



**AASW**

Australian Association  
of Social Workers

**Submission to the Queensland Child Safety Inquiry**

**Youth Justice & Corporate Parenting**

January 2026

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## Acknowledgement of Country

The Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW) acknowledges the Traditional Owners of Country throughout Australia. This submission was written on the lands of the Wurundjeri People of the Kulin Nation. We pay our deep respect to Elders past, present and emerging, and recognise their continuing connection to land, water and community.

## Acknowledgement of The Stolen Generation

Through our Associations '2004 Acknowledgement Statement to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples, we acknowledge the enduring impacts of the Stolen Generations. We recognise coercive and forced adoption practices of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children for most of the 20th century, which resulted in mass removals of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from their families and the forced separations of children, families, and communities over generations.

We recognise that social workers were agents of practices which were antithetical to the values and ethics of the social work profession, especially regarding respect for persons, human rights, social justice and self-determination.

## Acknowledgement of Member Contributions

This submission has been informed by feedback from our member consultation advisory group. The AASW thanks members who contributed their expertise and lived experience insights throughout our consultation processes.

**Please note:** this submission should be read in conjunction with the recommendations outlined in our previous submission, "*Commission of Inquiry into Child Safety, visit to Cairns, QLD (2025)*".

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## Introduction

I write on behalf of the Australian Association of Social Work (AASW) as an Australian social worker with over ten years of experience across state, national and international child safety roles. This submission responds to the Inquiry into Queensland Child Safety: Youth Justice and Corporate Parent. The AASW perceives this Inquiry as a critical step towards strengthening child safety and youth justice services and systems, as well as relevant laws and policies across Queensland. We appreciate the opportunity to contribute this submission.

This submission responds to the inquiry with a strong focus on children's rights, human rights, social justice, and procedural fairness, while touching on the concept of delayed justice. Key themes outlined in this submission include workforce professional standards, stability and support mechanisms, quality of service delivery and the misalignment between stated intentions and practice, enhanced accountability and transparency needs, and policy and system reform (including those relevant to kinship care placements).

Across the global child safety sector, social workers are recognised as a core professional group in child protection policy, management and intervention. Working at the intersection of the individual and society, social workers address both the immediate impacts of child safety and the broader systemic and individual contexts that uphold rights and support access to justice.

The AASW urges the Queensland Government to draw upon the expertise of social workers to strengthen the presence of trauma-informed, person-centred care and improve the quality of care and support for children, young people and community members engaging in the child safety and Youth justice services across Queensland.

## Position Statement:

From a social work perspective, drawing on both a human rights and social justice lens, the Queensland child safety system must operate as a structure of protection, reliability, professionalism, accountability and resolution (with family and Aboriginal principles) at its centre. The standards of care set by the State as 'corporate parent' are known to, at times, sustain cycles of trauma, continue "patterns of control" and harm for children and young people, particularly for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people.<sup>1</sup> Currently, the State does not appear to be fulfilling its duties as a 'corporate parent'. Instead, it seems to rely on a disconnected network of frontline staff, a proportion of whom are under-resourced or underqualified.<sup>23</sup> Without systemic reform and sustained investment, this model continues to risk the safety, stability or developmental needs of children in care.

## Theme 1: Effective Corporate Parent

In several cases, the state is not an effective corporate parent. It is at times failing to provide safety, containment, consistency, and developmental support required of the children or youth

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<sup>1</sup> Queensland Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Protection Peak (QATSICPP). (2022, May). *Youth justice: Evidence review* [PDF]. [https://coe.qatsicpp.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/CoE-YJ-Evidence-Review\\_May2022.pdf](https://coe.qatsicpp.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/CoE-YJ-Evidence-Review_May2022.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> Queensland Family and Child Commission. (2025). *Modelling forecasts looming financial crisis for residential care* [Media release]. Queensland Government.

<sup>3</sup> Queensland Family and Child Commission. (2025). *Modelling forecasts looming financial crisis for residential care* [Report]. Queensland Government.

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in its care. The concept of 'corporate parenting' appears to be applied rhetorically but not operationalised in practice, particularly in residential settings.

### a) Staffing Requirements

Residential care is known to be founded on a 'therapeutic' model of intervention; however, in practice, it appears to be largely delivered by unqualified staff with minimal training, supervision, or clinical oversight. In residential care and youth justice settings, certificate-level training can represent the highest level of qualification required, despite the complexity and risk inherent in these environments.<sup>4</sup> Some of the most traumatised children in the state can be placed into the care or supervision of someone who may have minimal training and limited or no awareness of the developmental or psychological needs of children or young people.

*"I cannot find a single person employed [within a residential care facility] ... with any kind of professional qualification in psychology, social work, occupational therapy, or a mental health nurse."*

(AASW member, 2026)

Residential care is often underpinned by a casualised or unstable workforce operating in high-risk environments without adequate remuneration, professional support or resourcing. Introducing higher minimum qualification standards, mandatory professional development, and a structured workforce that is supported with fair and competitive remuneration is essential to improving workforce retention, care quality, and safety outcomes.

### b) Barriers to Kinship Care Placements

In 2024, the requirement for approved kinship carers to hold a blue card was amended. This was actioned to enable a new, risk assessment framework to be developed and managed by Child Safety Department.<sup>5</sup> This Legislative reform does not appear to have been operationalised, to its fullest extent, by the Department.

*"The legislation has changed... but the department does not yet have a risk management framework implemented."*

(AASW member, 2026)

There are instances where the Department has not overseen kinship care arrangements due to the presence of low-level and historic criminal history risks. In these instances, the Department has relied on the courts to formalise placements and orders. Without a risk assessment template in practice, to assess these risks formally, the Department has at times relied on the Court System to make this decision. This reliance exacerbates delays and wait times, undermines stability and safety for children and young people, and compounds trauma through unnecessary exposure to court processes and legal intervention.

## Theme 2: Systemic links: Child Safety and Youth Justice

*"I think disadvantage and loss of hope is what the feeder system is; into both the child safety and the youth justice system."*

(AASW member, 2026)

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<sup>4</sup> Institute of Child Protection Studies, & University of Western Australia. (2022). *The workforce in the child protection system needs urgent reform* [Policy analysis]. University of Western Australia.

<sup>5</sup> Queensland Government. (2024). *Working with Children (Risk Management and Screening) and Other Legislation Amendment Bill 2024: Explanatory notes*. Queensland Parliamentary Counsel.

The interaction between the Child Safety and Youth Justice systems is pervasive and deeply rooted in practice. Identifying what is working, particularly where positive outcomes are being achieved, requires robust, transparent and consistent monitoring, evaluation and learning processes. Without these mechanisms, effective practice remains obscured, and system failures will persist.

### a) Criminalising Trauma-Driven Behaviours

In practice, trauma-driven behaviours can often be misinterpreted as criminal conduct, creating a pipeline from child protection into the youth justice system. Before and often within the Child Safety System, children experience a lack of emotional safety and harm, which is then often compounded by trauma from being displaced. Succeeding this, they can experience a lack of boundaries, attachment, and/or nurture (for the person or culture), which is then at times, coupled with poor behavioural support delivered by underqualified staff within an under-resourced system. This is especially true for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and youth. This cycle undoubtedly increases the likelihood of engagement within the youth justice system. This lack of trauma-informed care can result in lifelong consequences. In these instances, it is not individual failure; it is systemic failure. Without reform that embeds trauma-informed, culturally safe, and developmentally appropriate responses across child protection and youth justice, State Child Safety and Youth Justice could continue to enable the very outcomes they work to prevent.

*"Young people... are looked after by inept models... which culminate in them engaging in behaviours in an attempt to get their needs met... which then becomes criminalized... We are criminalising what is being experienced as trauma."*

(AASW member, 2026)

### b) Policy Reviews

There exist Departmental policies, like the *'Child Safety Practice Manual - Positive behaviour support / restrictive practices'*, that limit the ability of staff to provide adequate, appropriate, and healthy boundaries or nurture for children or young people. [Policies](#) regarding restrictive practices and others need to be reviewed. In practice, they are at times obstructing a worker's ability to encourage healthy boundaries that we know children and young people need.

*"[Children] need [healthy] boundaries... the circle of security is a perfect example... firm hands - not weak, not mean, but fair and reasonable."*

(AASW member, 2026)

### c) Allocation of resources

There appears to be little evidence to suggest that large public expenditure translates into improved care quality. According to our members, funds appear to be absorbed by compliance structures and management rather than direct care.<sup>6</sup> In Queensland, there are some children or young people who have been noted as having received hundreds of thousands of dollars' worth of care and support from the Department. However, their positioning and outcomes do not appear to reflect this reality.<sup>7</sup> Metrics or mechanisms to track input and expenditure to

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<sup>6</sup> Queensland Government. (2024). *Budget 2024-25: Service delivery statements - Department of Families, Seniors, Disability Services and Child Safety* (Tabled Paper No. 5724T990-be03). Queensland Parliament.

<sup>7</sup> Queensland Government. (2025). *Budget 2024-25: Service delivery statements - Department of Families, Seniors, Disability Services and Child Safety*.

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output and outcomes may help inform the State as to where funds are best directed to help improve outcomes for children and young people.

#### d) Societal and Systemic Structures

Systems theory recognises that no single system or structure operates without influence on another. Macro structures, policy, and legislation often impact and interplay with other societal structures. These directly and indirectly influence meso and micro systems, with the child or young person at the centre. To this effect, child protection failures cannot be separated from housing stress, poverty, and other societal pressures and issues. The issues of the Queensland child protection system cannot be entirely addressed without addressing other key societal issues.<sup>8</sup> However, by enacting the recommendations of the AASW, the State would be able to work towards enhancing experiences for all who engage with the child protection and youth justice system.

### Conclusion

The AASW supports the Queensland Government's commitment to child safety and its intention to use this review to strengthen and sustain child safety and youth justice services across the state. The AASW supports reforms that embed trauma-informed, person-centred and culturally safe approaches, while ensuring that responses to harm balance justice, accountability and the protection of human rights for all.

Governments must ensure that child safety and youth justice systems uphold the Aboriginal Placement Principles and all relevant cultural laws and principles, while embedding an unequivocal commitment to the human right to safety. These obligations must extend beyond policy intent and be demonstrably implemented in practice, supported by clear accountability mechanisms to ensure cultural principles, human rights and safety are consistently realised for children and young people.

Social workers journey alongside children, young people, families and communities every day as they navigate the ongoing challenges within Queensland's child safety and youth justice systems. Through this work, social workers witness firsthand both the harm enabled, or at times created by, system failures and the opportunities for reform that prioritise safety and long-term well-being.

Achieving these outcomes requires the strengthened and integrated involvement of social workers across all stages of child safety and youth justice processes. Social workers bring specialist expertise in trauma-informed practice, cultural safety, family-centred intervention and systems coordination, and are uniquely positioned to support consistent, rights-based and person-centred practice across prevention, intervention and statutory responses.

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<sup>8</sup> Chapter 2 of the *Taking Responsibility* report explicitly identifies underlying societal factors – including poverty, welfare dependence, inadequate housing, parental substance abuse, domestic violence and social isolation – as key contributors to child protection notifications that must be addressed through prevention and early intervention, rather than solely statutory responses.

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## Recommendations

1. Social workers must be better integrated within child safety and youth justice systems.
2. Increase remuneration for social workers in line with qualification requirements and occupational risk.
3. The Queensland Government remains firmly committed to the full and effective implementation of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Placement Principle.
4. Address workforce concerns by mandating minimum qualification requirements, enhancing worker support mechanisms and reducing over-reliance on casualised employment models.
5. Continuing Professional Development in therapeutic, trauma-informed responses to challenging behaviours and complex needs be mandated for all staff in Queensland's residential care facilities.
6. Shift system responses to recognise trauma-driven behaviour as a care and therapeutic issue rather than a criminal one.
7. Embed effective monitoring, evaluation and learning processes into child safety and youth justice services.
8. Ensure expenditure is linked to measurable outcomes for children and young people, not only compliance.
9. Review Departmental policies (including restrictive practice policies) that limit staff capacity to provide healthy boundaries and nurturing care.
10. Operationalise existing legislative reforms intended to support kinship care placements without Court intervention.

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