

December 2024

# “Treat us like humans”

Workshops with young people living in residential care



Queensland  
Family & Child  
Commission



Queensland  
Government

## Residential care workshops

The QFCC partnered with Life Without Barriers (LWB) to deliver on Child Safety’s Residential Care Roadmap (2024) (the Roadmap) action to “*Formalise the Queensland Family and Child Commission Expert Panel on Residential Care – comprising 12 young people with lived experience in the system as a governing body – to inform the Ministerial Youth Advisory Board, monitor the implementation of this roadmap, and hold regional forums that give young people in residential care opportunities to voice their experiences*”.

The QFCC and LWB hosted three workshops in Brisbane, Toowoomba and Mackay with young people who are currently living in or recently transitioned from residential care. The workshops were open to young people aged 14-24 years. The intention of these workshops was to provide a space for young people to share their ideas about the improvements needed for the residential care system. The Commission is supporting this group as part of its core functions, and key sector partners are supporting the attendance and participation of young people.



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### Who we heard from

- 73 individuals across the 3 workshops
- Most participants aged between 16-21 years
- **Brisbane:** 22 participants, ages ranged between 16 and 23 years
- **Mackay:** 33 participants, ages ranged between 15 and 22 years
- **Toowoomba:** 18 participants, ages ranged between 15 and 19 years.

Participant details were not recorded to ensure all young people had the freedom to express their views and opinions.

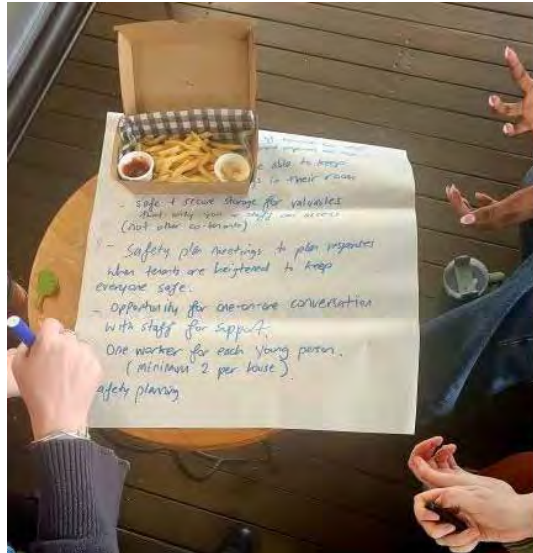
**First Nations Representation:** First Nations young people were present at each of the 3 workshops.

### The positives of residential care

There were some positives that we heard across the groups, with young people attending the Brisbane workshops sharing more positive experiences in residential care than those in attendance in Toowoomba and Mackay. The positives from residential care related to having their basic needs met, like having food to eat, a place to sleep, and clothing. Access and transport to school and community was also appreciated, as were celebrations for birthdays and Christmas.

Two comments from the Brisbane workshop however spoke loudly of the overall experience for young people living in residential care in Queensland:

*“Self-placing is a better alternative.”*  
*“The negative overrides the positive.”*



*“Treat us like humans”*

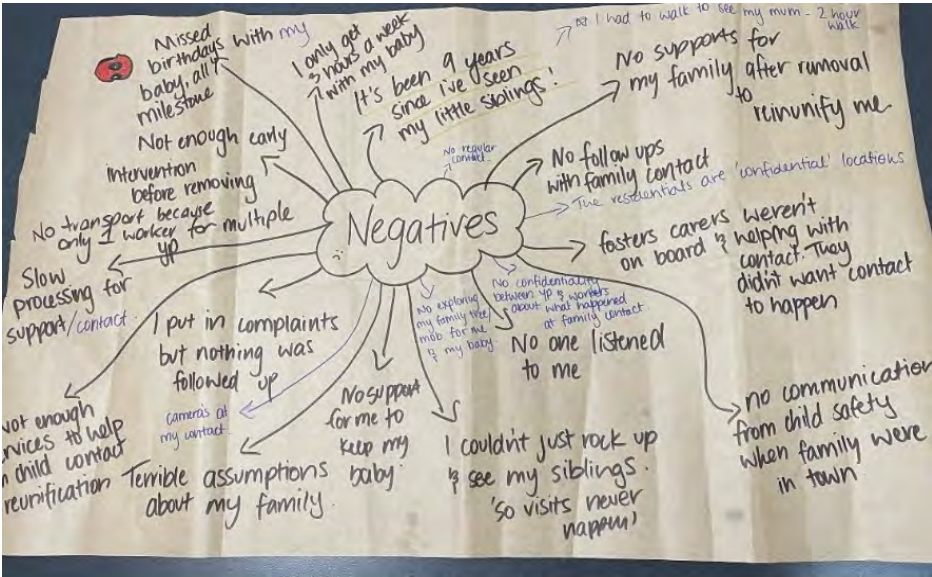
### What needs to change

While each individual story was unique, key themes were identified across the three workshops.

Firstly, **“Choice and voice”** emerged as a critical theme, demonstrating that young people want to have a say in what happens in their life. Unfortunately, overwhelmingly participants told us this does not occur, and that rules and regulations are prioritised over their needs and wants.

Another prominent theme was **“Connection”**, reflecting the importance of relationships and community in shaping experiences in residential care. This encompassed both the positive connections such as ongoing relationships with staff, family and community (school), and negative aspects such as disconnection from culture and family, loss of community, and multiple placement locations.

Thirdly, **“Safety”** was flagged as an issue that impacted multiple areas of the residential care experience. For example, safety is often the reasoning used to impose restrictions on young people within the residential homes (e.g. Locked cupboards, removal of personal items, supervised family contact). However, young people highlighted that safety consideration was not extended to cultural practices, mental health, transportation or placement matching.



- Negative:**
- changes in placement with 1-2 day notice
  - safety plans not being followed
  - workers not trained
  - workers in office whole shift (not engaged)
  - Refused basic medical treatment
  - excessive restrictions/punishments
  - refused education
  - medications not being provided / refused or late
  - no furniture
  - yp ratio to yw not appropriate
  - inappropriate placement options
  - using police as behaviour management
  - relocations - far away locations/change towers
  - refused to be left alone at eb.
  - locked out
  - no communication
  - leave me in middle of nowhere & not pick me up. because I wasn't scheduled I couldn't

*“Treat us like humans, not like prisoners.”*

*“You either have someone else’s routine forced on you or no routine.”*

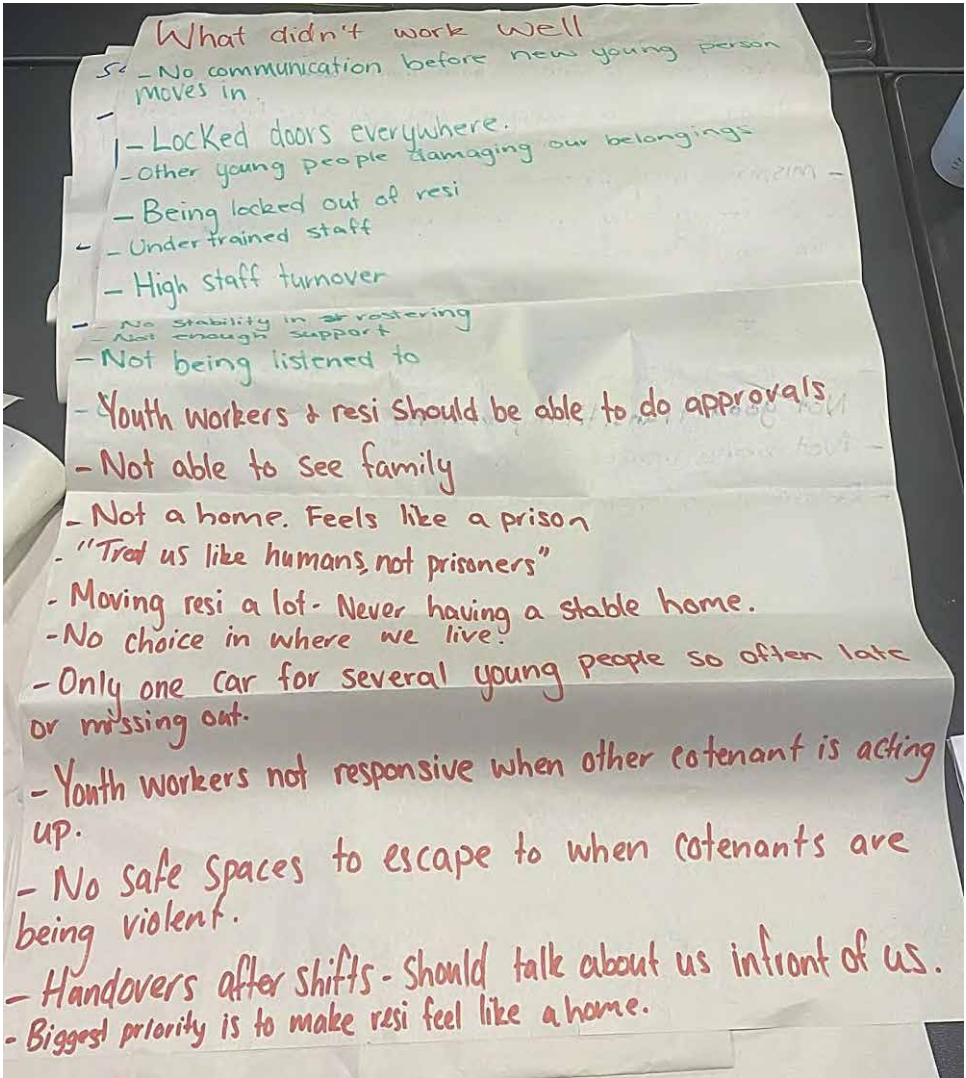
*“Treat us like humans”*

**Choice and voice**

Action 4 within the Roadmap is to “Support young people having more choice about their environment, routine and experiences”. The stories we heard in each of the workshops highlighted the lack of input young people had in their own lives and the capacity for this to change immediately.

Young people said they do not have a say in:			
Where they live	What they eat	Who they see	Where they go to school
Who they live with	What belongings they keep	What clothing they have	Changes in staff (youth worker/CSO/Community Visitor)
Who enters their room	What medications they take	What money they spend	When placement changes/ends
When family contact can occur	Feeling like they have a home	Rostering	Their independence

Across the three workshops we heard that young people felt that policy and procedural driven management remains a higher priority than their views and wishes. Young people shared that their input is often not sought or disregarded; they are often the last to know what is happening and are unsure why; and decision-making is not centred around what they want or need. We heard that the “best interests of the young person” are often determined without input from the young person.



**Young people have ideas and solutions. They would like to see:**

Transparency on where funding is being spent. YP want to advocate for themselves when they are not receiving the level of care as per their allocated funding.

Explanations of why things are approved/not approved and by who. Young people are often not given a reason why.

Handovers between youth workers occur in front of young people to improve transparency

Removal of "blanket rules". One size does not fit all

Access to their belongings

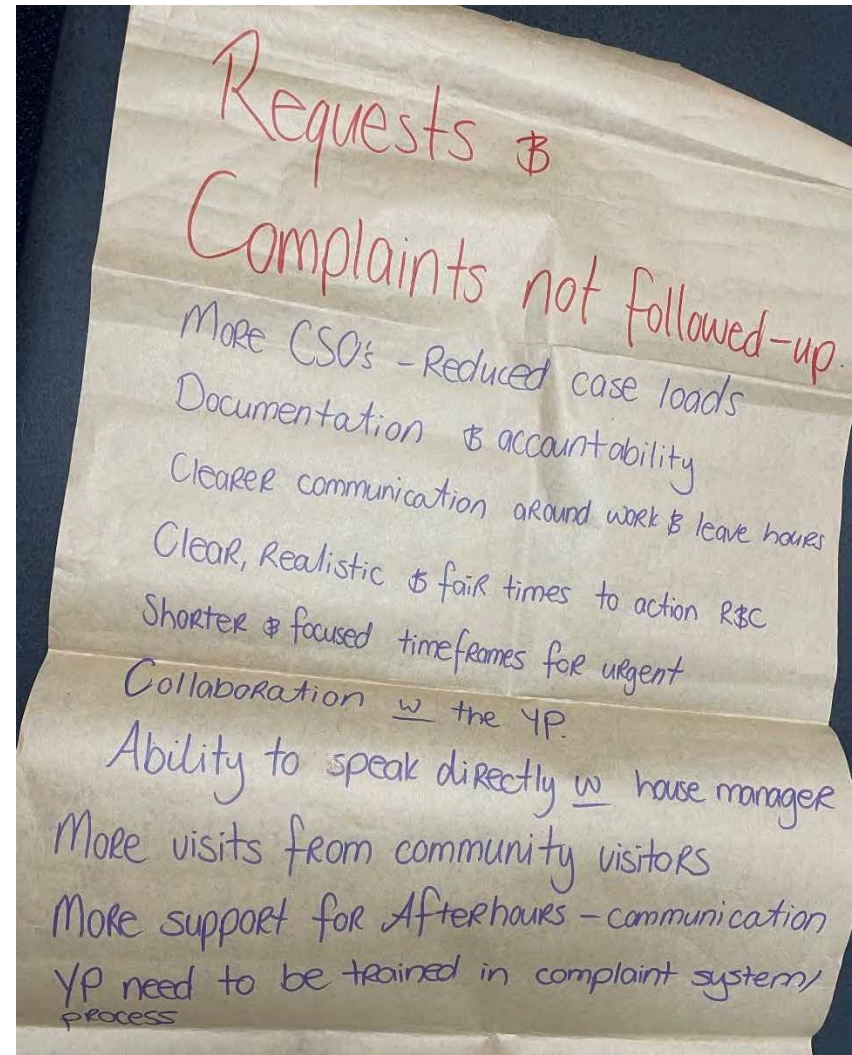
Participation in scheduled house meetings (with records). Want this to be actionable. This would promote better living environment ensuring all basic needs met.

Transparency and accountability for staff/providers

Access to complaint mechanisms

Increased clothing allowances to ensure basic needs met

Follow up with requests and access to their own records



*"Treat us like humans"*

## Connection

Action 5 within the Roadmap is “Design and pilot peer navigator initiative to increase peer support and connection for children and young people in residential care”. In our response, the QFCC called for the implementation plan for this action to be brought forward to 2024 (from 2026), highlighting the significance of connection for young people in residential care. We also called for genuine co-design and the inclusion of lived-experience mentors and peer support. This is time critical as we heard that young people lose most relationships in residential care and that there is a lack of understanding from staff regarding their experiences. This is exacerbated by multiple placement changes, high staff turnover, and the prohibition of family members knowing the location of residential placements.

### Young people told us about their experiences of connection and relationships in residential care:

- High staff turnover makes it hard to build relationships with workers.
- Moved out of area – family don’t have access to transport.
- No alone time with family members – surveillance impairs relationships.
- Nor normal relationships – not allowed to have friends over, not allowed to stay with family.
- Other young people going to co-tenants’ family contact because they can’t be left alone at the residential placement house.
- Family members are not supported for positive contact outcomes – they have no support for food/ fuel/ resources.

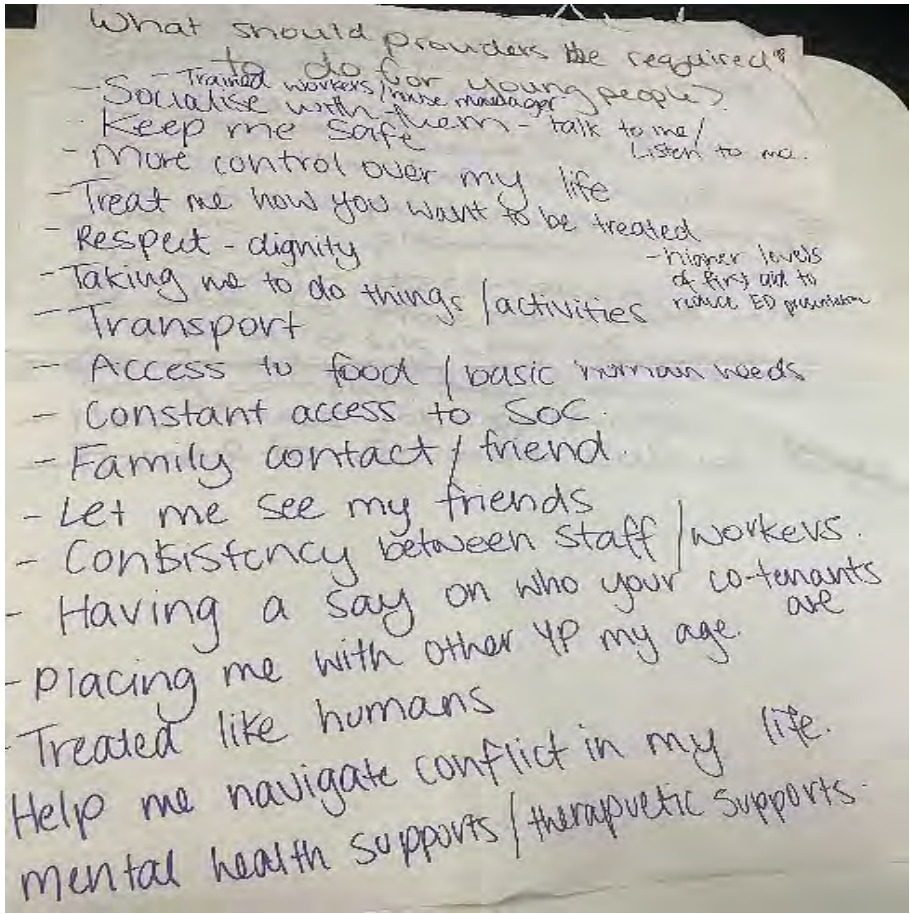


Across the three workshops we heard that young people felt a sense of helplessness and loss when it comes to connection. Young people told us that continuous early intervention and support is not provided to families, resulting in removal of a young person from their family, culture and community. We heard troubling stories of young people having little to no contact with family members due to events outside of their control such as co-tenants’ behaviours (impacting staff availability), and young people or parents/carers not having access to transport. Many young people felt a sense of judgement upon their families and that adequate supports are not provided to families to promote contact and steps towards reunification.

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Comments from young people at the Mackay workshop demonstrate why we need to prioritise connections and provide appropriate and timely supports to family and kin:

***"It's been 9 years since I've seen my little siblings."  
"I only get three hours per week with my baby."***



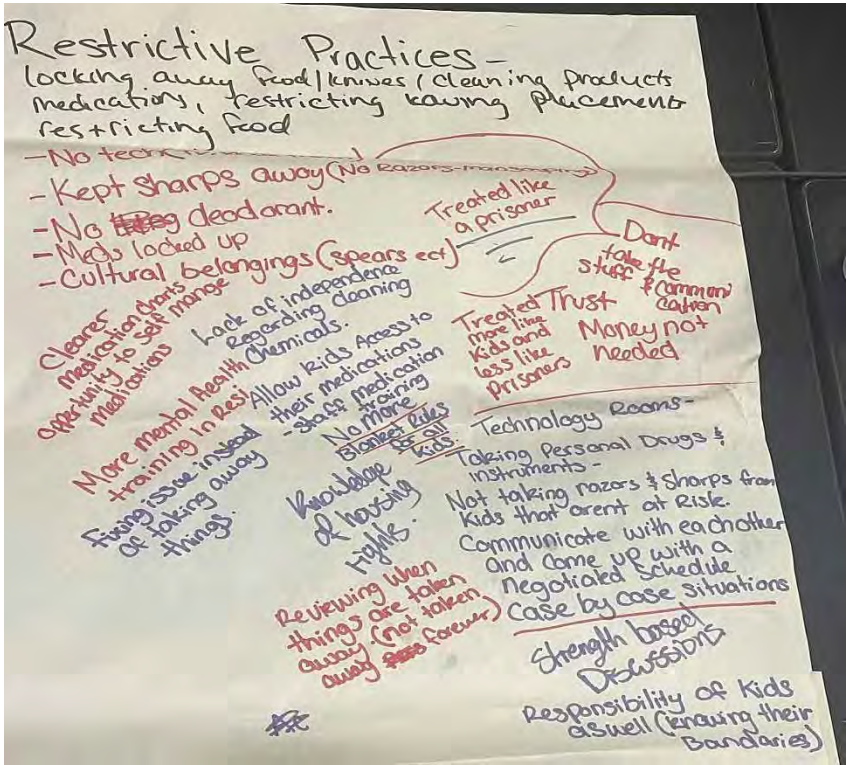
**Young people have ideas and solutions. They would like to see:**

- More overall support for parents. Employment and parenting support programs. Outcomes won't improve if families aren't supported.
- Early and ongoing DFV support
- Staff to communicate with family about what's happening in YP life
- Be open and transparent with young people.
- CSO to deliver bad news rather putting back on youth workers
- A constant independent advocate should be provided for parents through the process.
- Improved recruitment and training of youth workers to ensure they understand trauma and complex needs.
- Placements closer to family and community
- Improved staffing to YP ratios
- Family allowed to visit the resi home
- Support accessing the community and events
- Flexible accommodation incl. single tenancies and sibling placements
- Longer placements so young people can find stability and build connections.
- Consultation on decisions that impact them
- Stable schooling
- Family contact not impacted by co-tenant or other young people



**Safety**

Safety was another theme that arose across multiple domains. Young people shared that their placements do not feel safe (physically, emotionally, or culturally). We heard that violence and high-risk behaviours were often witnessed due to incompatible placement matching. This often caused further trauma, significantly impacting physical and mental health. Concerns over staff training to manage trauma-based behaviours was questioned as there were multiple accounts of the Queensland Police Service (QPS) and Queensland Ambulance Service (QAS) being used as “behaviour management” tools to de-escalate situations.



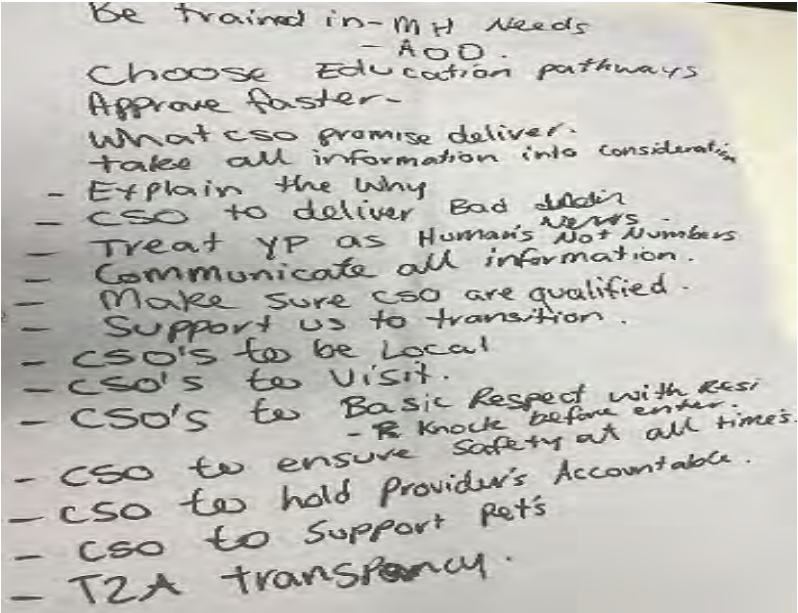
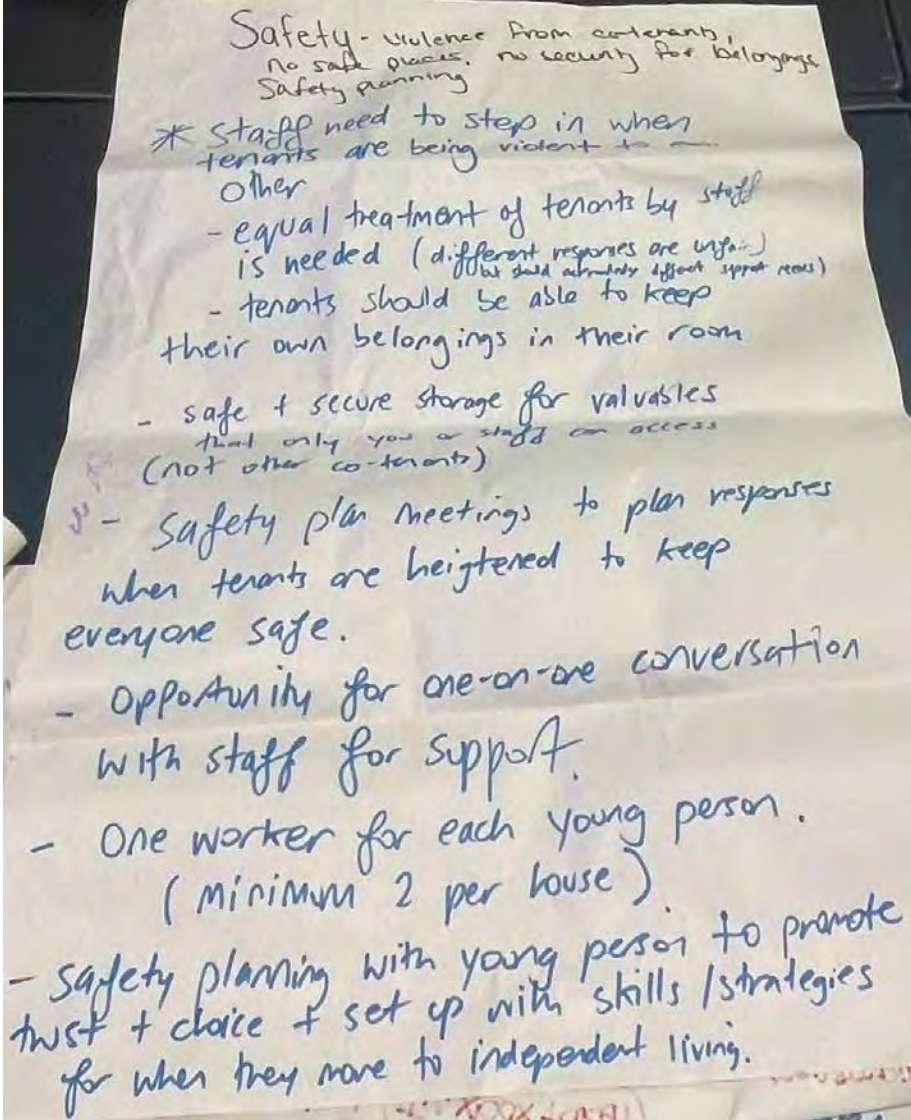
**What young people told us about their safety:**

Safety plans not being followed	Won't pick young people up from a location even when unsafe if it is "far away"	Female young people living with male youth workers and not feeling safe	Young people should be able to keep their own belongings safe in their own rooms.
Youth worker not responsive with other young people acting up	We should feel safe to express feelings to all staff members – having alternative communication needs	We should have a right to privacy	Workers don't know what cultural safety is
Workers don't step in when violence erupts. Some stay in the office. Other workers pre-occupied on their phones	Cameras everywhere but don't feel safe	Car restrictions imposed due to safety risk and/or behaviour management	No sexual education or information around pregnancy
Resi "Felt like an asylum". Resi was "traumatic" "In resi it felt like I had fog covering my mind. It felt like the fog lifted when I self-placed	QPS and QAS used as behaviour management	Youth worker/young person ratio not adequate	No mental health support. Mental health not considered when developing risk averse policies and procedures

"Treat us like humans"

Young people recalled claims of risk management and safety being misused to as justification for restrictive practices. Similar to what we heard in our 2023 consultations, young people shared that policies and procedures take precedence over their wellbeing and restrict them from living a 'normal' life. We heard countless stories of household items deemed to be safety risks and locked away or prohibited. Items requiring approval for use were razors, utensils, medications, food items, glass photo frames and deodorant.

The question must be asked – what level of dignity are we showing young people in care when they are required to ask a staff member, possibly someone they barely know, if they can shave their legs or put deodorant on? Young people shared there was a lack of trust, or willingness to educate them about risks associated with items, just removals.



**Young people have ideas and solutions. They would like to see:**

Improved tenant matching

Listen to us. Respond to our concerns. Speed up response times.

Quiet places for young people to go within the house

Safety planning with young people to promote trust and choice. This will set YP up with skills/strategies for when they move to independent living.

More mental health training for staff. Then they may be able to understand implications of their actions and better support YP.

More youth workers and Child Safety Officers with lived experience.

Workers should be more trauma-informed and trained in alcohol and other drugs and mental health. They should be able to de-escalate co-tenants before violence and aggression.

**Final thoughts**

Hearing from young people currently living in, or recently transitioned from, residential care is fundamental to transforming the system for Queensland’s children and young people.

**From the lived experiences shared in Brisbane, Toowoomba and Mackay, we heard that there is actionable work that can begin now. Each negative experience and challenge were shared alongside ideas for change.**

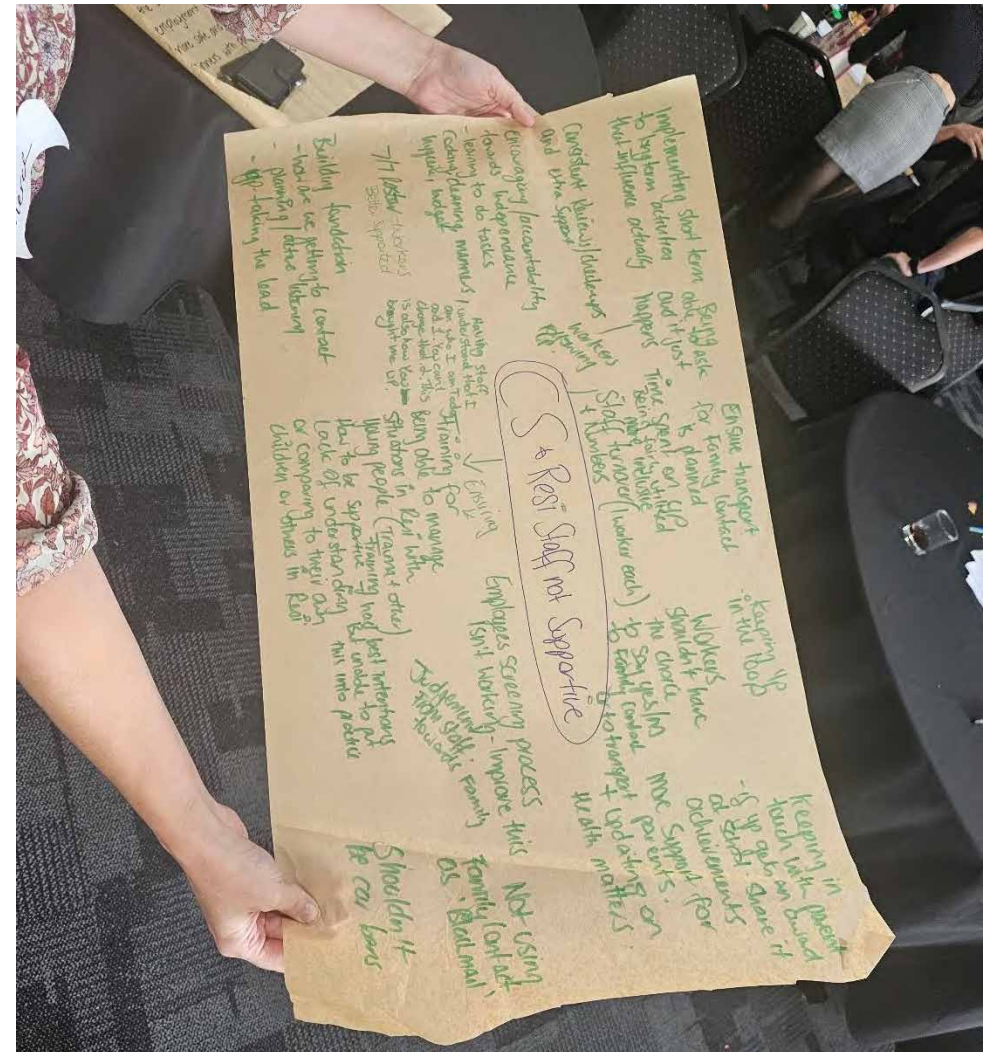
We thank the young people for engaging in this process and trusting us to amplify for their voices to improve the residential care system.

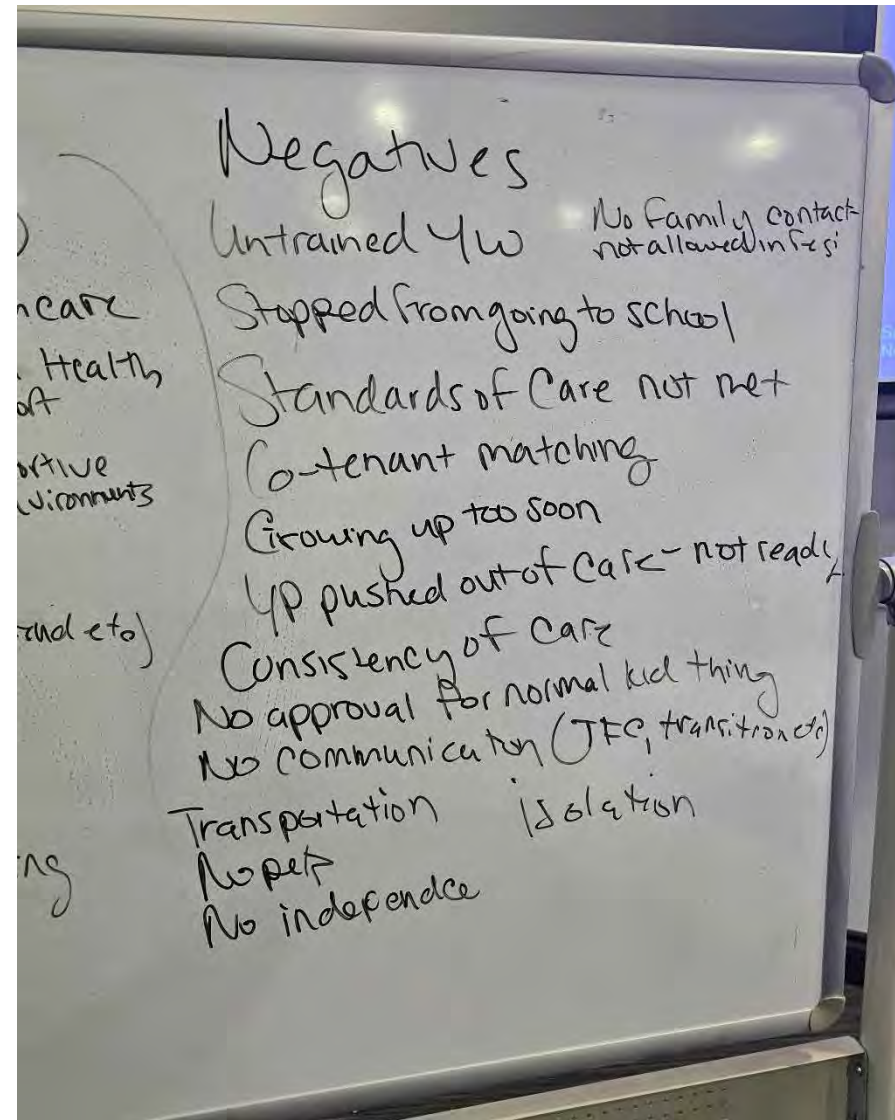
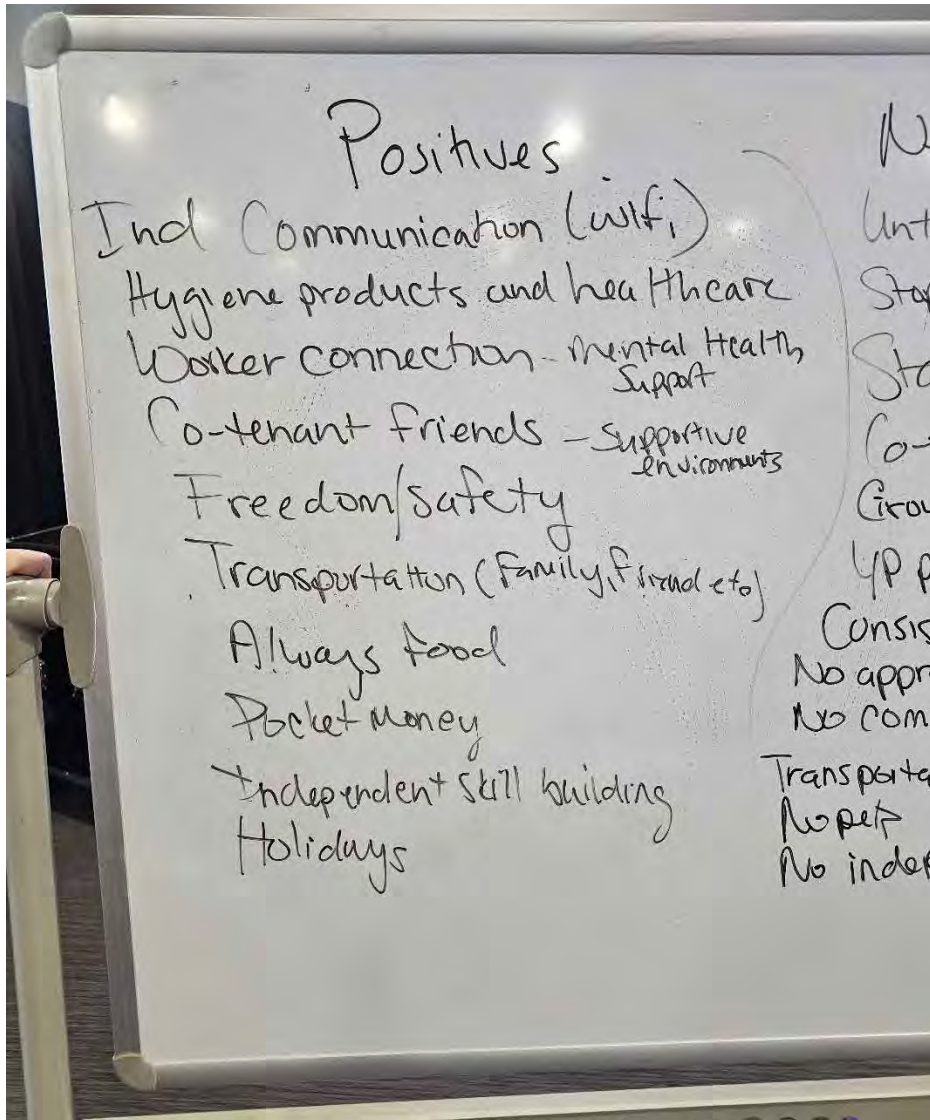
Let us act now so that children and young people living in residential care in Queensland feel respected and cared for, not like “prisoners”.

**Luke Twyford**  
**Principal Commissioner**  
**Queensland Family and Child Commission**

December 2024

Appendix





What should providers be required to do for young people?

- Trained workers / house manager
- Socialise with them - talk to me / Listen to me.
- Keep me safe
- More control over my life
- Treat me how you want to be treated
- Respect - dignity
- Taking me to do things / activities
- Transport
- Access to food / basic human needs
- Constant access to SOC.
- Family contact / friend.
- Let me see my friends
- Consistency between staff / workers.
- Having a say on who your co-tenants are
- Placing me with other YP my age.
- Treated like humans
- Help me navigate conflict in my life.
- mental health supports / therapeutic supports.

- higher levels of first aid to reduce ED presentation

What should providers be required to do for young people?

- provide more training for youth workers
- provide platform for yp to give feedback about resi /
- advocate for me to the Department
- Keep me safe / not bash me.
- Appropriate responses to violence / conflict
- Proper furniture, plates, cup - a place that feels like home
- outlets for emotional regulation.
- appropriate placement option - choice for placement.

Be trained in-<sup>ment</sup>MH Needs  
 - AOD.

Choose Education pathways  
 Approve faster.

What CSO promise deliver.  
 take all information into consideration

- Explain the why
- CSO to deliver <sup>Bad</sup> ~~delin~~ <sup>News</sup> ~~Not~~ Numbers
- Treat YP as Human's
- Communicate all information.
- Make sure CSO are qualified.
- Support us to transition.
- CSO's to be Local
- CSO's to Visit.
- CSO's to Basic Respect with Resi  
 - ~~R~~ Knock before enter.
- CSO to ensure safety at all times.
- CSO to hold Provider's Accountable.
- CSO to Support Pets
- TZA transparency.

*Handwritten notes on the left margin:*  
 - having alternative communication methods  
 - mal pers  
 - 3 work  
 - control  
 - dam  
 - me to  
 - info

No cultural support

Family Contact

Family Intervention - no support for family - parents/YP

Poor communication

No family in resi - other people allowed (no consultation)

Stopped from seeing chosen family

All YP had to agree to transport (leave resi)  
 (No efforts to map family link)  
 (Said resi make false promises)

Pushed to services YP doesn't want (no consultation)

No transport

No contact - diff resis/other family - inconsistent

No support to dev and maintain healthy relationships

Resi staff not supportive

Department not available to make decisions

Lack of staff

Complaints not followed up  
 (Incorrect info stopped visitation)

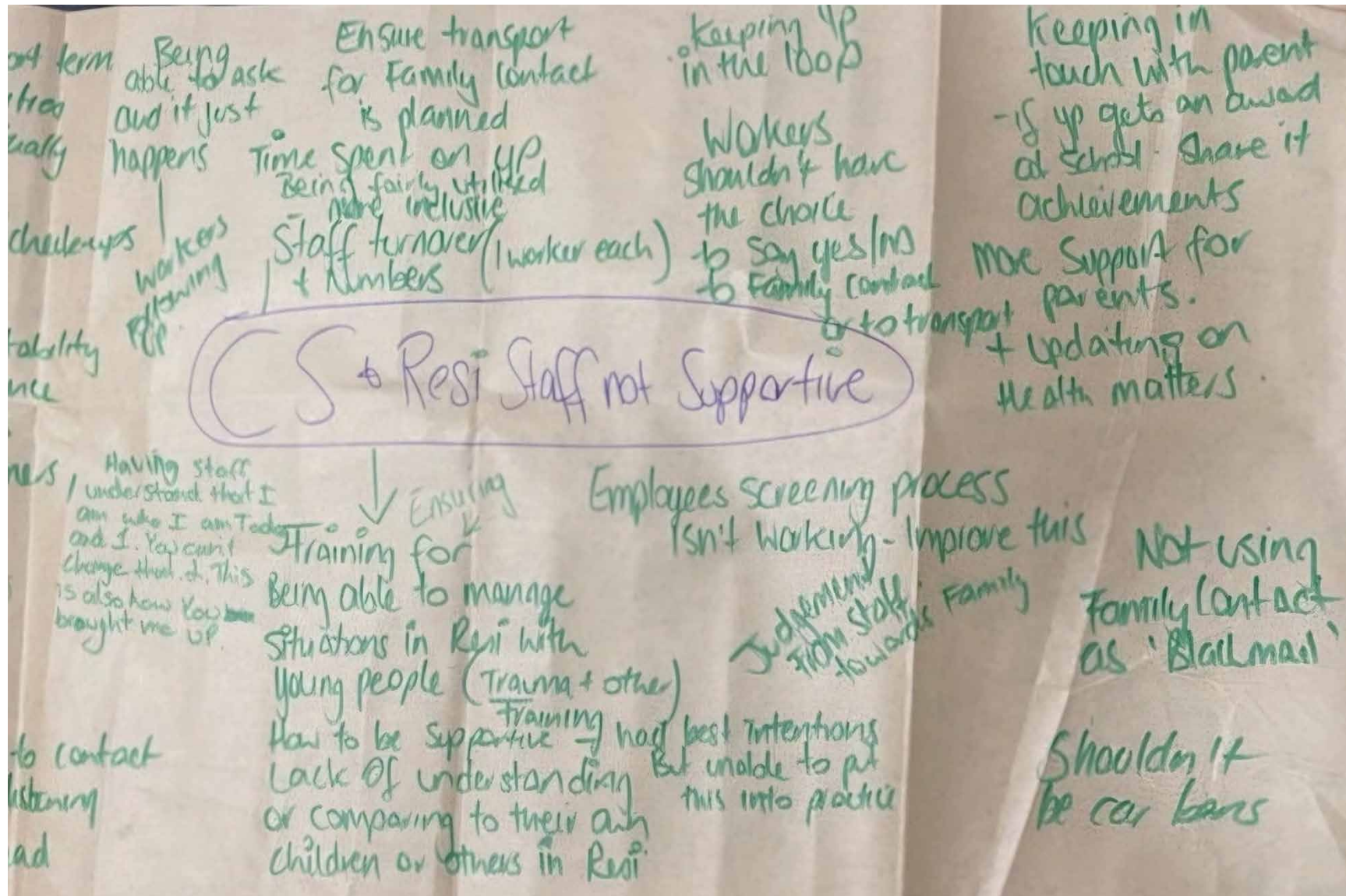
- made to feel bad about being in care  
 "No wonder you're not loved."

- no acknowledgment of special events

- supervised visitation made contact weird

- Slow to start contact

- no family mapping



"Treat us like humans"