

## 1. Introduction

Karakan welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the Child Safety Commission of Inquiry as it undertakes a comprehensive review of Queensland’s child protection system. Recent public hearings and government statements highlight a system facing long-term systemic failure, escalating costs, unmet mental health needs, placement instability, and significant safety concerns for young people in residential care. These issues have been well-documented across the Inquiry’s published scope and the broader reform agenda.

A key theme emerging from these findings is the urgent need for evidence-based, therapeutic, multidisciplinary, and integrated models of care that both prevent harm and promote recovery for young people in out-of-home care (OOHC). Karakan strongly supports this direction and submits that holistic, integrated mental health service models (such as our YouthKan Integrated Therapeutic Wellbeing Residential Service) must become a core feature of system reform.

## 2. Why integrated mental health support is essential

The Inquiry has emphasised several critical challenges that directly relate to mental health and wellbeing in OOHC:

- A significant proportion of young people in the system experience or have experienced physical abuse, sexual abuse, neglect, and domestic violence.
- Nearly one-third have unmet mental health needs; many have diagnosed or suspected mental illness.
- Large numbers of young people “self-place,” often due to unsafe, unsupported, or unstable placements.
- The system has relied heavily on high-cost residential care without demonstrated therapeutic benefit.

These challenges demonstrate the essential need for integrated clinical and psychosocial mental health supports embedded into young people’s daily living environments, rather than fragmented, appointment-based services.

## 3. YouthKan: an integrated therapeutic wellbeing residential service model

### About YouthKan

YouthKan is Karakan’s evidence-informed, trauma-aware, recovery-oriented residential service designed for young people aged 10–17 experiencing complex mental health needs, placement instability, and high-risk care situations.

Key features of YouthKan include:

- Embedding a Mental Health Allied Health professional within daily residential life
- Integrating clinical and non-clinical practice to deliver consistent therapeutic support
- Functional capacity building through practical, context-based interventions
- Cultural safety, community connection, and multidisciplinary collaboration.

The program is structured across three flexible, graduated phases:

- **STEP In** – providing immediate stabilisation and safety planning, with a focus on emotional regulation, building routines and mental and physical wellbeing.
- **STEP Down** – supporting wellbeing, skill development, confidence building, and readiness for sustainable transitions into alternate care arrangements, through intensive and holistic practice and capacity building supports
- **STEP Forward** – maintaining positive momentum and safe living arrangements by consolidating skills, embedding community supports, and strengthening placement sustainability to reduce the risk of disruption.

This graduated framework recognises that recovery and growth are non-linear processes. It offers developmentally responsive, tailored support that amplifies young people’s voice, choice, and agency. Each phase provides scaffolded opportunities for learning and independence, with support gradually reducing as confidence and capability increase.

We aim to provide exceptional care and support to vulnerable young people by prioritising their mental and psychosocial wellbeing and creating a safe, stable, nurturing environment that promotes healing and resilience. By addressing their emotional and social needs, we aim to break the cycle of trauma, support their recovery, and empower each young person to develop confidence, build positive relationships, and achieve their potential. Through this therapeutic and focused approach, we strive to equip them with the skills and strength to create a brighter, healthier future.

## YouthKan Practice Framework

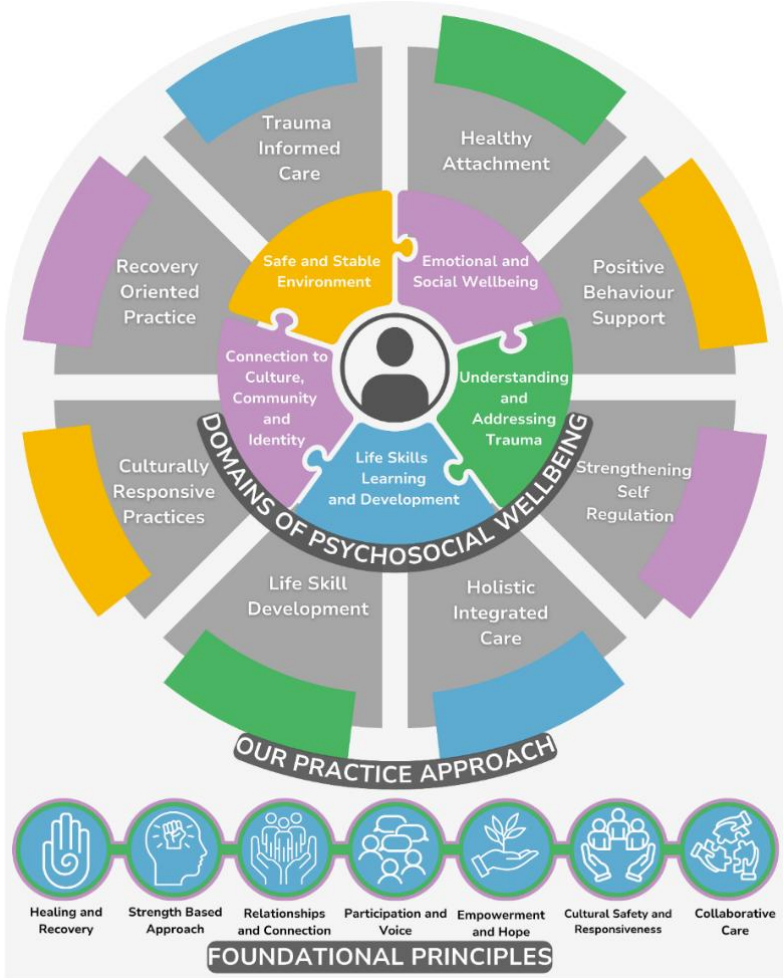
YouthKan’s person-centred, recovery-oriented Practice Framework is designed to empower young people in OOHC with complex mental health needs by centring their unique experiences, strengths, and aspirations. It emphasises collaborative practice, ensuring that care strategies are tailored to each person’s journey towards recovery and wellbeing, and fosters an environment of trust and mutual respect where young people actively participate in their healing process. This framework addresses immediate mental health challenges, builds resilience, instils hope, and promotes long-term wellbeing by integrating personalised psychosocial supports with broader systemic and community resources.

The framework comprises four components that are underpinned by the mission, vision, and values of Karakan:



**Diagram 1: Four Components of the YouthKan Practice Framework**

At YouthKan, we aim to ensure that as these four components work in synergy, they support long-term, lasting outcomes for vulnerable young people with complex mental health needs who have experienced trauma. With our practice and support guided by this evidence-informed framework, we provide a cohesive support system that addresses young people's immediate and underlying challenges as well as long-term developmental and psychosocial needs. Ultimately, YouthKan is dedicated to fostering an environment where each young person can transform their experience of trauma into a foundation for growth and sustained recovery.



**Diagram 2: YouthKan Practice Framework**

## Domains of Psychosocial Wellbeing

The YouthKan program focuses on five key domains of mental health and psychosocial wellbeing. Psychosocial wellbeing support is crucial for young individuals who have experienced complex trauma, as it significantly influences their recovery and overall development. Complex trauma can lead to a range of psychological challenges, including complex post-traumatic stress disorder, which encompasses symptoms such as emotional dysregulation and interpersonal difficulties (Li & Liang, 2023).



**Diagram 3: Domains of Psychosocial Wellbeing**

Addressing each of these domains of psychosocial wellbeing through targeted interventions can mitigate these adverse effects, promoting resilience and better mental health outcomes (Helmreich et al., 2017). These interventions not only help in the short term but also pave the way for long-term benefits. Moreover, fostering a supportive social environment and enhancing coping skills are essential in helping young people navigate the aftermath of trauma, ultimately contributing to their long-term psychosocial adjustment and quality of life (Li & Liang, 2023).

## Our Practice

The YouthKan program is built on evidence-based therapeutic practices that align with Karakan’s Recovery-Oriented Practice Framework and address and deliver on each of the domains of mental health and psychosocial wellbeing.



**Diagram 4: Our Practice Approach**

Our practice approach focuses on providing personalised, trauma-informed, and strengths-based support to assist young people in building connections, inclusion, and resilience, which are essential for their identity and sense of belonging. Our therapeutic practice approach is applied in daily, practical activities and context that meets young people where they are at, in their living and social environment, by building functional capacity through regular, consistent and age-appropriate interactions, activities, interventions and supports.

Delivering holistic integrated care is one of the foundational practice components, critical for the success of this model and the proposed outcomes in young people's lives to be realised. Young people who have experienced trauma need a holistic, person-centred approach that supports their mental, emotional, physical, and social wellbeing. Traditional youth work models are not sufficient to respond to or tailor support to the needs of young people with complex mental health needs in OOHC environments (The Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Psychiatrists, 2021). Nor is clinical care alone sufficient, making non-clinical supports (like peer connections, cultural healing, and community engagement) essential for recovery. An integrated approach combines clinical interventions with non-clinical approaches in practical ways to address the full impact of trauma and mental health needs (Wilson & Dayle Jones, 2023).

## 4. The challenge with conventional models for young people in OOHC

Young people with complex trauma often experience barriers to engaging in conventional, clinic-based therapeutic supports. They may feel unsafe or overwhelmed in clinical settings, leading to inconsistent engagement and limited therapeutic outcomes. Many young people benefit far more from relational, repetitive, consistent support delivered where they live, by a workforce equipped to manage trauma, mental health needs, and behavioural complexity.

Karakan highlights these essential considerations in developing trauma-informed, therapeutic services that will support young people with severe mental health needs in OOHC:

- The OOHC system needs to be based on therapeutic care principles. A therapeutic response is defined as appropriate to the background of abuse and neglect and the problems related to emotions, behaviour and functioning common to many young people in the sector (Herrman et al., 2016). All forms of OOHC risk re-traumatising young people by failing to respond to their needs (Herrman et al, 2016). Improvements in mental health services are unlikely to have much effect unless OOHC systems become more therapeutic (Herrman et al, 2016). Simply providing day-to-day care for children and young people in OOHC is no longer an adequate approach.
- Young people in care require early access to comprehensive, multidisciplinary assessment and intervention to prevent further trauma (including by the service system). This approach supports young people in care to reach their full psychosocial, emotional, physical and educational potential (The Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Psychiatrists, 2021).
- Young people in OOHC require innovative approaches to delivering evidence-based mental health practice, including cross-sector collaboration. The common approaches do not reach most of them nor provide appropriate responses to their needs (The Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Psychiatrists, 2021). Further, the environment and individual relationships with the young person are both crucial in the

therapeutic and recovery process (Whitaker et al, 2015). Those caring for young people need an understanding of trauma and its impact and need to develop the capacity to respond in an attuned way to promote mental health and wellbeing (Herrman et al, 2016).

## 5. Expected benefits and outcomes from integrated therapeutic models

The YouthKan Practice Framework aims to achieve transformative and measurable outcomes across multiple domains to support young people's healing, growth, and development in OOH. The YouthKan service has been designed to align to and support eight outcomes, based on the principles outlined in the Hope and Healing Framework (2019), and reflect the framework's commitment to trauma-informed, recovery-oriented, and therapeutic principles.



**Diagram 5: YouthKan Outcome Domains**

However, to have the capability to assist young people achieve these outcomes, we need to approach our service model and workforce composition differently than traditional youthwork models that do not achieve these outcomes nor are equipped to support complex mental health needs (The Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Psychiatrists, 2021).

Based on Karakan's experience, an integrated clinical and non-clinical approach delivers improvements across:

### A. Mental Health and Psychosocial Wellbeing

- Improved emotional regulation
- Reduced self-harm and hospitalisation
- Increased engagement in mental health supports

### B. Social and Behavioural Outcomes

- Reduced youth justice involvement
- Increased community participation and connection

#### C. Independence and Life Skills

- Strengthened daily living skills
- Improved resilience and confidence

#### D. Placement Stability

- Reduced placement breakdowns
- Increased capacity for step-down to lower-intensity support

## 6. Cost Effectiveness and Social Return on Investment

The integrated model requires a modest investment relative to the high cost of reactive residential care. The inclusion of an Allied Health role in the YouthKan model to support improved outcomes and holistic mental health and wellbeing longer-term, is a wise and economical investment. We expect long-term outcomes to yield meaningful economic and social benefits. We are in the process of conducting a program evaluation of the YouthKan model to highlight these benefits (this program evaluation can be shared with the Commission in late 2026).

## 7. Recommendations to the Child Safety Commission of Inquiry

Karakan recommends that the Inquiry:

1. Prioritise evidence-informed, holistic, multidisciplinary models of care to support young people with complex mental health needs in OOHC.
2. Consider embedding integrated mental health roles in therapeutic residential models.
3. Require therapeutic support to be delivered in daily living environments.
4. Invest in workforce development to support therapeutic care by qualified mental health and allied health professionals.

## 8. Conclusion

Young people in Queensland's child safety system deserve environments that prioritise safety, healing, and long-term wellbeing. Karakan submits that integrated, holistic mental health service models like YouthKan must be central to future reform. Such models directly address systemic issues highlighted throughout the Inquiry and offer a practical, evidence-informed pathway to stronger outcomes and lasting positive change.

## References

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