



Policy Position Paper

A call for action
to provide all young Queenslanders
in care with the option of
extended care and support
until the age of 21 years.

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The Home Stretch Queensland Steering Group



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Executive summary

About Home Stretch

- The Home Stretch movement advocates that young people in care in every Australian state and territory should *have the option of extended care and support until the age of 21 years*.
- The Queensland Home Stretch Steering Group comprises 14 major care providers and peak bodies, and a youth advisor with lived experience of the care system. Nationally, the movement comprises more than 180 organisations and 10,000 individuals.

The Queensland Government opportunity

- The Queensland Government has the opportunity to *lead the way in Australia* by committing to provide the option of extended care and support up to the age of 21 years for *all* of the approximately 500 per annum young Queenslanders in state care, as they transition to adulthood.

The importance of extended care and support

- While we acknowledge recent positive Queensland Government initiatives, the provision of post-19 supports is not mandatory, and they depend on a young person's ability and capacity to access them. None provide assurance that young people will have guaranteed care, and the security and stability of a place to call home once they leave care. Most other young Queenslanders have this surety.
- There is compelling international evidence for the benefits of extended care and support up to 21 years, including a rigorous US study demonstrating a long list of improved outcomes accruing to *each additional year* in extended care.¹ The outcomes for young people continue to improve in the two years between 19 and 21 years.
- Care leavers who face a forced early transition to adulthood are over-represented in homelessness, justice, unemployment and early parenthood statistics; have poor educational outcomes and fewer social supports; and are more likely to face physical and mental health issues as a result of past trauma.² Many face a cluster of these negative outcomes.³



Moving forward

- The above evidence indicates that there is no need for a trial of extended care and support in Queensland.
- Implementation should proceed, collaboratively designed by government with care leavers, carers, workers and peak bodies; and informed by international and interstate learnings. These include the importance of appropriate funding (including top up funds for young people leaving residential, semi-independent living or non-approved placements so that their allowances at least match the extended care payment for carers); and proactive and genuine communication with all stakeholders.

The vision

All young Queenslanders in care have the option of extended care and support until the age of 21 years.

About Home Stretch Queensland

This Policy Position Paper is a publication of the Home Stretch Queensland Steering Group, comprising 14 major care providers and peak bodies from across the state, and a youth advisor with lived experience of the care system.

The Home Stretch movement began in Victoria in 2015 and now comprises more than 180 organisations and 10,000 individuals who believe that young people in care in every Australian state and territory should have the option of extended care and support until the age of 21 years.

The movement is constantly growing in support. To date, state governments in Victoria,⁴ South Australia,⁵ Tasmania⁶ and Western Australia⁷ have made various commitments in favour of extended care and support to 21 years.

The Queensland launch at Griffith University, South Bank, in November 2019 drew nearly 100

local supporters from the community sector and academia, as well as concerned young people, adults and the media.

Simultaneous regional launches took place in Cairns, Mt Isa and Rockhampton, demonstrating state-wide support for a simple change that would ensure young people in care the same right to a secure place to call home and the support most other young Queenslanders have in their transition to adulthood.

The Queensland Steering Group has been meeting regularly during 2019–20. Executive members of each partner organisation draw on their knowledge, networks and decision-making authority to identify the strategic focus and approach of the movement in Queensland and support action towards our vision.

How do we know extended care and support is important?

The evidence, as summarised below, is incontrovertible. Equally, however, organisations comprising the Queensland Steering Group support **many thousands** of children and young people in care. Our staff see on a day-to-day basis the fears that these young people face as they approach their 18th and 19th birthdays — an event that for most other young people is an exciting milestone in their journey toward adulthood.

We see many of the young people we have supported, often over a period of years, struggle with homelessness, unemployment, and physical and mental health challenges when they leave care.^{8,9} It doesn't have to be this way.

Extending care and support to 21 is a **simple change** that can be the difference between these young people **surviving or thriving**.



Good, better ...

The *National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children 2009–2020*¹⁰ notes that most parents — supported by the community and the broad range of government supports and services available to all families — have the capacity to raise happy and healthy children. But some families need more help. In cases where children are at risk of significant harm, statutory child protection responses will be required. This may include placing children in the care of the state.

Under the Queensland *Child Protection Act 1999*, the Government is responsible for ensuring support and assistance is available to assist young people aged 15–25 years in their transition from care to adulthood.¹¹ This responsibility is currently exercised by the Department of Child Safety, Youth and Women.

The Department makes a commitment to children and young people that they will support them to:

- *be connected to family, community and culture*
- *feel safe and know who to talk to if they don't feel safe*
- *know that Child Safety will help their family to make changes to deal with the things that have everyone worried*
- *have people in their life that care about them and who will stay in contact with them*
- *know that we will do our very best for them*
- *dream big, achieve great things and become an awesome adult.*¹²

A range of Queensland Government initiatives has been put in place to help young people leaving care. These include:

- changes to the *Child Protection Act 1999*, as above, which extended eligibility for post-care support to young people aged up to 25 years; and the related redesign of *Next Step After Care* to become *Next Step Plus*, a statewide service providing support to young people aged 15–25 years with a care experience on or after their 12th birthday. The service aims to provide young people with support in areas such as managing finances; finding accommodation; training and employment; keeping safe and healthy; relationships; and obtaining legal advice.¹³
- the February 2019 extension of allowances to foster and kinship carers looking after children who turn 18 while still at school;¹⁴ and the further extension for all young care leavers in foster or kinship care up to the age of 19 years, regardless of educational status. The planned commencement date for this extension, 1 July 2020, was fast tracked to 29 March 2020 due to the Covid-19 pandemic.¹⁵

But not yet the best

The initiatives above are undoubtedly important investments in the future of our young people, and help support them to “become an awesome adult” as they leave care.

However, the provision of such supports is not mandatory, and they will depend on a young person's ability and capacity to access them.

None guarantee extended care and support as an entitlement; nor do they provide assurance that young people will have the security and stability of a place to call home.¹⁶ This requires **funded, tailored accommodation and support options for all young people in care up to the age of 21 years.**



As well as terminating at 19 years, however, the recently extended allowances **do not include** extended support for the more than 1 in 10 young Queenslanders in care who live in residential, semi-independent living or non-approved placements.¹⁷

As at 30 June 2019, there were 960 Queensland children in residential care, 11.8% of our young people in the statutory care system.^{18, 19} About 40% of young people in residential care are aged 15–17 years.²⁰ They make up a large proportion of the approximately 500 young people each year facing transition from the care system to adulthood.²¹

Currently, carers receive a base rate of \$588.70/fortnight from the Queensland Government to continue to care for a young person.²² Young people who exit care in alternative living arrangements receive no additional support from the Queensland Government, and they receive less financial assistance through Centrelink than the carer payment (\$462.50/fortnight).²³

These young people are likely to be more vulnerable, and to have more limited support networks than those in foster and kinship care — yet they are ineligible for the same financial security and accommodation support.²⁴

This is both unjust, and a contributing factor to the poorer life outcomes of young people exiting care. The Queensland Government could **address this inequity by supplementing Youth Allowance to at least match the extended care payment for carers**, and make a significant difference to the quality of life and future prospects of these young individuals.

In a recent Queensland Government media release, the Minister for Child Safety, Youth and Women said:

*Young Queenslanders leaving the family home traditionally have the support of parents and relatives to prepare them for the world. They're not told to pack their bags and hit the highway on their 18th birthday, and neither should young people in care.*²⁵

We need to ensure that **none** of our young people have to 'hit the highway' before they turn 21. Most young Queenslanders have the option of moving in and out of home, testing their wings, sometimes returning to a safe base and other times taking flight.

Every care leaver — from whatever type of care; from any cultural background; and dealing with any kind of physical, social or intellectual challenges — deserves the same options, and the chance to thrive as they transition to adulthood.

The alternative, as described below, is shocking.



The alternative to extended care and support is shocking

The life outcomes of most young people who leave care at 18 or 19 years are poor

Young people who leave care at 18 or 19 years are particularly disadvantaged in accessing the same social, educational, housing and employment opportunities that other young people access with the support of their families and close social support networks.

There is extensive evidence showing that young care leavers are heavily over-represented in homelessness, justice, unemployment and early parenthood statistics; have poor educational outcomes and fewer social supports; and are more likely to face physical and mental health issues as a result of past trauma.²⁶ Many face a cluster of these negative outcomes.²⁷

Traditional support structures — family, friendship circles and community — are more likely to be broken for these young people,²⁸ limiting the social support individuals can leverage to break the cycle of disadvantage which, if left unaddressed, has the potential to span several generations.

McNamara et al (2019) note that one reason for this reality is the significant decrease in formal support for these young people that occurs at [or around] 18 years of age, which often results in an “accelerated transition to independence”.³⁰

Care leavers are not a homogeneous group, and they experience leaving care in many different ways. Those who have experienced supportive and stable placements, and who have positive and ongoing relationships with carers and workers, often go on to live successful and satisfying lives despite a history of adversity.³¹

There is no doubt however that for many of the young people transitioning out of care and already dealing with past experiences of trauma, 18 or 19 is too young to have independence forced upon them.

Like other young people their age, they deserve the right to grow up gradually in a caring environment.

I really noticed that I was leaving and that I was going to be on my own and I started to stress, like six months forward, I was stressing out every single day, I would start crying and stressing because I knew I was going to be 18 soon ... I guess it's like a really big impact because since I was 12 years old, so five years, I've been relying on having like all of these workers in my life ...

I think that in between the years of 17–18, that the care should be really intensive. Like, I think overall where I needed care the most was right before I turned 18. That's kind of where I felt my life fall apart and like I had to force myself to pick myself back up and put all the bits back together and keep going because no one else was going to be able to do it. (Residential care leaver, female, 18).²⁹

Access to extended care and support improves life outcomes for care leavers

At least four rigorous international studies³² have demonstrated that extended care and support produces positive outcomes for care leavers, including increased engagement with education and employment prospects; as well as reduced levels of homelessness, alcohol and drug dependency, and interactions with the justice system.³³

A robust longitudinal evaluation of the California *Fostering Connections to Success Act 2010* (the CalYouth study) is demonstrating a long list of improved outcomes accruing to each additional year in extended foster care through to 21 years.³⁴ The outcomes for young people *continue to improve in the two years between 19 and 21 years*, and include:

- significantly increasing the probability that young people would complete secondary school
- increasing the number of quarters that young people were employed between their 18th and 21st birthdays
- decreasing their odds of being homeless or couch-surfing between the ages of 17 and 21 by about 28%
- decreasing the likelihood that young people became parents between the ages of 17 and 21 by about 28%
- decreasing the probability that young people had been arrested between the ages of 17 and 21 by about 41%, and decreasing the odds that they had been convicted of a crime during the same period by about 40%.

The evidence underpins extended care and support reforms in an increasing number of countries, including the United Kingdom's 'Staying Put',³⁵ and more than 40 states in the United States.³⁶ In New Zealand, the *Oranga Tamariki Act 1989/ Children's and Young People's Well-being Act 1989* now legislates a raft of transition support services in addition to extended care provisions enabling young people to stay with a carer until the age of 21 years if they choose that option.

New Zealand Children's Minister Tracey Martin noted with the announcement of the changes in 2019 that, in addition to the immediate and personal benefits to young people, "making the investment now ... would help break the cycle of families needing state care [since] nearly 30% of children in care have parents who had also been in care".³⁷



Ensuring program success

All young Queenslanders in care have the option of extended care and support until the age of 21 years.

There is no need for a trial

The evidence for the benefits of extended care and support are widely accepted and compelling. So **we don't need further trials** to tell us that extending care and support to 21 years is both a just and sensible thing to do. The various models and approaches to implementation evident in Victoria,³⁸ South Australia,³⁹ Tasmania⁴⁰ and Western Australia⁴¹ will however be useful resources as we develop and implement our own cost-effective, best practice model, collaboratively designed by government with care leavers, carers, workers and peak bodies; and appropriately resourced to effectively meet the emotional, financial and physical needs of vulnerable young Queenslanders.

Sufficient funding is a critical success factor

Evaluations of 'Staying Put' in the UK demonstrate the critical importance of **appropriate resourcing** to support the success of extended care and support initiatives.⁴² As well as facing the myriad challenges of late adolescence, many care leavers have additional complex needs requiring wraparound physical, emotional and/or intellectual support. Like other young Queenslanders testing their wings, they too may need to explore several post-18 living arrangements before finding a place where they can flourish. This needs to be considered in allocating funding.

Care leavers from residential, semi-independent living or non-approved living arrangements have as much right to thrive as young people in foster or kinship care. Funding also needs to be allocated to **supplement Youth Allowance** so that it at least matches the extended care payment for carers.

Communication is key

The UK experience also demonstrated the importance of **proactive communication with all stakeholders**, so that young people, their carers, and child safety and other workers can overcome long held expectations of the child having to leave care at 18 or 19, and have sufficient information to clearly understand the new options.

Similarly, there is evidence from the US showing that in counties where young people perceived that the child protection system was well integrated with other services to help meet their needs as they transitioned to adulthood, they were more likely to remain in and benefit from extended care and support.⁴³

Putting young people at the centre

At the core of a healthy and productive community are individual Queenslanders with a quality of life that enables them to both live personally satisfying lives, and give back to the community socially and economically.

Every individual matters. Each and every Queenslander deserves the support needed to live a flourishing life, and to enable them to fulfil their potential to contribute to society. Some, like young people transitioning from care to adulthood, need particular support.

Extending care and support to 21 is a simple change that can be the difference between these young people surviving or thriving.

The Queensland Government has the opportunity to lead the way in Australia by committing to provide the option of extended care and support up to the age of 21 years for *all* of the approximately 500 per annum young Queenslanders in state care, as they transition to adulthood.

Such a commitment gives life not only to the Advancing Queensland priority, 'Give all our children a good start', but also to other priorities of this government: 'Keep Queenslanders healthy', 'Keep communities safe' and 'Create jobs in a strong economy',

which includes the engagement of more young Queenslanders in education, training and work.

Extending care and support to all young people transitioning from care is consistent with the *Queensland Human Rights Act 2019* introduced by this Government, as a measure that assists individuals who have been in many cases socially, culturally and/or economically disadvantaged (Section 15).⁴⁴ The right to a safe and secure place to call home is a 'gateway' right — without it, other human rights cannot be realised.⁴⁵

Fiscally, there is no question that extended care and support makes good sense for this generation and the next. Deloitte Access Economics found that for every dollar invested by the Queensland Government in the continuation of care and support, there would be \$2.69 generated in either savings or increased income due to improved social outcomes.⁴⁶

An investment in extended care and support to 21 is however more than financial. It is an investment in individual young Queenslanders who have the potential to become active, contributing young adults who enrich our community.

The question is:
can we afford *not* to invest in
extended care and support?

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