread between regional and remote areas of Queensland. Further details of the demographic breakdown of the focus group participants can be found in Appendix A-1.

³ Prior to the 2024 Queensland State Election, the state department responsible for housing policy was the Department of Housing, Local Government, Planning and Public Works, and the Office for Youth (OfY) was located in the Department of Child Safety, Seniors and Disability Services (DCSSDS).

Following feedback from the Project Reference Group (see 1.1.3), the research team employed an Appreciative Inquiry approach to loosely structure the focus groups (see Appendix A-2). Appreciative Inquiry takes a strengths-based approach to idea generation (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2007), which assisted the research objectives of developing strategies to improve the wellbeing and outcomes for children and young people experiencing vulnerability and disadvantage in Queensland. Appreciative Inquiry moves through five stages: Define, Discover, Dream, Design, Deliver (Ludema & Fry, 2008).

In the interests of time, a pre-defined question drawn from the literature and the interviews with key government stakeholders was used to focus the inquiry. Participants then moved through a series of questions designed to generate ideas and discussion in a strengths-based manner. Participants were encouraged to use the chat function to express additional thoughts or perspectives. One of the facilitators also used the chat function to type summaries of the conversation to facilitate member-checking with the participants. As several members of the Project Reference Group were also participants in the focus groups, preliminary findings were presented at the Project Reference Group in late November 2024. The Project Reference Group indicated that the preliminary findings accurately reflected their understandings and perspectives from their focus groups.

Findings from these focus groups can be found in Chapter Four.

1.2.4 Focus group with young people

A focus group was held online with six young people in February 2025. The purpose of this focus group was to obtain feedback from young Queenslanders on the proposed recommendations in the report. Specifically, the focus group explored the framing of the recommendations and their relevance to the experiences of children and young people. The focus group ran for approximately 60 minutes and was facilitated by two members of the research team via Zoom video conferencing software. The young people who participated in the focus group were aged between 15 and 21 and were largely based in Brisbane. However, there were representatives who could speak to challenges in regional Queensland; to the issues for young people who were neurodivergent, gender and sexually diverse, or from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds; and to the impacts for young people who identified as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander.

Following a brief introduction, the focus group participants were asked to prioritise which of the six domains from The Nest Wellbeing Framework (see Section 2.3.2 below) was most important to them. The participants identified Material Basics, Identity and Culture, and Valued, Loved and Safe as the domains most important to them and provided explanations as to why they chose a domain. In the interests of time, we focused the discussion on the draft policy recommendations related to the prioritised domains, with a focus on relevance to children and young people. Participants first indicated the extent to which the recommendation would have an impact on children and young people in Queensland. They then prioritised which of the recommendations was most important to them. Participants were then invited to share their thoughts on why they made the selection(s) they did. The questions and rankings can be found in Appendix A-3.

Findings from this focus group can be found in Chapter Four.

1.2.5 Ethical considerations

Ethics approval was granted by The University of Queensland (UQ) Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC) under the reference 2024/HE001648. All participants were provided with a detailed Participant Information Sheet and Participant Consent Form prior to participating in the interview or focus group. All participants aged 18 or older completed a Participant Consent Form. Participants who were aged under 18 signed a Participant Assent Form and their caregiver or guardian completed a Participant Consent Form. All data collected from participants has been deidentified to maintain participant confidentiality. Pseudonyms have been used throughout this report.

1.3 Report structure

Following this introduction, the remainder of this report details the research findings in relation to the four key research objectives. We have framed our analysis to reflect the six domains that make up The Nest Wellbeing Framework developed by the Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY, 2024). This evidence-based framework views the whole child in the context of their daily lives and conceptualises wellbeing as six interconnected domains that support each other to help children reach their potential: a) healthy; b) valued, loved, and safe; c) material basics; d) learning; e) participating, and f) a positive sense of identity and culture (ARACY, 2024). To have optimal wellbeing and to thrive, a child or young person, their family, and their community need to be adequately supported in all six domains.

Chapter Two seeks to understand the level and extent of unmet need for vulnerable and disadvantaged children and young people in Queensland with a particular focus on health, housing, and education. We provide context for the current extent of unmet needs of these cohorts. This includes an analysis of currently trends and conceptualisations of the terms 'vulnerable' and 'disadvantaged' and how these are being embodied—or not—in contemporary literature and reports.

Chapter Three analyses and critiques contemporary Queensland state government policies regarding holistic responses to promote the social inclusion and wellbeing of vulnerable and disadvantaged children, young people, and their families. We note that these policies were developed under the previous state government, and we briefly reflect on how this might shift under a new state government with a different policy agenda.

Chapter Four analyses stakeholders' understanding of the opportunities and gaps that exist within the current system for children, young people, and their families. We present examples of where policy initiatives are achieving positive outcomes for vulnerable and disadvantaged children, young people and their families. We then note where stakeholders felt there are gaps and areas for concern.

Finally, drawing on the body of evidence outlined in this report, Chapter Five presents policy recommendations for holistic systems of reform to enable the delivery of services that provide foundational supports to all children, young people, and their families into adulthood, including those experiencing vulnerability and disadvantage.

2. CHILDREN, YOUNG PEOPLE, AND THEIR FAMILIES

Most Queensland children (around 92%) have a healthy start to life, but by school age, only 76% of them are physically on track and prospering. This chapter outlines why some Queensland children experience entrenched and compounding disadvantage and what they need to thrive.

KEY POINTS



National data suggests most Australian children and young people are healthy, safe, and well; however, **many subpopulations continue to experience high levels of vulnerability and disadvantage**, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people, children and young people in rural and remote locations, children and young people with a disability, and children and young people with out-of-home care experience.



Disparities in outcomes are well documented across sub-populations of children and young people in key life domains such as housing, education, and health.



While there is a general recognition that disadvantage is embedded in communities, multi-causal, and persistent, **there is not a single definition or understanding of what constitutes vulnerable and disadvantaged.**



There are gaps in national reporting across many domains of wellbeing for a range of populations of children and young people in Australia which inhibits capacity to develop an accurate understanding of the multidimensional disadvantage that may be present for certain populations and any changes to this over time.



ARACY has developed an evidence-based framework called 'The Nest' for enhancing wellbeing of all children and young people, which identifies six domains that must be supported for children and young people to have optimal wellbeing and thrive: material basics, participating, learning, healthy, identity and culture, and valued, loved, and safe.



Improving the wellbeing of children, young people and their families requires a mix of universal supports and targeted supports to ensure all children and young people thrive, while also addressing the vulnerability and disadvantage experienced by certain groups.

2.1 Children and young people in Queensland

Currently there are over 1.2 million children and young people (aged 0-17 years) in Queensland, representing over 20 percent of the total Queensland population (ABS, 2024). Yet the voices and needs of these children and young people are often missing or silenced in government policies and initiatives that affect them. Similarly, we know that positive child development occurs within—and is influenced by—family and community wellbeing and the wider society in which the child lives (AIHW, 2020). Yet government public and social policies often consider the child or young person as separate from their family and community context.

National data suggests that most Australian children and young people are healthy, safe, and well (AIHW, 2023). Nonetheless, certain subpopulations of children and young people continue to experience vulnerability and disadvantage (AIHW, 2020, 2024a). These disadvantages are observable across the domains of education, housing, and health. Bull and colleagues (2022), for example, have demonstrated vast disparities in health service use, reporting that vulnerable Australian children used a greater average number of inpatient and emergency department services compared with non-vulnerable children. Vulnerable children also used significantly fewer preventive care services such as General Practitioners (GPs) and specialists (Bull et al., 2022). They recommended that since health “is a key capability associated with improving educational outcomes, economic resources and labour force participation, vulnerable children also require greater access to primary care services to break intergenerational cycles of poverty” (Bull et al., 2022, p.8). When examining the data for children in respect to education, gaps in learning achievement are observed when comparing students overall with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, students in rural and remote locations, and children with out-of-home care experience (AIHW, 2020). Barker and colleagues (2024) also report unequal Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) access for disadvantaged and remote communities in their report card on Australia’s education (see also the National Agreement on Closing the Gap).

Queensland data suggests children and young people in Queensland are susceptible to poorer outcomes than those in other parts of Australia. The sharp increase in Queensland’s cost-of-living has had a significant negative impact on children, young people, and their families across the state, and contributed to family-level stress (QCOSS, 2024a; QFCC, 2023).

For children and young people living in regional, rural, and remote communities, increased cost-of-living pressures are significantly heightened because, due to geographical barriers, goods and services already cost more. The Queensland Family and Children Commission (QFCC) (2023) report that over 60% of Queensland parents and carers are finding it hard to pay for day-to-day expenses such as food and bills, and 13,600 young Queenslanders say their family cannot afford their rent or mortgage.

Pawson and colleagues’ recent analysis of the Queensland housing shortage, while not focused specifically on children and young people, identifies the factors negatively influencing housing affordability in Queensland. They include a “historic decline in the [housing] sector’s capacity to generate tenancies affordable to lower income households” (Pawson et al., 2024, p. 11). Indeed, the authors note that the shortage of affordable rental homes available to low-income renters has almost doubled in the past 15 years, with this trend

most marked in regional Queensland where, notably, the trajectory was already established well before the pandemic, with the proportion of new lettings affordable to the low-income cohort falling from 36% to 14% (Pawson et al. 2024, p.11).

Of particular concern are rates of homelessness in vulnerable populations in Queensland, with social services reporting an alarming increase in family homelessness (Pawson et al., 2024). Recent Census data indicates around 37% of the population experiencing homelessness in Queensland are young people aged between 12 and 24 years (ABS, 2023a). Children and young people accessing specialist homelessness services in Queensland also report experiencing high levels of family and domestic violence and engagement with the child protection system (QFCC, 2023). They have also highlighted that the recent sharp increase in cost-of-living coupled with decreased housing affordability is likely to disproportionately affect young people leaving out-of-home care placements, with almost a quarter reporting they are not confident about finding accommodation, managing money, or finding and keeping employment (QFCC, 2023).

Disparities in education and health outcomes are also well documented across sub-populations of children and young people in Queensland (QFCC, 2023). These vulnerabilities are further exacerbated by intersectional disadvantage, noting that many children and young people may fall into multiple subpopulation groups. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, for example, are overrepresented in the out-of-home care and youth justice systems and thus may be traversing multiple forms of vulnerability and disadvantage (AIHW, 2024b). Compared to all students in Queensland, young people with out-of-home care experience and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people are less likely to be meeting academic standards and are much more likely to be suspended or excluded from school (Graham et al., 2023, 2024).

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are over-represented in Queensland's youth justice system on all measures, including rates of detention and community-based youth justice orders (QATSICPP, 2022). Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people are much more likely to be living in regional and remote areas which, compared with the metropolitan southeastern corner of Queensland, have lower feelings of community safety, higher rates of unemployment, lower incomes for families and fewer services (QFCC, 2023). In this way, risk factors for experiencing disadvantage are multiplied and children and young people are more likely to be subjected to entrenched disadvantage and poverty.

2.2 Contexts of intersecting and cumulative disadvantage

While access to high quality social service systems is vital for all children and young people, exposure to multiple contexts of disadvantage had significant influence on children's outcomes over time. Children and young people who experience disadvantage are more likely to have poorer cognitive and social outcomes than peers (Warren & Edwards, 2017). Disadvantage can be conceptualised and measured in different ways. The Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) uses Socio-Economic Indexes for Areas (SEIFA) as a measure to rank areas in Australia according to relative socio-economic advantage and disadvantage (ABS, 2023b). However, disadvantage encompasses more than socio-economic indicators. Poverty is not only about low income, but also about deprivation within families and communities. Disadvantage is therefore multidimensional and complex (HRSCIWD, 2019). At the individual and family level domains of disadvantage include material resources; employment; education; health and disability; and social support (Warren & Edwards, 2017, p. ix). For certain individuals, families and communities disadvantage persists both across the lifespan and/or intergenerationally (Marmot et al., 2008). This is termed 'entrenched disadvantage' (Warren & Edwards, 2017). Several factors can increase the risk of entrenched disadvantage, including geographic location (accessibility / remoteness), educational attainment, single parent status, suitability of available employment, health and family welfare, and availability of appropriate support systems (HRSCIWD, 2019).

Mirroring the national context, certain populations of children, young people, and their families in Queensland are more likely to experience vulnerability and disadvantage, and this negatively impacts on their wellbeing across multiple domains (QFCC, 2023). The QFCC has argued that for “these groups of children and young people, we need to look at their specific needs and the needs of their communities and identify where stronger support may be needed for them and their families” (QFCC, 2023, p. 8).

Recent findings from the QFCC highlight the strong disparities between subpopulations in key health, housing, and education outcomes (QFCC, 2023). In general, Queensland children, young people, and their parents and/or carers are engaged in education. However, there are significant regional variations and outcomes. Children in Southwest Queensland, North Queensland, and Far Northern Queensland are far more likely to be developmentally vulnerable in their first full year of full-time school than children from the Brisbane, Southeast Queensland and Sunshine Coast regions. Similarly, the more regional and remote the school, the less likely a young person is to finish Year 12: 87% of young people in Brisbane and Moreton Bay completed year 12 in 2021, compared to less than 70% in Far North Queensland. Young people living in out-of-home care, for instance, are also less likely to have success at school and more likely to be suspended than those not engaged with the child protection system.

Queensland children, young people, and their families are, in general, healthy; however, as with educational outcomes, there are huge variations within subpopulations. Most Queensland babies (around 92%) have a healthy start to life (i.e., born at term and have a birthweight of over 2,500g), yet only 76% of children are assessed as being on track in terms of physical health and wellbeing by their first year of school. Rates of psychological distress and mental health problems are also rising, with many young people either unable to access or experiencing barriers to access for mental health services (QFCC, 2023). This is closely linked to safe, affordable, and secure housing access.

While most families in Queensland have access to adequate, secure, and stable housing, the number of families experiencing unsafe or unstable accommodation is increasing. An increasing number of young people reported that they are worried about having a safe place to stay (11%), and 6% of young people reported that they have experienced homelessness and/or lived in a refuge or transitional accommodation. This is higher than the Australian averages (10.4% and 5.6% respectively).

While there is a general recognition that disadvantage is embedded in communities, multi-causal, and persistent, there is not a single definition or understanding of what constitutes vulnerable and disadvantaged (HRSCIWD, 2019). This can make it challenging for both data and policy to address the needs of all populations. The *National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children 2021–2031* defines children and families who are experiencing disadvantage and/or are vulnerable as “a child/family who experience(s) a condition or circumstance that places them at a higher risk of child abuse or neglect when compared to the general population” (DSS, 2021, p. 48). The Nest Wellbeing Framework, on the other hand, recognises multi-dimensional disadvantage as being deprived in three or more of The Nest Wellbeing Framework domains (see 2.3 below).

Drawing on these various definitions, we thus conceptualise vulnerable and disadvantaged children and young people as children and young people (and their families) who experience context(s) of disadvantage, condition(s), or circumstance(s) that compromise their life chances compared to the general population. We note that these children and young people and their families typically have multiple and complex needs, including disability, housing instability, poor health, and/or experiences of domestic and family violence. They have typically experienced entrenched, multigenerational, and compounding disadvantage which manifests across a range of activities and areas of policy. While this research focuses on those aged under 18, we recognise that these challenges continue into young adulthood and beyond.

2.3 Understanding wellbeing

2.3.1 Measuring wellbeing

Overall, there are gaps in national reporting across many domains of wellbeing for a range of populations of children and young people in Australia. This inhibits the capacity to develop an accurate understanding of the multidimensional disadvantage that may be present for certain populations, and any changes to this over time.

The AIHW (2020) report gaps across many of the domains for a range of population groups including children and young people: living in out-of-home care; from refugee and asylum seeker families; who are incarcerated; with a disability; from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds or born overseas; who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans and gender diverse, or young people who have intersex variations; or live in socioeconomically disadvantaged households.

They also reported limited to no data measuring children's wellbeing and their interactions with services and systems over time (AIHW, 2020). There are also areas of known underreporting, particularly in relation to mental health, domestic and family violence, and substance misuse. This is particularly prevalent in contexts of intergenerational trauma and the associated mistrust of government systems. Many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people, for example, report a reluctance to engage with services such as Queensland Health due to a fear that reporting these challenges may result in child removal or parental incarceration (AIHW, 2025; Chamberlain et al., 2022).

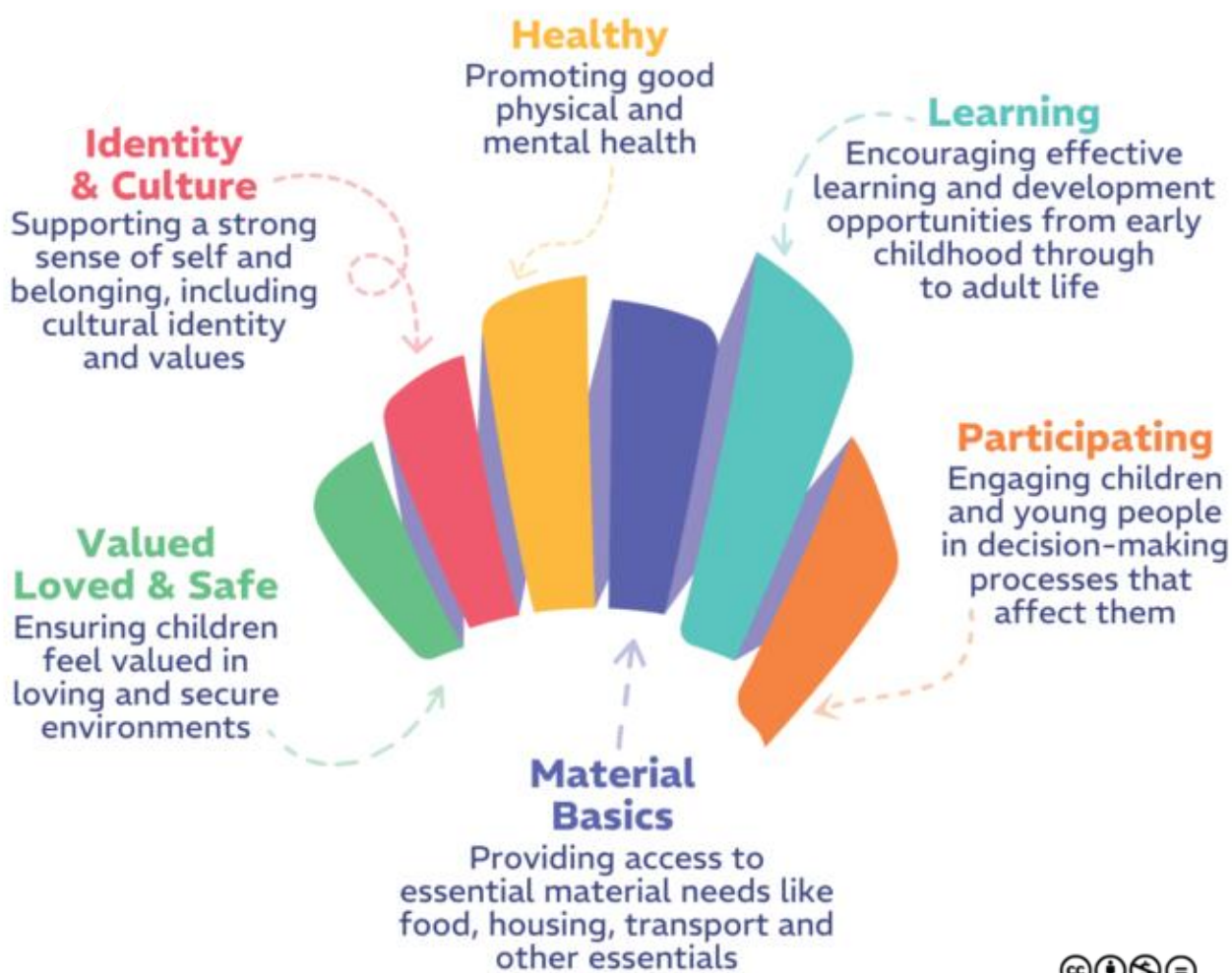
This highlights an urgent need to enhance existing data sets, including developing data sets for specific population groups and linking data across multiple data sets. This will help to improve our understanding of how children's wellbeing or service use differs among different populations or geographic groups, and the relationships across multiple domains, including between risk factors and protective factors. Longitudinal data would also allow for deeper analysis of how children transition between different key developmental stages, their outcomes at each stage, the different pathways children take through services, and the points where intervention would be most effective (AIHW, 2020).

While there have been wellbeing frameworks developed for specific subpopulation groups (e.g., Winangali, 2019), ARACY sought to address identified gaps in the measurement of wellbeing across the whole population of children and young people by collaborating with UNICEF to develop Australian Children's Wellbeing Index (ARACY, 2023). This is intended to provide a comprehensive picture of how children in Australia are faring across all domains of wellbeing. It uses data to measure and track children's progress over time, providing a view of where Australia is doing well, and identifying areas that need greater attention and action (ARACY, 2024). However, as the index is relatively new, ARACY have only released two reports focused on certain domains of children and young people's wellbeing – health (Morris et al., 2023) and education (Barker et al., 2024). Consequently, there is not yet a comprehensive picture across all domains of wellbeing and influences over time for Australian children and young people.

2.3.2 The Nest Wellbeing Framework

Wellbeing is understood as multidimensional and interconnected (AIHW, 2024a; ARACY, 2024). Following national consultation with young people, families, and experts, ARACY developed the evidence-based framework, 'The Nest'. It applies to children and young people aged 0 to 24 years and views the whole child in the context of their families, communities, the environments, and the systems that shape their daily lives and life trajectories. The Nest Wellbeing Framework conceptualises wellbeing as six interconnected domains that support each other to help children reach their potential (see Figure 1). Each of these interconnected domains, and the environments and systems that surround us, have a direct impact on childhood development. For instance, a young person may struggle to participate in learning if they do not feel valued, safe and loved at home. To have optimal wellbeing and thrive, The Nest Wellbeing Framework argues, a child or young person, their family, and their community need to be adequately supported in all six domains (ARACY, 2013, 2024).

Figure 1: The Nest Wellbeing Framework



The *material basics* domain recognises that children and young people have essential and fundamental needs that must be met. This includes access to suitable, secure housing with appropriate clothing, nutritious food, clean water, and clean air. Children and young people also require access to local and available services, including transport, and open spaces in nature. Their families need to have enough money to provide necessities and other tools required for child development, including school supplies, suitable technology, and sporting equipment.

The *participating* domain highlights that children and young people need to have a voice and say in the decisions that affect them. Children and young people should be empowered to speak out, express themselves, and be taken seriously within their families and their communities. This requires active involvement with peers and groups to be encouraged through various activities.

The *learning* domain acknowledges that children and young people engage in diverse learning experiences within the home, the classroom, and the community. Individual learning needs must be addressed and catered for in all environments. Families play a central role in a child's learning journey, and thus require support to actively engage with learning in various settings, including formal education. Children and young people need the opportunity to participate in a breadth of experiences.

The *healthy* domain ensures that children and young people's physical, mental, and emotional health needs are met. This includes the provision of timely care for all developmental health needs and requirements, as well as access to appropriate health services, including preventative measures. Access to preventative care can help to proactively address potential or emerging physical, emotional, and mental health concerns.

The *identity and culture* domain refers to children and young people fostering a positive sense of self and cultural pride. Children and young people, especially those who identify as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, require spiritual and cultural connectedness. This requires a sense of belonging and acceptance at home and in the community to be cultivated. Children and young people need to feel safe and supported to express their identity, regardless of gender, sexuality, culture and/or language. All identities and cultures need to be respected and valued, especially in systems that have a huge impact on children, such as school.

The *valued, loved and safe* domain is focused on relationships and connections. It argues that children and young people require loving, trusting connections with family and friends through nurtured relationships. They need to feel appreciated, knowing that teachers and other adults value and care for them. They need to feel safe at home, in their community, and online. The framework also argues that children and young people need to trust the environment and climate are being protected so that they can have confidence in their future.

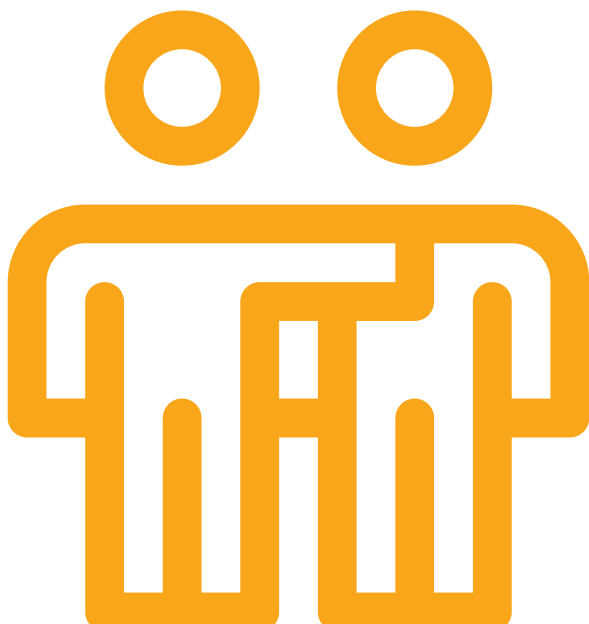


Table 2: The Nest Wellbeing Framework domains and objectives

Domain	Objective(s)
Material Basics	▪ Essential needs: have suitable, secure housing with appropriate clothing, nutritious food, clean water, and clean air ▪ Access to services and spaces: ensure availability of transport, local services (e.g., plumbing), and open spaces in nature ▪ Financial stability: family has enough money for necessities ▪ Development tools: access to school supplies, suitable technology, and sporting equipment for active participation in society
Participating	▪ Having a voice: empower children and young people to speak out, express themselves, and be taken seriously within their family and community ▪ Decision-making: ensure they have a say in decisions that impact them ▪ Active involvement: encourage involvement with peers and groups through various activities, including online communities, to be active members of society
Learning	▪ Diverse learning experiences: engage in learning through various experiences within the classroom, home, and community ▪ Individual needs addressed: cater to individual learning needs ▪ Family engagement: families are engaged in the child's learning journey, support and value it ▪ Wide support: encourage and support learning in various settings, including formal education ▪ Valued learning: provide opportunities to participate in a breadth of experiences
Healthy	▪ Holistic health: ensure physical, mental, and emotional health needs are met ▪ Developmental needs: provide timely care for all developmental health requirements ▪ Health services: access appropriate health services, including preventative measures ▪ Preventative care: address potential or emerging physical, emotional, and mental health concerns proactively
Identity & Culture	▪ Positive identity: foster a strong sense of self and cultural pride ▪ Spiritual and cultural connectedness: cultivate belonging and acceptance at home and in the community - especially important for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people ▪ Respect and value: ensure all identities and cultures are respected and valued especially in systems with the biggest effect on children like education ▪ Safe expression: feel safe and supported in expressing identity, regardless of gender, sexuality, culture, or language
Valued, Loved & Safe	▪ Nurturing relationships: build loving, trusting connections with family and friends ▪ Feeling appreciated: know that teachers and other adults value and care for them ▪ Security: feel safe at home, in the community, and online ▪ Future confidence: trust that the environment and climate are being protected for their future

Source: ARACY (2024)

2.4 Spectrum of interventions

Improving the wellbeing of vulnerable and disadvantaged children, young people, and their families involves the need to move ‘upstream’ and focus on equity of access to services and resources for all children and young people. This requires a mix of universal supports and targeted supports to ensure all children and young people thrive, while also addressing the vulnerability and disadvantage experienced by certain groups (Allen Consulting Group, 2008). This has been recognised in a range of areas, including calls for a public health approach that focuses on primary and secondary supports delivered via a cross-sector and ecological approach (e.g., Mathews et al., 2023).

The Australian Government has also recognised the need for a targeted focus on groups experiencing vulnerability and disadvantage to improve wellbeing outcomes for children, young people and their families (HRSCIWD, 2019). The Australian Government held a parliamentary inquiry in 2019 into entrenched disadvantage, and recommended services and investments required to address it in Australia. The inquiry concluded that two overarching principles were essential to deliver successful programs: place-based programs and wrap-around services. Indeed, the inquiry noted that a “place-based approach reflects an understanding of the community and local circumstance” while also recognising that “targeted, wrap-around support services are also essential, especially in engaging children and families where barriers to education and employment are complex” (HRSCIWD, 2019, p. xx). This echoes objectives and commitments established in the National Agreement on Closing the Gap. The HRSCIWD (2019) report also identified the need for a priority investment approach to federal investment which identifies priority groups at particular risk of entrenched disadvantage and targets assistance.

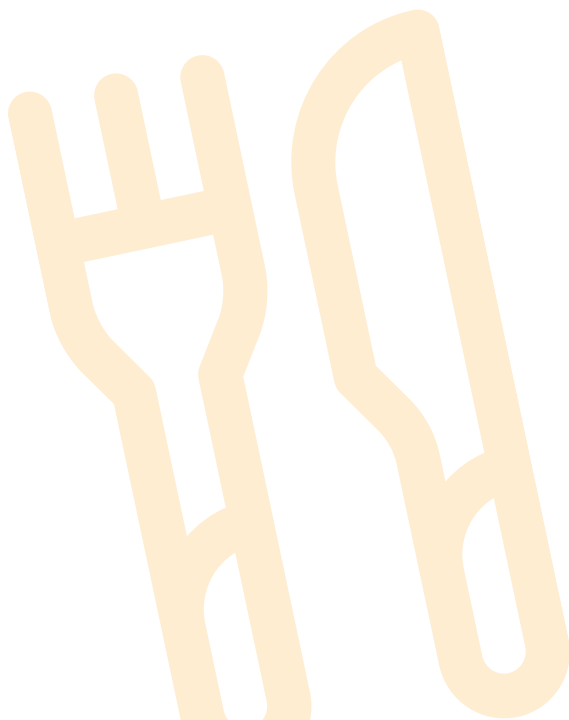
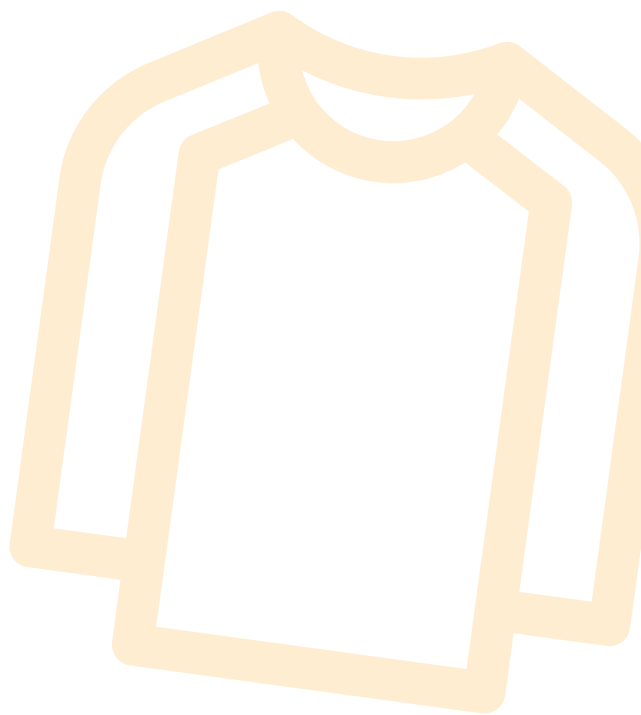
In the 2023–2024 budget the Australian Government committed to deliver a \$199.8 million package to target entrenched community disadvantage. This package has a particular focus on intergenerational disadvantage and improving child and family wellbeing via investment in place-based partnerships, a whole of government framework, a Life Course Data Initiative to improve understanding of how communities experience disadvantage, and social enterprise development initiatives. The Australian Government has also released the Early Years Strategy 2024–2034 which is intended to guide government’s investment into the wellbeing of children in their early years so that they can reach their potential. The strategy is underpinned by evidence that the first 2,000 days provides the opportunity to have the biggest impact on child development and a recognition that a holistic approach to wellbeing is required. The action plans and outcomes framework for the strategy have not yet been released.

At the Queensland level there is also recognition that to thrive, priority populations need ongoing support from conception onwards from their families, communities, systems and services (QFCC, 2023). Priority investment approaches could be further explored in the Queensland context to improve the wellbeing of disadvantaged children and young people and their families.

2.5 Conclusion

This chapter drew on national and international literature to provide a context for understanding the level and extent of unmet need for vulnerable and disadvantaged children and young people in Queensland. We drew on publicly available data, particularly from the ABS and QFCC, to identify what is currently known about children, young people, and their families in Queensland. We argue that while most children, young people, and their families in Queensland have the opportunity to thrive, there are pockets of extreme vulnerability and entrenched disadvantage that inhibit the chances of children and young people in these contexts to succeed, typically resulting in poor outcomes not only for children and young people, but also for their families and communities. It is thus essential that any policies that affect children and young people recognise the impact of intersecting and cumulative disadvantage.

Similarly, wellbeing needs to be understood within these contexts, recognising its complex, multidimensional, and interconnected nature. Children and young people must be viewed in the context of their whole and daily lives, not as individuals disconnected from their families and communities. Children, young people, their families, and their communities must be adequately supported across a range of domains to reach their potential. The Nest Wellbeing Framework identifies six interconnected domains that must *all* be supported for children and young people to thrive: material basics; participating; learning; healthy; identity and culture; and valued, loved, and safe. (ARACY, 2024). We have drawn on The Nest Wellbeing Framework as a framework for our analysis of the current needs, opportunities, and gaps in social policy for children and young people in Queensland.



3. POLICY REVIEW

This chapter analyses 10 key Queensland Government overarching strategies and policies regarding holistic responses to promote the social inclusion and wellbeing of vulnerable and disadvantaged children, young people, and their families.

KEY POINTS



The wellbeing of children and young people is shaped by a wide range of social and public policies, not only those focused specifically on children and young people.



The documents reviewed tended to view 'Queenslanders' as a homogenous cohort and focus on universal supports.

There was little mention of entrenched and/or intersectional disadvantage or families including families experiencing vulnerability or disadvantage.



Children and young people are frequently overlooked in key policies.

Although policy makers recognise the need to support this cohort, limited consideration is given to the holistic nature of children's wellbeing including its connection family.



While the reviewed policies commonly have goals of equity, inclusion, empowerment and self-determination, **limited thought has been given to how disadvantage and vulnerability can negatively impact the life outcomes of children, young people and their families.**



Where policies do consider the importance of responding to children's needs, the framing focuses on the future, rather than focusing on the present wellbeing of children (for example, reducing future burdens on society by diverting children away from tertiary systems or enhancing the capability and productivity of the future workforce).

It should be noted that this review was conducted prior to the Queensland state election and thus relates to policies of the previous Labor Government. Where appropriate and available, in our analysis below, we have included brief reference to relevant LNP election commitments and actions since taking office. Attention to changes in government policy in Queensland will be important to consider when seeking implementation of the recommendations made in this report.

3.1 Policy analysis overview

The wellbeing of children and young people cannot be separated from the wellbeing and functioning of their family unit and community. Thus, the wellbeing of children and young people can be influenced via a wide range of policies – not only those focused specifically on children and young people. As outlined in Section 1.2.1 above, a decision was made, in consultation with the Project Reference Group, to review ten overarching Queensland Government policies (see Table 3, for the full reference list these policies, see Section 6.2).

Each policy document was reviewed to identify (a) if and how children and young people were considered; (b) if and how families were considered; (c) the type of support described (universal or targeted); (d) if priority groups (e.g., Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and communities, regional/rural/remote locations, culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, having a disability, involvement with the child protection system) were identified; and (e) which domains from The Nest Wellbeing Framework were considered.

We first provide a general overview of the features of the policies. We then discuss the two policies focused specifically on children and young people – *Putting Queensland Kids First* and *Young Queenslanders Strategy*. We then turn to consider if and how the other policies reviewed contribute to the six life domains identified in The Nest Wellbeing Framework (ARACY, 2024, see also Section 2.3.2), highlighting whether the focus is on the child themselves, their family or the broader community.

Table 3: Queensland Government policies reviewed

No.	Policy Title	Queensland Government Department	Year
1.	<i>Homes for Queenslanders</i>	Department of Housing, Local Government, Planning and Public Works	2024
2.	<i>Strategic Plan 2024-28</i>	Department of the Premier and Cabinet	2024
3.	<i>Putting Queensland Kids First</i>	Department of the Premier and Cabinet	2024
4.	<i>Community Safety Plan</i>	Department of the Premier and Cabinet	2024
5.	<i>Young Queenslanders Strategy</i>	Department of Treaty, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Partnerships, Communities and the Arts	2024
6.	<i>Queensland Budget 2024-25</i>	Queensland Treasury	2024
7.	<i>HealthQ32</i>	Queensland Health	2023
8.	<i>Communities 2032</i>	Department of Communities, Housing and Digital Economy	2022
9.	<i>Equity and Excellence</i>	Department of Education	2022
10.	<i>Better Care Together</i>	Queensland Health	2022

For the full reference of these policies, see Section 6.2.

3.1.1 Overview of analysis

Across the policies, there was espoused commitment to actively engaging and connecting stakeholders across Queensland with government priorities and decisions. Several of the policies also referenced the importance of evidence-based decision making that takes into consideration best practice evidence, and the views of experts and, to a lesser extent, those with lived experience. The importance of consumer voice was most prevalent in health-related policies (*HealthQ32* and *Better Care Together*) and the *Young Queenslanders Strategy*.

As the documents reviewed were higher-level, overarching strategies and policies, they tended to focus on universal supports for ‘Queenslanders’, who were predominantly considered as a homogenous cohort. The main exception to this was recognition of the need for differentiated and targeted support for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, usually made with reference to the National Agreement on Closing the Gap or other Queensland policies (e.g., First Nations Strategy 2032). For example, *Better Care Together* recognised:

the importance of addressing the health inequities experienced by First Nations peoples and communities through the development and delivery of culturally safe and capable treatment, care and support (*Better Care Together*, p. 4).

In the reviewed documents there was limited mention of families, with only five highlighting the importance of specifically supporting families (*Queensland Budget 2024-25*, *Putting Queensland Kids First*, *Better Care Together*, *Equity and Excellence*, *Community Safety Plan*). There was less attention paid to the needs of families experiencing vulnerability or disadvantage, except for budget commitments to additional cost-of-living relief measures for “low-income families”, and recognition in the *Community Safety Plan* that family adversity (e.g., domestic and family violence, housing instability, unemployment) needs to be addressed as it contributes to youth offending. Throughout the documents, the needs and interests of children and young people as a specific cohort of Queenslanders was notably absent. The key exceptions to this were *Putting Queensland Kids First*, *Young Queenslanders Strategy*, and *Equity and Excellence*. Of these three documents, only *Putting Queensland Kids First* and the *Young Queenslanders Strategy* were underpinned by a holistic view of wellbeing supports (see section 3.2 for a more detailed discussion of these two documents). Like *Equity and Excellence*, most of the documents reviewed focused on a singular policy domain (e.g., education, health, housing), reflecting the siloed nature of service delivery. Even when policies were focused on one issue (e.g. housing or education), there was some acknowledgment of how that domain influenced others. For example, *Homes for Queenslanders* acknowledged that:

Housing means more than just a place to live. It is key to breaking the cycle of disadvantage because safe, secure and affordable housing supports financial security, social engagement and adds to the wellbeing of the whole community. Without secure housing, investments in education, health, domestic and family violence, justice, child protection and economic development are less likely to achieve the best results. (*Homes for Queenslanders*, p. 35).

Despite “equity” and “inclusion” being explicitly referenced as underlying principles of many of the policies (e.g., *Equity and Excellence*, *HealthQ32*, *Communities 2032*, *Young Queenslanders Strategy*), any acknowledgement of entrenched and/or intersectional disadvantage was largely absent from the documents reviewed. An exception was policy areas where those experiencing vulnerability and disadvantage place a burden on the rest of the community, most notably in terms of youth offending and tertiary health care systems. For example, *Community Safety Plan*, states that “many young offenders are from disadvantaged backgrounds” (p. 11) and then articulates the need for support in terms of protecting the community.

Health-related policies (*HealthQ32* and *Better Care Together*) articulated the greatest commitment to targeted and/or tailored support to address needs of priority groups who experience disadvantage, marginalisation and vulnerability. For example, *HealthQ32* acknowledged that:

...good health is not shared equally across our diverse community. We need to ensure our health system delivers safe, responsive and person- centred care for all Queenslanders, including the needs of priority populations, including First Nations peoples, people from multicultural, culturally and linguistically diverse, refugee and asylum-seeker backgrounds, people with disability, LGBTQIA+ people, people living in regional, rural and remote areas, older people, mental health, alcohol or other drugs clients, and children in out-of-home care or at risk of entering out-of-home care (*HealthQ32*, p. 4).

Notably, this excerpt focuses on the Queensland population as a whole, rather than on children, young people, and their families. The exception is recognition of children in or at risk of entering out-of-home care. Children in out-of-home care were also recognised as a priority population in *Equity and Excellence*, alongside children with disability and children from culturally and linguistically diverse and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander backgrounds.

In general, the policy documents emphasised individual autonomy and self-sufficiency. This was presented as a government commitment to 'empowerment' and 'self-determination', which allows individuals to "take control of their resources and decisions that impact their lives" (*Communities 2032*, p 23). This was particularly noted in the Young Queenslanders Strategy (see 3.2.2). However, as previously noted, across the documents there was limited consideration of how entrenched disadvantage and systemic barriers could prevent people from doing so. A notable exception was in *Homes for Queenslanders*, which states:

Despite record government investment in social and affordable housing, there are still Queenslanders who fall through the cracks, through no fault of their own. It's particularly challenging for people who have low incomes and are struggling with things like complex health challenges, past trauma or family instability. This makes it even more difficult to find and keep a home. It's a vicious cycle, and hard to break out of without help (*Homes for Queenslanders*, p. 31).

Similarly, *Communities 2032* (p. 16) also recognised that "systemic barriers create inequity, poor health and social isolation that are often beyond an individual's ability to control".

The aspiration of empowerment and self-sufficiency within the policies extended beyond individuals to communities, with the underpinning goal of diverting people from tertiary systems. This is intended to be achieved by a community and social services sector that is responsive to the "unique needs" of each vulnerable person (*Communities 2032*, p. 28). This is best illustrated by *Communities 2032*:

A capable and engaged community and social services sector can deliver significant social and economic benefits to the communities they support. Interventions delivered at the right time and in the right place, can mean vulnerable people are diverted from costly crisis interventions such as hospital emergency services and the justice system, into proactive and preventative programs and services that demonstrate longer-term benefits by supporting individuals to connect, participate, contribute and thrive. (*Communities 2032*, p. 28)

While *Communities 2032*, like other policies such as *Putting Queensland Kids First*, recognise the important role of the sector, there is no real consideration of how the government's approach to funding (nature, duration, etc) can impinge on their capacity to support children, young people and families. Industry and peak bodies such as PeakCare (2024) and QCOSS (2024b) have called on the government to provide a detailed workforce strategy, in recognition that important investments into the wellbeing of children and young people, such as *Putting Queensland Kids First*, can be undermined by workforce challenges, particularly in regional and remote areas. QCOSS, for instance, is seeking a whole of community sector workforce strategy (QCOSS, 2024b). This is imperative given the sector as a whole is critical to supporting the needs and wellbeing outcomes of vulnerable children, young people, and their families.

3.2 Policies focused specifically on children and young people

We now turn to consider the *Putting Queensland Kids First* and *Young Queenslanders Strategy* in more detail. While highlighting the individual benefits to children and young people themselves to “live their best lives”, both *Putting Queensland Kids First* (p. 33) and the *Young Queenslanders Strategy* (p. 6) are premised on the notion that investing in children and young people is an investment in Queensland's future workforce and reduces the costs associated with poverty, exclusion and tertiary systems.

3.2.1 Putting Queensland Kids First

The Queensland Government invested \$502 million in the early intervention and prevention focused *Putting Queensland Kids First* strategy, with the goal of saving money in the longer term by reducing the need for acute and tertiary interventions and disrupting inter-generational patterns of disadvantage and vulnerability:

Our wellbeing and economy are intrinsically linked. Social wellbeing fuels a strong and sustainable economy for all Queenslanders. We know that investing in the early years is one of the best investments for the long-term health, wellbeing, safety and prosperity of our community. Through this plan, we commit to working in partnership with communities, service providers and philanthropy to best understand and respond to the needs of families and children (*Putting Queensland Kids First*, p. 7).

Putting Queensland Kids First is focused on building strong foundations for children by investing in them and their families in the earliest years of their life for “positive and healthy pathways for life, building on the strengths and opportunities that help children and families to thrive... to give every Queensland child and family the best possible opportunities for a great life” (p. 7). The strategy's conceptualisation of wellbeing is based on ARACY Nest Wellbeing Framework (see Section 2.3.2 for a discussion of this framework) and thus recognises the connection between the wellbeing of the child and their family, community, and culture. The guiding principles of the *Putting Queensland Kids First* strategy include: children, families and communities at the centre; culture, inclusion, diversity and access; strengths-based and empowering; partnering to connect Queenslanders to holistic support; shifting balance to preventative care and a life course focus; and a commitment to evidence-informed, accountability and transparency.

Putting Queensland Kids First is evidence-informed and recognises the importance of material basics such as food, healthcare, household income and appropriate housing. The stated priorities are partnering for connected and community-led delivery; wellbeing in the earliest years of life; supporting families and strengthening communities; responsive support for healthy development and positive life courses; and supporting confident steps through life and

learning (p. 19). To do this, *Putting Queensland Kids First* proposes a range of holistic supports for both children and their families during the early years (see also Section 3.3).

Putting Queensland Kids First outlines the role of health and community services professionals, industry and families in the development of the program and purports to recognise the importance of “delivering meaningful, collaborative supports that are outcomes driven and flexible to respond to community and family needs” and working collaboratively with the non-government sector to “break down silos and better connect families to the help they need” (p. 13). The policy was welcomed by the sector and peak bodies such as QFCC and Thriving Queensland Kids Partnership (TKQP), who commended the Government’s focus on the early years, prevention and acknowledgement of the need for greater investment and coordination (Lewis, 2024; TKQP, 2024). The Government committed \$15 million for non-government organisations (NGO), including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled organisations (ATSICCO) to apply for funding to deliver community-led, place-based solutions (Queensland Government, 2024). However, concerns have been raised that the new Government may not sustain the \$500 million of investments committed in the 2024 Budget to implement *Putting Queensland Kids First*. Concerns have also been raised about the capacity of the sector, particularly in relation to workforce issues in regional areas for being able to implement this strategy on the ground (e.g., QCOSS, 2024c).

3.2.2 Young Queenslanders Strategy

The *Young Queenslanders Strategy* is intended to be a framework that guides the way in which the Queensland Government supports young people aged 12 to 25-years to transition into adulthood and be “empowered to actively participate, cultivate their futures, live their best lives and thrive in our communities” (*Young Queenslanders Strategy*, p. 10). Interestingly, the strategy neither references children and young people’s families, nor acknowledges the impact of family on their wellbeing. Instead, the document is focused on autonomy and underpinned by an emphasis on young people developing ‘identity capital’ (Côté, 2002). The strategy defines identity capital as:

a valuable collection of personal assets and resources people amass as they navigate life and construct their identity. These assets range from education, skills, experiences, achievements, to social connection and will support them on their individual journey to connect and contribute to our communities. (*Young Queenslanders Strategy*, p. 13)

While focused on individual agency, notably, the *Young Queenslanders Strategy* was the only document reviewed that specifically focused on the notion of intersectionality as a key element of the strategy:

Intersectionality is the concept that examines how these different aspects of identity intersect and interact, shaping a person's perspectives and experiences. As we continue growing as a society, our understanding of these dynamics and the corresponding support a person may need will refine as we gain better understanding of intersectionality... Ensuring our programs, interventions, and services are accessible for all young people is at the heart of our vision for the future. We commit to working together across government to build a more equitable and supportive environment for everyone, particularly those who may face greater challenges in accessing opportunities as they navigate life’s ups and downs, such as the impacts of discrimination, financial or relational stress, social isolation and loneliness, and other stressors (*Young Queenslanders Strategy*, p. 11).

There are five foundation principles to the strategy (*Young Queenslanders Strategy*, p. 12). The first principle is equity and access, which acknowledges the need for “fair and flexible access” to services that young people need. The second principle is informed decision-making by a government that is supported by data that “accurately represents young Queenslanders” (*Young Queenslanders Strategy*, p. 12). The third principle relates to affirming the rights of children and young people by drawing on approaches that create environments where young people are respected and empowered and can exercise their rights under the *Human Rights Act 2019* (Qld). The fourth principle is empowerment, ensuring that young people develop autonomy and capacity for self-determination. Finally, the strategy is founded on the principle of co-design, recognising that young people’s contributions are valued irrespective of their age, characteristics or background.

These principles underpin a framework which is intended to serve as a map for collaborative actions between government and young people that empower and support young people on their diverse pathways to: (1) participate; (2) cultivate their futures; (3) live their best lives; and (4) thrive in our communities. The strategy will be delivered through a series of action plans “that will evolve over time to respond to their [young people’s] emerging needs” (*Young Queenslanders Strategy*, p. 30). An action plan for 2024–2026 has been released (DTASIPCA, 2024), however, at the time of writing this report, there appears to have been limited implementation.

3.3 Analysis based on The Nest Wellbeing Framework

Drawing on The Nest Wellbeing Framework domains and associated wellbeing objectives (see Table 2, Section 2.3.2 above), we now provide examples of how the policy documents reviewed contribute to these domains and objectives. We predominantly focus on elements of the policies that relate specifically to children, young people, and their families.

3.3.1 Material basics

This domain is about families having sufficient material basics to meet their needs.

Access to financial stability and money for necessities

The primary focus of the *Queensland Budget 2024–25* was addressing cost-of-living challenges, with \$11.2b allocated to provide support to *all* Queenslanders with additional support for those “more vulnerable” (p1). Addressing cost-of-living pressures was not discussed specifically in relation to families and their ability to provide for their children in the *Queensland Budget 2024–25*. Although, the *Queensland Budget 2024–25* highlighted savings for eligible families via the provision of swimming lesson vouchers, funding towards transport costs for students attending non-state schools outside of the Brisbane City Council area, textbook and resource allowances for high school students, an information and communication technology subsidy for those enrolled in Distance Education, a living away from home allowance for children who need to live away from home to attend school and the \$15 million School and Community Food Relief Program. These contributions recognised the correlation between material basics and children’s ability to engage in learning.

While not specifically focused on children, *Communities 2032* speaks of a need for the Queensland Government to prioritise efforts that support Queenslanders’ financial independence:

...to ensure all Queenslanders can take control of their resources and decisions that impact their lives. *Communities 2032* will prioritise financial wellbeing assistance and deliver financial literacy, information, education, support and resilience initiatives to support individuals experiencing financial vulnerability (*Communities 2032*, p. 23).

Communities 2032 concentrates on efforts to help people take control of their resources and decisions, but does not address adequacy of financial resources or support available to families who are experiencing vulnerability and disadvantage. Unaffordable rent and low rental vacancy rates are placing families, particularly those on lower incomes, under significant financial stress, while rural and remote households are especially affected by increasing transport costs due to limited access to reliable public transport (QCOSS, 2024a). Competing financial needs also mean that families are either struggling to meet costs associated with children's schooling or neglecting health and medical needs due to out-of-pocket expenses (QCOSS, 2024a).

Access to adequate, secure, stable housing

Homes for Queenslanders recognised that young people are disadvantaged in the housing market:

Young people are often at a big disadvantage when it comes to accessing safe and affordable housing because they generally have lower incomes, insecure or part-time employment, and less rental history. We are moving to protect young people who are at risk [of] or experiencing homelessness (*Homes for Queenslanders*, p. 33).

To address this disadvantage the policy committed to more housing pathways for young people experiencing homelessness, support for young people in community housing, a youth support centre and specialist homelessness funding expansion for young people. While not mentioning children specifically, *Homes for Queenslanders* also recognised the impact of domestic and family violence (DFV) on the housing and homelessness sector. It committed to ten DFV shelters and supported accommodation options for those experiencing DFV. *Putting Queensland Kids First* also committed funding for housing including: tenancies for young parents with wraparound support (\$11.64 million); safe and secure housing for First Nations families (\$5.8 million); and housing with linked support services for young mothers and their babies (\$3.59 million). However, it is not clear if this is in addition to, or part of, the commitments made in *Homes for Queenslanders*.

Access to food and resources

Queensland Budget 2024-25 and *Equity and Excellence* both referenced the government's \$15 million investment into the School and Community Food Relief Program, which enables children to access food relief from a variety of sources including subsidised breakfasts and lunches. As well as addressing cost-of-living pressures for families, this initiative was also intended to contribute to children's physical health and enhance both their mood and engagement with learning.

LNP election commitments and recent actions related to material basics:

- Support women returning to work after children or unpaid carer work with grants for essentials like workwear, technology or training to help with the costs associated with job seeking.
- Boost home ownership options and deliver more clean water infrastructure in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.
- Establish the Cabinet Housing Ministerial Taskforce.
- Ease some of the pressure on renters and first home buyers by instructing Treasury to begin abolishing Stamp Duty on new builds for first home buyers, and allowing the recipients of the First Home Owner Grant to rent out a room without penalty.
- Approve 75 new social housing units in Toowoomba in build-to-rent scheme managed by Brisbane Housing Company and unlock church and charity-owned land for the community housing sector.

3.3.2 Participating

This domain is about children and young people being able to contribute to and participate in their communities.

Participation as a core element

While participation and being empowered to make positive life choices was a theme throughout the policies, only the *Young Queenslanders Strategy* specifically addressed the participation of children and young people. 'Participate' is a core element of the framework for empowered young Queenslanders. The *Young Queenslanders Strategy* (p. 14) suggests that the "delivery of adaptable programs and services" will support young people to "participate in the world around them through exploration and positive influence", which includes taking part in decisions that influence their lives. A core element of 'Participate' also included strengthening commitment to Truth and Treaty processes by "providing young people with the knowledge they need to actively participate... [so] their voices will be respected, valued and meaningfully actioned, allowing them to play a significant role in the collective journey towards healing and reconciliation" (*Young Queenslanders Strategy*, p. 14). The *Young Queenslanders Strategy* aligns with the vision of *Communities 2032* where Queensland's diverse communities support and empower every person to connect, participate, contribute, and thrive.

Putting Queensland Kids First strategy committed \$5.4 million to Neighbourhood Centres as a strategy for combatting the effects of isolation and loneliness on families with young children.

LNP election commitments and recent actions related participating:

- Abolish the Truth-telling and Healing Inquiry and repealed the *Path to Treaty Act 2023* (Qld). This move has been widely criticised including by the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commission, who described these actions as harmful to families and communities.
- Establish a Parliamentary Inquiry into volunteering to strengthen community participation.

3.3.3 Learning

This domain is about children and young people's engagement in education.

Children receive early childhood education and are ready to start school

The *Putting Queensland Kids First* strategy is intended to build upon the existing investment in free kindy for 4-year-olds. Through this strategy, the state government makes commitments (\$42.66 million) to the provision of Family Support Coordinators who will work with teachers and early childhood coordinators to support families with the transition to school in order to help establish patterns of attendance and engagement in learning.

Equity and Excellence emphasises the link between a successful start to schooling and lifelong wellbeing. It also recognises the important role that schools can play in partnering with families, communities and early years education to support successful transitions to school via the provision of "integrated and wrap-around support" (*Equity and Excellence*, p. 12).

Children and young people succeed at school

Equity and Excellence (p. 14) suggests that “education is a truly equalising force – sometimes the best chance for vulnerable children to emerge into adulthood with positive choices and opportunities”. The policy aims to lift educational outcomes for all students “no matter their background, circumstances, or postcode... [this policy] is about reducing barriers for all learners” (*Equity and Excellence*, p. 6). *Equity and Excellence* recognises the importance of schools to the lives and wellbeing of children and young people, and espouses the “genuine collaboration” between schools, families and communities is needed to ensure that all children have access to the best education. It promotes whole-of-government partnerships and place-based approaches that “empower school communities to respond to unique challenges” (*Equity and Excellence*, p. 23). The policy seeks to deliver “integrated responses and educational precincts” including integrated school-based hub models that provide a suite of support services to children and their families.

The *Putting Queensland Kids First* strategy commits \$67.33 million to providing behaviour specialists in primary schools to support better learning engagement. The *Community Safety Plan* highlighted the link between school disengagement and youth offending. To address this, the policy proposes a \$288 million education engagement package that included FlexiSpaces in schools,⁴ specialised alternative learning programs run by NGOs in certain regions and expanding the Queensland Pathways State College. The policy also invests in student wellbeing via the Queensland GPs in Schools program to reduce barriers to accessing healthcare that improve wellbeing and school engagement.

Young people participate in further education and training

The *Young Queenslanders Strategy* (p. 18) commits to delivering educational and learning opportunities that lead “to a diverse range of responsive occupational pathways and evolving positive transitions from school to work”.

LNP election commitments and recent actions related to learning:

- More Teachers, Better Education policy which includes more speech and occupational therapy, anti-bullying campaigns and more teachers and resources.
- Fund programs to boost health and education standards for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Queenslanders.
- Providing a differentiated and person-centred education space for vulnerable, marginalised and at-risk young people.

⁴ FlexiSpaces are inclusive, high-quality, in-school alternative learning settings for students at risk or who are showing early signs of disengagement from education. They are staffed with qualified teachers who provide flexible and individualised support to students who facing challenges in a normal schooling environment (Farmer, 2024).

3.3.4 Healthy

This domain relates to the factors shaping children's emotional, physical and mental health.

Newborns and infants are given the best start

Putting Queensland Kids First strategy provides funding to support pregnancies including health-risk, sustained home-visiting and antenatal support, as well as providing parents with essentials for “thriving babies”.

Parents and carers are supported to maintain their own health

Putting Queensland Kids First strategy makes commitments to enhancing mental health support for parents (\$10.4 million) and to expanding weekly text messaging to support parental wellbeing and child development (\$4.1 million).

Children and young people have good physical health and receive appropriate support for their physical health needs

HealthQ32 identified children in or at risk of entering out-of-home care as a priority population.

Putting Queensland Kids First strategy provides funding for enhanced child health developmental checks for children under five years, as well as improved hearing screening and diagnostic services. It also commits to identifying and responding to developmental delays as early as possible because to help children “transition to school with confidence and to prepare them for the best future outcomes” (*Putting Queensland Kids First*, p. 28).

Children and young people have good mental health and receive appropriate support for their mental health needs

Better Care Together recognises the need for mental health care across a person's life, and specifically notes the importance of support for children and young people. It commits to developing and expanding treatment and support for children and young people via a number of strategies including bolstering existing services, establishing new psychosis services with a focus on early detection, new acute response teams to respond to suicidality and mental health crises, new acute hospital beds, more community-based supports, a new model of service in regional areas and enhanced treatment options for alcohol and other drugs. *Better Care Together* also seeks to strengthen responses to complexity by working with other agencies and expanding existing forensic mental health services for young people at risk of youth justice involvement.

LNP election commitments and recent actions related to healthy:

- Free vision, hearing, and speech development checks for children in kindergarten to help identify health and developmental issues before kids' learning falls behind.
- Investing in new youth mental health support 'Step Up, Step Down' services.
- Stop pill testing for Schoolies on the Gold Coast.
- Assess current staffing levels across all regional Queensland maternity services to identify and understand gaps.

3.3.5 Identity and culture

This domain is about children and young people feeling connected to their culture and safe to express their identity and beliefs.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people feel supported in their cultural identity and spiritual wellbeing

Putting Queensland Kids First strategy commits \$15 million towards a partnership fund for non-government organisations and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled organisations.

Equity and Excellence (p. 12) espouses a priority to “support every Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander student to realise their potential” and recognises that at “each stage of learning...connections to culture enrich the learning of every student and strengthens all of our work”.

The *Young Queenslanders Strategy* purports to provide:

opportunities to embrace strengths-based language and the stories and practices shared by First Nations young people. It aims to support them as they exercise their right to belong to community and to freely determine their own development, as they build generational skills on Country and drive change in their local communities. Being part of a community and having shared aspirations with the people around us can foster a sense of connection, togetherness, and belonging. Finding our place in the world provides meaning in our lives and allows us to be part of something bigger than ourselves (*Young Queenslanders Strategy*, p. 26)

Children, young people and their families feel safe and supported in expressing their identity, culture and spiritual beliefs

The *Young Queenslanders Strategy* (p. 11) aspires to build “more inclusive communities” in which “young people have the space and opportunity to explore their individual identities and reflect on how their experiences, relationships and backgrounds can influence their lives”. As discussed in section 3.2.2, this was the only strategy that specifically discussed intersectionality and prioritised the development of young people’s identity capital.

LNP election commitments and recent actions related to identity and culture:

- Abolish the Truth-telling and Healing Inquiry and repealed the Path to Treaty Act 2023 (Qld). This move has been widely criticised including by the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commission, who described these actions as harmful to families and communities.
- Pause on hormone therapy for public patients under the age of 18 and instigate a clinical review into the provision of paediatric gender therapies.

3.3.6 Valued, loved and safe

This domain is about children and young people having positive relationships that give them a sense of being valued and safe within their families and communities. It considers environment, climate and safety.

Families meet the needs of their children and young people

Putting Queensland Kids First strategy includes \$2.04 million for early intervention programs to support families experiencing complex challenges.

Communities are safe places for children and young people

The policies reviewed tended to focus on the safety of Queensland community members in general, rather than the safety of children specifically. Indeed, *Community Safety Plan* specifically positions young people, particularly those from “disadvantaged backgrounds” as a risk to the community’s safety:

some young people in Queensland don’t have hope for their future. They don’t feel connected, they don’t feel cared for and they don’t have adults they can rely on. They may be growing up in homes where there is violence and dysfunction. This is not just a risk for them, it is a risk for all of us. The consequences of youth crime can be disastrous. If the warning signs are not seen and acted upon, people get hurt (*Community Safety Plan*, p. 5)

To address the “root causes” of youth crime, *Community Safety Plan* made commitments to addressing domestic and family violence, building new youth detention centres, expanding targeted interventions to stop recidivism and delivering programs and case management to help address the underlying causes of youth offending.

Environment and climate

Almost all policies had little to no focus on protecting the environment and climate for children and young people’s futures. An exception was the *Young Queenslanders Strategy*, which asserts that it:

harnesses opportunities for young people to play their part in building climate resilient, inclusive, and cohesive communities that are equipped to adapt to our ever-changing physical and digital worlds; a community where everyone works together towards a brighter future (*Young Queenslanders Strategy*, p. 26).

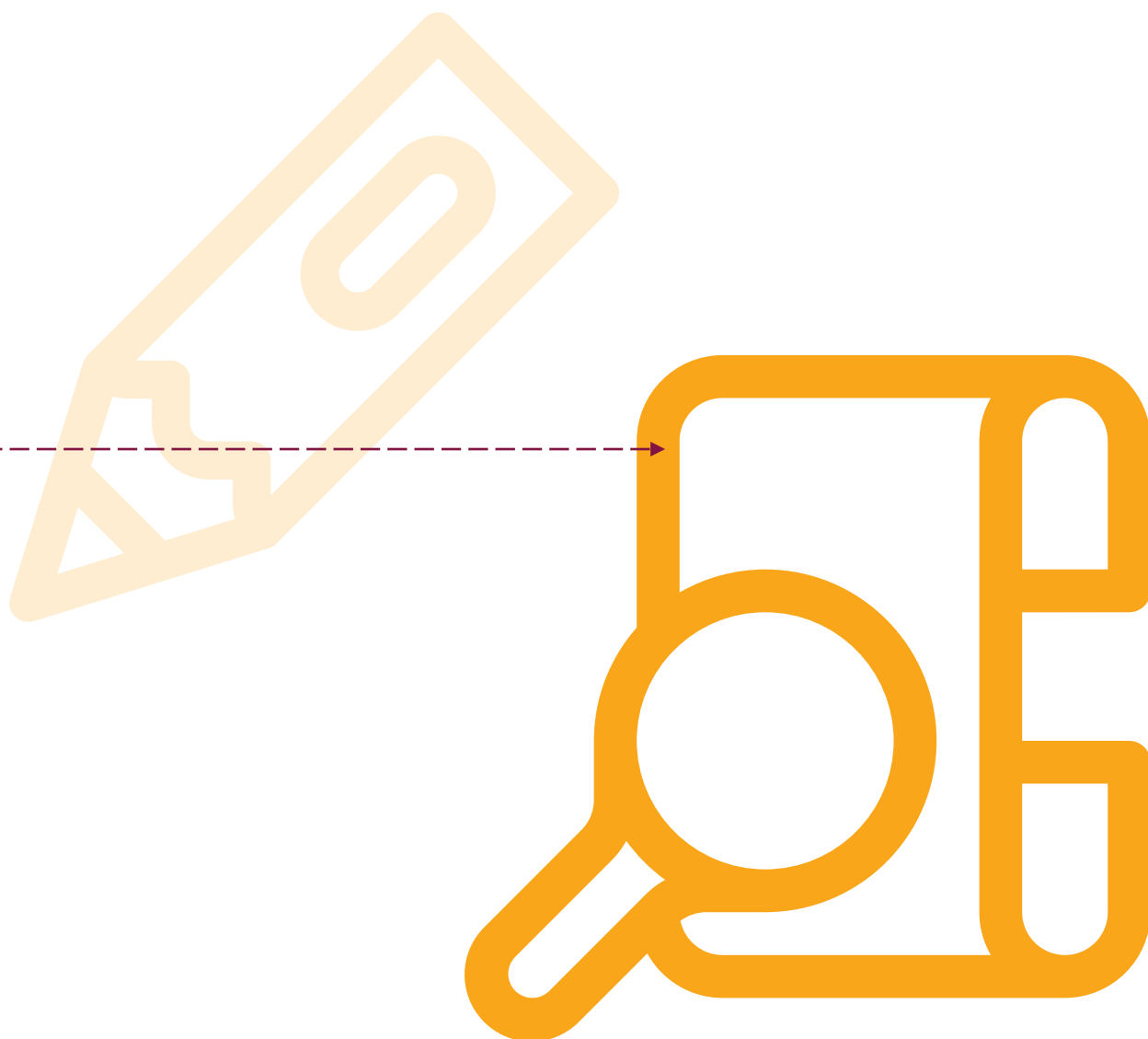
LNP election commitments and recent actions related to valued, loved and safe:

- Since being elected, the LNP Government has enacted the Making Queensland Safer Act 2024. Many submissions, including from QCOSS, several QCOSS members, and the QFCC have raised concerns about the new legislation, highlighting that it goes against current evidence on reducing offending, and will harm some of the most vulnerable children and young people in Queensland, disproportionately impacting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people and those young people with a disability.
- Open tenders for the Regional Reset and Staying On Track youth crime programs.
- Establish Gold Standard Early Intervention Policy for community-led initiatives focused on reducing crime and enhancing learning and employment.
- Establish a working group with those who have experienced domestic, family, and sexual violence to identify current system gaps and opportunities for reform.

3.4 Conclusion

We reviewed ten over-arching Queensland policy and strategy documents, released by the previous Labor Government. Our review has shown that despite recognition of the need to support children and young people, this cohort are frequently overlooked in key policies, which are predominantly community and/or adult focused and siloed. Children's wellbeing is often not considered holistic and connected to that of their family members. While equity, inclusion, empowerment and self-determination were commonly espoused goals, there was a notable lack of consideration regarding how disadvantage and vulnerability can negatively impact on the life chances of children, young people and their families. Where children are considered, being responsive to their needs was framed in terms of reducing future burdens on society (i.e., diverting people away from tertiary systems) or enhancing the capability and productivity of the future workforce, rather than on simply enhancing the wellbeing of children in the present.

The Queensland policy landscape is currently in a state of flux, as the new LNP government is still in the process of releasing the details of their policies. While some election commitments and recent actions of the new LNP government suggest there may be cause of optimism, there is still a lot of work to be done to ensure a holistic approach to improving the lives of many of Queensland's children, young people, and their families. When determining how best to improve outcomes for vulnerable and disadvantaged children and young people in Queensland, it will be important to take these changes into account.



4. STAKEHOLDER PERSPECTIVES

This chapter reports on the findings from the semi-structured interviews with key state government policy makers (*policy stakeholders*), focus groups with community services organisations (*community service stakeholders*), and a focus group held with young people (*youth stakeholders*).

KEY POINTS



All stakeholders suggested that the resources and services currently available to the sector are inadequate to achieve equity of access with and for disadvantaged children and young people.



Gaps in social service delivery, particularly in regional and remote regions, are due to a range of systemic factors (e.g., workforce availability, geographical restrictions, and funding silos).



Addressing these requires investment at all levels of the social service system, including schools, local community, and government service providers alongside state-level policies and systems.



Stakeholders particularly identified the need for:

- **material basics**
- **earlier support**
- **holistic responses**
- **sustained collaboration**
- **a quality workforce**
- **community-driven initiatives**
- **choice**
- **evidence-informed approaches**



Suggestions for system improvement include:

- **asking children and their families how best to deliver and structure services**
- **stronger cross-sector collaborations and partnerships**
- **peak bodies should develop shared priorities and advocacy goals that represent collective community needs**
- **the state government should take primary responsibility for funding programs and reforming policies to address unmet needs.**

This phase of the data collection and analysis (see Section 1.2 for overview of the method) aimed to understand these stakeholders' view of the opportunities and gaps within the current system, as well as insights and suggestions for how the community social services sector can help achieve better outcomes for children, young people, and families across Queensland. The focus group with young people provided key insights into whether the priorities and recommendations developed through the research aligned with the views and perspectives of children and young people in Queensland.

4.1 Queensland Government policy stakeholders

Three semi-structured interviews were undertaken with four policy stakeholders from four state government departments in September and November 2024. A fifth state government department provided a written response to the interview questions in December 2024. Policy stakeholders provided insights and perspectives in relation to what they viewed as working well across their departments and portfolios, and where they saw the gaps with regards to support for children, young people and families experiencing vulnerability.

4.1.1 Material basics

Policy stakeholders all acknowledged that the current cost-of-living is creating a real and pressing concern for Queensland families. They reported that for those most disadvantaged, this lack of material basics impacted on their engagement in other systems such as education and health.

So more and more families are living closer to the breadline and suffering or feeling financial pressures. That, of course, brings with it a whole flow on effect of things right through to domestic and family violence and the lack of social services and then not being able to I guess support their children to engage with education in the most positive way that they can as well...the number of those are increasing significantly. Not just in some low socioeconomic areas but really across the board. (Policy Stakeholder, INT03)

Policy stakeholders also noted that some families who may be experiencing a lack of material basics are not always adequately supported as they are not necessarily identified in the current system due to departmental silos. For instance, services providing health or education support to a family may not register that the family is also experiencing housing instability.

I think the issue that we have is that sometimes the measures that we use are not that exacting... people in that category [of vulnerability and disadvantage] are not necessarily showing up in the full range of systems we have across government. (Policy Stakeholder, INT04)

Some policy stakeholders discussed that information about families experiencing vulnerability and disadvantage may not necessarily be shared between different portfolios, due to the departmental structure of the state government system. Others highlighted that unless families are experiencing extreme disadvantage, they may not be picked up at all. This was noted as a gap within the current system:

Those are the people we can identify. If we're not doing better for them, then the latent need, or the need that we can't necessarily see, we're never going to be able to properly support... those young people and families interacting with other parts of the system: police, DFV, justice, and the risk of homelessness. (Policy Stakeholder, INT04)

Overall, a key theme from the policy stakeholder interviews was that while there was widespread recognition across government of the impact of material disadvantage on the wellbeing of vulnerable children and families, holistic responses were hampered by the lack of whole of government response to material disadvantage. There was acknowledgment that this negatively impacts on children and families' equity of access to needed resources and services.

4.1.2 Participating

Policy stakeholders recognised the importance of community engagement and co-design of policy initiatives. One policy stakeholder described a recent co-design process undertaken with a rural community. They noted that:

It's not aimed at children and young people necessarily. But because it is a whole of community approach it picks that up... all of the points that we typically make about it needing to be community led for it to be successful, is something that I think still rings true. (Policy Stakeholder, INT04)

While policy stakeholders support community involvement in policy design, they did not discuss how or when they engaged children and young people as stakeholders in decision-making in relation to the portfolios for which they were responsible. However, they did note the need to work collaboratively across agencies and departments, with one policy stakeholder highlighting that they:

...have a responsibility for working very closely with [other] agencies. We like to use the word 'partner' with the agencies. (Policy Stakeholder, INT01)

This, as another policy stakeholder noted, was essential given children, young people, and their families who are experiencing vulnerability and disadvantage often interact with multiple government departments.

But it's that cohort that are touching up against all of our systems, that we know continue to touch up against all of our systems. So they are children whose families are already in contact with police and the justice system, who are experiencing DFV [domestic and family violence], who are experiencing economic disadvantage, who then have incredibly negative experiences with education because of developmental delays and disabilities, who then have terrible experiences with child safety because of abuse and neglect, who then find themselves in contact with youth justice.

I know that this isn't a linear trajectory, but you know the children and families I'm talking about, and there's these ongoing intersecting drivers of disadvantage that I think if we can get it right, and I know that it requires a whole of government, whole of sector integrated response, then not only will we provide those children with an opportunity that they don't currently have, but we'll also relieve pressure against the broader system so it can respond better to other clients...but who also need supports and services. Because, at the moment, when we look to our mental health supports, to our housing supports and so on, they are going to those who are most at need and there's a whole raft who are potentially not being provided with responses because of finite resources". (Policy Stakeholder, INT02)

As this stakeholder identifies, for many disadvantaged Queenslanders, the challenges they face are not limited to one domain such as mental health or domestic and family violence but rather to a combination of pressures. Each of these disadvantages and challenges has flow-on effects, compounding the impact of disadvantage. For example, lack of access to affordable, sustainable and appropriate housing limits children's opportunities to engage with school and this in turn can contribute to poorer training and employment opportunities.

Stakeholders noted that school is a core system that impacts on children's wellbeing particularly for children and families who need additional support.

Schools are often one of the stable factors in a young person's life. Schools are really good at wrapping support around young people and providing support to families as well. (Policy Stakeholder, INT03)

Stakeholders identified that schools needed to partner more effectively with the community services sector. Reflecting on emerging policy directions, a stakeholder stated:

[A new position was] put in place [in regional locations] really to work with other agencies about how do we work together to support our young people in a school setting but outside of a school setting as well. We're seeing a willingness to do that more. (Policy Stakeholder, INT03)

If you're going to go to people, maybe if you're on campus at schools you're not going to get the kids that aren't already going to school. But you will at least get those kids who are turning up to school. (Policy Stakeholder, INT04)

However, despite a willingness to support schools to provide better support to children and families, stakeholders reported challenges at implementation:

But they can't do it alone. Across government, we do need to connect - like connecting services and working - those services working together to provide holistic support is certainly something that we could do a lot better... I do think that there's a way for us to go as far as connected government services to provide holistic support to families and young people. (Policy Stakeholder, INT03)

A key challenge of implementing more holistic school-based support for children and families centred on the need for greater connection across government agencies.

4.1.3 Healthy

Stakeholders recognised that demand for health services—both physical and mental health—currently outstrips the supply. Several stakeholders noted that health and mental health services were often not readily available in regional areas, that schools are unable to provide the intensive mental health supports needed for some children and young people, and that there are workforce shortages resulting in extended gap periods in regional areas.

The demand for holistic responses relating health to other areas, including material basics, was raised by several policy stakeholders. There was recognition of the need for:

...system policy... doing that horizon scan of the gaps in [Queensland state government] policy and looking at how we can either [fill] those gaps or improve on the policies that we have. (Policy Stakeholder, INT04)

Policy stakeholders suggested that this required more strategic and holistic work between different departments and portfolios:

...a lot of what system policy in my division is focussed on is about the interface between health and every other social service. Whether that's child safety, youth justice, disability, aged care, housing, those services supporting people at risk of homelessness. (Policy Stakeholder, INT04)

This, policy stakeholders argued, could be better enhanced and supported by linked data, including health data,

...to ensure you have complete information about the child or young person to be able to provide the most appropriate treatment. (Policy Stakeholder, INT04)

Improved data linking could assist policy makers to gain a better understanding of the features and needs of children and young people experiencing disadvantage and other vulnerabilities. Data linkage can also provide insights into the effectiveness of responses, particularly the types and timing of responses to maximise impact.

4.1.4 Identity and culture

For the most part, policy stakeholders did not discuss cultural safety. It is important to note that the interviewees were not specifically asked about how the state government addresses identity and culture within their policy domains. However, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples were often raised as a key priority group, with the need for cultural safety implied in many of the comments. One policy stakeholder put forth an example of where wellbeing funding had been pooled between schools to address cultural needs:

Schools can also think creatively about how they can use that [wellbeing] money. It was in [location name] actually, that I met with the principal and they said [to me], 'Look, we've got six students in care and five of them are Indigenous. A school down the road has got 10 and seven of those are Indigenous. We want to use, like pool, a big chunk of the funding that we've both got and employ a First Nations person to generally - like not token cultural sort of activities or whatever - but really genuine cultural connection. They did that together as a bit of a group. They really saw the value in that as well. (Policy Stakeholder, INT03)

This quote highlights that flexibility in resource distribution alongside discretion by social service providers may allow for cultural needs to be met.

4.1.5 Valued, loved and safe

A key theme raised by policy stakeholders was that young people may not feel safe to engage with government social services. For instance, some policy stakeholders felt that young people may not engage with government services, such as health services, if they had experience or involvement with other statutory services, such as Child Safety or Youth Justice. This may then contribute to the further detriment of their health and wellbeing outcomes, particularly if those health needs were not identified and addressed appropriately.

One policy stakeholder suggested that some social services may need to avoid government branding on their buildings, for government staff to provide outreach services within the community, or for government services to partner with other organisations or schools to increase their legitimacy and better engage children and young people.

The reality is that to get better outcomes for the cohort we're talking about, we need to go to them, and in plainclothes and in a less than bombastic fashion, and to tolerate all of the almost inflamed behaviour that some kids can have when they've experienced trauma and just sit in that storm for a minute to be able to engage with them and their families. That's a hard ask for clinicians. (Policy Stakeholder, INT04)

4.2 Queensland community service organisations

Eleven (11) focus groups with 56 non-government community service stakeholders from 47 QCOSS member organisations were conducted during October and November 2024. Further information regarding the characteristics of these stakeholders can be found in Appendix A-1. This section draws on their insights and provides suggestions for how the community service sector can help achieve better outcomes for children, young people, and families across Queensland. Community service stakeholders provided insights and perspectives during the focus groups in relation to what they viewed as working well and where they saw the gaps.

4.2.1 Material basics

What is working well?

A theme emerging from the focus groups was that children, young people, and their families who had access to material basics were able to better engage with community services. Community service stakeholders noted that providing these material basics had significant positive impact, but was only possible where they had appropriate funding and managerial support to respond

What are the gaps?

Several community service stakeholders highlighted that they faced increasing demand to provide material basics such as food, clothing, and school uniforms and supplies to children and young people, regardless of whether this was within the scope or funding of their service. Community service stakeholders explained that they prioritised these material basics because they saw these as fundamental material needs that needed to be provided first before children and young people could engage in other life contexts, such as school. They provided specific examples of needs such as young people exiting juvenile detention and not having access to school uniforms, young people needing access to school lunches, or young people not willing to return to their homes as they felt unsafe.

4.2.2 Participating

What is working well?

There was consensus that the voices of children, young people, and their families should be included and prioritised in decision making about the community service programs that are designed to support them. They acknowledged that there has already been an increased recognition by government and non-government agencies of including “the voice of the child” within their sector. They asserted that children and young people need a more active voice, from a younger age, in determining their futures. Community service stakeholders stated that children and young people’s voices should be “front and centre”, with their voice(s) driving social support options. Examples were shared about how children and young people’s voices were being incorporated into community service provision, with some organisations describing how they encourage youth engagement to inform and shape their services. This included youth councils, such as the Solid Voices Youth Council formed by the Queensland Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Protection Peak (QATSICPP).

At a service response level, community service stakeholders commented that engaging with children and young people at an early stage had a positive impact, recognising the resilience and capability of children to identify what they need. As one community services stakeholder commented: “voices under 12 are capable”. They expressed a need for both community and government services to “have a child lens”, where children and young people have influence and choice, rather than services being driven by top-down policy agendas. Community service stakeholders provided examples of hubs which had been purposefully co-designed by young people to create a feeling of safety.

What are the gaps?

Community service stakeholders identified that it was more difficult for young people to participate in decision-making in statutory contexts such as Child Protection. Specifically, they observed that high rates of workforce turnover created situations where children and young people had to repeatedly tell their stories to statutory authorities. This was perceived to contribute to a lack of connection, poor relationship-building with these authorities, decreased engagement in decision-making about their lives, and a lack of continuity of service provision. All these factors—connection, relationship-building, engagement in decision making, and continuity of service provision—were reported as necessary for both young people's successful engagement with service providers and improved wellbeing.

4.2.3 Learning

What is working well?

Community service stakeholders consistently identified schools as a core environment in the lives of Queensland's children and young people. It was suggested that schools are a potential first point of contact to identify developmental vulnerability, physical and mental health needs, and to make appropriate referrals to external providers. The community service stakeholders reported that for many of the children and young people they worked with, school represented a stable and safe environment.

Several community service stakeholders reported that alternative models of education such as flexi-schools were working well in their local areas. There was consensus among community service stakeholders that flexi-schools are needed. They were considered spaces of safety for disadvantaged children and young people where alternate ways of being and learning fostered engagement. Remote alternative engagement programs for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people that promoted cultural safety, connection and reconnection to learning were also considered to be working. School programs that provided material basics, such as school breakfast and school food initiatives, were considered to be working and were well received in their communities but stakeholders said they needed to be extended.

Community service stakeholders also gave examples of how they sought to improve the school engagement. For example, some stakeholders described community bail services that supported children leaving detention to obtain school uniforms.

What are the gaps?

Community service stakeholders noted that educational opportunities were limited in outer regional and remote areas. They reported that several regional and remote areas offered only primary schooling, or high school up to Year 10, with no opportunities to engage locally in higher education (e.g. TAFE). This dearth of educational opportunities was said to create ongoing disadvantage. For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people, having to leave Country to continue their schooling—sometimes thousands of kilometres away—often resulted in disengagement with formal education in favour of returning home. There was also concern that many schools across the state were favouring punitive approaches, rather than operating in a trauma-informed manner that focused on maintaining engagement with children and young people who may be experiencing different forms of vulnerability and disadvantage.

Community service stakeholders highlighted that formal education is a key safe space and, once children and young people disengaged from it, they may not be able to obtain much needed supports. Community service stakeholders noted that many of these disengaged children and young people only became 'visible' again upon interaction with the youth justice system. Stakeholders also reported that representatives from the state education department were not always present at multi-sector forums and meetings, which made it challenging to raise these concerns at a state policy level.

4.2.4 Healthy

What is working well?

Several community service stakeholders indicated that local 'hubs' were effective in providing holistic support to children, young people, and their families, particularly in regional and remote areas. At these Community or Neighbourhood Centres physical and mental health services, as well as other social services, are co-located and there is a single access point to a range of supports. This meant that presenting children, young people, and their families could have a range of needs addressed. The co-located services had established relationships with the other social service providers in the building, could collaborate, make 'gentle referrals' and provide dove-tailed supports. Community service stakeholders reported that drop-in, out-of-hours access to these community centres provided an option for children and young people to get off the street and to safety. They reported that they were less confronting places for young people to seek support at times of vulnerability or risk. They suggested that there may not be the same shame and stigma attached to accessing a community building that there might be to accessing a "branded government service".

Community service stakeholders also mentioned that programs like school-based GPs, guidance officers, therapists, and social workers could potentially identify these developmental needs. Some community service stakeholders gave examples of schools becoming increasingly focused on the broader health and wellbeing of children and young people, however they reported this was dependent on individual geographic areas and individual school priorities.

What are the gaps?

Community service stakeholders reported increasingly long waitlists for children and young people to access mental health provision, including from child and youth specific services such as the Child and Youth Mental Health Service (CYMHS) and Headspace. Long waitlists and/or limited availability were particularly noted to be present in regional areas and, in some instances, there was reportedly no mental health provision. The community service stakeholders commented on the flow on effects of this lack of access to health and mental health services to other domains of children's wellbeing. For example, not diagnosing disability and mental health conditions in children in regional settings was perceived to impact on how they were treated and managed in schools, leading to children and young people being excluded or becoming involved in other systems such as child protection and/or youth justice. Where there was health and mental health services available, access was reportedly complicated and often burdensome to their clients.

4.2.5 Identity and culture

What is working well?

Community service stakeholders acknowledged the importance of cultural safety within services for children and young people. Representatives from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-led organisations remarked on the success of Aboriginal Community-Controlled Organisations targeted community services in terms of improving cultural safety. They attributed these programs' success to the fact that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people were able to remain on Country with their families and communities while accessing services which enabled them to maintain connection to their cultural identity. These children and young people had access to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff who were local to their communities, had knowledge of local needs and circumstances, could work with family, and used whole-of-community engagement strategies and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ways of knowing in their work to engage children and young people.

What are the gaps?

As noted above, community service stakeholders reflected that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people having to leave Country to continue their schooling often led to disconnection from culture, leading to disengagement with formal education in favour of returning home. This meant local community members were unable to pursue the higher education required for certain professions desperately needed in the area, such as teaching, nursing, and midwifery. Several community service stakeholders suggested that all community services organisations as well as government agencies should consider and review how they recruit, train, and support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff across Queensland.

Community service stakeholders from community-controlled organisations also highlighted that while they wanted to collaborate with mainstream services, doing so could jeopardise their future funding due to the competitive nature of funding. They reflected on how this created barriers for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, young people and families wanting to access culturally responsive services.

4.2.6 Valued, loved and safe

What is working well?

For many of the community service stakeholders, providing safe spaces and places for children and young people was a priority. As noted above, community service stakeholders shared examples of community service hubs that had been co-designed with young people. These hubs were designed to create a sense of safety and accessibility; these hubs had none or minimal branding, comfortable furnishings, encouraged drop-in attendance, and were made attractive to young people through the facilities on offer (e.g. table tennis). Community service stakeholders explained that these spaces were successful because they offered food and recreational activities that appealed to young people.

These community spaces reportedly started their service engagement by providing material basics to address immediate needs; young people could then focus on broader and/or future needs such as education and employment. Having a safe space available after hours was recognised as imperative for children and young people experiencing vulnerability and disadvantage. Community service stakeholders reported that young people who feel unsafe at home require safe spaces where they can drop into late into the evening, rather than “roaming the streets” where they were typically picked up by local police.

Many community service stakeholders also reported that when the children and young people they worked with felt unsafe in their home environments, school provided a safe and stable environment. When alternative or flexible school systems were available, the community service stakeholders explained, children and young people at risk of disengaging with education were more likely to attend school, creating opportunities for other challenges, such as health and mental health issues, to be addressed.

What are the gaps?

Community service stakeholders highlighted the need to address safety across all levels of children and young people's environments, including their family, their community, and broader social systems. They recognised that without addressing these broader needs, children and young people did not feel safe, nor were they able to thrive. Within family environments, community service stakeholders reported safety needs related to lack of material basics, including housing insecurity, food insecurity, exposure to family and domestic violence, drug and alcohol use, poor mental health, and gambling.

At the community level, stakeholders noted issues around the lack of available safe community spaces, and poor accessibility to local services, particularly in regional and remote areas. System-wide safety issues that were perceived by the community service stakeholders included safe and affordable housing, funding restrictions on service provisions, and availability of a quality workforce. Feeling unsafe, the community service stakeholders explained, alongside 'othering' framing of their experiences, meant that children and young people often struggled to feel loved and valued in their homes and communities. Community service stakeholders suggested that the framing of children and young people in the media reinforced this polarisation and othering.

Community service stakeholders reflected that there had been an increase in trauma-informed approaches across the community services sector in Queensland and these were being implemented well in some contexts. However, they reported that there were still gaps in certain domains, including schooling, police, and correctional settings. A trauma lens was perceived as one way of framing a common understanding of the causes of the certain behaviours expressed by some children and young people, and thus helpful in creating a safe space where the child or young person could begin to thrive.

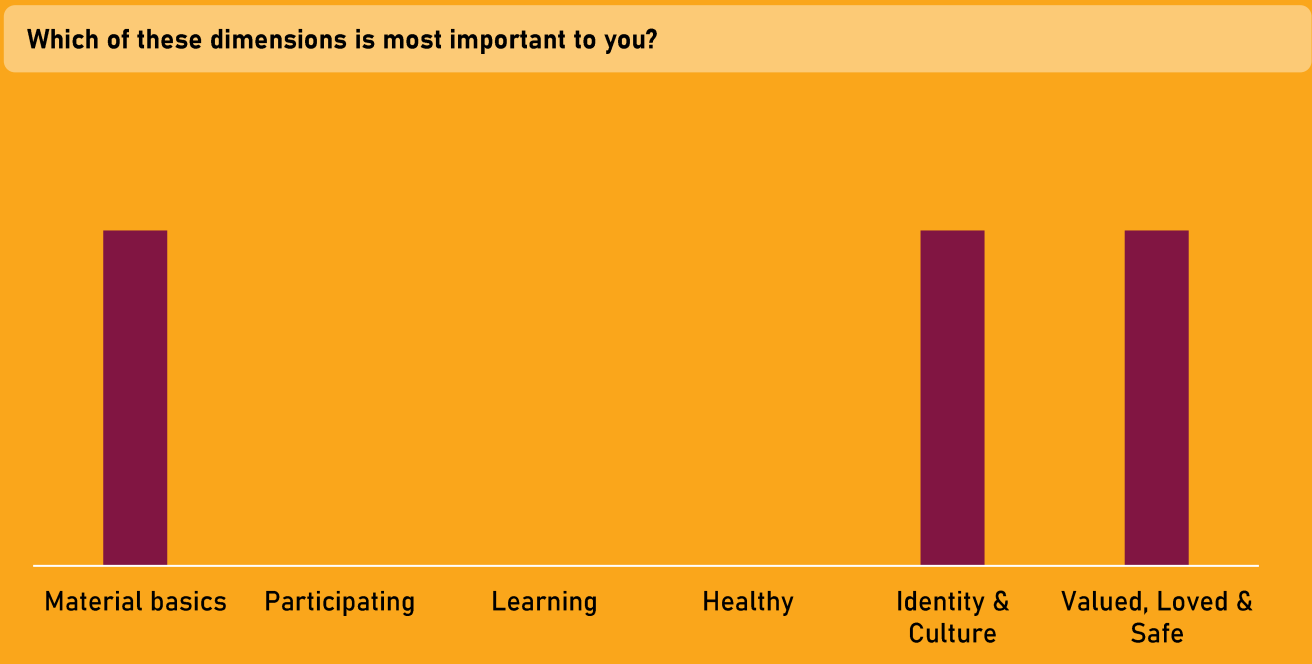


4.3 Queensland youth stakeholders

A focus group was held online with six young Queenslanders in February 2025. The participants were aged between 15 and 20, and were predominately located in the Greater Brisbane area, although one participant did join from a regional area. The focus group aimed to obtain young people's perspectives and insights into the draft policy priorities and recommendations developed from the policy analysis, policy stakeholder perspectives, and community service stakeholder perspectives. The questions posed in the focus group can be found in Appendix A-3.

Participants were first asked to rank which of the six domains from The Nest Wellbeing Framework was most important to them. Participants identified material basics, identity and culture, and valued, loved and safe as the most important domains for them (see Figure 2: Most important dimension for youth stakeholders). The discussion then focused on the recommendations relating to the draft policy priorities and recommendations for these domains. The focus group concluded with a brief discussion of three multidimensional policy priorities (see Section 4.3.7).

Figure 2: Most important dimension for youth stakeholders



4.3.1 Material basics

The youth stakeholders indicated that a Housing First approach, alongside school and community-based food programs would have significant impact on children and young people in Queensland (see Figure 3). Providing higher rates of income support was also considered to have a lot of impact, however housing was seen as the most important of the three options (see Figure 4). As one youth stakeholder noted:

It's hard to be healthy without having the material basics and the financial means to sustain it. Same with learning and same with the ability to participate in your community and stuff. Because if you're so focused on getting [the basics] then you're not able to engage and participate out because you just don't have the time to. (Youth Stakeholder, YP05)

Youth stakeholders particularly stressed the importance of safe, secure, and affordable housing. An unstable or insecure home environment, particularly if it is subject to housing distress, can have knock-on effects for other areas of a child or young person's life, such as engagement with education systems.

With regards to housing, it can be really important for young people and their families, especially with the crazy housing market and shortages, to have accessible housing. What happens in the home can have direct impact to how young people show up to school, community etc. (Youth Stakeholder, YP06)

However, youth stakeholders were quick to stress the need for unconditional housing policies, such as Housing First. This was explicitly linked by youth stakeholders to providing opportunities for children, young people, and their families to disrupt cycles of poverty and disadvantage.

[I prioritised] providing housing. But like, all without conditions. Because maybe someone might have had a previous issue with drugs or alcohol, but now they're generally trying to make their life better, and if everyone just bases it off 'judging a book by its cover', if maybe they've been two [or] three weeks clean, but it might still be in their system or something, it's just not fair if they're getting shut out, but they generally are trying to make a change. (Youth Stakeholder, YP03).



Figure 3: Impact of policy priorities on children and young people relating to material basics

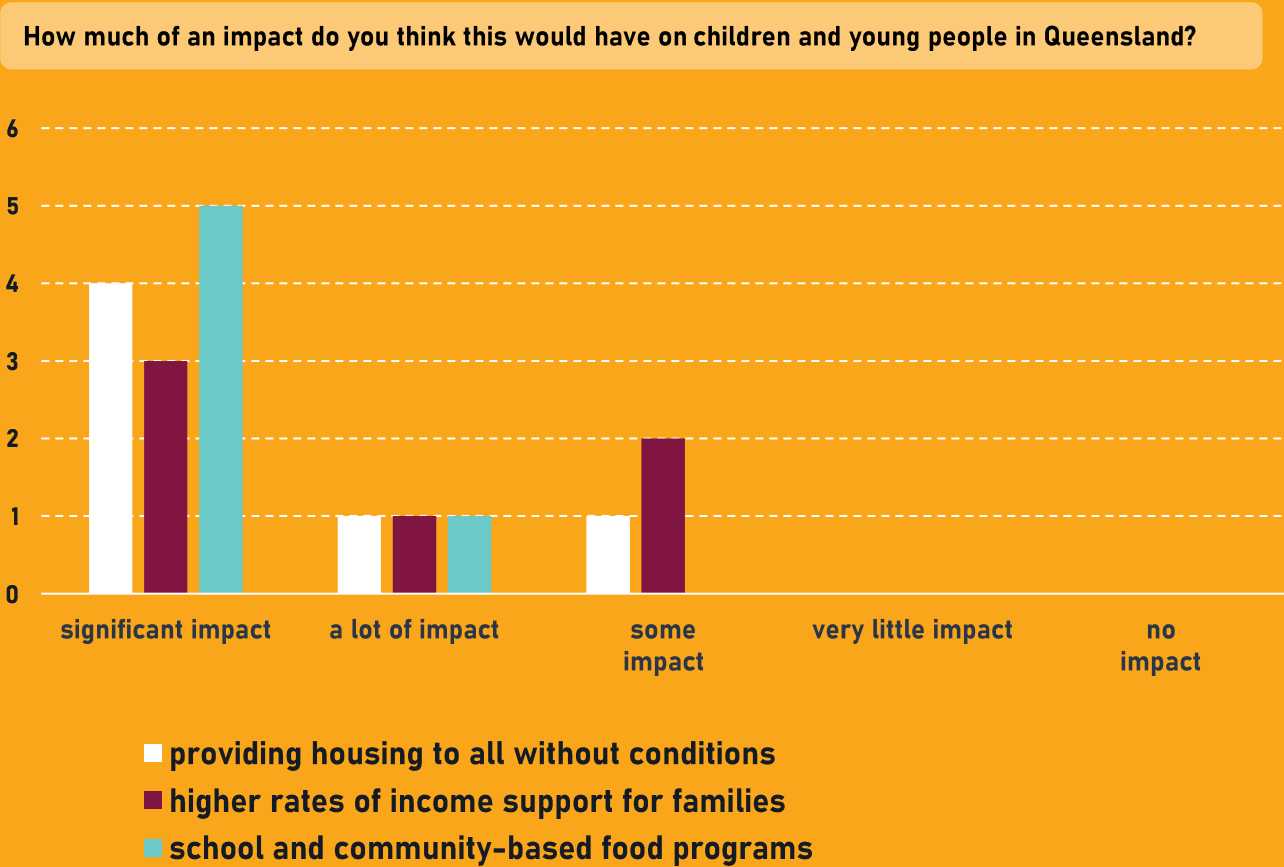


Figure 4: Ranking of priorities relating to material basics by youth stakeholders



4.3.2 Participating

Although the domain of participating was not one of the domains directly engaged with during the focus group, youth stakeholders frequently identified the intersecting and overlapping nature of the domains underpinning The Nest Wellbeing Framework (see Section 2.3.2). One youth stakeholder discussed how school-based food programs not only helped to provide material basics to children and young people experiencing vulnerability and disadvantage but also helped to create a sense of community and engagement, which relates to both the domain of 'participating' but also 'valued, loved and safe' (see Section 4.3.6).

So at my school... on one morning each week, they'd make sure that there was like a morning food program. So kids could have food in the mornings... I do think it had a very big impact, even on kids where food insecurity wasn't as much of a concern. Just having that getting together, gathering for food in the morning, got kids together and made them more happy to start the school day. And I think like just having that kind of brought that sense of community and also helps the kids where food insecurity was a big issue as well.
(Youth Stakeholder, YP05)

Similarly, youth stakeholders discussed the "importance of having youth in discussions about youth" (Youth Stakeholder, YP05) and young people having a voice in decisions that affected them, and how closely this was linked to feeling valued. As one youth stakeholder explained:

...if you don't feel valued in the first place, then your voice isn't going to feel valued either. (Youth Stakeholder, YP02)

Youth stakeholders also raised the importance of considering gender, sexual, and neuro diversity in each policy, especially as it can be "overlooked" and "is missed if it's not explicitly stated as being a point" (Youth Stakeholder, YP01).

4.3.3 Learning

As with participating, youth stakeholders drew explicit connections between the impact that policy priorities and recommendations in one wellbeing domain had on other wellbeing domains. Lack of material basics, such as access to sufficient and nutritious food, prevented some children and young people from actively engaging in education.

I think that consistently, issues that we're seeing in schools is that kids don't have food, they don't have access to food, they don't have the opportunity to even have a conversation about there being food available or not available because it's too embarrassing to talk about, which then means they're not able to engage in education, but they're also lethargic, and they're not happy, and they're lashing out, and that sort of thing. (Youth Stakeholder, YP01)

Education about different cultures was also raised as vital for the understanding and acceptance cultural difference.

It was really hard to change people's mindsets when it comes to identity and culture when they weren't learning about those things in the school system, or even having things that were incorrect be perpetuated...having things taught from a young age and [at a] foundational level is just so important, and ties into all of the other things [around wellbeing]. (Youth Stakeholder, YP05)

Youth stakeholders also highlighted that the opportunities available to children and young people can be determined by the school they attend. One youth stakeholder pointed out that the opportunities available at their government high school, such as availability of certain sporting teams or extracurricular activities like instrumental music, was quite limited compared to those at a nearby private high school.

4.3.4 Healthy

While the policy priorities and recommendations relating to the healthy dimension were not explicitly discussed in the focus group, youth stakeholders frequently raised concerns about equity of access to health services, especially mental health services. The intersection between lack of material basics and mental health was particularly prominent in discussions. One youth stakeholder noted that children and young people being unable to access the resources they need due to financial constraints can negatively impact the mental health of everyone in the household.

And not only is this [lack of access to material basics] stopping children from getting the resources that they need because of financial constraints, it's also very harmful to the family dynamic. It can be very harmful for the mental health of not only the children, but the people in the family.
(Youth Stakeholder, YP04)

Access to mental health services was also raised as an area of concern. One youth stakeholder discussed how the need for a guardian or caregiver to provide consent for access to mental health services can be a barrier for some young people, particularly those who come from backgrounds where their culture does not recognise mental health challenges in the same way.

Another youth stakeholder discussed how the importance of engaging in local activities, such as sport, is essential not only for the feeling valued, loved and safe (see Section 4.3.6) but also as important for physical and mental health.

Playing sport myself for my whole life, I think definitely getting the kids on the field is really important, because I think it also has a mental aspect to it. Rocking up on the Saturday and just being a part of something as well [is pretty important]. (Youth Stakeholder, YP03)

4.3.5 Identity and culture

The youth stakeholders indicated that support for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations, stronger collaborations between different agencies, and staff who can provide culturally responsive and appropriate services would all be impactful for children and young people in Queensland (see Figure 5). In terms of which of these options was most important to them, however, the youth stakeholders who participated in the focus group were evenly split (see

Figure 6).

Youth stakeholders indicated there was a strong overlap between support for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations and staff who can provide culturally appropriate and responsive services. Indeed, there was discussion about how Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations are often best suited to deliver local programs as they have a clear understanding of the needs of the communities in which they work.

For me, the most important thing, like the foundation, is staff who can provide culturally responsive and appropriate services, simply because I feel like it encapsulates a lot of different aspects of identity and culture, in that you're not going to be able to really get anywhere with programs or like activities in the community if the people who are running them don't have a clear and a sensitive understanding of the needs of that community (Youth Stakeholder, YP04)

The youth stakeholder went on to explain that the absence of these skills and support could be harmful.

If they don't have that [cultural] understanding, then the things that are just going to happen could likely cause harm to those communities, and a harm to the perception that other people have of those communities. (Youth Stakeholder, YP04)

Youth stakeholders also stressed the importance of all social services staff being trained to provide culturally responsive services, especially in mainstream services. They noted that, particularly in rural and remote areas where service delivery choice is limited, young people may need to access a mainstream rather than specialised service. However, the need for culturally safe and responsive approaches is still needed in these spaces.

I think that it's necessary that we have people that are trained and capable of providing culturally responsive services everywhere, just because of the fact that there are lots of services. For specific groups of people it may be really difficult to actually get into and to see [a specialist service] or there might be stigma or shame about actually going to those services. Which I think just makes it super necessary to have people that are qualified and capable of actually handling different situations in a culturally respectful way. (Youth Stakeholder, YP01)

The importance of strong collaborations between agencies and organisations was also highlighted as having significant impact on children and young people in Queensland.

[We need] more collaborations between different agencies, because I think in a lot of different [areas], like youth advocacy work and stuff, a lot of the barriers we run into...there was no open dialogue between the agencies and the kind of collaboration that was needed to get the ball rolling. (Youth Stakeholder, YP05)

Indeed, one youth stakeholder described a project with which they had been engaged where there was minimal evidence of collaboration between agencies, which led to poor communication and unsatisfactory outcomes for the young person involved. This could also happen between different levels of government (i.e., local, state, and federal).

Figure 5: Impact of policy priorities on children and young people relating to identity and culture

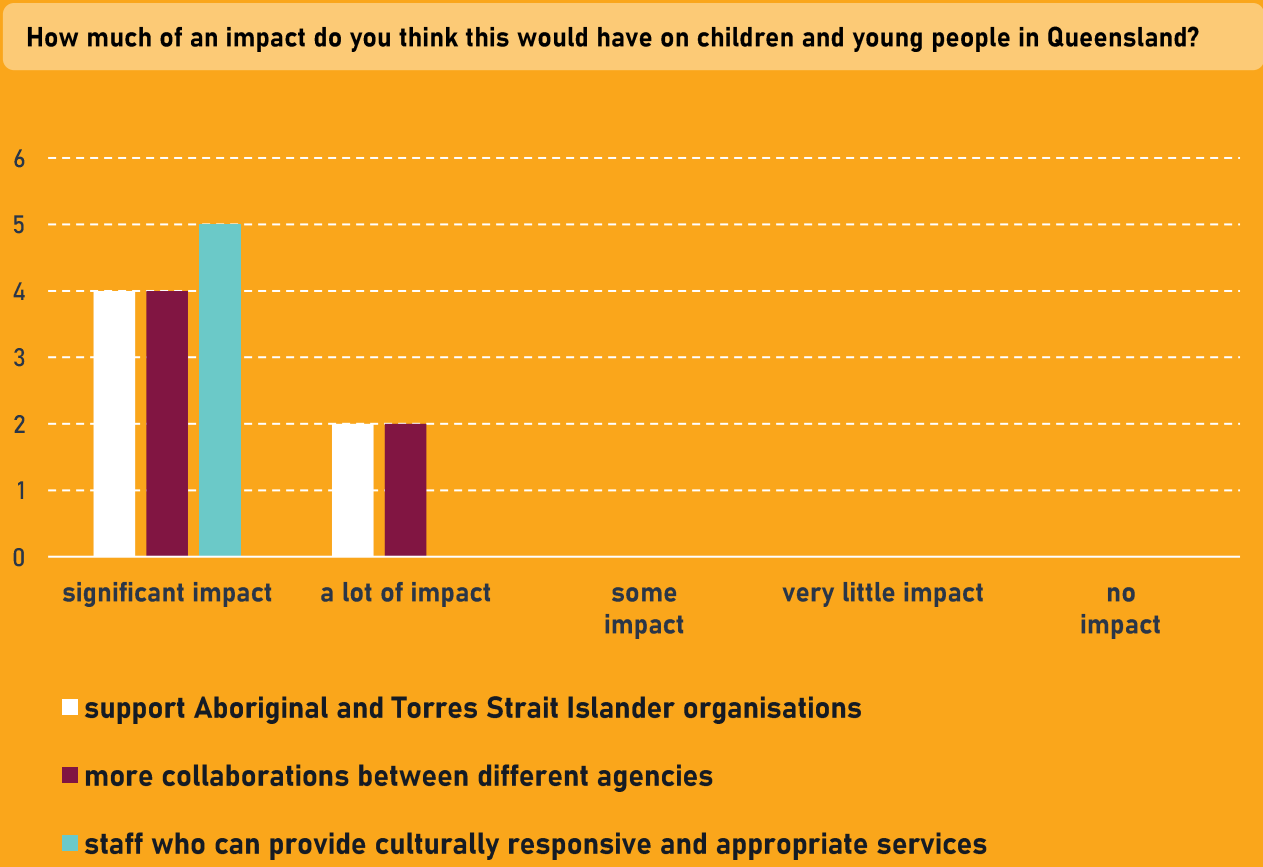


Figure 6: Ranking of priorities relating to identity and culture by youth stakeholders



4.3.6 Valued, loved and safe

Help to participate in local activities was seen as having a significant impact on children and young people in Queensland (see Figure 7). Youth stakeholders discussed how engaging in local activities can strengthen social capital, an important source of support and resources, particularly for young people who are experiencing vulnerability and disadvantage.

It's also important with participation [in local activities] because it can support disadvantaged youth to develop stronger social capital which can have profound impacts with education, career, wellbeing etc (Youth Stakeholder YP06)

Youth stakeholders recognised that barriers, such as cultural norms and financial costs, can prevent some children and young people from participating.

To help them participate ...from a culturally and linguistically diverse community perspective, many young people from these communities, their families don't see the 'value' in it within the extracurricular activities and other things take priority (e.g. having to look after siblings and family responsibilities). Having the tools and open accessibility for families and young people to participate (and educating these families about its benefits and importance is vital) (Youth Stakeholder YP06)

Indeed, the need to feel connected and supported was viewed by the youth stakeholders as central for children and young people to be able to thrive.

I just think that it's pretty hard to just do anything in life if you just do not feel like you'll maybe have support behind it or you're going to be protected once you've made a decision...just that kind of safety net when doing anything in life. (Youth Stakeholder, YP03)

The need for locally designed programs and initiatives was also seen as important (see Figure 8). Youth stakeholders highlighted that young people were more likely to participate in activities if they are local to them, especially as it can reduce barriers to access, such as transport.

If the programs and initiatives are local to them, then they're going to feel more inclined to go... If it's far away, they're just simply just not going to attend. And I think if they go into those local programs and things, they'll see improvement [in their wellbeing] just from that alone. And then the rest follows in a way. (Youth Stakeholder, YP02)

However, youth stakeholders noted that this may not alleviate other barriers to engagement, such as financial costs. One youth stakeholder explained that one of their extracurricular activities involved playing a musical instrument. This activity, they explained, was dominated by young people who attended private schools, which they implied indicated a privileged position.

[Most] of the people I spoke to went to private schools because they're the people who could afford to participate in music programs and go [to the activity] on a Saturday and afford to play an instrument and the uptake of what it takes to have an instrument. So I think that help to participate in local activities is so important because when you look at a lot of those [extracurricular] activities, the demographic is people who are more affluent. (Youth Stakeholder, YP05)

The need for holistic responses that addressed multiple wellbeing domains was frequently raised during the focus group discussion.

But I also think that providing financial aid to participate in local activities is also really important. Because I think, again, it ties back to material wellbeing, in the sense that you're not going to be able really do anything unless you have the material or financial means to do it. And for that reason, I think things like ... subsidising or providing grants for sports or vouchers for engaging in like sports clubs and things like that I think is really important. Not only to provide them with those opportunities, but also to provide them with opportunities to grow. (Youth Stakeholder, YP04)

Figure 7: Impact of policy priorities on children and young people relating to valued, loved and safe

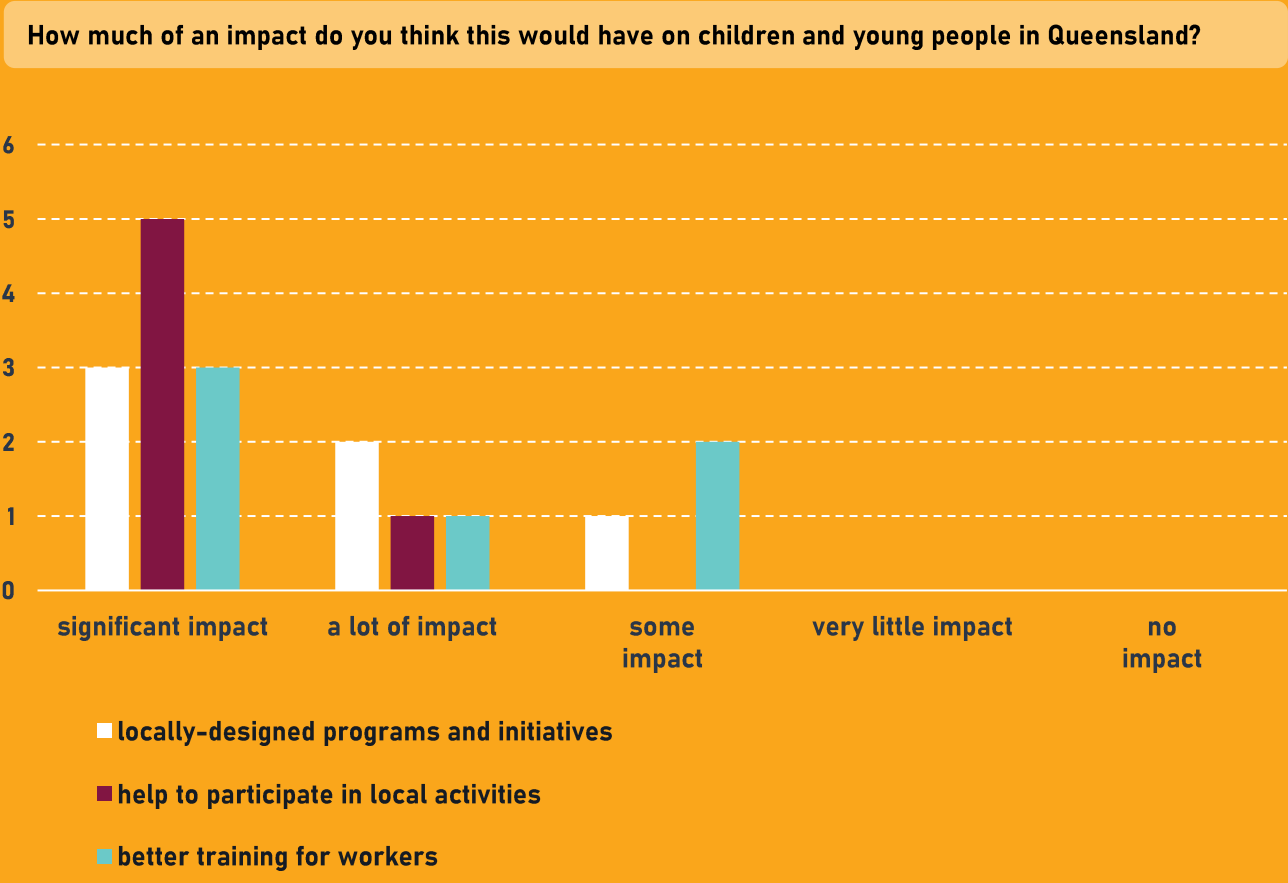


Figure 8: Ranking of priorities relating to valued, loved and safe by youth stakeholders



Youth stakeholders also discussed the need for third spaces (i.e., spaces outside of home and school) where young people can feel safe and connect with other people who share identities.

It's so important to have those third spaces you can go to, not only find people with parts of identity that feel similar to you and you can connect with, but also to explore your identity and figure out like parts of your identity may not even know about. (Youth Stakeholder, YP05)

The importance of these third spaces being inclusive was heavily stressed. The youth stakeholders stressed the importance of contextually and culturally appropriate activities to ensure inclusivity, reinforcing the need for locally designed programs and initiatives.

4.3.7 Multidimensional priorities

The focus group concluded with a brief discussion of three multidimensional priorities that cut across multiple domains from The Nest Wellbeing Framework. The first multidimensional priority was one department that is purely responsible for children, young people, and families to cut across the different silos of health, education, child protection, youth justice, communities, and so on. The second multidimensional priority was the need for the government and social services sector to hold a shared, stable vision to ensure cohesion between levels of government, or if there is a change in government. The third multidimensional priority was a more skilled, available, and accessible child and family services workforce.

The youth stakeholders indicated that all of these would have significant impact on children and young people in Queensland (see Figure 9), but a shared vision and single department responsible for children and young people (and their families) was particularly important (see Figure 10).

As one youth stakeholder described:

I think that the most important one would be a mix between one department [being] responsible and a shared vision between government and social services. Because I think it's very important to keep partisan politics out of people's lives and the way that they're living them, particularly when it comes to social services and the access [to those services]. (Youth Stakeholder, YP04)

Indeed, the youth stakeholders indicated that the need for an overarching department responsible for children and young people was essential for establishing and implementing a shared vision, noting that there are different ideologies underpinning many policy decisions.

I feel like a shared vision is always quite difficult to ensure that everyone's actually realistically on the same path. The way that I interpret a shared vision might be different to the way that [another person] interprets it. And it can be really difficult if you've got different political situations going on within each different department to make sure that they're both working towards the same goal in the same way. So, I think for me, it would be more important to have one department that sort of looks over it all because it's more likely that the shared vision will actually be shared and will actually be considered in the same ways. (Youth Stakeholder, YP01)

Figure 9: Impact of multidimensional policy priorities on children and young people

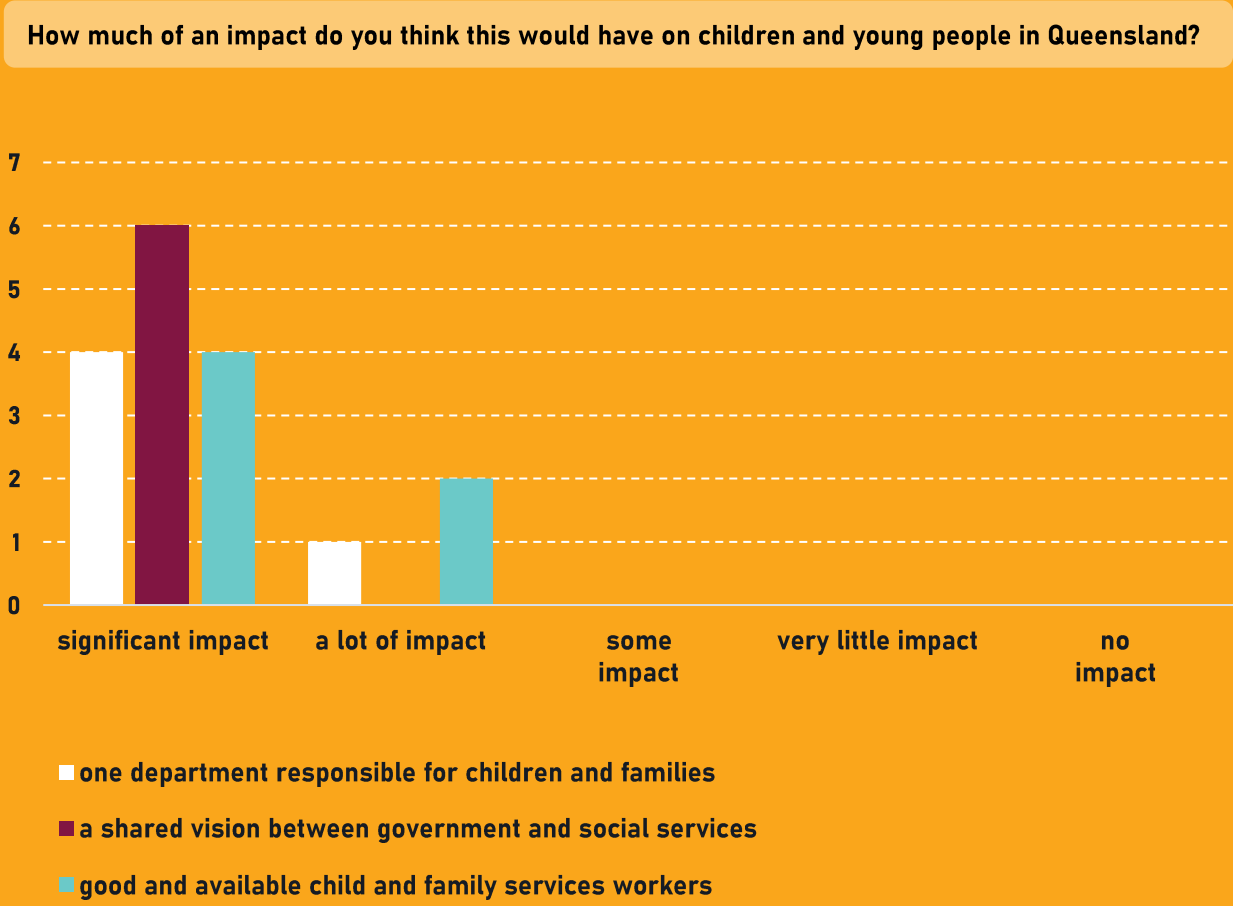


Figure 10: Ranking of multidimensional priorities by youth stakeholders



Youth stakeholders also raised the negative impact of government funding changes for many community service organisations and initiatives that children and young people relied on.

I think one of the issues is also that sometimes [the government will] just pause funding [during transition periods] until they decide what would be the best approach. And that transitional period between governments can be really harmful if all funding for communities is just suddenly gone, essentially. I think that there needs to be...one department responsible for children and families [to make] sure that even when there is that change of government [funding stays stable]. (Youth Stakeholder, YP05)

The need for stable and responsive funding was thus an important issue for the young stakeholders, who identified these challenges from a service user perspective, echoing the views of several community service stakeholders.

4.4 Overview of stakeholder findings

Despite representing different elements of the social services system, policy and community service stakeholders also had some strong views in common. This section summarises the key findings: the need for material basics, the need for earlier support, the need for holistic responses, the need for sustained collaboration, the need for a quality workforce, the need for community-driven initiatives, the need for choice, the need for evidence-informed approaches, and the need for third spaces. Please note, these findings are overlapping and are not ordered in terms of priority. Rather, they highlight the current frustrations and opportunities for change expressed by the various stakeholders who engaged in this research.

4.4.1 Need for material basics

Across all stakeholders, there was a strong focus on material basics, especially safe and affordable housing. It was consistently raised that without appropriate housing options, other services struggle to meet their objectives. Many community service stakeholders reported that changes should begin ‘upstream’: there is a need to first address some Queenslanders’ fundamental unmet needs for material basics before other social services can be provided. They pointed to the success and need for the extension of universal approaches such as Housing First (Padgett et al., 2016). Youth stakeholders also stressed that the provision of material basics was fundamental before other domains of wellbeing, such as learning and safety, could be met. Universal implementation of policies such as Housing First would allow Queenslanders at risk of experiencing vulnerability and disadvantage to then access other services more easily and effectively.

School-based food programs

Stakeholders described a breakfast food program that was open to all students at the school. The universal nature of the program—meaning anyone in the school could access it—meant that some of the stigma and shame around accessing similar services was mitigated. Stakeholders also described this as way to build community.

4.4.2 Need for earlier support

There was consensus amongst both groups of stakeholders that there is a need for social interventions to happen earlier. Community service and policy stakeholders alike reinforced their support for a focus on the early years, particularly the first 2,000 days of a child's life. They provided examples of initiatives and programs that they perceived were successful in the early years space including universal access to free kindergarten and the increase to 30 hours of free kindergarten in certain areas. Several stakeholders, however, highlighted that the 'middle years' is often a gap in both policy and social service provision. Stakeholders provided examples of programs (and funding) that supported children up to Primary School (approximately five years old) or from high school (approximately 12 years old). However, community service stakeholders explained that they were receiving requests for support from children under twelve years of age, which was outside the scope of their service.

Both policy and community service stakeholders highlighted this gap for the 'middle years' of childhood. Stakeholders felt that family support should be considered as a connected part of children and young people's wellbeing across the lifespan, and that community services targeting children and their families in these middle years was extremely limited. Stakeholders indicated that, ideally, they would engage the parents and grandparents of children and young people across the lifespan, providing holistic support that is responsive to the needs at every life course stage. At present, some community service stakeholders implied that much of this support is only available to families when the children are in the early years.

Health practitioners in primary schools

A policy stakeholder indicated up to 20 health practitioners will be embedded in State Primary Schools across Queensland by expanding the GPs in State Schools Program. This will enable children between Prep and Grade 6 (approximately 5-12 years old) to access a General Practitioner (GP) or Nurse Practitioner on site with no out-of-pocket expenses. This is to help support children and their families during the 'middle years', which may be missed by more targeted early childhood and adolescent services.

4.4.3 Need for holistic responses

Policy and community service stakeholders alike recognised holistic, wrap-around supports as best practice for supporting the complex and intersecting needs of disadvantaged children and young people in Queensland. Stakeholders across both groups reinforced that children and young people do not live in isolation—they have families and communities that also need support across a range of areas, including education, health, and housing. Community service stakeholder provided examples of holistic and wraparound support services, such as mother-baby units and parenting hubs, that provided intensive, targeted support for those identified as 'at-risk'. It was reported by community service stakeholders that this focus on supporting parents, particularly mothers, and their wellbeing had achieved some positive outcomes for their children. Community service stakeholders called for a further policy focus on providing family support, suggesting that the wellbeing outcomes for vulnerable and disadvantaged children and young people cannot be improved without addressing the intersecting and entrenched disadvantage and other complex issues that typically occur within their family contexts. These stakeholders called for further consideration of family support programs when families did not meet the threshold for tertiary involvement (e.g., Child Safety or Youth Justice).

While policy stakeholders did not speak specifically about policies and systems to address children's safety, they did acknowledge that there are groups of children and young people in Queensland that are not thriving. These children and young people shared commonalities both with issues they experienced and the service systems they interfaced with.

Community service stakeholders spoke about the strength of services that provide support to the whole family, including parenting support. Community service stakeholders described how support for the children and young people who accessed their services achieved better outcomes when a spectrum of support options could be provided. This included not only a mix of community and government supports, but also supports that were available across the life course and responsive to different needs at different life stages. These services could help facilitate 'soft' referrals, generate knowledge and skills, and strengthen connections within and between both formal and informal networks.

Stakeholders in both groups acknowledged the need for certain foundational needs, particularly housing and safety, to be provided universally. However, there was also consistent agreement on the need for targeted supports and individualised approaches to ensure all children and young people thrive. Stakeholders acknowledged that there was no 'one size fits all' approach that works to support all children and young people. It was agreed that those at risk or currently experiencing vulnerability and disadvantage needed different or additional supports to other children and young people in Queensland. Several stakeholders suggested that individualised and tailored approaches should be responsive to local and contextual needs.

Family-orientated and integrated space

A bail support program in a regional Queensland town has developed a family-oriented space where families and young people can access food, vouchers, clothes, and hygiene packs to address their immediate needs. A community service stakeholder reported that this service was perceived by the community as a safer space for young people to have mediation meetings with government youth justice staff. The service also provided an outreach bus which went to the young people and provided breakfast and other essentials before their court hearings.

4.4.4 Need for sustained collaboration

Considering the intersecting and overlapping needs, both policy and community service stakeholders, as well as young people, recognised the need for cross-portfolio work and integrated service models on the ground. Policy and community service stakeholders reported that services worked best when every service in a young person's life was communicating and collaborating on shared goals, using a shared language, and had a similar understanding of wellbeing. Overall, stakeholders reported that there has been an increase in holistic approaches and less working in silos.

Policy stakeholders described examples of greater coordination efforts and collaborative responses between government departments. However, they acknowledged that there was still scope for multi-sector service delivery to be improved, particularly between community services organisations and government sectors. Some stakeholders provided examples of successful partnerships such as the Thriving Queensland Kids Partnership, who work together to improve systems in Queensland that support the wellbeing of children and young people, and philanthropic organisations that are part of the Queensland Kids Funders Alliance (such as Hand Heart Pocket, Tim Fairfax Family Foundation, The Bryan Education Foundation, and John Villiers Trust) partnering with government to co-fund programs.

Community service stakeholders, especially, expressed a collective will for action and for strengthening partnerships with all levels of government to improve the wellbeing of children and young people across Queensland. One stakeholder provided an example of an 'educational precinct' in a regional town which has reportedly linked the school into the community more effectively, as well as creating opportunities for collaboration between the school and community services providers. This educational precinct, the stakeholder explained, had

created an opportunity for local community service organisations to have a direct relationship with the school principal, and had developed working groups for providing mutual support to children and young people ‘at risk’.

Community service stakeholders also suggested there was opportunity for the state government to capitalise on existing community expertise through better consultation and partnership with services ‘on the ground’. Both policy and community service stakeholders described communities of practice, collectives, or forums that brought multiple agencies and organisations together to discuss key challenges and identify potential solutions. Community service stakeholders indicated that many of these groups could develop stronger partnerships with government to help create change. Examples of where it was working well included the Thriving Queensland Kids Partnership, as well as key pieces of work being undertaken by bodies such as PeakCare, QATSI CPP, and QFCC. Community service stakeholders reported that where there was strong on-the-ground collaboration between schools, community organisations, and government agencies, they were able to better provide solutions to address the systemic barriers facing the children and young people accessing their services.

Child Protection and Health Workforce

A policy stakeholder described a service where Child Protection Officers (Department of Families, Seniors, Disability Services and Child Safety) conduct outreach activities with a Clinical Nurse Consultant (Queensland Health) to meet with families who are providing foster and/or kinship care support for children and young people. This service ensures cross-departmental collaboration to work with the child or young person and the household in which they are current residing to conduct a physical and mental health assessment through a trauma-informed lens, which is leading to better outcomes for the child or young person and their family.

4.4.5 Need for responsive funding

The issue of funding for community service provision was raised by all groups of stakeholders. Community service stakeholders spoke about the need for their funding contracts to be more flexible and responsive to current need. The short-term competitive nature of current service funding made it challenging to respond to shifting community needs and collaborate with other organisations. Community service stakeholders indicated that current funding arrangements did not provide adequate resourcing to meet the needs of the communities they served. Linked to the need for more holistic responses (see Section 4.4.3 above), stakeholders suggested funding programs that cover the life-span, including sustainable, longer-term, flexible, brokerage models that worked with community-identified and community-controlled service providers. Funding models that would encourage community organisations to partner together, rather than position them as rivals for limited funds, was frequently suggested.

Overall, there was a perception that there was not enough resourcing, particularly through funding, to meet the current needs of children, young people, and their families. This was particularly prevalent in discussions with community service stakeholders based in regional, rural, and remote areas. Community service stakeholders reported that inflexible funding arrangements meant that they were unable to be responsive to the needs of the children and young people in their communities. Some community service stakeholders, for instance, described having to specify what the children and young people’s outcomes would be before they were able to obtain the funding. This was perceived by these stakeholders as limiting their ability to be responsive to emerging needs, or to provide timely support. It is important to note that this is not due to a lack of planning by social services providers; rather, there is a strong desire for needs-based and responsive investment.

Timely support was considered crucial for children and young people already at risk, however several community service stakeholders—particularly those in regional, rural and remote areas—reported that many community services either did not exist, had long waiting lists, or were only provided using outreach models that were often sporadic and unreliable. Services for intermediate level risk were reportedly needed, not just supports for those children and young people already at high-risk. Several community service stakeholders in regional, remote, and rural areas highlighted the current ‘fly-in, fly-out’ (FIFO) or ‘drive-in, drive-out’ (DIDO) models were not working. Changes to funding models, stakeholders indicated, would allow community service organisations to creatively and flexibly respond to local, shifting needs of children and young people. Stakeholders also called out the need for systematic reforms to improve the flow and impact of investments and reduce the burdens and disconnects associated with disparate programs.

Responding to community need

A community across three rural towns has created a health liaison role to assist with navigating regional health services. Through a co-design process, the community decided it did not want a permanent health service in the community but rather, it wanted to be able to easily access the health network as and when needed. This role provided frontline support to ensure that community members had a single contact point to help schedule medical appointments, manage paperwork, and liaise with regional hospital services.

4.4.6 Need for quality workforce

Quality workforce shortages were also highlighted as a significant challenge to sustainable social change, particularly in regional, rural, and remote areas. This included a shortage of skilled and experienced staff who had expertise in engaging with vulnerable and disadvantaged children, young people and their families, who were trauma-informed, and had knowledge of the local contexts. Community service stakeholders expressed a desire for workforce issues to be prioritised, particularly in regional areas. They described challenges with staff quality, retention, and training. Specialist services, especially in the areas of mental health and disability, were identified as a significant gap in the work force.

Community service organisations, particularly in regional areas, often attract and train staff, only for them to move on to government roles which offer high remuneration. While some investment has been made into workforce initiatives for the community services sector, these often only address one part of a highly mobile workforce and are not joined-up efforts. While place-based workforce initiatives can be effective and responsive to local needs, there remains a need for a whole of sector workforce plan which addresses significant attraction and retention issues across the state. Stakeholders indicated that this included improved support for workforce capability, including in developing a core and common language, knowledge, skills, and tools for practitioners across systems and services.

High levels of staff turnover were reported as a challenge for both community service organisations and government agencies. Some community service stakeholders noted that it was difficult to sustain partnerships and collaborations with local government services due to high staff turnover, particularly in areas relating to child safety. They also indicated this had a negative impact on the children and young people accessing their services. Young people also shared this view – highlighting the importance of skilled and stable workforce for building trusting relationships with children and young people to support engagement.

Mental health servicing outreach model

Stakeholders reported that the need for mental health services currently outstrips the supply, particularly in regional, rural, and remote areas where recruiting and retaining qualified specialist staff can be challenging. ‘Mental health servicing’ was described as an outreach model that worked with schools to provide in-house mental health and support for children and young people in an educational setting. It was noted, though, that this model provides limited support for children and young people who have disengaged from school.

4.4.7 Need for community-driven initiatives

Both policy and community service stakeholders spoke about the need for place-based, community-driven initiatives that include the voices of children and young people, highlighting examples of how these processes are vital for enacting positive social change. Stakeholders pointed out that there is a diverse array of communities across Queensland, and thus the needs of children, young people, and their families may differ both across and within these communities. With this context in mind, many community service stakeholders as well as policy stakeholders particularly expressed their desire to be involved in community-generated and community-led solutions that were able to respond to contemporary needs. However, it was recognised that these would need to be adequately resourced (both in funding and length of time) to be successful.

Ground-up, place-based community solutions were mentioned by community service stakeholders, policy stakeholders and young people as a necessary component of improving outcomes for children, young people, and their families. Stakeholders provided examples that worked well due to the centrality of community-identified needs and priorities. A community services stakeholder from a remote community, for example, described the success of adventure-based learning programs in creating opportunities for disengaged young people to re-engage with schooling. These targeted services were developed and delivered via a local organisation. The stakeholder attributed the success of the program to the fact that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people were able to remain on Country while accessing services which enabled them to maintain connection to their cultural identity. They had access to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff who were local to their communities and had knowledge of their local needs and circumstances, and these staff members employed a whole-of-family approach, using community engagement and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ways of knowing in their work.

Adventure-based learning

A regional town has implemented an adventure-based learning program to help children and young people re-engage with schooling. The program is managed locally and includes qualified staff who provide transport and food for the young people in the program, alongside alternative educational programs based on experiential learning. Stakeholders reported that this has been hugely successful in encouraging young people to re-engage with education and has improved school attendance in the area.

4.4.8 Need for choice

Some community service stakeholders reported that young people only engaged with community services when they had different service options available and were able to have choice. However, both policy stakeholders and community service stakeholders, as well as young people, acknowledged that often this choice was only available in larger metropolitan areas, and not in rural and remote areas. Regional community service providers reported being under-serviced by government providers or having nowhere local to refer children and young people who needed specialist services. Community service providers described relying on visiting specialist and government services, which they reported had long wait times or outreach service provision that was inconsistent (e.g., specialists not turning up at all for scheduled appointments or taking months to visit the town after a referral was made).

Community service stakeholders reported that sometimes this timing was too late to address the urgent needs of the child or young person, or it damaged the trust that the local community service provider had built with the young person and their family. As such, some community service stakeholders reported feeling pressured to fill the gaps in government and/or specialist service provision. For example, one community service stakeholder described that they had felt they had no choice but to work outside their areas of expertise, because specialist services did not exist locally.

There was a perception amongst community service stakeholders that to receive funding, it was necessary to have concentrated numbers of children or young people with common needs in a single town. This was reinforced by community services feeling that support services were decided and funded in a top-down approach with insufficient consultation of children, families, and communities about their needs.

After hours hub

The importance of a youth-designed space that was available outside of standard business hours was described as a successful strategy for engaging young people at risk of interacting with the justice system. Having a third space (i.e., not home or school) that was open, safe, and local was described as incredibly beneficial as it gave children and young people somewhere to go if they felt their home environment was unsafe. It was also described as being a way to build a sense of community. However, the location needed to be local and require minimal, if any, transportation to reach, as access to public and/or private transportation was raised as a barrier for many young people.



4.4.9 Need for evidence-informed approaches

Policy and community service stakeholders spoke about the need for evidence-informed approaches in the community services sector. They reported that, overall, there was increased understanding about ‘what works’, including the need for early years support, holistic support for vulnerable families and communities, trauma-informed approaches, recognition of in-house family supports and care. However, while this understanding of the ‘evidence-base’ was shared, both groups of stakeholders reported that the pathways to these supports were not always or not consistently available across Queensland. They suggested the need for standards and expectations for service delivery across all sectors.

Stakeholders also demonstrated a common understanding that children, young people, and their families may face a range of complex, intersecting issues. However, stakeholders expressed challenges in addressing these issues, particularly in relation to a perceived gap in data access. Community service stakeholders indicated challenges demonstrating impact within the short-time frames of their funding contracts, while policy stakeholders described challenges balancing accountability for public funding with the need for responsive funding.

Sharing what works

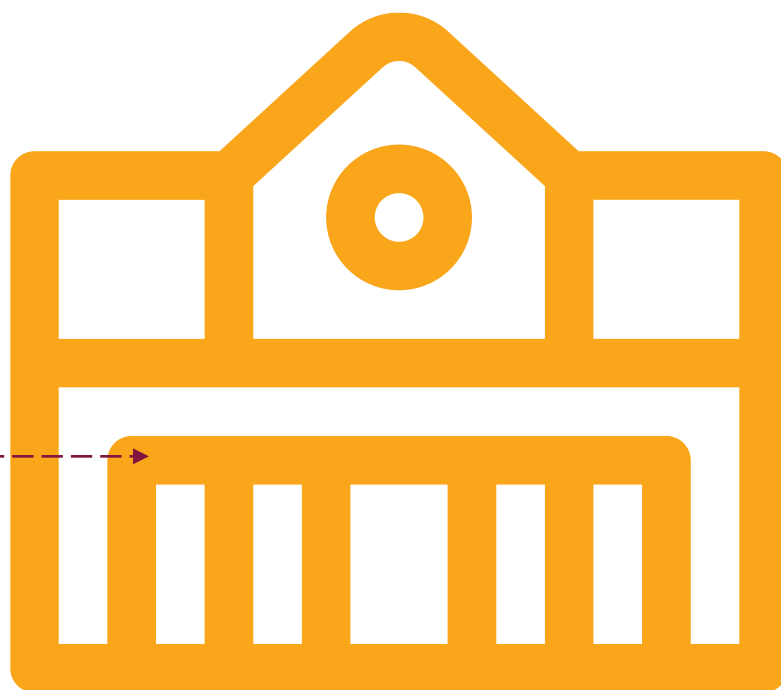
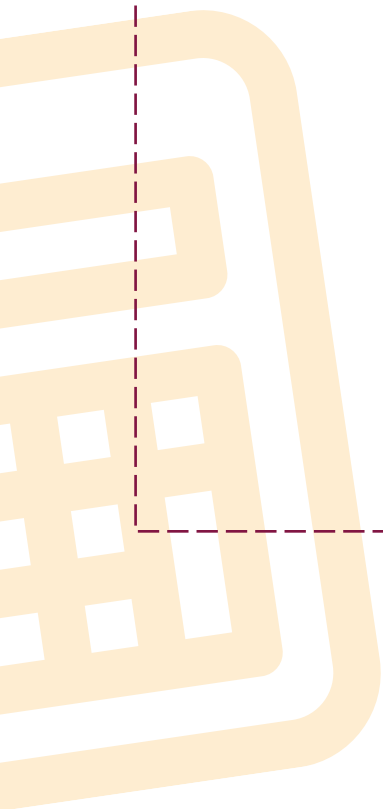
Stakeholders described an informal community of practice that had evolved in a regional town between community services providers. This community provided an opportunity to share knowledge and learnings about what works locally and contextually, highlight opportunities where providers could work together, and identify where there were gaps in local community service provision. Stakeholders emphasised that an increasingly shrinking funding pool meant that sharing knowledge between ‘competitors’ was often discouraged by senior management, however frontline workers stressed the value they found in these communities of practice.



4.5 Conclusion

A key theme raised through both the policy stakeholder interviews and the community services stakeholder focus groups was that the resources and services available to the sector are inadequate to achieve equity of access with and for disadvantaged children and young people.

They recognised that there are many gaps in community service delivery, particularly in regional and remote regions, due to a range of systemic factors (e.g., workforce availability, geographical restrictions, and funding silos). Stakeholders across all groups reported that supporting change to improve equity of access and outcomes will require investment at all levels of the social services system, including schools, local community, community service providers, and government services alongside state-level policies and systems. Community service stakeholders, in particular, indicated a range of levels in which different stakeholders from across the community service system can contribute to improved policy and service delivery. These suggestions included involving children, young people, their families, and their communities in service design and delivered; building stronger cross-sectoral collaborations and partnerships, ensuring that peak bodies continue to focus on developing shared priorities and advocacy goals that represent collective community needs, and for the state government to take primary responsibility for funding programs and reforming policies to address unmet needs. However, it was repeatedly reinforced by all stakeholders, particularly youth stakeholders, that addressing barriers to accessing material basics, particularly housing, needs to be addressed in order for social services to be effective.



5. POLICY PRIORITIES AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This chapter presents policy recommendations for holistic systems of reform to enable the delivery of services that provide foundational supports to vulnerable and disadvantaged children, young people, and their families into adulthood.

KEY POINTS



Governments and the community sector can support families to care for children and create family inclusive communities.

Integrated and multisystem responses will ensure vulnerable children and families have equal access to the range of resources and services needed for their social and emotional wellbeing.



Multi-dimensional responses must attend to the challenges of building and maintaining a skilled workforce across all agencies working with vulnerable children and families,

particularly across the key domains of housing, health, and education.



There needs to be a strong and consistent focus on material basics, especially safe and affordable housing,

alongside place-based, community-driven initiatives that include the voices of children, young people, and their families.



Equal access to health and mental health services and education and training systems is vital.

As is the need for these to be responsive to the needs of vulnerable children, young people, and their families.



Strengthening the capacity of the service sector to provide culturally safe and responsive services is critical

to ensure equal access to culturally and linguistically diverse communities and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families.

5.1 Prioritising children, young people, and their families

Drawing on the evidence from the previous chapters, this chapter presents policy recommendations for holistic systems of reform to enable the delivery of services that provide foundational supports to vulnerable and disadvantaged children, young people, and their families into adulthood. The recommendations focus on the need for integrated and multisystem responses to ensure vulnerable children and families have equity of access to a range of resources and services needed for their social and emotional wellbeing. There is a strong need for integrated universal and targeted services delivered by a mixture of non-government and state agencies to ensure improved equity of access and improved outcomes for children. Multi-system responses are needed to prevent vulnerable children and families “falling through the cracks” in and across service systems.

The recommendations focus on actions applicable to the community services sector, the Queensland Government, and the Australian Government, noting that implementing these recommendations will require strong partnerships.

5.2 Multidimensional policy priorities and recommendations

Our analysis indicates an urgent need for better data collection and linkage to inform multidimensional responses and policies to vulnerable children, young people, and their families. This data should also be used to inform decisions around funding investment and measuring outcomes and impact. Stakeholders identified that data is not collected on numbers and features of children and young people with multiple vulnerabilities and entrenched disadvantage such as children and parents living with a disability, living in out of home care, with a youth justice experience, living regionally or remotely. This lack of information limits government and the sector’s capacity to identify whether some population groups are disproportionately represented among vulnerable children and families. For example, the lack of systematic data collection about parents with intellectual and cognitive disabilities constrains the sector’s capacity to identify the particular needs of these families in accessing service systems such as health, housing and education. The lack of information also limits governments’ and the sector’s capacity to recognize the factors contributing to children and families’ vulnerability, build multi-system responses and to monitor the effectiveness of these responses. Further, improved data linkage could provide insight into the impact of government policies including the type and timing of policy interventions for greatest impact in addressing the needs of children and young people experiencing multiple intersecting forms of disadvantage.

Participants in the research suggested that policy and strategies for responding to the needs of children might be best addressed by a single ministry such as a Ministry of Children and Families or a families portfolio. It is noted that a Minister of Families was established during the most recent machinery of government change in Queensland, alongside the addition of ‘Families’ to (now) the Department of Families, Seniors, Disability Services, and Child Safety. This Minister has the opportunity to pave the way in working across government agencies to improve how different departments can support families and communities. We note that the current remit of this minister and department is broader than simply families and we recommend a more focused department that could be responsible for overseeing data collection, data linkage and integrated policy responses for children and families. Ideally this would involve aligned ministries at commonwealth and state levels so that there is a common approach, and shared learning about, best practice in working with vulnerable children and families. This aligns with similar calls by the National Commission for Children and the Act for Children campaign. Similarly, ARACY has joined with the Intergenerational Fairness Coalition to call for a Commissioner for Future Generations.

Multi-dimensional approaches need to include attention to the challenges of building and maintaining a skilled workforce across all agencies working with vulnerable children and families. This is particularly important in education and health services where ensuring equity of access for vulnerable children and families has been found to play a critical role in positive short and long term outcomes (Homel et al., 2015; Allen et al., 2024). It is essential that any actions engage with and support existing processes that address areas of inequity for children, young people, and their families, such as the implementation of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap. However, multisystem responses are required to secure equity of access and positive outcomes with vulnerable children and families. The challenges faced by these children and families are multidimensional, requiring evidence-informed and co-ordinated responses between the community services sector and the government, at both a state and a commonwealth level.

It is **recommended**:

- **to commission** the Department of Families, Seniors, Disability Services and Child Safety with responsibility for overseeing multi-dimensional and integrated responses to children and families. This would include ensuring comprehensive data collection and data linking to identify the multiple systems impacting on vulnerable children and families and to monitor the impact of policy interventions across multiple domains on wellbeing outcomes. This would contribute to more efficient and effective service planning and implementation by identifying which policy levers have the greatest impact on driving positive change and to ensure integrated and cohesive responses across all government agencies to children and families and particularly those experiencing vulnerability.
- **to create** a shared vision between all levels of government, the non-government community services sector, and philanthropy focused on the desired outcomes for vulnerable children and families. These goals could include improved life chances for all children and improve equity of access to resources and services for vulnerable children and families (Warren, 2017). This shared vision would support intersectoral collaboration in service design and delivery alongside funding and investment decisions.
- **to adopt** the Nest Wellbeing Framework to guide a holistic approach to working alongside children, young people and their families (ARACY, 2024). This would involve using an evidence-based approach to recognising and addressing how the gradient of social disadvantage adversely impacts social inclusion and wellbeing outcomes for vulnerable children and families. This focus could contribute to the funding and delivery of targeted interventions by both government agencies and the community services sector to ensure equity of access to needed resources and services for children and families experiencing vulnerability.
- **to build** a sustainable child and family services workforce by increasing the duration and adequacy of funding contracts to include provision for professional development and training opportunities needed to build workforce capacity, alongside a whole of community sector workforce strategy.
- **to support** members of equity groups, such as people living in rural and regional areas and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, to undertake tertiary child and family studies through a combination of subsidies and practical support. Subsidies should be easily accessible with clear eligibility criteria and a straightforward application process. Practical support could include working with members of equity groups to create study plans and accountability checkpoints throughout the course. Support could also include providing paid internships to help these community members to achieve qualifications. Providing more training to equity groups will have the dual benefit of improving the cultural responsiveness of the workforce and enhancing access to employment and income for equity groups.

5.3 Policy priorities and recommendations across domains

5.3.1 Material basics policy priorities and recommendations

There needs to be a strong and consistent focus on material basics, especially safe and affordable housing. Without appropriate housing options, services struggle to provide consistent and accessible support to vulnerable children and families

It is **recommended**:

- **to support** a Housing First approach which recognises that sustainable and affordable housing for families is the bedrock for access to other services (Padgett et al., 2016).
- **to advocate** for higher rates of income support for families who need to meet material needs and have opportunities for social and economic participation.
- **to continue** school and community-based food relief programs such as School Foods Program provided by the Queensland Department of Education which funds schools to provide breakfasts and lunches to students.

5.3.2 Participating policy priorities and recommendations

Place-based, community-driven initiatives that include the voices of children, young people, and their families are vital to positive social change.

It is **recommended**:

- **to foster** place-based and evidence-informed collaborations in primary health and education services to provide early support to vulnerable children and families. Family support, including parenting and children's behavioural support, could be integrated within preschool and school programs (Homel et al, 2024). Place-based programs of this nature have been found to offer a range of positive outcomes including reduced behavioural problems in the classroom, improved school participation and reduced probability of the long-term likelihood of involvement with the youth justice system (Homel et al, 2015; Allen et al, 2024).
- **to encourage** collaboration across government and non-government agencies in building place-based responses with vulnerable children and families. Community-led approaches to protecting children and supporting families requires a supportive culture in which central and local agencies work collaboratively with families to address needs. This requires the development of mutual respect and a shift to shared responsibilities for working with vulnerable children and families to ensure equity of access and social inclusion rather than focus on risk management (Warren, 2017). Some practical strategies for achieving this include co-location and integrated services, regular and responsive consultation by government agencies with local community and other primary services, and developing common assessment frameworks for understanding the needs of children and families (Warren, 2017).

5.3.3 Learning policy priorities and recommendations

Education and training systems need to be responsive to the needs of vulnerable children, young people, and their families.

It is **recommended**:

- **to support** universal early learning and care access. Access can be improved by providing low and no-cost places especially to vulnerable children and low-income families where parents are undertaking education and training.
- **to build** the responsiveness of the education system to vulnerable children and families. This can be achieved by collaborations between pre-schools and schools with family support and other child and family specialists to strengthen teachers' capacities to proactively engage with families and manage challenging behaviours of children (Homel et al., 2015; Allen et al., 2024).
- **to adopt** a Pathways to Prosperity approach focused on creating multiple, community-based pathways for young people and adults (particularly parents in vulnerable families) to re-engage with learning and training. Governments could also subsidise training places for equity groups in community-based health, education and community-service agencies to provide pathways for disadvantaged young people and adults to gain qualifications in high employment fields.
- **to implement** Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS) for schools that encourage alternative models of education. MTSS involves assessing the needs of the child across the key areas of academic, behaviour, and social and/or emotional wellbeing (including spiritual), and providing support at increasing levels of intensity in correlation to the needs of the child. This could include expanding the availability of FlexiSchools as well as reducing the use of student disciplinary absences.
- **to build** on one of Australia's best evidence-based but under-resourced child development initiatives, the First 5 Forever program, an initiative of the previous LNP Government, to support local councils to strengthen early literacy and family connections, especially in regional Queensland (through the State Library of Queensland, via the Department of the Education and the Arts).

5.3.4 Healthy policy priorities and recommendations

Equity of access to health and mental health services is vital for ensuring the wellbeing of all children, young people, and their families, particularly those experiencing vulnerability and disadvantage.

It is **recommended**:

- **to co-locate** health and mental health services in community-based settings. Examples of this include the establishment of midwifery and child-health services in community-based young parent programs and the delivery of mental health services for young people in youth-friendly and community-based services.
- **to strengthen** the capacities of health professionals to understand and respond to vulnerable families in ways that promote families' confidence and inclusion in services.
- **to maintain** and build on diverse pathways to access health and mental health services at varying levels of intensity to match children and families' circumstances. Examples include low level direct engagement such as text messages to support parents' mental health and community-based family support programs, through to targeted family support services co-located with other services such as health services, and acute services such as in-patient mental health services.
- **to bolster** acute care service systems so that families can access emergency and intensive health and mental health services in a timely and accessible manner. This includes offering family-inclusive services such as mother-baby hubs in community mental health and in-patient mental health services. A focus on strengthening staff capacity to collaborate with families as part of the care system for children, people and parents is also important.

5.3.5 Identity and culture policy priorities and recommendations

Strengthening the capacity of the community service sector to provide culturally safe and responsive services is critical to equity of access to culturally and linguistically diverse communities and to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

It is **recommended**:

- **to implement** the National Agreement on Closing the Gap in full, including strengthening processes for shared-decision making arrangements between government agencies and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-led organisations, developing the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled sector, and ensuring the principles of co-design and self-determination underpin all work with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families, communities, and organisations.
- **to support** the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled sector to build the evidence-base for best practice with Aboriginal and Torres Islander people in all service systems impacting on vulnerable children and families. Government and non-government agencies should be made accountable for using this evidence-base for informing program-development and service delivery with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.
- **to continue** to enhance and expand the community-controlled Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander agencies to offer integrated health, family support and education early childhood services to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families.
- **to subsidise** the community sector through sustained and flexible government funding to build strong collaborations between specialist health, education, child protection and family support agencies with agencies representing culturally and linguistically diverse communities to design and deliver culturally responsive training and ongoing support to the sector.

5.3.6 Valued, loved and safe policy priorities and recommendations

Governments and the community sector have an important role to play in supporting families to care for children and in creating family inclusive communities.

It is **recommended**:

- **to strengthen** place-based responses to foster the participation of vulnerable children and families in their local communities. This includes strengthening the capacity of service providers to offer welcoming and responsive environments to vulnerable children and families.
- **to subsidise** the community service sector to broker the resources and services needed for vulnerable children and families to participate in community activities such as recreational and sporting activities.
- **to build** the capacity of the community service sector to offer evidence-informed family support programs focused on achieving positive short and long-term outcomes with children and families (Homel et al., 2015). The State government and the community service sector should commit to partnering with universities and research centres to build a large and impactful program of research on evidence-informed community and place-based practice with vulnerable children and families.

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A-1 Demographics of community service stakeholders

56 stakeholders from Queensland community service organisations participated in focus groups throughout October and November 2024. Demographic information was obtained for 47 focus group participants. Most of the participants in the focus groups identified as women and non-Indigenous. Many were mid-career professionals aged between 35 and 55 and held higher education qualifications. While most lived and worked in Brisbane and/or the larger metropolitan areas of Southeast Queensland, 15 participants indicated they were based in regional and remote regions of Queensland. Stakeholders were highly experienced and held a range of positions across various sectors. Approximately half of the stakeholders worked across more than one sector.

Figure 12:
Gender of community service stakeholders

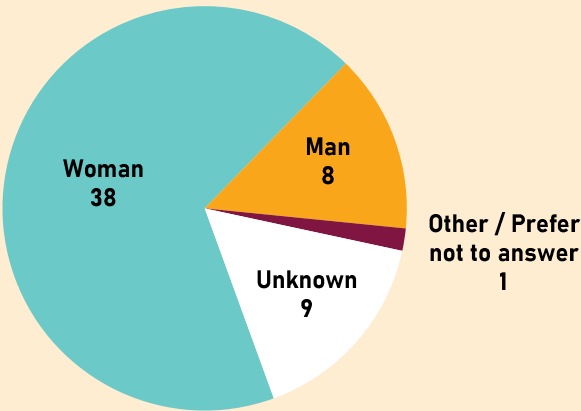


Figure 11:
Age ranges of community service stakeholders

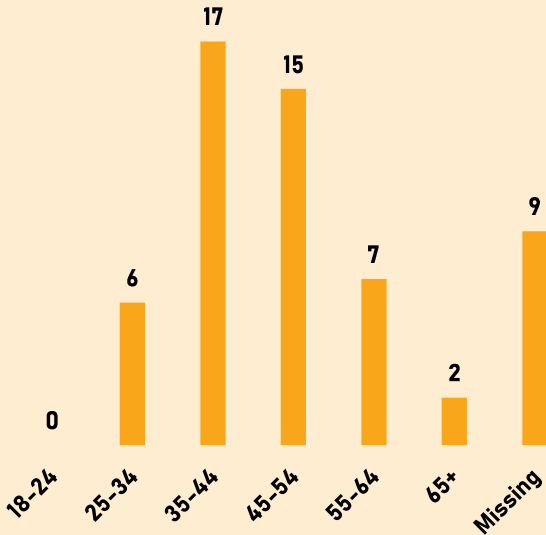


Figure 13: Community service stakeholders identifying as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples

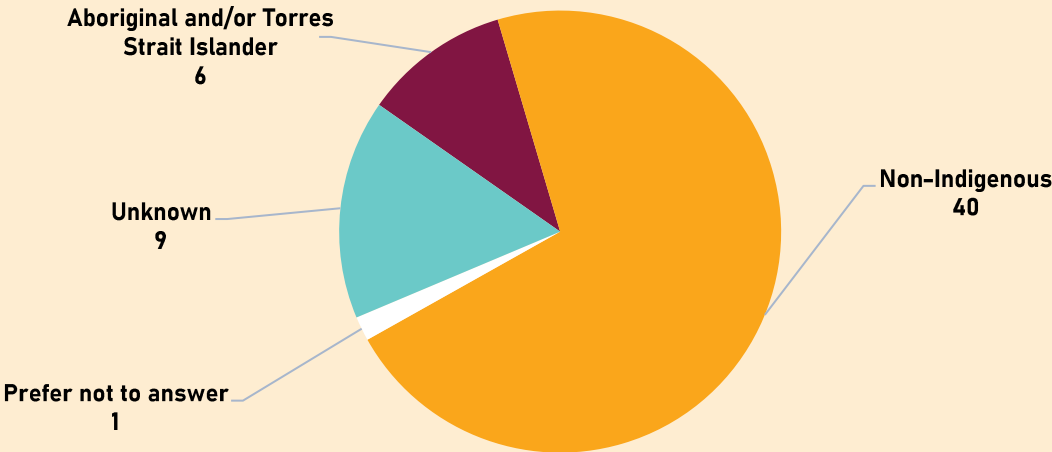


Figure 15:
Highest level of education of
community service stakeholders

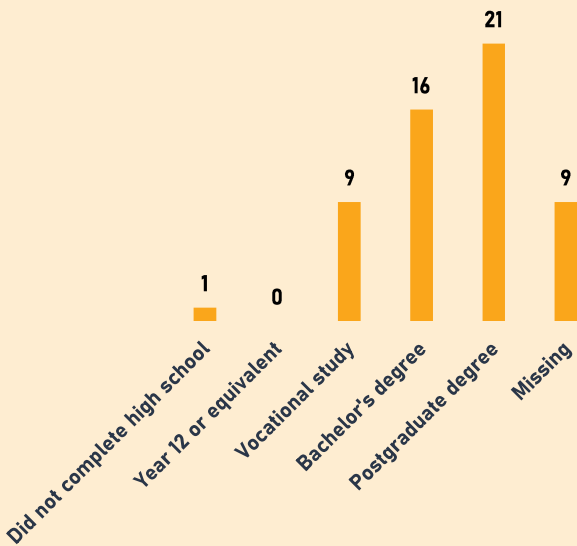


Figure 14:
Geographical location of
community service stakeholders

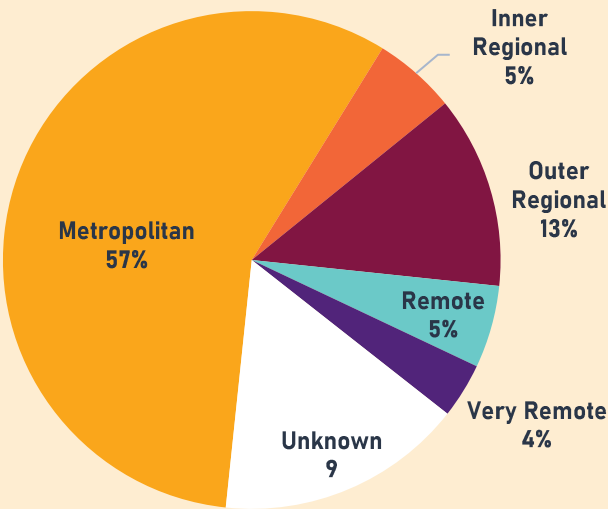


Figure 16:
Current role of community
service stakeholders

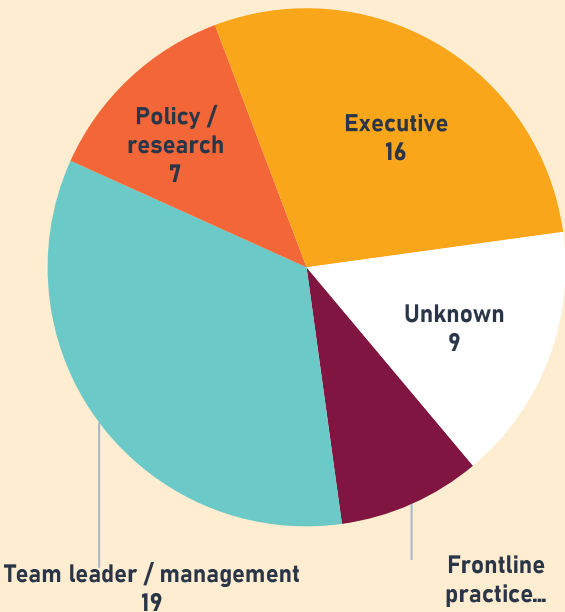


Figure 17:
Years of experience in the sector for
community service stakeholders

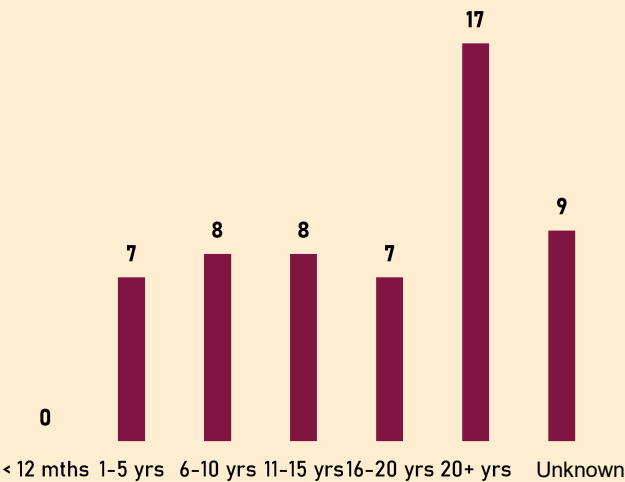
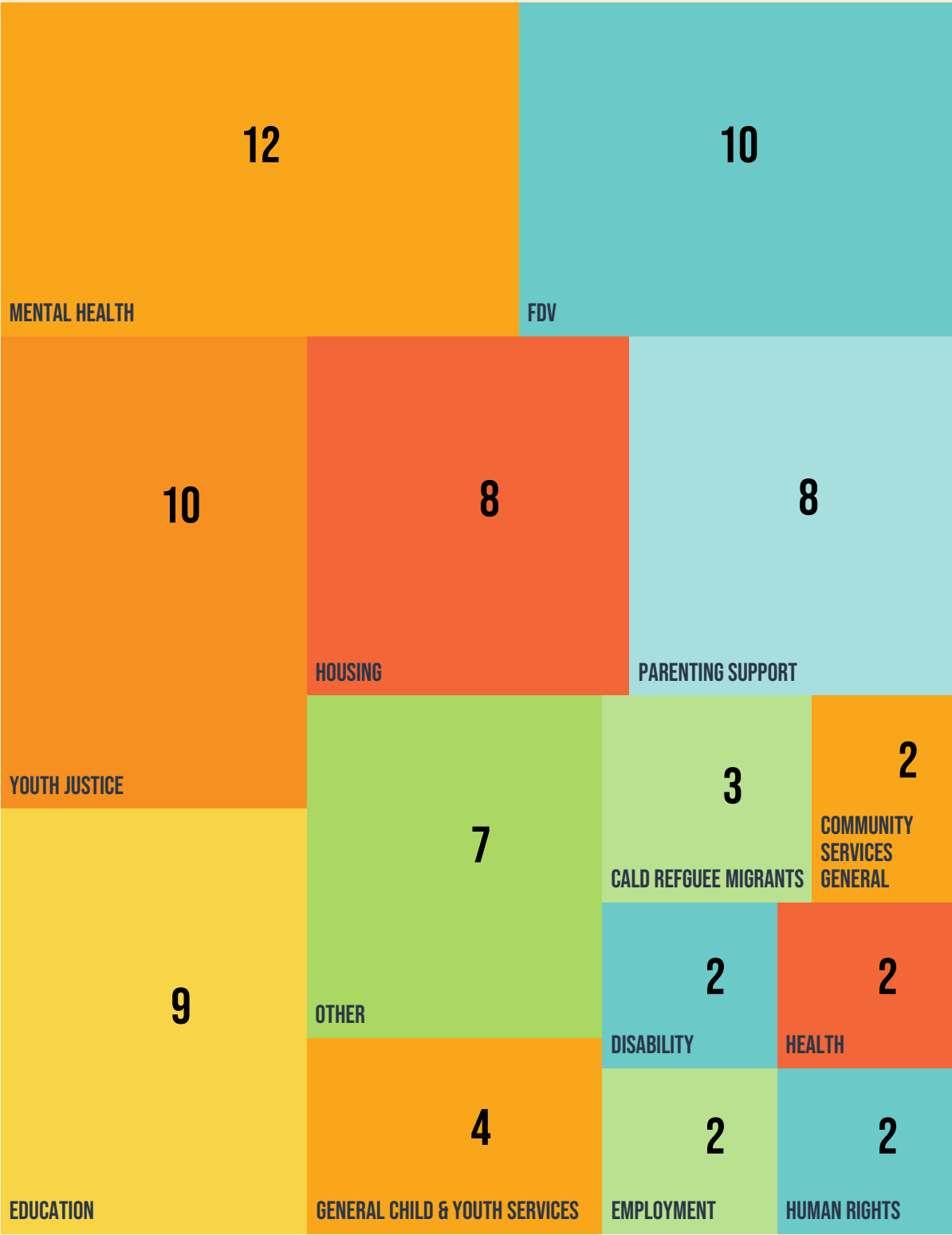


Figure 18:
Community service sectors for community service stakeholders

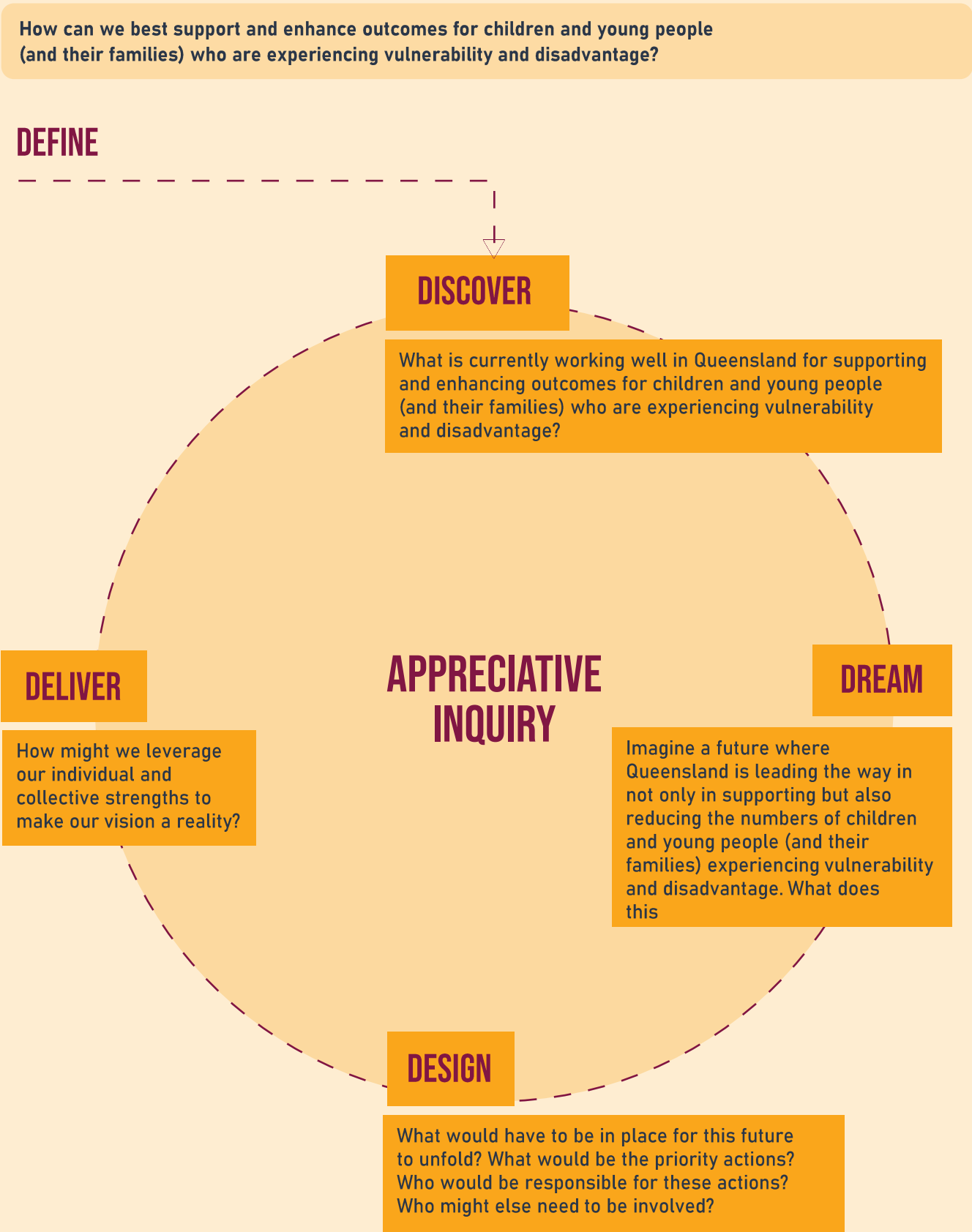


Note:
Approximately half the community service stakeholders in the study indicated that work across multiple community service sectors.

A-2 Appreciative Inquiry framing

This framing was used to structure the focus groups with Queensland community service stakeholders (see Chapter Four).

Figure 19: Appreciative inquiry framework for focus groups with community service stakeholders



A-3 Queenslander youth stakeholder questions

Six young people aged between 15 and 21 participated in an online focus group in February 2025. This focus group sought the perspectives of young people on the draft policy priorities and recommendations that had been developed through the project. Participants were asked which of the six domains from The Nest Wellbeing Framework was most important to them. In the interests of time, we focused the discussion on the draft policy recommendations related to the prioritised domains. Participants first indicated the extent to which the recommendation would have an impact on children and young people in Queensland. They then prioritised which of the recommendations was most important to them. Participants were then invited to share their thoughts on why they made the selection(s) they did.

The draft recommendations for all six domains are outlined below, however the discussion focused on the multidimensional, material basics, identity and culture, and valued, loved and safe recommendations.

Material basics

1. How much of an impact do you think would this have on children and young people in Queensland?

	Significant impact	A lot of impact	Some impact	Very little impact	No impact
providing housing to all without conditions	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
higher rates of income support for families	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
school and community-based food programs	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

2. Which of these priorities is most important to you?

- ☐ providing housing to all without conditions
- ☐ higher rates of income support for families
- ☐ school and community-based food programs

Participating

1. How much of an impact do you think would this have on children and young people in Queensland?

	Significant impact	A lot of impact	Some impact	Very little impact	No impact
strong local connections to health services	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
strong local connections to education	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
strong networks between service providers and governments	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

2. Which of these priorities is most important to you?

- ☐ strong local connections to health services (e.g. doctors)
- ☐ strong local connections to education (e.g. schools)
- ☐ strong networks between service providers and governments

Learning

1. How much of an impact do you think would this have on children and young people in Queensland?

	significant impact	a lot of impact	some impact	very little impact	no impact
everyone can access childcare	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
better links between schools and daycare/kindy	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
more options to (re)engage with school	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

2. Which of these priorities is most important to you?

- ☐ everyone can access childcare (free or very low cost)
- ☐ better links between schools and daycare/kindy
- ☐ more options to (re)engage with school

Healthy

1. How much of an impact do you think would this have on children and young people in Queensland?

	Significant impact	A lot of impact	Some impact	Very little impact	No impact
youth-friendly 'hubs' for health and mental health services	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
training for staff to respond to changing needs of families	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
variety of ways to access health and mental health services	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
less waiting times	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

2. Which of these priorities is most important to you?

- ☐ youth-friendly 'hubs' for health and mental health services
- ☐ training for staff to respond to changing needs of families
- ☐ variety of ways to access health and mental health services
- ☐ less waiting times

Identity & Culture

1. How much of an impact do you think would this have on children and young people in Queensland?

	Significant impact	A lot of impact	Some impact	Very little impact	No impact
support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
more collaborations between different agencies	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
staff who can provide culturally responsive and appropriate services	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

2. Which of these priorities is most important to you?

- ☐ support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations
- ☐ more collaborations between different agencies (e.g. health, education)
- ☐ staff who can provide culturally responsive and appropriate services

Valued, Loved & Safe

1. How much of an impact do you think would this have on children and young people in Queensland?

	Significant impact	A lot of impact	Some impact	Very little impact	No impact
locally designed programs and initiatives	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
help to participate in local activities (e.g. sport)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
better training for workers	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

2. Which of these priorities is most important to you?

- ☐ locally designed programs and initiatives
- ☐ help to participate in local activities (e.g. sport)
- ☐ better training for workers

Multidimensional

1. How much of an impact do you think would this have on children and young people in Queensland?

	Significant impact	A lot of impact	Some impact	Very little impact	No impact
one department responsible for children and families	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
a shared vision between government and social services	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
good and available child and family services workers	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

2. Which of these priorities is most important to you?

- ☐ one department responsible for children and families
- ☐ a shared vision between government and social services
- ☐ good and available child and family services workers

