

QUEENSLAND TREASURY

2026-2027 Queensland Budget

Stakeholder Submission



Acknowledgment of Country

Anglicare Southern Queensland acknowledges Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as the first Australians and recognises their culture, history, diversity, and deep connection to the land. We acknowledge the Traditional Owners and Custodians of the land on which our service was founded and on which our sites are operating today.

We pay our respects to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Elders both past and present, who have influenced and supported Anglicare Southern Queensland on its journey thus far. We also extend that respect to our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff, clients and partners (past, present and future) and we hope we can work together to build a service that values and respects our First Nations people.

We acknowledge the past and present injustices that First Nations people have endured and seek to understand and reconcile these histories as foundational to moving forward together in unity.

Anglicare is committed to being more culturally responsive and inclusive of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and we are committed to embedding cultural capabilities across all facets of the organisation.

About Anglicare Southern Queensland

Anglicare Southern Queensland (Anglicare) has responded to the needs of our community through more than 150 years of delivering innovative, quality care services. More than 3,000 Anglicare staff and volunteers operate across southern Queensland and in Townsville. Our comprehensive, integrated range of community services includes community aged care; residential aged care; and community support programs, including youth justice, child safety, disability support, counselling and education, mental health, homelessness, and chronic conditions. Our services are designed to 'wrap around' clients in a comprehensive way, recognising their health needs but also addressing the social needs which contribute to wellness.

This submission may be quoted in public documents.

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Contents

Introduction	5
Problem 1: Undiagnosed disability is a key driver of youth justice contract	6
Gaps in current funding and service responses	6
Recommendation 1: Fund early diagnosis and support pathways	7
Problem 2: Repeated school suspensions increase risk of justice involvement	8
Gaps in current funding and service responses	8
Recommendation 2: Invest in inclusive education and re-engagement	9
Problem 3: Fragmented systems respond too late and in isolation.....	10
Gaps in current funding and service responses	10
Recommendation 3: Strengthen cross system coordination and accountability	11
Conclusion	12
References.....	13

Introduction

Many of the young people in Queensland who enter the youth justice system are there because early warning signs of need were missed or responded to too late. Across disability, education, and child safety systems, opportunities for prevention exist but are inconsistently accessed, poorly coordinated, and too often replaced by punitive or crisis driven responses. The result is avoidable harm to children, pressure on frontline systems, and rising long term costs across multiple government portfolios.

Anglicare Southern Queensland (Anglicare SQ) welcomes the invitation to make a submission to the Queensland Treasury to inform the 2026-2027 Queensland Government budget. This budget submission identifies three connected drivers of youth justice contact and their subsequent costly repercussions.

1. Many children enter the system with undiagnosed disability. Behaviours linked to unmet need are frequently treated as defiance rather than indicators for assessment requiring additional adjustments to support needs.
2. Repeated school suspension and exclusion actively increase risk, particularly for young children, students with disability, and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. Exclusion removes protective factors and pushes children towards a well evidenced school-to-justice pipeline.
3. Fragmented service systems respond late and in isolation, often requiring children and families to reach crisis before coordinated action is triggered.

The recommendations in this submission focus on early, practical, and cost-effective intervention. They propose targeted investment in early disability diagnosis and support pathways, strengthened inclusive education with appropriate training and support for educators and reengagement within mainstream schools, and improved coordination and accountability across portfolios.

These measures build on existing Queensland investment but shift the focus to access and shared responsibility. Modest upfront funding in these areas will reduce demand on high-cost crisis responses, including detention, court processes, child protection escalation, and intensive education supports.

Preventing youth justice contact is not only a social imperative, but also a fiscally responsible strategy that delivers savings over time while generating better outcomes for children, families, and communities.

Problem 1

Undiagnosed disability is a key driver of youth justice contact

Many young people and children who enter the youth justice system live with cognitive, neurodevelopmental, or psychosocial disability that was not identified or supported early in their lives.^{1,2} In many cases, warning signs are visible from the early years of schooling, including learning difficulty, emotional regulation challenges, and developmental delay, but do not trigger timely assessment or support.³

When disability is not recognised, behaviour linked to unmet need is misinterpreted as defiance, resulting in punitive responses rather than assessment and appropriate accommodations.⁴ Identification often occurs only after repeated suspension, disengagement, or contact with police, at which point children are already entrenched in crisis-driven systems.

Failure to identify and respond to disability early is not incidental. It is a systemic driver of youth justice involvement and a clear point for preventative investment.

Gaps in current funding and service responses

Queensland does fund early intervention, screening, and support services for children and families. However, given the high number of young people who enter the justice system without a diagnosis, it is clear these systems are not consistently reaching those who need them most. Key gaps include:

- Access barriers for families experiencing poverty, housing instability, or child protection involvement
- Long wait times and complex referral pathways for assessment and diagnosis
- Services that rely on schools or families to identify concerns, missing children who are disengaged or excluded
- Limited coordination between health, education, child protection, and justice systems

The ongoing incidence of young people entering detention without a diagnosis indicates that current investment is fragmented and uneven, rather than preventative.

Recommendation 1

Fund early diagnosis and support pathways

Strengthen and redesign early diagnosis and support pathways for young people most at risk of youth justice involvement. This includes:

- Expanded universal screening for disability in early years settings
- Faster, simpler assessment pathways that do not rely on parental capacity or consistent school attendance
- Integrated responses across health, education, child protection, and justice systems

This approach builds on existing investment but shifts the focus to accessibility and coordination.

Early diagnosis and reasonable adjustments are critical protective factors that reduce escalation into expensive systems designed to respond to crisis, rather than prevent it.

While this requires modest upfront resourcing for screening, workforce capability, and referral pathways, the cost is low compared to the long-term expense of unmanaged disability. Early diagnosis reduces later demand on intensive education supports, child protection involvement, policing, court processes, and detention.

Every child diagnosed early represents avoided future costs across multiple portfolios.

Problem 2

Repeated school suspensions increase risk of justice involvement

Suspension and exclusion remove children from structured and protective environments at precisely the time when intervention would have the greatest impact. Once disconnected from school, children often experience increased unsupervised time, reduced access to trusted adults, and heightened exposure to risk, all of which increase the likelihood of contact with the justice system.

The Australian Institute of Criminology demonstrates positive associations between repeat school suspensions and the problem behaviour of teenagers: for example, violent and nonviolent antisocial behaviour, violence, and tobacco use.⁵ School suspension and other forms of school exclusion rely on a “zero-tolerance approach” to students exhibiting challenging behaviours, but this rarely accounts for other significant precipitating factors such as trauma.⁶ Students with disability are disproportionately affected, with exclusion occurring from the earliest years of schooling and compounding disadvantage over time.

There is a significant body of evidence that suggests that the younger a student is when they are first suspended, the more likely it is they will end up involved in the juvenile justice system.⁷ Data obtained by the ABC revealed that in 2023 Prep students received more than 700 suspensions, Year 1 students about 2,000, Year 2 students approximately 2,500, and Year 3 students about 3,500.⁸

Of particular significance is the fact that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children (particularly boys) are suspended or excluded from schooling at much higher rates than non-First Nations children.⁹ This is consistent with Queensland data, where Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are overrepresented in school suspensions.¹⁰

Each exclusion increases the likelihood of further disengagement and future exclusion, accelerating movement along the school-to-justice pathway. School exclusion does not merely coincide with youth justice involvement, it actively contributes to it.

Gaps in current funding and service responses

Queensland has policy commitments to inclusive education and provides some funding for learning support, behaviour support, and specialist services within mainstream state schools. However, these supports are unevenly available and insufficiently resourced to meet the needs of students with disability, trauma histories, or complex behaviour needs. Key gaps include:

- Limited access to specialist inclusion staff such as guidance officers, behaviour specialists, and allied health professionals in mainstream schools
- High thresholds and long delays for disability verification and learning support funding
- Classroom teachers expected to manage complex behaviours without adequate training, time, or specialist backup
- Continued reliance on suspension as a behaviour response, particularly in under-resourced schools and those experiencing workload capacity

In practice, inclusion often means managing risk rather than providing meaningful adjustments. As a result, students with the highest support needs may be excluded early and repeatedly, despite evidence that exclusion increases harm and youth justice involvement.

Recommendation 2

Invest in inclusive education and reengagement

Strengthen inclusive education in Queensland state schools so suspension becomes a genuine last resort.

This includes:

- Increased investment in specialist inclusion supports embedded in mainstream schools, including behaviour support and allied health
- Faster and more accessible pathways to disability identification and learning adjustments
- Practical, ongoing training for mainstream teachers in trauma-informed and disability-responsive practice
- System-level monitoring and reduction targets for suspensions, particularly for young students and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students

A well-resourced inclusive education system supports teachers, keeps children connected to school, and interrupts the school-to-justice pathway before it becomes entrenched. This recommendation focuses on reducing the use of suspension and exclusion, which are costly and ineffective responses to complex behaviour. Funding would support schools to use proven alternatives that keep students engaged and supervised.

The cost of inclusive and flexible learning options is significantly lower than the cumulative cost of exclusion, disengagement, and later justice involvement. Investment at this point reduces downstream pressure on youth justice, income support, and crisis services. This is a cost saving measure over time, with benefits accruing across multiple portfolios.

Problem 3

Fragmented systems respond too late and in isolation

Children with complex needs interact with multiple systems, including education, disability, health, child protection, and youth justice, yet no single system holds responsibility for acting early when risk first appears. Supports are delivered in isolation, information is not consistently shared, and responses are often delayed until behaviour has escalated to crisis point.¹¹

Current arrangements rely on high thresholds before coordinated support is triggered, meaning children must first experience repeated exclusion, harm, or justice contact before meaningful intervention occurs. This design prioritises reaction over prevention, despite strong evidence that early, coordinated action reduces later system demand.¹²

In practice, families are left to connect fragmented services, advocate for support, and manage risk without authority or backing from the systems responsible for child wellbeing. The absence of shared accountability allows responsibility to shift between agencies, enabling children to fall through gaps that are well known and long standing.¹³

Gaps in current funding and service responses

Queensland funds a wide range of early intervention and family support services across multiple portfolios. However, these services largely operate in silos, with limited mechanisms for shared responsibility or joint planning. Key gaps include:

- Funding and accountability structures that prioritise individual program outputs over shared outcomes
- Limited information sharing between agencies, particularly across health, education, and child protection
- Threshold-based responses that delay support until risk has escalated
- Time-limited interventions that end before stability is achieved

The fact that many young people reach youth justice after years of service contact demonstrates that the issue is not absence of services, but lack of coordination and timely action.

Recommendation 3

Strengthen cross system coordination and accountability

Invest in integrated, cross agency early intervention responses for children and families at highest risk. This includes:

- Place-based or cohort-focused models that bring services together around the child and family
- Shared accountability across agencies for prevention of youth justice contact
- Clear lead agency responsible for coordination and follow through
- Data sharing and joint planning arrangements that allow earlier, collective responses

Improving coordination and the timing of support reduces duplication, closes gaps, and prevents escalation into the youth justice system.

Current spending is undermined by fragmentation. Funding coordination and shared accountability ensures existing investments are used more effectively, rather than duplicating or working at cross purposes.

This recommendation, primarily focused on shared planning, data use, and cross-agency decision-making, requires limited resourcing compared to service delivery costs. The return is improved targeting of supports, faster responses, and fewer children escalating to high-cost crisis systems.

Small investments in coordination deliver outsized savings by preventing system failure, not funding new layers of response.

Conclusion

Involvement with youth justice should not be an expected outcome for the children and young people described in this submission. Rather, it is the predictable result of systems that respond too late, work in isolation, and rely on exclusion and punishment in place of early intervention. Without coordinated responses and shared accountability, the existing investment across these systems will continue to fail to prevent escalation into the most expensive and harmful systems.

The measures proposed in this submission do not require large scale new service creation. They require a shift in focus toward earlier identification of disability, stronger inclusive education responses, and coordinated action across portfolios when risk first appears. These are targeted, evidence-informed investments that keep children connected to school, supported in the community, and out of the youth justice system.

Every child diverted from detention represents avoided costs in policing, courts, custody, and crisis services, alongside better long-term outcomes in education, employment, and wellbeing.

Investing early is both a prevention strategy and a cost control measure. By acting now, Queensland can reduce youth justice demand, improve system efficiency, and deliver safer and fairer outcomes for children, families, and the broader community.

References

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