



A Blueprint to a Capable Child Protection System

Act for Kids Submission to the
Queensland Child Safety Commission of Inquiry March 2026



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Executive Summary

Queensland's system of services for children, young people and families is fragmented across and within government portfolios, agencies and regions, based on program guidelines and decisions made at a specific point in time. The reactive, crisis driven decision making has meant the central goal of these services, good outcomes for children, has not been achieved, particularly for children known to child protection services.

Act for Kids appreciates the opportunity in this submission to suggest a new way forward. By taking a whole of government approach supported by data, we suggest some options for governance and accountability to align policy, funding and programs to focus on outcomes for children, not on the systems.

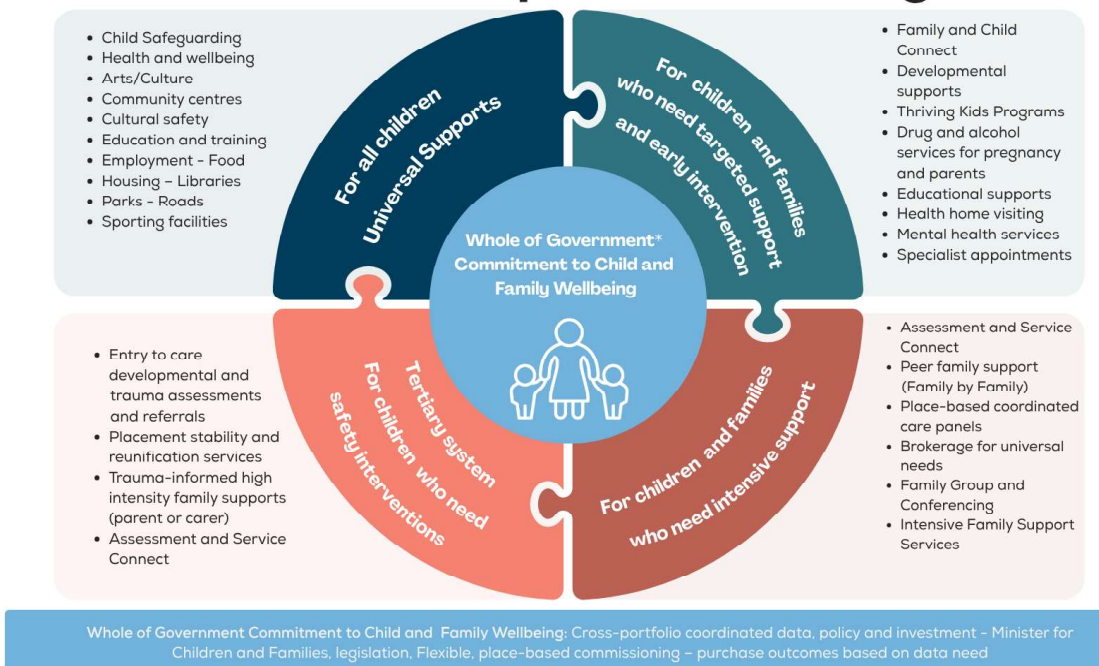
We suggest a coordinated structured support service ecosystem to improve outcomes and build best practice early intervention. Across the service spectrum, we identify solutions to the gaps we have identified:

Services	Gaps	Solutions
Universal services for all children	Universal services are not designed or resourced adequately to respond to complex and diverse needs for Queensland children and young people who are engaged in the child protection system.	Embed trauma-informed, culturally responsive practice across universal services, co-locate multidisciplinary supports, strengthen community partnerships and expand evidence-based prevention programs.
Targeted supports for children and families that need early intervention	Children and their families continue to face barriers in accessing timely targeted support, with difficult intake pathways and fragmented, short-term services that drive escalation rather than prevention.	Strengthen flexible, longer-term family supports, reform intake pathways to prioritise early help, expand multidisciplinary place-based models of care and increase access to culturally safe, community-led services.
Intensive supports for children	Children and families with complex and diverse needs lack consistent, coordinated intensive support aimed at addressing specific care and protection issues for children and young people.	Expand and enhance investment in multidisciplinary wraparound supports, embed care coordination, increase access to therapeutic services and enable place-based solutions funding for child-centred case responses.

Tertiary services for children who need safety interventions	The tertiary system is under pressure, responding too late with crisis-driven interventions and delivering poor long-term outcomes for children.	Rebalance investment toward prevention, embed therapeutic care in all care settings, strengthen transition and aftercare supports and enforce accountability of the department in their role as a corporate parent
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We are committed to working together towards a better Child Safety System, and we want to work together towards the map of an ecosystem that means Queensland children thrive. Below is an attempt to map that scenario.

Future state child protection ecosystem



1. About Act for Kids

Act for Kids is a national not-for-profit organisation with more than 35 years' experience supporting children, young people and families across Australia. The organisation delivers evidence-informed, trauma-informed and culturally responsive services across metropolitan, regional and remote communities through a network of 35 centres nationwide.

Act for Kids employs multidisciplinary teams including psychologists, social workers, counsellors, family support practitioners, occupational therapists, speech pathologists, early years educators, teachers and specialist domestic and family violence practitioners. Through this workforce, Act for Kids provides services across the full continuum of need, from universal prevention and early intervention through to intensive therapeutic support and crisis responses. Central to this work is the recognition that children's safety and wellbeing are closely connected to the stability, capability and resilience of the families and communities in which they live.

Act for Kids welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the Queensland Commission of Inquiry into Child Safety by examining the many systemic factors that continue to drive poor outcomes for children, young people and families within Queensland's child protection system. This submission identifies practical, sector-informed opportunities of reform for children and young people currently residing in out of home care.

Furthermore, the submission outlines existing and emerging approaches and models of care that support holistic, trauma-informed and culturally responsive support for children and their families, while also highlighting structural barriers that continue to limit the sector's ability to keep children safe, supported and thriving over the long term.

1.1 Act for Kids Programs

Act for Kids delivers a broad range of prevention, early intervention and therapeutic programs designed to improve safety, strengthen families and support children's development and wellbeing. Services include trauma-informed therapy, Intensive Family Support, Family and Child Connect, Assessment and Service Connect, specialist sexual abuse and harmful sexual behaviours counselling, domestic and family violence responses, early childhood and parenting supports and targeted services for children involved in or at risk of entering the statutory child protection system.

Many of Act for Kids' programs are delivered directly within family homes and communities, combining practical assistance with therapeutic support to

address the complex drivers of harm such as family stress, housing instability, domestic and family violence, substance use and social isolation. By strengthening parenting capability and responding to children's developmental and emotional needs, these services play an important role in stabilising families and reducing the likelihood of escalation into statutory intervention.

The scale and impact of Act for Kids services is significant. In 2024–25, Act for Kids supported more than 37,000 people, including 21,788 children. The success of Act for Kids programs is underpinned by a highly skilled multidisciplinary workforce that is embedded across its services, with expertise in child development, trauma and family wellbeing.

Act for Kids programs and interventions range from protective behaviours education and parenting support through to intensive therapeutic services, family-based interventions and residential care for children who have experienced neglect, physical, sexual or emotional abuse and domestic and family violence. Over the past six years alone, the Act for Kids services have supported more than 300,000 children and families, demonstrating the significant role community-based services play in strengthening families and protecting children.

1.2 Agencies need to align to fix child protection.

Currently in Queensland, the child protection system is not fit for purpose and is not consistently delivering safe, stable and family centric outcomes for children and young people. Act for Kids holds the strong view that meaningful reform must move beyond incremental change within the Department toward a deliberate, whole of government approach that addresses systemic fragmentation, strengthens accountability and rebalances investment toward prevention and early support, alongside high-quality care and protection for children already entrenched in the system.

At present, the Queensland government develops policy and funds services for children and families in silos across health, education and social services. This fragmentation leads to policy misalignment, suboptimal economic returns and, most importantly, poorer outcomes for children and families. Without careful system design, opportunities for early support are missed and responses become increasingly crisis driven.

A genuinely integrated, whole of government approach that is underpinned by cross-portfolio coordination of data and services and joined up commissioning would enable the state to invest in what works, based on evidence of need. The solutions outlined below set out a clear, cohesive pathway across

universal, targeted, intensive and tertiary responses, alongside practical mechanisms to address siloing and deliver more effective, accountable and outcomes focused reform.

2. Universal Supports

Universal services such as schools and hospitals are typically designed around episodic models of care and are resourced on the assumption that children and families have a baseline level of support and stability. As a result, these services are often not equipped to effectively respond to intergenerational disadvantage, trauma and child maltreatment.

Strengthening the capacity of universal services to recognise and respond to these complexities and increasing targeted investment in child and family support within these settings would enable earlier intervention and more holistic support for vulnerable families. This approach has the potential to reduce demand on intensive and costly tertiary and acute services over time, delivering both improved outcomes for children and better value for public investment.

2.1 Putting Queensland Children and Young People First

Children and young people do not constitute a minor proportion of our population and investing in them is an investment in Queensland's future. Approximately 1.6 million children and young people aged 0–24 years live in Queensland, while nationally around 8 million Australians fall within this age group. These figures alone highlight the scale of the Australian population that relies on effective systems purposed to safeguard their wellbeing and developmentⁱ.

Solution

Strengthening leadership, accountability and coordination across the systems that shape children's lives in Queensland would signal a clear commitment by Government to prioritising the care, protection and wellbeing of children and young people. The establishment of a dedicated Queensland Minister for Children and Young People would enable alignment of policy and investment across Government. Currently that responsibility is dispersed across multiple portfolios which limits any coordinated, whole-of-government responses to complex needs.

Importantly, this reform is already supported by a sector-led solution. The Queensland Council of Social Service (QCOSS) along with Act for Kids as a founding partner, has developed a whole-of-government Families Strategy

that was developed through an extensive consultation process with community organisations, service providers and stakeholders across Queensland. This work provides a strong, evidence-informed foundation to support a dedicated Minister for Children and Young People to align policy, funding and service delivery across portfolios including housing, health, education and child protection.

Implementing a Families Strategy of this scale would enable the Minister for Children and Young People to drive coordinated, measurable actions across government, while further strengthening shared accountability and prioritising early intervention through investment in the supports that families need to thrive. In doing so, it would move Queensland beyond fragmented policy responses toward a more cohesive system that supports families earlier, reduces escalation into statutory systems and improves long-term outcomes for children and young people.ⁱⁱ

2.2 Development of a Queensland Specific Children and Families Generational Research Strategy

Investment in children, young people and families in Queensland requires data and research to inform the most effective interventions targeted at the cohorts who need them. Large scale research projects for the same purpose have been undertaken in other states. For example, the *Children and Families Research Strategy 2017–2019* was developed by the Victorian Government as part of the *Roadmap for Reform: Strong Families, Safe Children* to strengthen the evidence base underpinning child and family system reform. The strategy recognised that improving outcomes for complex children and families requires a system that measures results, learns from evidence and continuously improves service responses. Prior to the strategy's development, the child and family service system was characterised by fragmented data, limited program evaluation and inconsistent use of research to guide service design and commissioning. As a result, it was often unclear which interventions were most effective in improving outcomes for children and families.ⁱⁱⁱ

Solution

Queensland does not currently have a coordinated, evidence-led body of data guiding investment and outcomes in child and family services. To address this, it should establish a child and family learning system that embeds research, evaluation and continuous improvement within policy, commissioning and service delivery. This would ensure programs are regularly evaluated, outcomes are measured and service models are refined based on emerging evidence. A key component of this approach would be the development of a

publicly accessible Queensland “Menu of Evidence” which is similar to the model implemented in Victoria. This resource would provide independent information on evidence-based and promising programs that improve outcomes for children, young people and families experiencing vulnerability. Making this evidence accessible to policymakers, commissioners and service providers would support more transparent, evidence-informed decision-making and help ensure that public investment is directed toward interventions that deliver measurable improvements in child safety and family wellbeing^{iv}.

2.3 Establish a legislated, whole-of-government data linkage and analytics function within a central agency to enable continuous tracking of service use, costs, and outcomes for children and families interacting with the child safety system.

Along with research and evidence, a data linkage function would be a key component of a Families Strategy for Queensland. Many children and families known to the child safety system are also serviced by other high-cost state systems. There is an opportunity for the state to invest in linkage of administrative data across:

- child protection,
- health,
- education,
- communities and families,
- youth justice,
- policing,
- housing and homelessness;

to examine the cost effectiveness of various state interventions against policy outcomes.

Evidence from New South Wales (NSW) demonstrates the value of this approach. In 2016, the NSW Government launched *Their Futures Matter* (TFM) - a whole-of-government reform aimed at delivering improved outcomes for vulnerable children, young people and their families. TFM was the government's key response to the 2015 *Independent Review of Out of Home Care in New South Wales* (known as 'the Tune Review'). Under *Their Futures Matter*, the government integrated administrative data across child protection, health, education, justice, and housing to build longitudinal cohorts of vulnerable children. This enabled identification of high-need groups,

quantification of lifetime service costs, and more targeted investment in early intervention programs^v.

They also undertook this sort of work in the development of the *Pathways to Homelessness Report*. The NSW Department of Communities and Justice commissioned analytics and actuarial consultancy Taylor Fry to complete detailed analysis on the government services people use before, during and after experiencing homelessness to improve the evidence base for homelessness prevention and early intervention programs^{vi}.

The *Pathways to Homelessness* analysis demonstrated how linked data can reveal patterns of service interaction before, during, and after crises, allowing government to identify missed opportunities for earlier intervention and reduce downstream costs.

Without an equivalent capability, the Queensland Government does not have insights into effective service use and cannot reliably assess which interventions best improve outcomes at best value. This limits the state's ability to prioritise investment, evaluate program effectiveness, and intervene earlier with families at risk.

A centralised data linkage function, supported by appropriate legislative authority, data governance, and privacy safeguards would enable ongoing, system-wide analysis to inform commissioning, policy design, and resource allocation across agencies, rather than fragmented, program-level decision-making.

2.4 Reimagined Cross Agency Commissioning

A review by the NSW Audit Office of the *Their Futures Matter* reform highlights the challenges of translating evidence into meaningful whole-of-government action. While the reform successfully built a valuable evidence base that included piloting programs and developing a new cross-agency dataset. The report showed that data alone does not establish an evidence-based, whole-of-government early intervention approach for children and families with complex and diverse needs. To this end, the Auditor-General emphasised that without strong cross-portfolio leadership and accountability, efforts to coordinate across government will continue to fall short. This underscores a critical lesson for reform across jurisdictions, highlighting that building an evidence base alone is insufficient. Without clear governance structures, authority to drive reprioritisation and aligned commissioning mechanisms, system-wide change will not occur^{vii}.

Solution

Realigning programmatic and commissioning frameworks in Queensland's social services, including the child protection sector, would enable organisations that work with children and young people to deliver more flexible, targeted and needs based programs, ensuring that support follows the child across the care continuum and is aligned with a whole of Families Strategy.

This transformative commissioning framework would include models that facilitate integrated service pathways, minimise duplication in assessment processes and prioritise timely access to therapeutic intervention. Moving away from rigid, criteria-based program eligibility toward responses driven by assessed need would enable the system to provide more timely and appropriate support to children and young people. This approach not only strengthens placement stability it supports healthier family relationships and improves overall health and wellbeing. It also promotes healing and reduces the likelihood of escalation into statutory intervention.

2.5 Increased Investment in Family and Child Community Hubs Throughout Queensland

Around 17% of children in Queensland live in poverty, meaning nearly one in six children grow up in households below the poverty line. Poverty is a significant driver of vulnerability for children and families, contributing to financial stress, housing instability, and increased risk of child protection involvement. These conditions highlight the importance of early intervention and coordinated responses that address both the social and economic factors affecting family wellbeing^{viii}.

Place-based initiatives provide an important mechanism for responding to these challenges. The *Logan Together* initiative demonstrates the value of community-led approaches to improving outcomes for children and families. Through initiatives such as *1000 Voices* and *Splash!*, community members identified priorities that informed the development of the *Logan Together Roadmap*, a community-owned plan guiding action for children from pregnancy through the early years.

The *Roadmap* aligns government, services and community partners around shared priorities and measurable outcomes, using local data to track progress and adapt strategies over time. This collaborative approach strengthens coordination across services and supports sustained improvements in outcomes for children and families^{ix}.

Solution

Act for Kids supports the increased establishment of place-based, community hub models across Queensland to ensure families can access timely, integrated support within their local community. These hubs would be embedded in trusted, universally accessed settings such as schools, libraries, General Practice (GP) clinics and community centres, creating a “no wrong door” approach where any family seeking help can be connected to the right support without navigating complex or intrusive service systems.

Each hub would include a Family and Child Connect (FaCC) worker with intake and triage functions to enable early identification of needs for families and immediate access to appropriate supports - including targeted early intervention and timely referrals to support services such as Intensive Family Support Services (IFS) and Family Wellbeing Services (FWB) for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families.

Through a co-location approach and strong local partnerships, the community hubs would reduce unnecessary referrals into Child Safety by providing a responsive, preventative pathway for families before risk escalates. The Community Hub could also provide a location for complex care panels that would operate from each community and would bring together local service providers to coordinate responses for families with diverse or escalating needs, further ensuring shared accountability and timely, wraparound support.

This model would not only strengthen early intervention but would improve service integration and ensure that all families, regardless of where they present, can access the help they need, when and where they need it. For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families, Community Hubs must be designed and delivered in genuine partnership with local communities, Elders, leaders and Traditional Owners. This approach ensures that self-determination is embedded at the centre of program design and that culture is meaningfully integrated across all supports and service responses.

Evidence from the *National Child and Family Hubs Network* demonstrates that place-based hub models are an effective mechanism for delivering integrated, early intervention support to children and families. With over 470 hubs operating across Australia, these models improve access to services by connecting families to evidence-based supports, enabling early identification of developmental needs, and facilitating seamless pathways across systems. National recommendations emphasise the value of leveraging the existing network, alongside sustained investment in the coordination “glue” that enables effective service integration. They also highlight the importance of

expanding both physical and virtual hubs to extend reach and improve access for children and families. Together, this evidence reinforces hubs as a critical model for reducing fragmentation and ensuring families can access timely, coordinated support within their local community.^x

2.6 Drop-in Centres in Urban and Regional Areas for Young People

Young people often have reduced options for support and may not attend family focussed services or require services during business hours. This is especially true for children and young people in residential care. Children and young people residing in out-of-home care are significantly over-represented in missing persons reports. In Queensland alone, hundreds of children leave their placements each year, with recent government data identifying more than 770 young people “self-placing” from care. Research consistently shows that young people are most likely to run away when they feel unsafe, disconnected from trusted adults or unsupported within their placement. These absences expose already vulnerable children to heightened risks of exploitation, homelessness, and involvement with the youth justice system^{xi}.

Solution

Youth drop-in centres provide an important diversionary response for young people experiencing homelessness, crisis or disconnection from family and support networks. These centres operate as safe, supervised spaces where young people can access immediate support during high-risk evening and overnight hours, when exposure to harm, exploitation and contact with the youth justice system is most likely to occur.

Staffed by trained youth workers, the centres provide a calm environment for de-escalation, crisis support and connection to appropriate services, including pathways to crisis accommodation and longer-term housing options. During daytime hours, these centres can also offer flexible, self-paced learning opportunities for children excluded from schools and home environments, encourage life skills development and connection to education, training and employment supports.

Providing a safe alternative to street-based environments, late night drop-in centres reduce young people’s exposure to violence, substance use and criminal activity while creating opportunities for early intervention and engagement. As part of a broader youth homelessness and diversion strategy, this model helps stabilise vulnerable young people, prevent escalation into the youth justice system and supports more positive long-term outcomes.

2.7 Accessible After-Hours Support for Parents and Carers

Parents and families also need supports outside business hours. The scale of usage of services such as Lifeline Australia phone counselling services is significant. Lifeline responds to over 1.3 million contacts each year across phone, text, and online channels, with a call received approximately every 30 seconds. This equates to thousands of interactions every day, requiring continuous staffing across all hours, including overnight periods^{xii}.

Caring for children is a 24-hour responsibility, yet the service system that is intended to support families operates within standard business hours. This misalignment creates a critical gap for families in crisis. Furthermore, challenges within families do not arise neatly between 9am and 5pm but often occur in the evenings, overnight or on weekends and frequently when formal supports are least accessible.

For many parents and carers, particularly those experiencing stress, social isolation or caring for children with complex needs, these moments can be pivotal. Without access to timely support or a trusted network, situations involving conflict, behavioural escalation or emotional distress can intensify quickly. In the absence of immediate support, parents may feel overwhelmed and unsure how to respond in that moment increasing the risk of harm, relationship breakdown, or escalation into statutory systems^{xiii}.

Solution

There should be greater investment in outside of business hours, easily accessible supports for families. Increased investment in Parentline Queensland would be an effective way to do this. Parentline Queensland plays an important role in strengthening families, offering free, holistic and confidential counselling that centres on relational support within a trauma-informed and attachment-based framework. Operating from 6:00 am to midnight, seven days a week, the service offers professional phone and online counselling, giving parents timely access to trained counsellors who can provide guidance on parenting challenges, child behaviour, family relationships, mental health concerns and school-related issues. By offering early advice and practical strategies, Parentline helps parents and caregivers build confidence, strengthen relationships with their children and address issues before they escalate into more serious family crises or require statutory intervention^{xiv}.

Evidence consistently shows that when parents are supported with advice, information, and connections to services, they are better equipped to promote

their children's wellbeing, learning and emotional development. As part of Queensland's broader early intervention and family support system, Parentline provides a critical first point of contact for families seeking guidance and referrals for specific supports, helping to stabilise family environments and reduce pressure on more intensive child protection and crisis services^{xv}.

3. Targeted Support

For children and families with complex and intersecting needs, targeted supports represent a critical intervention point in the family support system where timely, intensive support can stabilise families and prevent entry into the child protection system. Without sufficient investment in these supports, families are more likely to escalate to crisis, resulting in significantly higher human and financial costs.

3.1 Increased Investment and Access to Semi-Supported Accommodation Programs for Mothers and Newborns

Target supports should benefit cohorts of children who are at the highest risk of being harmed. As highlighted by the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) (2023), infants are largest group to enter out-of-home care in Australia, with children under one year of age experiencing the highest rate of removals at approximately 8 per 1,000 children.^{xvi} Many of these removals occur at or shortly after birth following prenatal child protection notifications.

In Queensland alone, more than 12,400 children are currently living in out-of-home care, demonstrating the scale of statutory intervention and the urgent need for preventative responses that support mothers and babies to remain safely together wherever possible. Evidence also suggests that many infant removals occur where housing instability, social isolation, generational poverty, and limited practical support intersect with other vulnerabilities experienced by young or first-time mothers^{xvii}.

Anecdotal evidence from the sector highlights that despite infants being the most vulnerable age group due to their complete reliance on caregivers, Child Safety's engagement with expectant mothers often occurs too late for any meaningful preventative support to occur. Feedback from the sector also indicates that Child Safety Officers often lack the capacity and skill to effectively support unborn child cases, with system pressures limiting Child Safety's ability to undertake thorough pre-birth safety assessments and case planning processes that aim to provide sustained engagement with expectant mothers during pregnancy. As a result, these significant assessment

processes delivered by Child Safety frequently occur only after the birth of a child and often through statutory mechanisms such as Temporary Assessment Orders (TAOs) or Temporary Custody Orders (TCOs) both processes which are ex parte and exclude parents from having a means to address the concerns against them. Strengthening early engagement and providing practical supports to expectant mothers and parents, including access to safe and stable housing, creates greater opportunity to assess parenting capacity, build safety networks and reduce the need for immediate infant removals.

Solution

Semi-supported accommodation models for parents and newborns provide a practical and preventative response to these challenges while supporting parent and child attachment. These programs allow mothers and fathers to remain safely with their babies while living in a supported environment where parenting capability can be strengthened and risks can be actively monitored and addressed. Within these settings, parents typically live in shared or clustered accommodation and receive structured, wrap-around supports including guidance with infant care and safe sleep practices, parenting education, connection to health and developmental services, daily living skills and practical supports such as budgeting, cooking and maintaining a safe home environment.

Given the over-representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in out-of-home care, including infants removed at birth, live-in support models for new parents could be developed within cultural frameworks and delivered by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations. In 2013, Act for Kids conducted a co-design session with Traditional Owners in four Cape York communities who identified a significant need for young new parents to learn about parenting and cultural responsibilities in caring for children. The Traditional Owners suggested this would be a good use of the safe house facility in their community. They asked Act for Kids to present their opportunities for effective and efficient use of the safe house facility to the then Child Safety Minister.

The Elders' vision for the Aurukun Centre was put to the Child Safety Minister by Act for Kids in 2013. Instead of calling it a safe house, they wanted to have it known as a Family and Community Learning Centre that provided three types of services needed by families in the community:

1. Short-term residential services for children who are not safe at home
2. Helping Families Grow their Kids service – targeted in-home family supports for families where children are not safe at home, or are being reunified or placed with kin

3. Parenting programs – mandatory for all new parents in the community. They would be delivered by trained staff and local Elders. For very young new parents, there would be a live in program in the safe house where parents are taught how to care for their baby and about their cultural responsibilities to the baby, family, and community.

An existing service in Far North Queensland provides similar supports to mothers from the Cape and Torres Region. Mookai Rosie Bi-Bayan provides a strong example of a holistic “mums and bubs” model, delivering culturally safe, wraparound support for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women and their infants. The service integrates accommodation and postnatal care, parenting support and social and emotional wellbeing services within a single, place-based model, ensuring continuity of care during pregnancy and the early years of a child’s life. Delivered through an Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisation, the model centres self-determination, cultural safety and early attachment while ensuring mothers and babies remain safely together while addressing the complex health and social needs of families who must travel away from community to give birth^{xviii}.

The model also provides peer support from other mothers experiencing similar circumstances, helping to reduce isolation and build confidence during the critical early stages of parenting. Evidence consistently shows that establishing the mother–infant relationship during the earliest stages of life supports secure attachment, improves developmental outcomes and reduces the likelihood of children entering out-of-home care^{xix}.

By combining safe housing with therapeutic and practical supports this semi-supported accommodation service creates a structured environment where mothers can develop the skills, confidence and stability required to care safely for their children. Importantly, these programs provide an alternative to immediate infant removal by addressing the underlying risk factors that often trigger statutory intervention. When appropriately resourced and integrated with child protection and health services, semi-supported accommodation has the potential to significantly reduce infant removals, strengthen family stability and support better long-term outcomes for both mothers and their children^{xx}.

3.2 Increased Investment in Housing for Single Parents

Housing instability is increasingly recognised by the sector as a significant driver of child protection involvement. Research shows that each year more than 100,000 children and young people access specialist homelessness services across Australia, with approximately 30,000 of these children also experiencing a substantiated child protection notification. Families experiencing homelessness or unstable housing are more likely to be

investigated by child protection authorities, have children placed in out-of-home care and remain involved with the statutory system for longer periods. In Queensland the demand for homelessness services among families has increased substantially, with a 41.3 per cent rise in families accessing specialist homelessness supports between 2018–19 and 2022–23. These trends highlight the critical relationship between housing stability and child safety outcomes, reinforcing the need for housing focused responses as part of any strategy aimed at reducing child protection notifications and family separation^{xxi}.

Further to this, the QCOSS *Living Affordability in Queensland Report (2022)* identifies housing as a significant and disproportionate pressure for single-parent households. The report notes that single parents may spend close to 46% of their income on housing costs, well above accepted affordability benchmarks and indicative of severe housing stress.^{xxii} This is not an isolated or improving trend. The more recent QCOSS *Raising Queensland Report (2026)* reinforces the scale and persistence of housing pressures across Queensland, confirming that single-income households continue to experience acute and sustained financial strain driven by housing costs.^{xxiii}

Solution

Targeted supports for families that include housing solutions have been shown to address the pernicious cycle of housing instability and associated child protection intervention. For example, the *Families Back on Track (FBOT)* program delivered by the St Vincent de Paul Society was established in Queensland in 2014 to support families experiencing homelessness who are also involved, or at risk of involvement, with the child protection system. The program provides an integrated housing and family support model that combines access to safe, stable accommodation with intensive, wrap-around case management.

FBOT works with families to address the underlying drivers of instability, including housing insecurity, financial stress, domestic and family violence, and parenting challenges. Through this approach, families receive practical support to strengthen parenting capability, improve family functioning and reconnect with community, health and education services. By addressing both housing and family support needs simultaneously, the FBOT model helps stabilise families, reduce the likelihood of children entering out-of-home care and supports children remaining safely with their parents wherever possible. The program recognises that stable housing is a critical protective factor for children's safety and demonstrates how coordinated housing and family

support responses can prevent family separation and promote long-term stability^{xxiv}.

4. Intensive Support

There remain critical gaps in the system for children and families requiring intensive support. While programs such as Intensive Family Support Services provide significant assistance, challenges arise when family's needs extend beyond the scope of a single department's portfolio. This can result in fragmented responses and unmet need, particularly for families experiencing complex, intersecting issues. The following solutions outline approaches that have demonstrated effectiveness in improving outcomes for children and addressing these system gaps.

4.1 Increase Investment for Domestic and Family Violence Services that work with the Person Using Violence and Their Families

Domestic and family violence (DFV) remains a significant issue in Australia, causing loss of life, long-term trauma and substantial pressure on service systems. It is estimated to cost the Australian economy \$32.8 billion annually. At a local level, the scale of the issue is also evident. In the Moreton Bay region alone, there were 1,714 Domestic Violence Order (DVO) applications in 2024–25, with DFV incident rates of 13.1 per 1,000 residents, significantly higher than Brisbane's 7.9 per 1,000 residents^{xxv}.

Men's behaviour change programs are a key intervention designed to address DFV by working directly with perpetrators to recognise and change abusive behaviour towards their partner and children. Research indicates these programs can significantly reduce violence, with one Australian longitudinal study finding reported violent behaviour reduced by around 50 per cent following program completion. Despite this evidence, most perpetrators never engage with behaviour change programs, highlighting the need for greater access, earlier referral pathways and stronger integration with child protection, justice and community services to support behaviour change while prioritising the safety of women and children^{xxvi}.

Solution

The Act for Kids *Safe Families* program provides a holistic and intensive service model to families impacted by DFV where the person using violence is still connected to the family unit. This unique program responds to a critical system gap for families who are not eligible for, or in contact with, other child

protection and DFV agencies for various reasons, particularly through a common exclusion criterion for families where a perpetrator of violence resides with the family.

In response to high demand for an evidence-led intervention for families where the perpetrator of violence resides in the home, Act for Kids, along with its philanthropic donors partnered to pilot the *Safe Families* program. It is delivered through Act for Kids Moreton Centre. Co-designed and established between August and December 2023, with client intake commencing in January 2024, *Safe Families* uses a multigenerational, whole-of-family approach to supporting families impacted by DFV. The pilot has generated valuable insights into how the model can be refined to increase reach and impact while maintaining safety, quality, and therapeutic integrity.

Alongside the individual supports provided to parents, Act for Kids delivers a range of programs designed to support the whole family unit experiencing the impacts of DFV. These include:

<p>Caring Dads (17 weeks)</p>	<p>Supports fathers to end controlling, abusive and neglectful behaviours and build safe, respectful relationships with their children. The program strengthens accountability, improves parenting capacity, and increases children’s emotional and physical safety.</p>
<p>Shark Cage – Women – (8 weeks)</p>	<p>Empowers women who have experienced abuse to understand their rights, recognise patterns of coercion and control, and strengthen boundaries. The program reduces vulnerability to revictimisation and builds confidence and self-advocacy.</p>
<p>Rhythm 2 Recovery School aged children aged 4 – 17yrs (6 Weeks)</p>	<p>A therapeutic, evidence-based program using the rhythm of drums and reflective activities to improve emotional regulation, resilience, connection, and wellbeing. It supports trauma recovery by enhancing safety, engagement, and belonging.</p>
<p>Love Bites (1 day) Primary and High School</p>	<p>A respectful relationships education program that increases young people’s understanding of consent, gender-based violence, and online safety, promoting healthy relationship norms and early intervention.</p>

See Case Story 1 in the Appendix for an example of how the program worked with a family experiencing DFV.

4.2 Matched Investment in IFS to Decrease the Spending in Out-of-Home Care

Removing children from their families and placing them in out-of-home care must be the option of last resort in a coordinated, evidence-led system prioritising the safety and wellbeing of children. Therefore, investment in such a system must by need be biased toward prevention and early intervention strategies, rather than the options of last resort. This is not currently the case in Queensland.

Queensland's investment profile in out-of-home care is both significant and unsustainable. Residential care alone now exceeds \$1 billion annually, with costs averaging around \$1,360 per child per night and expenditure projected to surpass \$7 billion per year by 2030 if current trajectories continue. Despite this, the system remains heavily weighted toward late, crisis-driven responses rather than early intervention and prevention^{xxvii}.

Solution

Evidence consistently shows that early intervention delivers better outcomes for children and families at a lower cost by stabilising families, reducing risk and preventing entry into care. Act for Kid's Intensive Family Support (IFS) program demonstrates this impact in practice with the program supporting over 57,000 children and families across Queensland since 2015.

See Case Story 2 in the Appendix for an example of a deidentified recent IFS client family.

Timely, relationship-based multidisciplinary support programs like the IFS service reduces escalation into statutory systems and helps keep children safely at home. Rebalancing investment toward early intervention and prevention, rather than continuing to expand high-cost tertiary responses offers a more effective, sustainable and fiscally responsible pathway to improving outcomes for children and young people.

4.3 Government Investment in Act for Kids Re-ACT CO Model

Children who have experienced trauma require stable home environments and relationships as well as timely therapeutic supports. Children living in rural and remote areas of Queensland face significant inequities in accessing specialist therapeutic and child wellbeing support. Approximately one-third of Queensland's population lives outside metropolitan areas, where access to specialist services is often limited by workforce shortages and geographic

isolation. At the same time, thousands of children who live in regional and remote locations remain engaged with the statutory child protection system.

As of December 2024, 12,497 children were living in out of home care in Queensland with data also highlighting that 10.9 per 1,000 children were subject to care and protection orders. Further to this, the data also highlights that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are disproportionately affected by child protection concerns, with 4,961 children in care as of June 2024, a rate 9.3 times higher than non-Indigenous children. For many children living in rural and remote communities, accessing trauma-informed therapeutic services requires travelling long distances or going without care entirely. These structural inequities highlight the urgent need for flexible service models capable of delivering consistent, trauma-informed support in regional and remote communities^{xxviii}.

Solution

Providing services in regional, rural and remote Queensland is difficult for many reasons. It is an issue we have striven to address by piloting programs and evaluating their capacity to be delivered in diverse geographies and be scaled. An example of this is Act for Kids Re-ACT CQ therapy program delivered in Central Queensland (Rockhampton and communities to the west).

Currently Act for Kids philanthropically funds the Re-ACT CQ model which addresses these structural barriers by combining strong local service leadership with a flexible in-reach workforce that blends face-to-face therapy, telehealth and coordinated care. Evidence from both the pilot and the broader literature consistently demonstrates that sustained, in-person therapeutic engagement is critical for children who have experienced trauma, particularly in building trust, maintaining engagement and achieving meaningful therapeutic outcomes. By structuring services around school terms and embedding therapy within children's existing support networks – including schools, caregivers and community organisations, the Re-ACT CQ model maximises accessibility while ensuring care is integrated and responsive to each child's environment.^{xxix}

Importantly, the model responds directly to the well-documented workforce challenges that prevent traditional service models from operating effectively in remote communities. By combining locally based leadership with fly-in-fly-out (FIFO) and drive-in-drive-out (DIDO) clinicians, the service can maintain consistent therapeutic relationships while expanding the available workforce pool and reducing clinician burnout and isolation. This hybrid approach allows services to commence and scale even where a permanent local workforce cannot be sustained.

The pilot has demonstrated that with appropriate leadership, clinical governance and coordinated intake processes, services can deliver intensive trauma-focused therapy to children who would otherwise have no access to specialist support. Investment in scaling this model will enable a sustainable expansion of trauma counselling across rural and remote regions, ensuring children can access consistent, high-quality therapeutic care regardless of where they live^{xxx}.

What is the Investment Footprint of Re-ACT CQ?

With an investment of \$549,600 pa, a model with 1.8 FTE clinicians and leadership can support 50 children, at an average of \$223 per client support hour or \$10,992 per child. When scaled to 4.8 clinicians and increased leadership and intake, we can support up to 150 children pa across one or two rural, regional and remote regions. Economies of scale reduce the average cost to \$9,521 per child, with a total investment of \$1.43 million and an improved cost-efficiency of \$195 per support hour whilst still including the support structures required for safe and effective service delivery.

4.4 Strengthen Access to the Bail Response Program – Family Partnerships

Children and young people engaged with the youth justice system routinely face barriers to completing bail requirements. This is due to a range of factors including homelessness, not being safe at home, family dysfunction, undiagnosed developmental impairments and lack of social supports. Evidence demonstrates that bail is a critical intervention point within the youth justice system, where timely support can influence whether a young person remains in the community or enters detention^{xxx}^{xi}. Bail support programs assist young people to meet conditions, recognising that many have complex needs that make compliance difficult without structured support^{xxx}ⁱⁱ.

Solution

Act for Kids currently delivers the Bail Response Program (BRP), which provides intensive, in-home support to high-risk young people on bail and their families. The program directly addresses the in-home and environmental risk factors driving offending behaviour and strengthens the child's whole-of-family capacity while supporting compliance with bail conditions and a

demonstrated reduction in the likelihood of remand and further justice escalation.

Core elements of the program that must be retained and strengthened for future reform:

- Intensive in-home intervention to stabilise families and mitigate risks
- Practical assistance to support compliance with bail conditions
- Early intervention to prevent entry into detention
- Targeted therapeutic support for individuals and their family members including addressing key issues such as substance use, domestic and family violence and housing instability
- Evidence-informed strategies to interrupt offending cycles and build pro-social decision-making
- Assistance with transport challenges to support education engagement, training and employment pathways

The success of the BRP is fundamentally driven by its flexible eligibility criteria and its bespoke service delivery model. This ensures that the program has the capacity to support young people from all cohorts – specifically those with higher Serious Repeat Offender Index (SROI) scores or those engaged with the Multi-Agency Collaborative Panel (MACP) particularly where no other appropriate service exists.

4.5 Invest in Evidence-Led Interventions to Reduce Recidivism

As highlighted in data from OzChild, *Multisystemic Therapy* (MST) is one of the most rigorously tested interventions for high-risk young people, with consistent results across 74 studies and 57,000 families. Evidence shows 91% of young people remain at home, 86% are engaged in education or employment, and 87% avoid reoffending at program completion. Long-term outcomes include up to 54% fewer rearrests and 75% fewer serious offences, with significant reductions in detention and out-of-home care. Compared to usual services, MST delivers significantly better outcomes across offending, family functioning and overall wellbeing, demonstrating the effectiveness of holistic, family-based approaches^{xxxiii}.

Reducing youth offending requires responsive, family-centred interventions that address the underlying drivers of risk before a child or young person's behaviour escalates. The Youth Opportunity Program (YOP), delivered by Act for Kids for Youth Justice Services in Far North Queensland from 2008 - 2012,

provides compelling evidence for outcomes and cost-effectiveness. Designed as an intensive case management program, YOP supported young people on Youth Justice Orders at moderate to high risk of reoffending or remand through two service streams: the Community Response Service (CRS) and the Bail Support Service.

An independent evaluation of YOP completed in 2011 confirmed the Community Response Service was both effective and cost-efficient in reducing youth reoffending. The evaluation noted that young people engaged in CRS were significantly less likely to reoffend than comparable cohorts, with reoffending rates of 25% at six months and 24% at twelve months, compared with 40% and 48% respectively in the comparison group.

The evaluation further found that participants in the YOP not only reoffended at lower rates but also committed fewer offences. This pattern was significant as it demonstrates a reduction in young people having contact with the justice system and a clear and measurable shift in a young person's behaviour over time. These outcomes reflect an increased stability for children and young people engaged in the program, which was achieved through an intensive, family-centred intervention that addressed the underlying drivers of offending. By strengthening home environments and building protective factors across education, relationships and wellbeing, the program helped interrupt the cycle of criminal behaviour and poor outcomes across multiple life domains.

The YOP supported a holistic, culturally responsive and relationship-based recidivism prevention program that promoted the voice of young people through healing. Furthermore, the evaluation provided a compelling case for reinvesting in and scaling similar models of care whereby a whole family would receive support to reduce recidivism in young people. In 2012 the program was de-funded when the Queensland Government adopted a different approach to supervising young people on youth justice orders.

5. Tertiary Supports

Tertiary child protection supports are the most intensive, statutory responses that are initiated when a child is assessed as being at significant risk of harm. They are intended to ensure immediate safety through interventions such as investigations, court orders and where necessary, removal into out of home care. While essential for protecting children in critical circumstances, these responses are designed as last-resort measures and are not intended to address the underlying drivers of risk or provide long-term, preventative support to families.

5.1 Place-Based Community Allied Health and Health Assessments for Children Entering Care

Children entering out-of-home care in Queensland do not consistently receive timely, coordinated health and wellbeing assessments, despite often presenting with complex and unmet medical, developmental and trauma-related needs. Evidence demonstrates that many children in out-of-home care do not receive recommended health checks within required timeframes, with research indicating that as few as 1 in 130 children receive all recommended health assessments within their first 12 months in care^{xxxiv}. This lack of health equity contributes to undiagnosed conditions, escalating behavioural and medical complexity and an increased risk of placement and reunification instability. Collectively, these failures reflect a broader systemic inability to operationalise the State's responsibility as corporate parent to safeguard and promote the holistic wellbeing of children in its care.

Solution

To address this gap, Act for Kids recommends establishing a program to fund place-based services to deliver allied health and developmental assessments for children at the point of entry into the child safety system. This service could be delivered through partnerships with local Hospital and Health Services, community organisations, or Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Community Controlled Organisations.

The program would deliver timely baseline assessments to identify developmental delays, trauma-related symptoms, functional needs and speech and language concerns. Early identification of these needs would enable appropriate supports to be implemented from the outset, ensuring children's circumstances are well understood and responded to appropriately. Undertaking comprehensive health and wellbeing assessments of children within the first weeks of a placement would equip carers, Child Safety Officers and service providers with the critical information and supports required to support placements and improve outcomes for children in out-of-home care.

Act for Kids considers that timely access to comprehensive developmental and allied health assessments is critical to reducing the risk of placement breakdown and would further support the reunification of children to families. This reform would also enhance the State's capacity to meet its obligations as a corporate parent, supporting a shift away from reactive, crisis-driven responses towards a more proactive, coordinated system that prioritises the long-term wellbeing of children and young people in Queensland.

5.2 Mandatory Protective Behaviours Training for All Carers and Children in Out-of-Home Care

National child protection data show that around 1,500 children in Australia were the subject of a substantiated abuse incident while living in out-of-home care in 2023–24, with the largest proportion aged 10–14 years^{xxxv}. These figures highlight that, even after entering the care system, some children and young people continue to experience harm. This underscores the importance of ensuring that children placed in out-of-home care are supported by stable, trusted networks of adults and services that actively promote their safety and wellbeing.

At the same time, there is increasing concern about the vulnerability of children in out-of-home care to exploitation and other forms of harm. Children who have experienced trauma, placement instability and disrupted relationships may be particularly susceptible to grooming and exploitation. Strengthening protective networks around children in care and improving coordinated responses across child protection, community services and law enforcement is therefore critical to reducing these risks and improving safety outcomes.

Solution

Strengthening children’s and caregivers’ understanding of interpersonal safety and personal boundaries should form a key component of reducing the risks of harm and exploitation in out-of-home care. Evidence-based protective behaviours programs, such as the *Emmy and Friends* Protective Behaviours Program, provide children with age-appropriate education that helps them recognise unsafe situations, understand their rights and identify trusted adults they can turn to for support.

The program is widely used in schools and early childhood settings to teach children practical strategies for personal safety, including recognising warning signs, understanding that everyone has the right to feel safe and building a network of trusted adults. By equipping children with these skills early in life, protective behaviours programs can support children to disclose concerns sooner, strengthen their ability to seek help and reduce exposure to abuse and exploitation.

The program is also widely used to train early childhood and primary educators on the same topics and to identify signs of harm and respond appropriately to children’s disclosures of harm. Act for Kids has delivered this training in schools for nearly two decades, and teachers consistently report that they do not feel they have the required skills or confidence to identify and

respond to harm, despite inclusion into various components of curricula in Queensland and other states.

If educators report not feeling confident, it is likely that support workers and kin and foster carers, who do not consistently receive protective behaviours training have significant gaps in their ability to identify the signs of harm, speak to children about protective behaviours or respond appropriately to disclosures of harm.

5.3 Increased Investment in Kinship Mapping and Family Finding Services

Children in out-of-home care continue to be placed in general or residential care settings, even where family or kinship options may be available but have not been fully explored. High statutory workloads and frequent changes in caseworkers limit the capacity of Child Safety Officers to undertake thorough family-finding and engagement processes. As a result, opportunities for stable, family-based placements are often missed, further increasing the likelihood of placement instability and prolonged time in care. As noted in the Queensland Family and Child Commission *Annual Report (2024-2025)* Queensland has Australia's lowest rate of home-based care placements, with over-reliance on residential care (2,093 children as of late 2024, costing \$1,360/child/night). Kinship care opportunities are often missed amid statutory pressures^{xxxvi}.

Solution

Investment in community-based family finding and kinship mapping services will ensure children involved in the out-of-home care system will have dedicated, culturally led family-finding and kinship-mapping to support the timely identification of safe and suitable family placements. Evidence shows that prolonged interim placements in residential facilities increases a child's instability and time in out-of-home care. Strengthening culturally informed family-finding services would ensure earlier placement with family as a priority case plan goal, while also improving the stability of the child or young person and adherence to the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Placement Principle^{xxxvii}.

5.4 Increase Investment for Young People to access Semi Independent Living (SILS) Models while Residing in Out-of-Home Care

Supported Independent Living Services (SILS) placements are currently used for only a small proportion of young people in out-of-home care in

Queensland. While more than 12,000 children are living in out-of-home care across the state, only a few hundred older adolescents are placed in independent living arrangements such as SILS, highlighting the limited use of this model despite its potential to support young people transitioning to adulthood^{xxxviii}.

SILS placements provide semi-independent accommodation for young people in the care of the child protection system who require structured support as they develop the skills needed to transition into adulthood. Typically used with older adolescents, SILS placements involve young people living in shared units or individual accommodation while receiving regular support from youth workers or case managers. This support focuses on building practical life skills such as budgeting, cooking, maintaining a household, accessing health services and sustaining engagement with education, training or employment.

The model can provide a more developmentally appropriate alternative to residential care by offering young people greater autonomy while maintaining consistent adult guidance and oversight. When implemented effectively, SILS placements can support stability, promote confidence and prepare young people for independent living, reducing the likelihood of homelessness and justice system involvement after leaving care^{xxxix}.

Despite these benefits, SILS placements are not utilised as widely as they could be within the child protection system. This is often due to concerns about risk management, the perceived vulnerability of young people and system constraints such as limited housing stock and workforce capacity. In many cases, young people remain in residential care environments that may not align with their developmental needs or readiness for greater independence.

Expanding access to SILS placements, with appropriate safeguards and wrap-around supports, could provide a more flexible care option for young people who can live in semi-independent settings. Increasing the availability of these placements would allow the system to better match care arrangements to individual needs while supporting young people to build the skills, confidence and stability required for a successful transition to adulthood.

5.5 Child Safety to Embed Blue Card Legislation Changes

Families are often unable to care for children in out-of-home care without holding a positive Blue Card notice, resulting in the exclusion of kin and family members who may have historical criminal convictions, even where Child Safety has assessed them as posing no current risk to the child. This creates

unnecessary barriers to kinship care and can lead to avoidable placements with general foster carers^{xl}.

Solution

It is essential that recent legislative reforms to the Blue Card system that are intended to enable safe and suitable family members to care for children without being unnecessarily excluded are fully implemented and monitored. These reforms should ensure that kin who are assessed as safe and capable are not prevented from caring for children due to administrative barriers or historical matters unrelated to current child safety risk, while maintaining appropriate safeguards. Clear guidance, consistent practice and strong accountability mechanisms are required to support timely decision-making, reduce delays and prioritise placement with kin wherever it is safe to do so.

6. Conclusion

Queensland's child protection system continues to experience increasing demand, rising complexity and growing pressure on statutory services. For this reason, improving outcomes for children and young people requires more than incremental reform; it requires a coordinated, whole-of-government and community response that strengthens prevention, supports families earlier and ensures children receive the best quality care when they are residing in out-of-home care.

The recommendations outlined in this submission draw on more than three decades of frontline service delivery and two previous Queensland Child Protection Inquiries. The blueprint represents practical, evidence-informed reforms that strengthen workforce capability, expand therapeutic supports for children and families, improve housing stability, increase access to kinship care and embed multidisciplinary teams within Child Safety.

Together, these reforms aim to address the underlying drivers of harm by strengthening families, supporting earlier intervention and ensuring statutory systems can focus resources where they are most needed to obtain the best outcomes. To this end, with strong sector leadership and sustained partnership between government and community organisations, the Queensland Government has an opportunity to reimagine the current child protection system to one that is not only responsive to harm but can prevent it. Act for Kids welcomes the opportunity to continue working with government and sector partners to translate these reforms into practice and ensure every child in Queensland can grow up safe, supported and thriving.

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