

# Queensland Home Stretch Budget Priority Statement January 2022

**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



## About The Home Stretch

The Home Stretch movement comprises nearly 200 organisations and 10,000 individuals nationally who believe that young people in the care systems in every Australian state and territory should have the option of extended care and support until the age of 21 years.

Each year in Queensland approximately 500 young people leave the care of the state. Research shows that about half of those young people will be homeless, unemployed, in jail, or a new parent within the first 12 months.<sup>1</sup> A national youth homelessness survey by Swinburne University found that 63% of homeless youth were care leavers.<sup>2</sup>

Internationally, governments have tired of the costly social and economic consequences when care is terminated at 18 years. Child welfare systems in the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom and New Zealand have all extended care to 21 years. The outcomes for governments, the young people concerned and the community have been extraordinary:

- homelessness rates are halved for this cohort;
- education participation rates doubled;
- a 41% decrease in arrests and 40% decrease in convictions of crime; and
- an increase in the likelihood of full time employment.<sup>3</sup>

Given these exceptional outcomes, six Australian state and territory governments have now adopted extended care to 21 years. More than 1000 young people nationally now benefit from the extended care and support provided through this reform.

The statewide Queensland Home Stretch Steering Group, a collective of executive members from 14 major care providers, peak and representative bodies, has been meeting regularly since 2019 to raise awareness of the vital importance of extended care and support for our young people.

**It's now time for action.** As one young person, Jess, said recently:

*I remember hearing about Home Stretch when I had barely left care myself. Now I'm nearly 26, and it's still a thing. Let's just get it done, Queensland.*

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## Introduction

While parents have the primary responsibility for raising their children and providing support, the *National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children 2009–2020*<sup>4</sup> notes that where the home environment is not safe enough for children, children are to be placed in the care of the state. State care in Queensland involves a range of services including foster and kinship care, residential care and supported independent living. Carer allowances continue up to 19 years for young people in foster and kinship care, but young people in residential care, semi-independent living or in a non-approved placement do not have the option of extended care after their 18th birthday.

Young people who have been in state care are among the most vulnerable people in Australia. Every year in Queensland approximately 500 young people leave care, with far too many experiencing homelessness, mental health issues, substance abuse and engagement with the criminal justice system. They are also less likely to pursue post-school education or to be employed.<sup>5</sup>

The reasons for this are well established, and relate to the early and abrupt end to care that occurs when a young person in out of home care reaches age 18 or 19. Many young people find the process of transitioning difficult, and may not be ready to be fully independent due to factors including past trauma, poor health and mental health, limited educational attainment, and a lack of support networks and resources.

Yet compelling evidence from the United States, United Kingdom and other countries shows that extending care to age 21 supports extraordinary improvements in outcomes in education, employment and other life domains.

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

Most significantly, extending care to 21 years will have intergenerational impact, not only providing a promise of hope for these young people personally as they transition out of care, but also altering the trajectory of their future relationships and families. It is, in fact, the earliest intervention we can provide to reduce future demand on child protection services and other government services. For the 4 out of 10 care leavers from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander backgrounds, it is also an important step toward closing the gap, and progressing the generational strategy that underpins *Our Way*.<sup>6</sup>

As this pandemic continues, dramatically impacting the lives of young people both in and leaving care, we urge the Queensland Government to support the inclusion of extended care to 21 years for all care-leavers in the next State Budget. The flow-on effects of Covid-19 to the education, employment and housing sectors are making it increasingly difficult for any young person to make a positive start to adult life after exiting state care.

Now more than ever, our most vulnerable young people require your support.

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## Our priority

That all young people in state care in Queensland **should have the option of extended care and support until the age of 21 years.**

## The evidence base

[Extended care makes strong fiscal sense: the Deloitte Access Economics Queensland benefit–cost analysis](#)

In 2016 and 2018, Deloitte Access Economics was commissioned to provide a cost–benefit analysis for the Home Stretch campaigns in Victoria and New South Wales. In 2021, the Queensland Home Stretch Steering Group commissioned a similar piece of work for this state, drawing on an analysis of outcomes across the same nine categories as the earlier work: housing; education and employment; early parenthood; hospitalisation; the non-hospital costs of mental illness and smoking; interaction with the justice system; and alcohol and drug dependency.

The findings of all three reports concur that the benefits of extending care and support to 21 years are expected to outweigh the costs — that is, in financial terms, implementing Home Stretch will provide a positive return on investment.

The estimated return on investment in Queensland, including only financial costs, is **\$3.30 for every \$1 invested** in extended care to 21 years.

If both financial and wellbeing costs are included, the expected return for Queensland is **\$5.90 for every \$1 invested**.

The financial impact of *not* implementing Home Stretch for the current cohort of care leavers aged 18 to 21 years due to higher usage of Queensland Government services is estimated to be **\$71 million** over the next 10 years. Costs to the Queensland Government are primarily attributable to the cost of housing and homelessness services (46%). Hospitalisations, crime and smoking costs collectively account for 40% of total costs.

The social and economic outcomes achieved when extended care is provided to care-leavers are therefore compelling, with significant reductions not only in homelessness, arrests and hospitalisations, but also teenage parenthood and poverty. Further detail is provided below.

The life outcomes of a high proportion of young people who leave care at 18 years are poor.

Young people who leave care at 18 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 and unemployment 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.<sup>7</sup> Many face a cluster of these negative outcomes.<sup>8</sup>

There is compelling Australian and international evidence that access to extended care improves life outcomes for young people in state care.

At least four rigorous international studies<sup>9</sup> have demonstrated that extended care 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.<sup>10</sup>

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.<sup>11</sup> These 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 reforms in an increasing number of countries, including the United Kingdom's 'Staying Put',<sup>12</sup> and more than 40 states in the United States.<sup>13</sup> In New Zealand, the *Oranga Tamariki Act 1989/ Children's and Young People's Well-being Act 1989* now legislates a raft of transition 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."<sup>14</sup>

[In Australia, most jurisdictions have made commitments supporting extended care to 21 years.](#)

Every jurisdiction in Australia apart from Queensland and New South Wales has made a commitment to support extended care to 21 years.

The Victorian Government has recently announced the full implementation of Home Stretch for all young Victorians leaving care.<sup>15</sup> In Western Australia, the 2021 election saw the return of Premier Mark McGowan, whose campaign pledges included the extension of universal foster, kinship and residential care to the age of 21.<sup>16</sup> South Australia,<sup>17</sup> Tasmania,<sup>18</sup> the Northern Territory<sup>19</sup> and the Australian Capital Territory<sup>20</sup> have also made pledges in favour of extended care and support to 21 years.

The different states demonstrate a range of models and approaches to implementation that will be a useful resource as Queensland develops and implements our own cost-effective, best practice model, resourced to effectively meet the emotional, financial and physical needs of these vulnerable young Queenslanders.

## **Why do care-leavers need more than the current supports?**

We recognise the positive steps the Queensland Government has taken to date in supporting these young people as they face especial challenges in their transition to adulthood. Initiatives such as the changes to *the Child Protection Act 1999* and programs such as *Next Step Plus* are important investments in the future of our young people. Unquestionably, current initiatives are helping to mitigate the risk of poor life outcomes facing this vulnerable group.

Nevertheless, even the best programs, pathway planning and support services are clearly not producing the positive life outcomes we want for all these young people. Provision of post-care supports is not mandatory, and such supports depend on a young person's ability and capacity to access them. None guarantee care through to 21 years as an entitlement.

We noted above the impacts of Covid-19 on the education, employment and housing sectors, which are amplifying the difficulties faced by young people as they transition to adult life after exiting state care.

As an immediate response to the Covid pandemic, we urge the Queensland Government to extend state care for 2022–23, so that young people in state care whose orders expire during this time can continue to receive the same care arrangements.<sup>21</sup>

Implementing this measure is a prudent and responsible way to fulfil our duty of care to these vulnerable young people during the pandemic, and to ensure that they are not exiting care into homelessness.

## Can we afford *not* to invest in extended care?

Fiscally, there is no question that extended care makes good sense for this generation and the next.

As we note above, implementing Home Stretch for the current cohort of care leavers would save the Queensland Government \$71 million over the next 10 years. The return on investment, including only financial costs, is more than threefold. When wellbeing costs are included as well, the return is nearly six-fold.

An investment in extended care 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.

Members of the Queensland Home Stretch Steering Group are keen to work with this Government and its various departments to further explore and develop a model of extended care to 21 years in this state. We would welcome queries and further discussion about any of the points raised within this Budget Submission.



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LIFE WITHOUT BARRIERS  
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Aimee, youth advisor



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