

Submission for the Queensland Review of Residential Care

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CREATE Foundation

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About CREATE Foundation

CREATE Foundation is the national consumer body for children and young people with an out-of-home care experience. Nationally, we represent the voices of over 45,000 children and young people in out-of-home care and those with a care experience up to the age of 25 years. We listen to what those with a lived experience of the care system tell us, and advocate with and for them to achieve systemic change.

In Queensland, CREATE provides a range of connection and empowerment programs for children and young people with a care experience, and conducts annual consultations with children and young people with a care experience on key topics relating to the care system each year. We have just over 6,500 members in Queensland.

Introduction

CREATE Foundation welcomes this opportunity to contribute to improving the residential care system in Queensland through the *Queensland Roadmap – A contemporary care system for Queensland: Review of Residential Care* (Review).

To inform our submission, CREATE facilitated a Youth Advisory Group (YAG) on 17 September 2023 to hear from young people across Queensland with a recent experience in residential care. Nine young people participated in the session to share their experiences and views. Their insights and advice have been incorporated into this submission, and we thank them for their time and contributions. Young people's voices are extremely important because, ultimately, they are the ones who experience the residential care system, and they know what changes would be meaningful for them. Therefore, young people's perspectives are the focus of this submission.


At CREATE, we believe that all children and young people with a care experience should be supported to reach their full potential. We know, however, from our extensive research (McDowall, 2018; 2020; 2022), that young people with a care experience have poorer outcomes across all key life domains compared with their peers without a care experience, including in the areas of health, education, employment, and housing, and that young people living in residential care are further disadvantaged. These findings are consistent with other research showing that children and young people living in residential care are often at risk of poor life outcomes, experience abuse while in care (Euser et al., 2013; Moore et al., 2016; Moore et al., 2017; Sellers et al., 2020), school failure and dropout (Garcia-Molsosa et al., 2021), and homelessness after leaving care (Thoresen & Liddiard, 2011).

Poor outcomes, set against the backdrop of a rising number of children entering residential care in Queensland, creates an urgent need to put in place immediate actions to improve outcomes for children and young people in residential care, and to consider broader strategies and reforms to move away from residential care.

Summary of recommendations

Our submission includes the following recommendations:

1. The review process moving forward must be centred around the voices of children and young people with lived experience of the residential care system. The Queensland Minister for Child Protection should establish an advisory body composed of young people with a lived experience of the residential care system to co-design and advise on the implementation of any reforms that




stem from this review and ways to improve experiences and reduce the stigma for young people in residential care more broadly.

2. Queensland Government should commit to a clear plan to transition away from the use of residential care over the next 10 years. Alternative home-based care arrangements such as professionalised foster care and home-based Intensive Therapeutic Support should be established to replace the need for residential care for young people that require more intensive support for particular behaviours.
3. To reduce the over-reliance on residential care in the interim, CREATE recommends a multi-faceted approach, comprising strategies and investments including:
 - 3.1 A whole-of-government approach to improved early-intervention strategies to support families at risk.
 - 3.2 Increasing the number of foster and kinship carers to better meet the current demand of children entering care. Strategies are needed to attract more family carers and encourage kinship placements through investment in family-finding and Family Group Conferencing or similar programs, targeted and place-based campaigns, incentive packages, and extra-support for children and young people with special needs and groups of siblings.
 - 3.3 Working with Aboriginal-led organisations to implement appropriate community-based alternatives for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people.
 - 3.4 Immediately prioritising action to identify home-based alternatives for infants and very young children, even in crisis situations, to ensure they are not placed in residential care.

These strategies and investments need to be place-based, evidence-based and effectively targeted to ensure they can reduce the number of children entering residential care in the short term and eventually prevent the need for the use of residential care.

4. The safety of children and young people in care must be at the centre of any reforms to the residential care system. To achieve this, Queensland Government should:
 - 4.1 Commission a comprehensive and independent inquiry (research) to better understand and respond to the safety concerns raised throughout this review, particularly those relating to abuse and neglect from workers.
 - 4.2 Implement improved mechanisms to identify and respond to harm and neglect in care, particularly by giving voice to young people through safe and nurturing channels. This includes a review of relevant complaint and incident handling policies and practices.
 - 4.3 Provide additional resourcing and specialist training for all residential care workers to increase their capacity to care for young people with complex trauma, and to respond to high-risk behaviours.
 - 4.4 Require residential care facilities to have qualified social workers with expertise in complex-trauma, de-escalation skills to support young people with complex needs. Collaborate with Universities to increase the number of graduates and courses in these areas.
5. As strategies to reduce the over-reliance on residential care may take some time, CREATE recommends the following immediate actions to ensure that all children and young people in residential care are safe, supported and receive the level and type of care they need. This includes:


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- 5.1 Expanding therapeutic models of support to all residential care homes across Queensland.
 - 5.2 Improving placement matching to ensure children and young people are placed with others of a similar age and with similar support needs. Conduct comprehensive health-assessments to provide appropriate care and services to young people who need it. This would require reviewing the placement of each child currently in residential care through a safety and child best-interest lens
 - 5.3 Reducing the number of young people placed in each residential home to better ensure appropriate placement matching, adequate staffing support, and to create more home-like and less institutional environment. This could lead to adopting policies practiced in the Netherlands (van Schie et al., 2023) limiting the group size of residential units to no more than six individuals.
 - 5.4 Increasing funding for additional residential care workers to ensure workers have the capacity to provide the level of support and care that individual children and young people need.
 - 5.5 Improving support from caseworkers to facilitate safe and timely contact with siblings and other family members.
 - 5.6 Arranging for more frequent visits from community visitors from the Office of the Public Guardian to ensure children and young people are being properly cared for.
 - 5.7 Engaging with children and young people around the design and management of residential homes.
6. CREATE recommends expanding the post-care support available to residential care leavers to include guaranteed housing options, and support services required to transition to independent living, for example by investing in models such as the Youth Foyer or Supported Independent Living.
 7. CREATE recommends developing a strategy to reduce stigma and criminalisation of youth in residential care involving:
 - 7.1 A training package for residential care workers focused on stigma.
 - 7.2 Piloting a project on “dual involvement” to end the criminalisation of youth in residential care.

CREATE urges the Queensland Government to direct adequate resources and effort to improve the residential care system. The current system is costly and unsustainable, and at the same time, does not meet the needs of young people placed there, having negative impacts on their life outcomes long-term. This submission outlines some short and long term strategies and actions which are designed to meet the immediate needs of children and young people and support their development, improve life outcomes and reduce the stigma and criminalisation of young people with a residential care experience longer term. Although these recommendations do require investment, they will be more likely to produce effective outcomes.

Our submission

Establishing a Lived Experience Advisory Group

The voices of young people are critical and must underpin any reform process related to residential care. Unfortunately, CREATE has been disappointed by the low level of engagement with children



and young people as part of the consultation phase of the review and calls for the review and reform process to be centred around children and young people moving forward. This is the only way to fully understand their needs and make a meaningful change.

At CREATE, we know that young people's perspectives present valuable dimensions, identifying problems as well as solutions that may not otherwise be included in policies and discourses on care. For example, while the perspectives of workers and providers as summarised in the QFCC monthly reports for this review (2023) identify critical issues that must be addressed as part of this review, young people at our YAG placed more emphasis on safety, problems with abuse and relationships with the workers themselves, day-to-day needs, requests for privacy and connections with birth family, and the experience of stigma..

CREATE recommends establishing a Lived Experience Advisory Group to achieve co-design and provide guidance around the implementation of reforms to the residential care system in Queensland, .

More broadly this group could also provide advice to government around ways to improve outcomes for young people with a residential out-of-home care experience, and to reduce stigma and criminalisation of young people while fostering safety. For example, this advisory group could help review and co-design the Joint agency Protocol to Reduce Preventable Police Call-outs to Residential Care Services and provide advice around how to improve the design and the everyday running of residential care in ways that respond to their needs (QFCC, 2018).

Shifting away from residential care

The current crisis in Queensland shows that the residential care system is unsustainable. With more children and young people entering care (Department of Child Safety, Seniors and Disability Services, 2023), and the number of family-based carers not keeping up with the demand, it is clear that urgent strategies and investment is needed to reduce the overreliance on residential care.

Queensland has the highest numbers of children and young people in residential care, at 16.4% of the total OOHC population in the state, compared to an average of 7.3% for other Australian states (AIHW, 2023). This reliance on residential care has more than doubled since 2018. There were 756 young people in residential care in June 2018, and 1634 in March 2023, according to data published by the Department of Child Safety, Seniors and Disability Services (2023).

Residential care is an expensive, unsustainable model that does not fulfil the needs of children and young people and has negative long-term impacts on their life outcomes. Children should grow up in loving, home-based environments, and residential care settings cannot provide the level of care and support that children and young people need, despite best efforts from providers and individual workers. Further, residential care is a particularly inappropriate form of care and living arrangements for infants and young children, and for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people where there are community-based options available.

CREATE urges the Queensland Government to commit to a 10- year plan to transition away from the use of residential care, in favour of an increased investment in early intervention programs; targeted and place-based recruitment drives to increase the number of foster and kinship carers into the system; and the introduction of alternative in-home care and innovative therapeutic interventions to specialise on providing targeted therapeutic care for young people with high needs through evidence-based models of care.



Addressing the root causes and investing more in early intervention

Children and young people from vulnerable groups end up in residential care for different reasons. CREATE recommends addressing those root causes and allowing children and young people to stay in nurturing family environments, close to their communities and cultures.

Investment in early intervention and support for families could help reducing the number of children and young people being placed in residential care. The Breaking Cycles Action plan represents an important and welcome step in this direction for First Nation families (Queensland Government et al. 2023), and it would also be a model to work with other groups at risk of being placed in residential care, for instance groups of siblings and children with disabilities. In circumstances where poverty, unsuitable housing, and lack of access to adequate disability support drive placements in residential care, more cross-collaboration between government agencies could also help preventing young people being placed in residential care.

Address the shortage of foster and kinship carers

The current demand on residential care is unlikely to ease until the Queensland Government is able to incentivise more foster carers into the system, and provide more support to existing foster carers to improve retention rates. The Queensland Government must significantly increase its investment in “in-home” care models and strategies and incentives to increase the number of foster carers across the state.

A recent study sheds light on the needs of foster and kinship carers, and their motivations and challenges, and suggest that carers need more adequate support (Smart et al., 2022). Therefore, increased financial support is needed. Furthermore, carers also need better training, respite care, and support to help dealing with transitions, managing relationships with birth families and care workers, and other challenges. Peer support and cultural support were also identified as needs. (Smart et al., 2022). A better design and management of the onboarding, formation, and ongoing support for carers could help attract and retain workers, as well as increasing the quality of care.

In addition, we would recommend providing incentives for groups of siblings, including economic incentives to allow groups of children to stay in an in-home placement all together and for caring for children with disabilities, including to provide facilitated access to NDIS, health-care, and in-home care services to families in need.


Supporting kinship care and Aboriginal community placements

The over-representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people in residential care in Queensland is increasing, sitting at around 43.4% of the residential care population in March 2023, up from 42.6% in December (Department of Child Safety, Seniors and Disability Services, 2023).

Queensland’s *Our Way* strategy was introduced to increase the self-determination and wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and reduce over-representation through a 20 year plan to address the root causes that likely drive children and young people into care (Queensland Government, 2017).

Unfortunately, the *Breaking the Cycles* consultation report shows several barriers to implementing the proposed actions in the *Our Way* strategy, including inadequate funding for the services to be delivered (Queensland Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Protection Peak, 2022). That consultation report identified specific issues such as housing issues and needs for families and kinship carers that could help children and young people stay out of residential care.

Collaborating with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities around extending investment in early intervention and support for families, Family Group Conferencing, and other family-led decision-making techniques, as proposed in the *Breaking Cycles* consultation are key to reducing pressure on the residential care system (QATSICPP, 2022). This approach would help young people



find a carer in their extended family and community and achieve greater stability and connection to their culture. There could be different ways of increasing support to kinship carers to encourage stable placements, both through services, access to resources, and better financial packages.

Service quality and access varies across regions, and there is a demand for a more localised approach, particularly through Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations, who have the capacity to be more responsive to the needs of children, their families and carers (Queensland Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Protection Peak, 2022; Smart et al., 2022). A more localised approach and place-based targeted campaigns would allow to develop community-based relationship and better responsive to local needs, make better use of local knowledge and human resources, which could take pressure off the residential care system.

CREATE supports the recommendations made by QATSICPP in their submission to this review around transferring authority and flexible funding to First Nation-led solutions to the residential care crisis. These include the suggestion to establish an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander governance mechanism to implement the child placement principle and investing more in alternatives to residential care developed by First Nations community (QATSICPP, 2023).

Alternatives to residential care

Queensland Government should invest in the roll-out of alternative, evidence-based and trauma-informed in-home based models of care to provide alternative living arrangements for young people that require more intensive support for behaviours. Models that could be considered include:


- **Professionalised foster care** – Professional foster carers who receive compensation similar to a wage, and they are specialised on children and young people with challenging behaviour due trauma. Through this approach young people can stay in stable family environments, and reduce problems around safety. Not only would this approach help meet the young person needs, but also would encourage carer recruitment (McHugh et al., 2013).
- **Intensive Therapeutic Support** – ITC also provides specialised in-home based care to young people with complex needs, but it is designed as temporary with the view to supporting the young person into a family based foster care placement. Examples are the *Mackillop's Intensive Therapeutic Care (ITC)* program in NSW and the ACT, and The *Treatment and Care for Kids (TrACK)* program. An independent evaluation in 2018 showed that 48 young people from residential care who entered *TrACK* were almost always able to achieve stability (McPherson, et al., 2018).

Although these services may be costly, they are more likely to be cost-effective, particularly if delivered to the young people who need them. An assessment of young people's health and mental health needs is critical to deliver the appropriate services to each child in need. This is also important from a policy perspective to estimate the costs needed. Not every child currently in residential care has the same needs. Therefore, CREATE recommends that a comprehensive assessment of the child's health and special needs is prior to placement, to match every child young person with the proper care and services.

Infants and children under 12

A particular trend of concern is the rising numbers of infants and young children being placed in facilities alongside young people who have been through complex trauma, involvement with the justice system, and at risk of challenging behaviour, who also need appropriate care and attention (Cramsie, 2023; Department of Child Safety, Seniors and Disability Services, 2023).

According to the quarterly data published by the Department of Child Safety, Seniors and Disability Services (2023), there were 249 children aged 0 to 10 years old living in residential care in March 2023. The numbers have continued to rise, even after the review has been called.



One young person at our YAG spoke about the long-term effects of being placed in residential care from a very young age:

“When you are in care you are never able to connect with someone on a deeper level. If you are placed in a resi since you are born is going to be so detrimental. It will last for the rest of your life.” (Male, 20)

CREATE’s position is that residential care environments are not suitable for infants and children who need to form healthy attachment to carers. Therefore, despite the current challenges and shortage of carers, there should be urgent steps to find appropriate family-based placements for them. Even temporary-solutions for infants and young people would still need be appropriate for their needs.

Temporary solutions

The QFCC August *Oversight Report* (2023) indicates that much of the pressure to place children and young people in residential care comes from the urgency of finding them a place to stay. Although placing children and young people in temporary placements should be avoided as much as possible, at the moment having a system to manage urgent solutions is needed, for example through a crisis response system, respite care, and emergency carers. Crisis solutions should not focus only on accommodation, but also on the needs of child, taking into account how an emergency would impact their health and mental health.

CREATE recommends further engagement with young people with lived experience to advise around the best approach for urgent assessment situations.

Addressing safety in residential care


Evidence-based action to improve safety and prevent abuse in care

Ensuring the safety of children in residential care must be paramount to this review. It is a fundamental right, recognised in the *Charter of Rights* in the *Child Protection Act 1999* (QLD) that every child is to be protected from harm and fear.

Queensland Government must be cautious of recommendations raised as part of this review that involve lowering the screening processes to fast track workers and carers. While there may be some administrative improvements that can be implemented safely, simplifying recruitment processes for carers and workers must not be at the expense of children’s safety.

In Queensland, 278 children were the subject of a substantiation in 2020–21 for abuse that occurred in care (AIHW, 2021). Children and young people in residential care are the most vulnerable to abuse (Moore et al., 2016; Moore et al., 2017; Sellers et al., 2020). Queensland Government’s *Life in Care* survey (2022) showed that of those who remembered their experience of entering care, only 29% indicated they were told what to expect, and 5.7% and 5.3% of young people still feel confused or worried respectively after being in care for some time (Queensland Government, 2022). These data show that safety is an area of concern; however, it does not provide enough details about the dynamics of abuse specifically in residential care.

The current Review was announced following series of media articles detailing allegations about serious concerns about abuse and neglect of children and young people, in particular young people with disabilities, in residential care in Queensland. Some of the young people who participated in CREATE’s YAG also reported being abused by residential workers and expressed that they felt the workers could get away with acts that would have resulted in criminal charges in other contexts. They also expressed concern that workers who engaged in harmful behaviours were allowed to continue working with young people, whether in the same or different facility. These accounts raise concerns about the systemic nature of abuse in residential care, and the need to explore the extent, causes, and dynamics through a more comprehensive and independent inquiry. The young people



pointed out that perhaps, this happened because residential care workers were in such high need, and suggested that workers, when being hired, should go through better screening processes:

“I think it there should be a better screening processes, it is too easy to get in because there is so much need, and so then they do what they want, and then they just get transferred to another house even when they do bad things to kids. They don’t get fired, they keep working with other kids.” (Male, 20)

While these accounts may be anecdotal and the review will likely gather more insights, it has highlighted a need for a more comprehensive understanding of safety in residential care (Bennett & McCormack, 2023; Cramsie, 2023).

The need for more workers (or foster carers) should not compromise the safety of children and young people further. Instead, there is a need to ensure that the workforce who work with young people in care do not exploit their vulnerability.

A comprehensive independent inquiry would be very important to inform an appropriate evidence-based plan of reform, and ensure that expenditure in this direction is invested efficiently. The aim would not be to point the finger at the sector, but to highlight issues, patterns, and root causes that need to be addressed with urgency. The current review into the residential care system is a welcome step; however, it is been conducted in a tight timeframe, and does not allow scope for a systematic analysis with a focus on safety.

Another way to achieve better transparency would be to collect and publish more disaggregated data that show insights on safety in residential settings in Queensland. Furthermore, research into residential care, and particularly on issues of safety and neglect, could be included among the priority areas of research sponsored by the Queensland Government.

Managing high-risk behaviour


Since residential homes often cater for young people with complex needs who may engage in high-risk behaviour towards themselves, their peers, or workers, these young people need to be housed in facilities that are equipped to manage and support them while maintaining the safety of everyone involved. This group includes young offenders who have been involved with youth justice. Though aiming for a long-term nurturing family environment should be the goal, all placements in residential care should be appropriate and adequate to the needs of the young person, and with staff who have the skills and training to support them.

CREATE identifies two important dimensions to improve the levels of safety. First, residential facilities need to have enough staff and resources to manage possible risks. When young people have complex needs, the ratio may be smaller, so that there is enough staff to support young people during a crisis. Work published recently from the Netherlands shows that best results can be achieved when residential group size is limited to six young people (van Schie et al., 2023). A comprehensive inquiry into the residential care system could highlight measures to promote the implementation of safe environments for all.

At CREATE’s YAG, the young people who had negative experiences of violence and abuse while in residential care told us that the number of workers was not adequate for the number of young people:

“When my sisters left, I felt very intimidated when three new people came in, and they didn’t talk to me and tell me that these people are going to be like this [having anger issues]. I had to get my family to pick me up and take me to things that I wanted to do, and the resi couldn’t take me because they had things going on, I had to take the bus etc.” (Female, 20)

This young person explained that a consequence of not having enough staff in facilities with young people with anger management issues, was the inability to go out and participate in activities



because of the fear of being assaulted in public, that the other person may abuse others, and that outside there would not be enough workers to manage the behaviour.

Second, CREATE recommends that workers in residential care must have adequate training to respond to crisis and challenging behaviour and to actively prevent harm in care. They need to have professional qualifications as social workers and clinical knowledge. There should be workers with these qualification in each residential care. CREATE recommends that the government collaborates with Universities to increase the number of graduates in these areas, support students, and develop specialist courses that can form workers with skills relevant to complex trauma, de-escalation and co-regulation.

While formation of more skilled workers may take time, an urgent measure would be to ensure that every worker, no matter if the facility is licensed or unlicensed , completes training such as

- PeakCare Hope and Healing Training
- Mackillop training to prevent sexual abuse - this is free and available for residential care workers
- De-escalation and co-regulation trainings based on neuro-science

Accountability and responses to harm in residential care

While explaining their experiences of harm in residential care, another point of concern that young people raised at the YAG was the lack of response and accountability. In some residences, they felt that not only they were exposed to abuse, but also felt that the workers did nothing to stop it or to protect them. As a result, they ended up trying to contact the police on their own, locking themselves in their room, or avoiding situations where they could be at risk. Young people in residential care are particularly vulnerable and their voices can easily be silenced, which makes it more likely for abuse to continue and to be repeated on other young people.


CREATE recommends further work is needed to review and improve complaints handing and incident management systems to better respond to harm in residential care, and to ensure that abuse is detected and not allowed to continue. Incidents management systems for residential care need to ensure that young people have access to the relevant information and are aware of each step, they are supported throughout by someone they trust, and listens with genuine empathy to their concerns, particularly around perceptions of safety and trauma.

Meeting children and young people's needs

We have heard from young people and the sector that workers do not always have capacity or resourcing to fully meet the needs of young people in residential homes. This places children and young people at risk in terms of their immediate safety and well-being, and has longer term impacts life outcomes. For example, if young people do not get support or materials needed to complete their school work on a regular basis, it will impact on their ability to achieve and remain engaged in their education.

Expanding therapeutic supports to all residential care services

A therapeutic-care model should be rolled out across all residential services in Queensland to support healing and better outcomes. Therapeutic care is delivered by specialised staff with relevant skills on childhood complex-trauma, focused on the individual needs of the young person, in an environment designed to foster positive attachment and social skills (McLean, 2018; McNamara, 2020). For example, the Victorian Government is delivering a new model of therapeutic care by setting up 19 new two- and three-bed residential care facilities to ensure better placement matching and to improve the quality and safety of residential care (Department of Families, Fairness and Housing, Victoria, 2021).



Another example is Ardlaghan House (Moore House Care in Scotland), which offers a two-bedroom model with the aim of building positive, nurturing relationships with young people through the principles of playfulness, acceptance, curiosity and empathy (PACE) (Moore House Group, n.d).

Assessing individual placement needs and risks and improving placement matching

What aggravates the complexity of the Queensland residential care situation is that it brings together groups of children and young people who may be vulnerable for different reasons and have different sets of needs.

At CREATE's YAG, young people raised the importance of appropriate placement matching. When asked about what should change in the residential care system, one young person said:

"They individually need to match the kids with the houses. I was in a hotel and then I was put in a resi care, and I was beaten up in that resi. After that I had a great experience, it was the first place I felt I could come out, there were other LGBTQ+ people." (Gender fluid, 18)

Although residential care is often considered as a last resort placement, the levels of safety and wellbeing for children and young people cannot be compromised. Every child or young person's placement should consider whether the placement will allow them to feel safe. Assessments should take into account the child's specific needs, past-trauma, and any potential issues with people living in the placement.

It is vital that the child or young person's voice is heard in the decision-making to avoid placing them in an environment where they will be anxious about their safety. If a child or young person reports incidents or complaints about other peers or adults, they need to be separated from people they fear. The quote above also suggests looking into positive and protective factors, for example being placed with other LGBTQ+ young people was very helpful for this young person.

It is easier to ensure appropriate placement matches in a service environment where the overall number of young people in each house is low (see recent work by van Schie et al., 2023)

For the children and young people currently in residential care, CREATE recommends urgently reviewing each placement while considering the young person's voice, their needs, safety concerns, and possible family-based options.

Increased funding to ensure adequate staffing levels in all residential homes

Additional resourcing is needed to ensure there is adequate staffing levels in residential care homes so that children and young people can receive basic day to day support and attention that children and young people require for their development.

The number of workers should be adequate to ensure that they are able to support young people with their individual needs, for example helping them with education, attending activities and events, visiting their families, eating healthy meals, and keeping the home environment clean and healthy, as well allowing young people to feel safe and supported during possible times of crisis of personal problems. In other words, there should be enough workers to allow young people to have adequate standards of wellbeing and life outcomes. These are issues that young people have raised:

"We had to go out and buy my own things for school, there were a lot of issues around schooling, but the school if I needed anything would give it me at the school (like for menstrual products) because the house wouldn't give me." (Female, 20)

The accounts of violence and neglect reported in the media also indicate that there are low numbers of workers in residential facilities (Bennett & McCormack, 2023), and not enough capacity to safely and adequately respond to the needs of young people who have been through complex trauma.



Improved support from caseworkers, including to facilitate family contact

Additionally, caseworkers need to check-in regularly with young people living in residential care, to listen to concerns and ensure they are included in decision-making. Young people have consistently brought up the desire and barriers to connect with their birth families and siblings, both at Youth Advisory Groups, and during past consultations (CREATE, 2023b). Connection to their biological family is important for young people's sense of identity, have a strong impact on emotional wellbeing, and can be an important protective factor. Young people in residential care may face barriers due to workers not willing or unable to take them for visits, lack of privacy, difficulties with communication and arranging contact, and feelings unheard and their needs dismissed (CREATE, 2023). Therefore, when young people wish to, it is important for residential staff and caseworkers to ensure they are able to connect with their families and respect their needs for privacy, when it is safe to do so.

More contact with community visitors from the Office of the Public Guardian

A number of young people stated that they appreciated visits from community visitors and felt the number of visits had been reduced recently. They called for (at a minimum) monthly visits from community visitors. Community visitors provide a valuable role in ensuring children and young people are being properly cared for and that their needs and rights are being met.

Some young people have also indicated that it would be good for some of the visits to be unannounced, as they felt the workers would often clean up the house prior to the arrival of scheduled visitors which may give a false impression of the living conditions.

Supporting children and young people with disabilities


Children and young people with disabilities need appropriate care and services, whether they are in a home environment or in residential care. There have been reports and concerns that some children have been exposed to severe neglect in residential care (Bennett & McCormack, 2023). Reports suggest this is related to the lack of staff, and in particular, trained staff who can look after specific needs related to certain conditions.

QFCC August *Oversight Report* (2023) suggests that there is a crisis where children with special needs are placed in residential homes that are understaffed and cannot take care of their needs. Also, it has been reported that families are choosing to place their children in residential homes because they are unable to look after them. This trend shows that many families who have children with disabilities do not receive enough support, and extra assistance packages including access to in-home care through NDIS could prevent these children being placed in residential care in the first place, and would reduce the pressure on residential homes. Extra support services and extra financial support could also be provided to foster and kinship families who look after children and young people with special needs.

Children and young people with disabilities who are still placed in residential care need to be placed in adequate facilities where they can be allocated trained staff that can properly care for them, without neglecting them or other young people living in the home. For example, the young people who participated in our YAG suggested that non-verbal children should have staff who are competent in sign language, otherwise the repercussions for the child who cannot communicate are severe.

Nurturing relationships

At CREATE's YAG on residential care, when we asked what makes residential care good, all the responses were about one single factor: the quality of relationships. Young people did talk about how meaningful it was when they had workers who cared about them, listened, and took the time to get to know them and do activities with them. Previous research has also pointed to the importance of the quality of relationships and communication as factors that most influence feelings of safety for



young people in residential care (CREATE, 2023a; McDowall, 2020; Sellers et al., 2020; Slaatto et al., 2023). They stressed that an effective worker should be: caring, proactive, tenacious in building relationships, and available. Importantly, every young person's needs in regards to relationship were different, with some wanting more contact than others.

CREATE recommends that every person in residential care should have at least one adult they have a deep relationship of trust and who knows them well, whom they can count on and who can be on call, either a carer or mentor. This is important so that young people have someone they can talk to about feelings of safety, incidents, and health. Young people's say on who this person might be is fundamental.

Improving home design and household management

Home design

Residential facilities should be also be built and maintained to a high standard, and designed to provide therapeutic environments, replicating home environments to the extent possible, to provide a safe and personalised home for the children and young people who live there. The Josephine Schneider's House in Copenhagen, Denmark, for example takes this approach to make the house as "homelike" as possible. Rice et al. (2011) suggest that personalising the space supports young people to take ownership and thus respect the environment. Young people participating in their study also suggested that they wanted to be involved in the design process, particularly in relation to their bedrooms specifically the colour scheme, and choice of furniture and accessories such as plants.

Currently RMIT is conducting a pilot project that involves engaging young consultants on issues of design and layout of residential care homes. Two lived experience consultants from Y-Change and two from CREATE have been involved in design sessions. The intention is to gather insights into some practical advice for improvement of residential care settings that can be achieved immediately without a budget. As this is an ongoing project, CREATE's Advocacy & Influencing Team will report achievements as the work progresses and further insights are gleaned (see [research blog](#) for more information).


Queensland Government should consider engaging with children and young people around the design of residential care homes.

Young people's voice and privacy

A topic that was raised as the YAG was respect for privacy and having their say in their personal matters, for example when it comes to going to a health appointment, family visits, or posting on social media. There seems to be a variety of ways in which residential homes are organised and managed, but a common theme appears to be that control and rigid regulations often do not allow space for young people to express their voices and fulfil their needs, even in situations that affect their physical and mental wellbeing.

Impact of household management on health

The daily management of residential homes can have an impact on young people's health and wellbeing in many ways. The way a house is managed influences or controls children and young people's access to nutritious food and healthy eating habits, exercise, hygiene, health care, access to feminine products, and more. For example, one young person said they were only given "junk" food and therefore had developed health issues; for others, they had to follow strict meal plans, and in others food cabinets were locked. A young person said that she was not provided sanitary products, confirming figures from a recent government survey showing that 11% did not have appropriate access to these basic needs (Queensland Government, 2022). There were also discussions around



how in some homes the staff did not help in house cleaning, packing school lunches, and with school needs.

Furthermore, other issues that young people discussed were that when they talked to workers about their health and mental health, they were dismissed and even shamed. This could be detrimental for young people who have gone through severe trauma and continue to feel unsafe. Therefore, they suggested that workers need to have better training and be supportive of young people's mental health:

"I feel residential workers should know more about people with mental health and about their situation, instead of judging them for their mental health, be there for them." (Female, 20)

Many of these suggestions point to underlying issues that could be addressed by making residential homes as close as possible to a home environment, where young people can form attachment and trust with at least one adult. As mentioned above, young people would benefit from having at least one person as close as possible to a carer figure, so that they can express their concerns safely, and receive more individualised responses to their needs.

The *Hope and Healing Framework for Working with Children and Young People Living in Residential Care* (Queensland Department of Child Safety, Youth and Women et al., 2019) already sets standards for the wellbeing of young people in residential care.

Supporting residential care leavers

Young people leaving residential care need to be adequately supported to avoid them exiting into further cycles of insecurity, poverty, and homelessness (CREATE, 2022). Although Queensland has recently introduced the Extended Post-Care Support Package for care leavers, there are some gaps, for example, the need for mentoring to help developing the skills needed to live independently. This is particularly important for residential care leavers who may not have had the opportunity to learn essential skills to successfully transition to independence, as highlighted in CREATE's recent consultation in Queensland on Extending Support to 21:

"I didn't have any support or youth worker support or check ins or anything. Keep engaged with them [young people], rather than taking a step back and not engage with them. In resi, they don't teach us budgeting, cooking etc—they do everything. And they literally expect us to fend for ourselves. For my first year coming out of resi, I think the hardest thing I had to do was the bills. I have the internet, I have electricity—you don't get prepared for how to pay the bills. Kids aren't given the information they need to be independent." (Male, 19; CREATE, 2022)

Therefore, it would be important for the transition from care program to include solutions that can support residential care leavers to acquire skills through mentoring, caseworker support, education, and employment. One model could be to extend the Supported Independent Living model to care leavers over 18, so that young people could be followed by a mentor or care worker while living independently (Queensland Government, n.d). Furthermore, an effective model that CREATE recommends expanding in Queensland, is the "Youth Foyer". This model provides housing, education, and other services under one roof, with high rates of success (Foyer Foundation, 2023) and could be a suitable model to expand to support those young people leaving residential care to prevent homelessness and develop the education and skills necessary for long-term positive life outcomes

CREATE also recommends addressing the gaps in eligibility for financial assistance under the the Extended Post-Care Support Package, as currently young people who are aged between 18 and 21 who turned 18 before 1 July 2023 are not eligible for the financial support under the ECPS Package. These are life changing payments that all young care leavers should be entitled to.

Addressing stigma and criminalisation of youth in residential care

The young people who attended the YAG discussed the ways in which residential care could encourage children and young people to engage in criminal behaviour. For example, there were accounts of how some children lived in residential facilities which had locks on food cabinets, and young people were not allowed access to food, activities, or screens for entertainment. Left on their own, they ended up joining groups of friends on the streets and getting involved in crimes. In other words, this kind of behaviour sounded like a cry for help. The young people also felt that nothing was being done to address this, and these young people would just continue repeating the same offences. They suggested that residences should be places where young people were offered positive role models, and were afraid that, instead, young people would turn 18 and continue harmful behaviour after leaving care.


Avoiding the situation where the conditions in residential care result in the criminalisation of young people can be achieved through the strategies suggested above of placing young people who engage in high-risk behaviour in therapeutic homes with appropriately trained staff, assessing placements based on individual needs and risks, and ensuring there are enough workers and resources.


The safety of young people in residential care is also related to active efforts to counter the stigma and criminalisation that affects their everyday lives. Not all young people in care engage in violent behaviour or are involved with youth justice. Less than 4% of them do (The Guardian, 2023). However, the other children do suffer the consequences of this stigma, both through the way they are treated at home, and their relationships outside their residential homes. CREATE strongly advocates for active strategies to stop the stigma and criminalisation, starting in particular from the training of residential care workers themselves. Furthermore, CREATE recommends the introduction and funding of an oversight mechanism with a focus on stigma and rights of young people in care, and improve accountability processes. Care criminalisation must be avoided (McFarlane, 2018). CREATE suggests piloting a project on “dual involvement” in residential care and youth justice with a goal to end the criminalisation of young people in residential care, similar to the SADI project in South Australia (Office of the Guardian for Children and Young People, 2022; McFarlane, 2018).


The current review into the residential care system is a welcome step; however, it is been conducted in a tight timeframe, and does not allow scope for a systematic analysis. The relationship between residential care and youth justice is an area that needs urgent analysis (Victorian Government, 2020).

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