



yourtown
POWERING kids helpline

Queensland Youth Strategy

A submission to: The Queensland
Government

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

Our Queensland services

For over 60 years, **yourtown** has been supporting children, young people, and families in Queensland. Our track record in Queensland includes:

- Kids Helpline, **yourtown**'s national 24/7 helpline providing free professional counselling and support for children and young people aged 5-25, responding to over 1,488,903 counselling sessions via Kids Helpline from Queensland since 1991
- Parentline, a telephone and online counselling and support service for parents and carers in Queensland since 1996
- Accommodation, post refuge and therapeutic support for women and children seeking refuge from domestic and family violence in southeast Queensland since 2004
- Skilling Queenslanders for Work offering training and support for unemployed or underemployed young people in southeast Queensland since 2014
- Social Enterprises, which have provided young people aged 15-25 with paid work experience and training as a 'stepping-stone' to employment in southeast Queensland since 2000
- Kids Helpline @ School since 2013, which delivers early intervention and prevention programs through primary schools to improve student mental health literacy, resilience, and help-seeking skills
- Kids Helpline @ High School since 2020, to high schools in the Northern Queensland Primary Health Network region, facilitated by qualified Kids Helpline counsellors and developed in collaboration with teachers for their students
- My Circle, a confidential, private, online peer support network for 13–25-year-olds to share information and build coping skills
- Expressive therapy programs for infants and young children who have experienced trauma and abuse or who have been exposed to violence in southeast Queensland since 2012
- Mental health services for children (0-11 years of age) and their families, including Starfish Family Mental Health Support Service in Deception Bay and Logan since 2015 and Mind4Kids in Deception Bay since 2019
- Facilitating partner of Communities for Children in Deception Bay since 2004
- Engagement in Education Program, supporting primary school students at risk, to successfully transition to and complete high school in Ipswich since 2020
- Transition to Work (TtW) supporting young people to develop their social, emotional and communication skills while helping them identify and access opportunities to find work or commence apprenticeships and traineeships since 2015, and
- Glugor Young Parents Program providing parenting support to help with child development, life skills and health and wellbeing activities in safe, supportive environments in Deception Bay since 1996.

Kids Helpline

Kids Helpline is Australia's only free and confidential 24/7 phone and online counselling service for young people 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 8.6 million contacts from children and young people nationally in the 31 years since our service was first established, whilst also providing tens of millions of self-help interactions via our website and social channels.

In 2021, children and young people in Queensland constituted 18% (85,385) of all attempted contacts to Kids Helpline from across Australia - approximately 234 contacts per day or one contact every six minutes.

yourtown welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Queensland Government's Youth Strategy (the Strategy) consultation. **yourtown** strongly supports the development of a new Strategy that reflects the needs of young Queenslanders today.

For more than 31 years, **yourtown** through our Kids Helpline service has been at the forefront of providing digital mental health and wellbeing services for children and young people in Australia. Kids Helpline is available 24/7 for children and young people no matter where they live in Australia, anytime they need help, and for any reason. Our service is provided by a professional and experienced workforce comprised by paid qualified psychologists, counsellors and social workers specifically trained in supporting children and young people through digital mediums.

yourtown considers the following issues need to be addressed within the new Strategy to ensure young Queenslanders have the support they need to achieve a brighter future:

- adopting a whole-of-government human centred design approach to addressing issues within services and systems as a key principle of youth participation under the new Youth Strategy
- facilitating the independent, fearless, and unmediated voice of young people
- conducting regular pulse checks to determine what's happening 'now' with young people on the ground
- commitment to long term investment in relationships of trust within the community and with young people, to deliver effective co-designed solutions that work
- embedding the National Principles for Child Safe Organisations across all portfolios, as a key priority under the Strategy, and
- committing under the Strategy to updating the Human Services Quality Framework to include a dedicated standard for the delivery of services to young people.

foundational principles

The need for co-design

yourtown strongly supports the establishment of the Youth Strategy Engagement Group to ensure the new strategy is informed by young people for young people. We also support the foundational principle of 'giving young people a voice' under the current Youth Strategy.

However, giving young people a voice, and encouraging their participation does not go far enough. Young people want more than the current strategy's commitment to 'have a say', or 'be an active participant'. They want to help build and co-produce the solutions with government.

yourtown strongly recommends that the Queensland Government adopt a human-centred design approach, where children, and young people are fully engaged in the design and implementation of this strategy, as well as the solutions to address key issues for Queensland youth today.

Other jurisdictions are already fully engaged in this approach to working with their citizens to find solutions. Since the release of the Human Centred Design (HCD) Playbook in 2020, the Victorian Government has adopted this approach in developing services addressing family violence, mental health, bushfire recovery and bespoke technology products within government. A key feature of the HCD Playbook is that it was created and informed by the Victorian context, including understanding of Victorian citizens' needs and the responsibilities of the public sector.

Adoption of such an approach for the Queensland context would allow for the engagement of young people across all government portfolios to help government understand the key issues for young people, their support preferences and importantly co-design 'successful'

services and supports. The benefits for the Queensland Government and young Queenslanders include:

- lower risks of a 'failed' policy, strategy, or service through validation
- a clearer picture of the wider context in which the problem lies
- reduced costs by building more targeted systems and services that meet the needs of people
- creating a positive reputation and increased trust in government through greater engagement
- potential increases in productivity and improvements operational efficiency
- increased organisational resilience through an agile and iterative process, and
- helping the Queensland Government understand the Queenslanders (including young Queenslanders) affected by their decisions.

Case example: human-centred design at yourtown

In 2021, **yourtown** engaged in a human centred design project to better understand the ways young people and parents seek help. Through focus groups, in-depth studies, surveys, and interviews, we received more than 1,500 different responses. When asked about barriers to help-seeking young people raised the following concerns:

- anxiety about talking to someone
- concerns related to privacy
- not realising they need help, and
- difficulty navigating the many and varied systems at the same time

Understanding what young people want and need

Through this process we were better able to understand how young people seek help, and their experiences have led to a number of changes to existing services, the development of future service options and informed our digital transformation process.

The Strategy should set the standard that services should be designed to meet the needs, communication styles and preferences of children and young people living in the 21st Century; to meet them 'where they are at' and prepare them for transitioning to adulthood. This includes designing services:

- that 'don't feel like services', whether through peer-to-peer approaches or similar mechanisms
- for ongoing connectivity and availability of services
- that facilitate online access, whether through multi-channel use, or ongoing connectivity and availability of services
- that provide reassurance of trust between the service provider and young people
- that enable young people to tentatively reach out and 'try before they buy'
- for privacy, and
- for early intervention and prevention of mental health issues, and ongoing wellbeing.

Listening to the experts in their own lives – young people

Where young people are impacted by a policy change, they have the right to be heard and involved in how their rights and interests should be protected, promoted, or where they may be (in some cases) limited.

The Strategy should consider the rights, needs and drivers of wellbeing for all young Queenslanders, regardless of whether they live in urban, rural, or remote areas. **yourtown** supports the current Strategy and its focus on helping Queensland's most vulnerable young people; however, the new Strategy should go further to understand the drivers of wellbeing for vulnerable young Queenslanders. This will be critical to advancing the wellbeing of all young Queenslanders and will involve considering the needs of vulnerable young people, having a clear evidence base and understanding of the barriers that these young people

experience with respect to participation in society, or access to services. This is particularly important for those who are hard to reach, disengaged or disconnected from systems where they might naturally seek support (e.g., education, housing, health, or justice).

At **yourtown**, we recognise young people's right to participate in decision making processes that affect them. In 2021, over 2.3 million unique users accessed our Kids Helpline website. This significant traffic gave us the platform to conduct 'state of the nation' real time pulse surveys and collect timely data on young people's views and pressing concerns. This has also enabled us to engage with a diverse range of young people enabling them to use their time, energy, lived experience, critical thinking, and dedication to make things better for all young people and to advocate for change in their communities.

Recommendation 1:

That the Queensland Government:

- **adopts a whole-of-government human centred design approach to addressing issues within services and systems as a key principle of youth participation under the new Youth Strategy, and**
- **listen and co-lead with those who are experts on youth – young people themselves.**

maximise the engagement of all young Queenslanders

Prioritise the voices of young people

To develop a solid strategy that is truly representative of the vast differences of issues facing young people today across Queensland, will require significant work to consult with and engage young people state-wide.

Young people can sometimes be reluctant to give open and honest feedback to government or even an organisation where they regularly seek help. They may fear that honesty about the services they are receiving might result in repercussions on them personally. One means of ensuring honest and courageous engagement is using independent facilitators who can consult directly with young people, supporting them to voice their issues and concerns. As an example of this, to ensure courageous feedback when re-designing its services, **yourtown** hired independent consultants to work directly with young people to obtain their fearless feedback and ideas about what works, and what doesn't work for young people in delivering services.

By working with independent consultants or organisations, the Queensland Government can strengthen their youth engagement process including:

- expanding the role of the Youth Strategy Engagement Group to support implementation of the new Queensland Youth Strategy
- conducting ongoing surveys to gather critical information about young people, their issues and needs, and
- engaging young people in co-design forums both virtual and face-to-face across Queensland.

An example of independent engagement - Your Voice project

In 2021, **yourtown** commenced an engagement with young people around Australia on behalf of the Australian Government, seeking their feedback and recommendations to government about government decision-making processes, policies and programs and hearing about their issues and concerns. Despite the challenges of COVID-19 and interstate lockdowns, over 3,500 young people aged 15-24 from around Australia worked with **yourtown** to deliver their thoughts, concerns and recommendations to government through

the Your Voice Report ([see the report here](#)). While these recommendations were directed towards the Australian Government, they also raise issues highly relevant to the Queensland Government.

Young people told us that they faced multiple, varied, and complex issues in all aspects of life, including:

- how their mental health has been impacted by COVID-19, particularly the multiple and long lockdowns, and the fear and uncertainty about COVID-19's long-term impacts to health and society
- the many barriers they face in accessing appropriate and timely support; and how services (particularly, mental health services) are not always designed to 'meet their needs', with practitioners often lacking an understanding of how to help or work with them
- how the education system leaves them stressed, and they don't have the supports they need to help them achieve their best now and into the future
- how they feel under-prepared to enter the workforce, and are worried about finding a job that will pay enough to support them
- how they feel financially stressed by the high cost of living, including housing and transport, particularly if they rely on welfare, while they are unemployed or studying
- how they do not feel safe
- how those from diverse groups often struggle with accessing assistance and preparing themselves for the future
- that they felt hopeless because of climate change, and uncertain about what government was doing about it and its priorities, and
- that they had generalised lack of knowledge and trust in government and its processes.¹

Through the work of 94 young people who, in face-to-face and virtual workshops, together developed seven recommendations for policy reform for the Government's consideration:

- supporting the development of Youth Wellbeing Hubs in educational facilities and community settings to provide educational, mental health, employment, transitional and wellbeing support
- co-designing youth-specific communication strategies, in partnership with young people, so government policies, processes and supports are accessible to youth of all ages, backgrounds, and needs
- increasing income support and allowances with regular reviews to ensure they are sufficient, flexible, and equitable to meet basic needs
- increasing funding to youth mental health services for comprehensive, specialised and intensive supports
- requiring funded organisations through service agreements to provide a welcoming, safe, and supportive environment, that caters for the diversity of all youth (Gender diverse, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders, Culturally and Linguistically Diverse and young people with a disability)
- committing all members of Parliament to actively engage with youth in their electorates as part of serving their constituents, and

¹ **yourtown**. (2021). Your Voice Recommendations Report Prepared October 2021 (<https://www.yourtown.com.au/sites/default/files/document/yourvoice-Recommendations-Report-Oct2021-WEB.pdf>).

- committing to, and independently assessing, actions to limit global temperature increases to 1.5 degrees by 2030.²

Prioritise pulse checks

The Strategy needs to be a 'living' strategy, that is flexible and enables constant understanding and tracking of issues that are relevant to young people both 'now' and in the future. A critical component of the Strategy will be the inclusion of mechanisms to regularly check the 'pulse' of what is happening with young people, and issues that may be impacting them. This is particularly important following times of crisis, or major events (such as bushfires, or floods).

Many Independent community groups and not-for-profit organisations such as **yourtown**, have established mechanisms to directly engage with, and work with young people on a regular basis. For example, **yourtown**'s Youth Advisory Groups and the Kids Helpline website provide us with opportunities to conduct timely and in-the-moment surveys which allows us to gain an understanding of the needs and drivers behind impacts upon young people, their wellbeing and how they are going 'today'.

yourtown's Youth Participation team also engages a diverse and active range of young people, including those with direct experience with **yourtown** services including Kids Helpline (current or previous). Their engagement creates opportunities with young people to use their time, energy, lived experience and critical thinking to make things better for other young people and to advocate for change within **yourtown**, as well as participate in systemic advocacy. They are also able to keep their finger on the pulse of what is happening on the ground with young people and provide a groundswell of information and ideas that can filter 'up' throughout the organisation.

Prioritise long-term investment in relationships to deliver co-designed solutions

In addition to 'pulse checks', the Strategy needs to be sufficiently flexible to take the long 'journey' of learning, improvement, and change, particularly where issues take time to explore and address. An example of **yourtown**'s ongoing long-term engagement is through our work with remote Cape communities in Far North Queensland, where we have been working closely with elders and the community over the last 12 months to develop Kids Helpline @ Schools resources specifically designed for individual communities. We met with local elders, listened to their stories and what was happening in their communities before engaging in a process of co-design to develop resources for the broader community. This co-design work is ongoing and reflects the significant investment in relationships and time to develop resources and approaches that match the needs of these remote communities, including young people, parents, and carers.

Given the strength of these relationships we are now working with these communities to deliver events for Youth Week 2023 and helping them create and deliver a variety of unique activities across several different communities in the Cape in April 2023.

² **yourtown**. (2021). Your Voice Recommendations Report Prepared October 2021 (<https://www.yourtown.com.au/sites/default/files/document/yourvoice-Recommendations-Report-Oct2021-WEB.pdf>).

Recommendation 2:

That the Queensland Government prioritise mechanisms in the Strategy that -

- facilitate the independent, fearless and unmediated voice of young people to be heard
- conduct pulse checks can be made on what is happening 'now' with young people, and
- Commit to long term investment in relationships of trust with young people and local communities to deliver effective co-designed solutions that work.

prioritising safeguarding

In 2018, the Queensland Government confirmed their commitment to the National Principles for Child Safe Organisations³ and accepted these as informing best practice for department that provide services to children.⁴

However, Queensland Government's fourth annual progress report Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse (2021) makes clear that while Queensland Government departments are continuing to commit to the safety and wellbeing of children and young people, the approaches to doing so are varied and inconsistent.

Ensuring the safety and wellbeing of all children and young people in Queensland cannot be achieved by the development of strategies in isolation, it requires collaborative action and alignment of priorities across all portfolios, services, and between the professionals who deliver them whether in government or non-government service sectors.

Currently some departments have comprehensive strategies in place such as the Department of Education's 'Aware. Protective. Safe. Strategy'⁵ and the Department of Children, Youth Justice, and Multicultural Affairs' 'Roadmap to Embedding the National Principles for Child Safe Organisations'⁶. While others make high level commitments including the Department of Communities, Housing and Digital Economy.

Developing a consistent and comprehensive approach will support better coordination and establish systems that measure and track alignment, implementation, and embeddedness of the National Principles for Child Safe Organisations. Importantly, an approach would acknowledge the need to safeguard and protect children and young people at all touch point/interactions with Government department, services and supports.

Further, development of such an approach would support current scoping work being undertaken by the Queensland Government to understand options for potential regulation and oversight of child safe standards across Queensland (led by the Department of Children, Youth Justice, and Multicultural Affairs). Without a clear and consistent approach, it will be

³ See Australian Human Rights Commission. (2018). National Principles for Child Safe Organisations (https://childsafesite.humanrights.gov.au/sites/default/files/2019-02/National_Principles_for_Child_Safe_Organisations2019.pdf).

⁴ The State of Queensland. (2022). Queensland Government fourth annual progress report Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse December 2021 (<https://www.cyjma.qld.gov.au/resources/dcsyw/about-us/reviews-inquiries/qld-gov-response/gov-annual-progress-report-child-abuse-2021.pdf>).

⁵ See The State of Queensland (Department of Education). (2022). Aware. Protective. Safe. Strategy (<https://alt-qed.qed.qld.gov.au/programs-initiatives/department/aware-protective-safe-strategy>).

⁶ See The State of Queensland. (2022). Queensland Government fourth annual progress report Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse December 2021 (<https://www.cyjma.qld.gov.au/resources/dcsyw/about-us/reviews-inquiries/qld-gov-response/gov-annual-progress-report-child-abuse-2021.pdf>).

difficult to build clear indicators for oversight and to measure, monitor and secure lasting change, or identify what has or has not, worked and the extent of any impact.

Recommendation 3:

That the Queensland Government clearly embed the National Principles for Child Safe Organisations across all portfolios, as a priority under the Strategy.

commit to the delivery of services for young people

While the Human Services Quality Standards⁷ provide a benchmark for service provision, these standards do not adequately to consider the nuances and intricacies of service delivery for children and young people.

Young people need services and support designed from the outset to meet their needs preferences. We know from our 2021 human centred design project that this includes ensuring services fit within the eco-system that young people live, 'meet' them where they are at and has consideration for their developmental needs and ecological factors (including family, school, transition periods and community contexts).

yourtown recommends the development of a separate standard to improve the quality and accessibility of services for young people. Doing so would also help to improve referrals and connections systems (including government and non-government services) who are often 'first responders' identifying the current and emerging health needs of children and young people.

Further, commitment to inclusion of a dedicated standard for the delivery of services to children and young people will highlight the importance of developing the skills of the workforce to support this cohort given the low rates of help-seeking behaviour by young people.⁸

Recommendation 4:

That the Queensland Government commit under the Strategy to updating its Human Services Quality Framework to include a dedicated standard for the delivery of services to young people.

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 Kathryn Mandla, Head of Advocacy and Research at **yourtown** via email at kmandla@yourtown.com.au.

⁷ See The State of Queensland. (2021). Human Services Quality Framework: Measuring quality, improving services (<https://www.dsdsatsip.qld.gov.au/resources/dsdsatsip/work/hsqf/framework.pdf>).

⁸ Orygen (2016). National Youth Mental Health Workforce Strategy (<https://www.orygen.org.au/About/News-And-Events/Orygen-Workforce-Strategy/Orygen-National-Youth-Mental-Health-Workforce-Str.aspx>).