



yourtown
POWERING **kids**helpline

Putting Queensland Kids First

A submission to the Queensland Government

February 2024

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yourtown is a trusted provider of services for young people, with a focus on mental health and wellbeing, parenting and early childhood development, long-term unemployment, prevention of youth suicide, child protection, and support for those experiencing domestic and family violence. **yourtown** has evolved to helping hundreds of thousands of young people each year through a range of service offerings, supporting them through many difficult challenges.

Our services

- Employment, education, and social enterprise programs to help long term unemployed young people re-engage with education and/or employment
- Domestic and family violence refuge, accommodation, and therapeutic supports for women and their children, including post-refuge support
- Accommodation and therapeutic supports for young parents and their children at high risk
- Parentline, a telephone and online counselling and support service for parents and carers in the Northern Territory and Queensland
- Expressive Therapy interventions for young children and infants who have experienced trauma and abuse, or been exposed to violence
- Young Parents Program providing parenting support to help with child development, life skills and health and wellbeing activities in safe, supportive environments.
- Kids Helpline, providing professional counselling and support to 5–25-year-olds across Australia since 1991
- Kids Helpline @ School and Kids Helpline @ High School, which delivers early intervention and prevention programs through primary and secondary schools
- My Circle, a confidential, private, online peer support network for 13–25-year-olds to share information and build coping skills, and
- Mental health service/s for children aged 0-11 years old and their families, with moderate mental health needs.

Kids Helpline

yourtown's Kids Helpline is Australia's only free and confidential 24/7 phone and online counselling service for any young person aged 5 to 25. It offers children and young people a range of care options that are right for their needs and circumstances. Our commitment to being there anytime, and for any reason, has meant that we have responded to more than 8.8 million contacts from children and young people nationally in the 32 years since our service was first established, whilst also providing tens of millions of self-help interactions via our website and social channels. In 2023, our Kids Helpline counsellors responded to nearly 123,000 contacts from children and young people across Australia, including 3,893 crisis responses for children and young people at imminent risk of harm.

Family and Domestic Violence Refuge and Transitional Housing

yourtown's refuge offers supported accommodation for up to 12 weeks. A specialised team provides women and children with a safe and welcoming environment and creates opportunities for mothers to re-build self-concept and experience control and empowerment over their lives. The wrap-around care also includes linking with transitional housing and community outreach programs for women and children exiting refuges. Transitional housing is a vital steppingstone for women and children moving towards long term, safe and sustainable independent living in the community. **yourtown**'s transitional housing offers a safe and supportive environment for 6 – 12 months, with support for legal and financial matters, accessing pre-employment support, and helping children into school. In 2022-23, we supported 73 mothers and their young children in our refuge and 14 families in our transitional housing.

Children and Families

yourtown provides accommodation and intensive individualised support to vulnerable young parents and their children through our San Miguel service. For over 40 years, San Miguel has provided a place to call home for vulnerable and at-risk families. In 2022/23, San Miguel supported 35 parents and 38 infants and young children.

Early Childhood Development Programs

We support vulnerable pre-school aged children to make a successful transition to school by using prevention and early intervention approaches to create health families and strong, child-friendly communities. This includes working with parents to better understand their child's barriers to reaching social development milestones, how to help them thrive at school, collaborative case management and support, and in-home help. In 2022/23, we supported 179 families in Queensland and Tasmania.

Parentline

Parentline offers free confidential phone and webchat counselling and support for parents and carers of children in Queensland and the Northern Territory. It offers a safety net for families by providing support when it is most needed. This includes after hours and weekends, where families feel isolated and where local services are unavailable. In 2022/23, parents and carers in Queensland and the Northern Territory attempted to contact Parentline over 12,000 times.

ParentsNext

We provide specialised support for parents with children under six years of age, to plan and prepare for their future employment in regional South Australia, from Port Pirie. Our primary goal for ParentsNext is to empower parents to embrace life changes, improve their skills and self-confidence, and achieve their education and employment goals. More than 1,200 young parents participated in our ParentsNext program since it commenced in July 2018.

Employment Services

For over 20 years **yourtown** has been delivering specialist youth employment services. Our employment services programs, including Transition to Work, Skilling Queenslanders for Work, Get Back in the Game, and ParentsNext, provide young people with training to expand their options and help them find sustainable employment. Over the last seven years we have secured more than 37,000 job placements for young people. During 2022/23 there were more than 4,000 commencements in our employment services in Queensland, New South Wales, and South Australia.

Social Enterprises

yourtown has worked with young people and employers to break down barriers to sustainable employment for more than 20 years. As a leader in work-based enterprises we provide young people at risk of long-term unemployment paid jobs in the following areas: construction, landscaping, and asset maintenance to help their transition to open employment. In 2022/23, 201 young people were employed in our social enterprises across Queensland, New South Wales, South Australia, and Tasmania, with 90% transitioning into longer term employment in the open labour market or progressing into education.

yourtown welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Queensland Government's *Putting Queensland Kids First* consultation draft (the draft).

For over 60 years, **yourtown** has been supporting children and young people in Queensland. We support children, young people and families with mental health and wellbeing, parenting and early childhood development, long-term unemployment, prevention of youth suicide, child protection, and support for those experiencing domestic and family violence. Given our extensive experience in Queensland and throughout Australia, we are well-positioned to provide feedback on the draft.

Question 1 - What are the core principles you think should inform our early intervention and prevention approach to support children, young people and families?

yourtown agrees that each of the core principles (child and young person centric; prevention and early intervention; integrated ways of working to connect Queenslanders; culture, equity and inclusion; strengths-based; and evidenced-informed) is important to an early intervention and prevention approach to support children, young people, and families.

yourtown notes that there are synergies between the draft and the recently released National 'Draft Early Years Strategy',¹² and therefore advocate for a unified approach between the Federal and State Governments. Having consistent language and approach will enable families, communities, services, and all tiers of government to work collaboratively. A unified approach will strengthen accountability and coordination of governments, reducing silos, and increase the likelihood of improved outcomes. This would also create an opportunity to develop a National Agreement between the Commonwealth and state and territory governments, and joint funding approaches for services, opening up opportunities for holistic supports.

Recommendation 1:

That the strategy aligns, where possible, with the Federal Government and other jurisdiction strategies, to allow for greater collaboration and shared funding agreements.

Child and young person centric

yourtown considers centring the voices of children and young people to be the most important core principle in this strategy; however, we cannot continue to look at children and young people's needs through only an adult lens. The strategy must be informed by the stakeholder groups it is supporting. Hence, the human-centred³ design and co-design processes should be utilised, prioritising children and young people, while also including their families, carers and services that support them.

The Queensland Government must engage with a range of children and young people, including those who are marginalised and most at risk, throughout the development and implementation of the strategy. As part of this process, the Government needs to prioritise training for government and community leaders (who have the respect and trust of children and young people most at risk) to engage in genuine co-design.⁴

¹ Australian Government (2023). The Draft Early Years Strategy 2024-2034 (<https://engage.dss.gov.au/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/draft-consultation-early-years-strategy.pdf>)

² The guiding principles in the National Draft Early Years Strategy are: child and family-centric; strengths-based; respect for families and community; equitable, inclusive and respectful of diversity; and evidenced informed

³ A problem-solving technique that places real people at the centre of the development process, enabling the creation of products and/or services that resonate and are tailored to the audience's need

⁴ Design process that is participatory, in which community members are equal collaborators

Recommendation 2:

That the strategy prioritises the involvement of children and young people through human-centred design and co-design processes throughout the policy lifecycle.

Prevention and early intervention

Prevention and early intervention increase the protective factors in the life of a child and are key to reducing the impact of risk factors in both the short and long term.

To be effective prevention and early intervention cannot be targeted on one area of concern or be delivered independently. Support needs to be holistic, integrated and co-ordinated to ensure that it is effective and efficient. Holistic approaches, consider needs related to areas including health, education, housing, justice, child safety, family and domestic violence. Working in this way allows parents, services, and the community, to identify potential issues, respond appropriately and reduce the risk of poor long term outcomes.

Improving the connectivity and accessibility of services will allow for improved referrals and connections, particularly for 'first responders' who identify the current and emerging needs of children and young people.

Evidence-informed

yourtown supports evidence-informed as a core principle, but it does not go far enough. It is critical that the strategy includes the voices and lived experiences of children, young people, parents/carers, and families.

While there is a wealth of data concerning children, young people and their families held by both government and organisations who work with clients, it is not currently accessible or effectively used. The Queensland Government needs to consider the development of a data strategy encompassing a whole of government approach to data, alongside mapping of the many organisations that hold large data sets. The strategy should also include the development of systems and mechanisms so that connected datasets encompassing data from across the ecosystem (e.g. including health, education, housing, justice, child safety, family and domestic violence) are accessible.

Having up to date, available and connected data ensures that services can meet the needs of the community, reduce silos, and enable a greater understanding of what is working and what is not. Without using connected data to inform strategy development we cannot ensure the best outcomes for children, young people, and families.

Recommendation 3:

That the Queensland Government develops a data strategy to ensure the wealth of data held across government and community organisations is accessible, connected and used efficiently to enable the best outcomes for all Queenslanders.

Trauma-informed and guided by human rights

While the draft does make a small mention of delivering trauma informed services in their partnerships with community, the strategy needs to prioritise implementation of a trauma-informed approach in all areas. Without grounding in trauma-informed practice, children and their families will be at risk of re-traumatisation because the system lacks the requisite knowledge and training around the sensitivities, vulnerabilities and triggers of children who have experienced or been exposed to trauma. Children exposed to violence in the home can experience profound impacts on their physical, psychological, and emotional health and

wellbeing; with ongoing exposure to trauma potentially altering the child's brain development and affecting mental, emotional and behavioural health in adulthood.⁵

Trauma-informed practices that are guided by and consider the human rights of the child and family, create opportunities to rebuild a sense of control and empowerment, while also developing the capacity to manage issues in the future. Trauma-informed practice emphasises physical, psychological, and emotional safety, and operates from the core principles of safety, trust, choice, collaboration, and empowerment, and is grounded in an understanding of the impacts of trauma.

Recommendation 4:

That the strategy is grounded in trauma-informed practices and guided by human rights to minimise the potential for re-traumatisation and harm, while creating opportunities to empower children and build or rebuild a sense of control and empowerment.

Question 2 - What are the key protective factors in keeping children and young people on positive trajectories, and how can we further boost these?

It is important that the strategy considers both risk and protective factors, so we can stack the scale in favour of the protective factors. Over time, the cumulative impact of the protective factors can move the scale making it easier to achieve positive outcomes.

yourtown argues that it is important to move away from an individual focus and look towards the social determinants of health. As the Australian Child Maltreatment Study highlighted, we need to look beyond the individual and at the context that the child exists in.⁶ This requires a system-focused approach to intervene early and provide the opportunity to set positive trajectories through to adolescence and adulthood. Of particular importance are the mechanisms that support cross-sector collaboration throughout a person's life.

Meeting children, young people and families where they are at

The draft makes no mention of how digital services will be incorporated and prioritised in the strategy. **yourtown** supports inclusion of a strong component on digital supports enabling children, young people and families to access support when and how they want. Digital services can extend the availability of and complement face-to-face services. They are critical mechanisms that can bridge the gap when other services are unavailable due to time, location, waitlists, or limited resourcing. Digital services can also help reduce barriers to help seeking including stigma, cost, confidentiality, and transport availability.

The strategy needs to ensure it takes a systems approach and meets the needs and preferences of children, young people and families living in the 21st century. This includes designing services for privacy, ongoing connectivity and availability, and ensuring online access.

Services are needed that:

- 'don't feel like services'
- provide reassurance of trust between the service provider and the child, young person and family
- enable families to tentatively reach out and 'try before they buy'
- are safe spaces
- provide equitable and fair access to services

⁵ Child Welfare Information Gateway. (2017). Supporting brain development in traumatized children and youth. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Children's Bureau (<https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubpdfs/braindevtrauma.pdf>)

⁶ Haslam D, Mathews B, Pacella R, Scott JG, Finkelhor D, Higgins DJ, Meinck F, Erskine HE, Thomas HJ, Lawrence D, Malacova E. (2023). The prevalence and impact of child maltreatment in Australia: Findings from the Australian Child Maltreatment Study: Brief Report. Australian Child Maltreatment Study, Queensland University of Technology. DOI: <http://doi.org/10.5204/rep.eprints.239397>

- ensure that service users only have to tell their story once, and
- have clear pathways to navigate the complex service landscape and to identify immediate local support

For example, **yourtown's** Kids Helpline is a digital mental health and wellbeing support available 24/7 for children and young people no matter where they live in Australia. It offers a safety net for children and young people by providing support when it is needed most including after business hours and on weekends.

Recommendation 5:

That the Government prioritise services and supports that 'meet' children, young people and families where they are, using technology and methods that are agile and relevant in the 21st Century.

Support for parents

Positive parenting is a protective factor for children. The quality of attachment between parents/carers and their children is key and holistic services can support the development of this attachment.⁷ This highlights the need for early interventions with high-risk or vulnerable families that support parenting attachment and responsive care. Secure attachment helps children learn to manage their own feelings and behaviour, resulting in the confidence, resilience, and self-reliance from which they can thrive, engage in education, and break the cycle of disadvantage.

Parents and carers of children with complex needs experience a high level of pressure to meet children's needs while maintaining family functioning. Consequently, they often experience reduced well-being and elevated psychological distress.⁸ Parents/carers with the skills and confidence to support the healthy development of their children have: effective coping strategies; the ability to advocate for their child's needs; and can engage/connect with their peers and the broader community.

An example of prevention and early intervention support for parents can be seen in **yourtown's** Parentline service:

*In 2022-2023, parents and carers in Queensland and the Northern Territory attempted to contact Parentline over 10,300 times, with our Parentline website attracting almost 377,600 visitors since 2018. **yourtown's** Parentline is an evidenced-based confidential telephone and online service that provides professional counselling, education and support for parents and carers. Our service operates within a parent-centred and child-focused relational therapeutic practice framework designed to meet the diverse needs of service users, the unique requirements of a virtual service, and to educate and support caregivers. When parents and carers are supported, children achieve better social and emotional outcomes. By supporting parents, Parentline supports children.*

And our Glugour Young Parents program:

***yourtown's** Glugour Young Parents Program is an evidenced-informed prevention and early intervention service which provides parenting and child development workshops, case management and advocacy support for pregnant or parenting young people aged 25 and under onsite at our Deception Bay site. Transport is provided for parents*

⁷ Sanders, M. R., & Turner, K. M. (2018). The importance of parenting in influencing the lives of children. *Handbook of parenting and child development across the lifespan*, 3-26.

⁸ Sartore, G. M., Pourliakas, A., & Lagioia, V. (2021). Peer support interventions for parents and carers of children with complex needs. *The Cochrane database of systematic reviews*, 12(12), CD010618 (<https://doi.org/10.1002/14651858.CD010618.pub2>).

within the catchment area. While parents attend on site workshops children over the age of 11 months can access the child development room supervised by Child Development Workers.

The program holistically supports and educates young parents, empowering them to break cycles of disadvantage and create a positive, self-sufficient future for themselves and their children.

Recommendation 6:

That the strategy prioritises increased support for parents/carers to improve parental/carer efficacy and strengthen the quality of attachment with their child, particularly for young parents and those in disadvantaged areas.

Question 3 - Are there any other priorities you think that Putting Queensland Kids First should consider?

Equipping the community

Many families have great fear and distrust of engaging with services. They fear that their children may be removed from their care if there is an intervention or support provided through government funding. Equipping the community ensures we are continuing to build trust with those who need the support, and we can be responsive to emerging needs. Investment priorities need to ensure we are resourcing and equipping the community to be able to identify and support at-risk and marginalised children, young people and families. If we want to achieve true prevention and early intervention, it is crucial we are meeting those who need help most where they are, rather than making them seek out services which reduces the likelihood of support being received.

Boosting the role of free accessible facilities

Many families cannot afford programs and supports requiring a fee, meaning they can miss out on key learning, play, and social opportunities. **yourtown** recommends boosting the role of the free accessible facilities available in Queensland communities. We need to ensure we are linking the facilities and human resources we already have in place with the people who need them. This involves making sure that they are spaces which are inclusive, culturally appropriate, and set up to engage with families from diverse backgrounds. For example, in our consultations with children and young parents we heard of the importance of libraries in their lives. Libraries offer a place to engage family members in opportunities to promote children's literacy and social skills, while strengthening relationships. Family co-learn experiences at the library, through reading, singing, play and making, which are often extended in the home. Libraries as a free accessible space are particularly important for families who cannot afford to visit other community venues such as a theatre or museum.⁹

Recommendation 7:

That investment also prioritise:

- a) Equipping the community to be able to identify and support at-risk and marginalised children, young people and families, and**
- b) Boosting the role of free accessible facilities already present in the community and ensuring that they provide inclusive and culturally appropriate spaces**

⁹ Lopez, M. E., Caspe, M., & McWilliams, L. (2016). Public Libraries: A Vital Space for Family Engagement. *Harvard Family Research Project*.

Question 4 - How can we best support connection to culture and community for children, young people and families?

Child and Family Hubs

Child and family hubs provide families with access to a wide range of supports and services. Integrated child and family hubs can fill a major gap in the early years landscape, particular for those experiencing high levels of disadvantage.¹⁰ Many children and families require an integrated response to meet their needs. Having them located together reduces barriers to help seeking.

It is important that the hubs are conveniently located in the community, that is, accessible by public transport and located away from major government sites (e.g. hospitals) to increase levels of trust and the likelihood that parents will drop in. To be most effective in meeting the needs of the community, the hubs also need to offer digital services and supports outside of non-traditional business hours.

Not only can these hubs provide access to a range of health, education and social services using a family centred and child centred approach, but they provide an opportunity to build parental capacity and for families to create social connections.¹¹

Placed based support

A place-based approach should be adopted where services are tailored to the needs of the community which vary depending on location and demographic composition. Services need staff who can engage with the communities they are working with and navigate their ecosystems. Place-based approaches are highly collaborative and drive shared accountability that leads to longer-lasting outcomes and impact within communities.

yourtown's Community for Children program adopts a place-based and strengths-based strategic model:

*As the Communities for Children Facilitating Partner (FP) for Deception Bay, **yourtown** develops and facilitates a whole of community approach to support and enhance early childhood development and wellbeing for children from pre-birth to 12 years.*

Building on local strengths to meet local community needs and create capability within local service systems, using strong evidence of what works in early intervention and prevention. They collaborate with other organisations to provide a holistic service system and seamless referrals for children and families.

With a range of community partners, the services and supports offered are tailored to the community resulting in a strong, collaborative, and collective local child and family sector. This results in services that are responsive to the need of children and families in Deception Bay, particularly those most disadvantaged and disengaged.

Connection to culture through placed based support

yourtown strongly supports increased funding for proven, strengths-based solutions led by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities that address the underlying social and economic issues and intergenerational trauma impacting our Indigenous young people. Safety

¹⁰ Social Ventures Australia (2023). Happy, healthy and thriving children. (<https://www.socialventures.com.au/assets/Enhancing-the-impact-of-our-Integrated-Child-and-Family-Centres-in-Australia-full-report-1-May-edit.pdf>)

¹¹ Honisett S, Cahill R, Callard N, Eapen V, Eastwood J, Goodhue R, Graham C, Heery, Hiscock H, Hodgins M, Hollonds A, Jose K, Newcomb D, O'Loughlin G, Ostojic K, Sydenham E, Tayton S, Woolfenden S. and Goldfeld S. (2023). Child and family hubs: an important 'front door' for equitable support for families across Australia. National Child and Family Hubs Network. <https://doi.org/10.25374/MCRI.22031951>

and engaging with local First Nations communities to understand cultural healing are key components to embedding a localised and 'on country' service.

yourtown also strongly recommends the strategy report prioritise initiatives that are tailored to the needs of CALD communities. While the draft noted the importance of partnering with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community organisations there was no mention of the same partnership occurring with CALD communities. Services need to understand the cohesive ties within various cultural communities. Community-led interventions can overcome the significant barrier of lack of trust that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and CALD families often experience when interacting with government or mainstream services and agencies. Services should focus on strengthening relationships to maintain the interconnectedness between self, family and extended kinship networks, community, place country, Elders, spirituality and ancestors.

Services can be culturally appropriate by implementing:

- Training to improve the awareness of and sensitivities towards different vulnerable groups, and
- Identified positions for workers from First Nation and culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds to reflect the diversity of those needing the services.

Recommendation 8:

That investment is directed towards place-based approaches tailored to the needs of the community, including strength-based solutions led by First Nations and CALD communities and organisations.

Question 5 - What would it look like for us to work together as partners, all committed to improving outcomes for children and young people?

Working in true partnership with the community sector

In adopting a partnership model, recognition should be given to critical role that community service organisations (CSOs) play and the power imbalance which exists between government funders and CSOs. This power imbalance can make it difficult for true engagement and consultation to occur. Governments must be deliberate in managing the power imbalance to engage and collaborate properly with, rather than dictate, to CSOs.

The strategy needs to outline how the government will work with the community sector. While the draft highlights the cross-sectional collaboration of government it does not detail how it will ensure ongoing collaboration with the community sector, especially regarding emerging needs.

Data sharing

Knowledge and data are power, and yet the Queensland Government does not currently effectively share data. This restricts full evidence-based collaboration with the community and among services and the government. Evidence should also not be limited only to data or statistics but include lived experience and qualitative evidence where available. True partnership involves bringing together of two or more parties to share ownership and responsibility for outcomes. There needs to be a shared responsibility over ideas, information, processes, and outcomes.

The recent Productivity Commission report on closing the gap highlighted the lack of progress made in data sharing with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.¹² First Nation communities want to ensure the best outcomes for their communities, but without being given the information and data they need to make the best decisions, this progress will always be limited.

¹² Productivity Commission (2024). Review of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap. (<https://www.pc.gov.au/inquiries/completed/closing-the-gap-review/report>)

Increasing the length of funding cycles

Currently funding cycles are too short to allow for the building of meaningful community connections. Government should recognise that the creation and entrenching of value is more likely to occur in longer-term initiatives. Shorter contracts present risks including higher staff turnover, disruption of service continuity, and inadequate time for CSOs to build trust with communities and gain traction on projects, particularly with vulnerable people and lower socio-economic areas.

Recommendation 9:

In adopting a successful partnership model with the community organisation sector the government needs to:

- **Recognise the important role that CSOs play**
- **Take measures to address the power imbalance including through adequate data sharing, and**
- **Increase the length of funding cycles to allow for the building of meaningful community connections**

Whole of system approach

The best outcomes for all Queensland children and young people cannot be achieved without a whole of system approach. There needs to be collaborative action and alignment of priorities across all sectors, services, and between the professionals who deliver them whether in government or non-government service sectors. Through our extensive experience in providing a range of services for children and young people (including our virtual services work), we have observed how systemic impediments can create barriers for help seeking. These barriers can be entrenched by a lack of communication, information sharing and warm referrals between state-wide services whether in early childhood, mental health, health, child protection, education, employment, youth justice or other social systems.

The key systems challenges that need to be overcome to achieve a whole of systems approach include:

- positively addressing information sharing needs from the outset between government, or publicly or privately funded non-government services, including building in parental consent mechanisms, and
- designing and investing in an early years' system that prioritises and facilitates warm referrals to other support services, and warm handovers within early years' services

Recommendation 10:

That the strategy adopts a whole of system approach to support child development to ensure the best outcomes for Queensland children and young people

Working in partnership with First Nations Communities

It is important the government listen to and facilitate self-determination and leadership from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities to ensure culturally safe and appropriate solutions. Priority needs to be given to the wealth of experience and knowledge that Traditional Elders hold, engaging with them in a genuine and non-tokenistic manner. Elders, communities, and families are the experts in their lives and the loves of their community and should drive the decision-making process. We need to empower them to identify the solutions that are right for them.

Recommendation 11:

That government ensures culturally safe and appropriate solutions for First Nations families by listening to and facilitating self-determination and leadership from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

We would welcome the opportunity to explore these ideas with you in further detail. Should you require further information about any issues raised in the submission, please do not hesitate to contact Tracy Adams, CEO of **yourtown** via email at advocacy@yourtown.com.au.