



# Submission to the Queensland Government

Commission of Inquiry into the Child Safety System





## Executive Summary

This submission draws on more than 30 years of trauma-informed practice by Lighthouse Foundation in supporting children and young people with complex needs in out-of-home care. While acknowledging the commitment of many professionals within child protection systems, Lighthouse submits that current structural settings continue to expose children to avoidable instability, harm and long-term disadvantage.

Evidence from Australia and comparable jurisdictions demonstrates that:

- Entry into out-of-home care is associated with significantly poorer long-term outcomes, even when pre-existing disadvantage is taken into account
- Placement instability compounds trauma and is a key driver of adverse developmental, mental health and social outcomes
- Kinship care delivers better relational continuity and stability, but is chronically under-resourced
- Foster care plays a critical role as a family-based option between kinship and residential care, but requires stronger therapeutic support
- Residential care can be safe and effective only when models are clinically led, relationally stable and adequately funded

Queensland now has a significant opportunity to make enduring, system-wide improvements for children and young people. From a trauma-informed social work perspective, reform that prioritises relational safety, stability and continuity is not only more humane, but more effective and economically responsible over the life course.



## Part A: About Lighthouse Foundation

Lighthouse Foundation (Lighthouse) is a specialist not-for-profit organisation providing therapeutic residential care, foster care, kinship care and outreach support to children, young people and families who have experienced significant trauma. Established in 1991, by our Founder Susan Barton AM, Lighthouse has supported more than 1,100 children and young people to find safe homes, develop secure relationships, reconnect with community, and re-engage with education and employment.

Children and young people are referred primarily through the Victorian Department of Families, Fairness and Housing (Child Protection), as well as through other out-of-home care providers, homelessness services and self-referrals. Lighthouse is recognised for working with children and young people with highly complex trauma histories and for providing long-term, therapeutic care that prioritises safety, stability and relational healing.

Our work is underpinned by the Lighthouse Model of Care (LMC), an evidence-based framework designed to support recovery from relational trauma and to interrupt cycles of placement instability, homelessness and intergenerational harm.

### Outcomes Snapshot (FY24/25)

(Source: Lighthouse Foundation Annual Report 2024–25)

- **169** children, young people and babies supported across Lighthouse programs
- **88%** of children in child-focused programs were enrolled in education (early learning to secondary school)
- Average duration of care: **19.3 months** in youth-focused programs and **22.4 months** in child-focused programs
- **91** young people remained in programs receiving ongoing support rather than exiting due to crisis
- **25** young people received intensive post-care support through the *On for Life* program

### Further Information

For commissioners seeking additional detail, the following information about Lighthouse Foundation's programs and outcomes is available via the links below:

- [Overview of the Lighthouse Model of Care](#)
- [Therapeutic Residential Care programs](#)
- [Kinship Care program](#)
- [Foster Care program](#)
- [On for Life \(post-care support\)](#)



- Young people's lived experience (de-identified case studies)

## **Part B: Learnings Relevant to System Reform**

Drawing on practice experience and the available evidence, Lighthouse offers the following learnings for consideration as the Commission explores pathways for meaningful reform.

### **1. Early Intervention: Supporting Families Before Crisis**

There is strong and consistent evidence that children who enter out-of-home care experience poorer long-term outcomes across health, education, mental health and justice indicators. Importantly, these risks remain elevated even when compared with siblings who remain at home, indicating that system-related factors — including separation trauma and placement instability — play a significant role.

Research demonstrates that when families experiencing adversity receive timely, intensive and coordinated support, many children can remain safely within their family networks. Intensive in-home family support and crisis intervention services have been shown to reduce entry into out-of-home care by approximately 40–50% across multiple follow-up periods.

From a trauma-informed perspective, early intervention is not simply preventative — it is reparative. Supports that address parental mental health, family violence, housing insecurity, disability, financial stress and social isolation can stabilise families and strengthen parenting capacity.

Systems that rebalance investment toward early, voluntary and non-punitive family support are better positioned to reduce harm, preserve belonging and avoid the downstream costs associated with long-term care, justice involvement and adult homelessness.

### **2. Kinship Care: Preferred, but Under-Resourced**

When children cannot safely remain with their parents, placement with relatives or kin is consistently associated with greater stability, continuity of identity and relational safety than other forms of care. Kinship care preserves family, culture and community connections that are central to healthy development.

However, kinship carers are often supporting children with complex trauma with significantly less resourcing than other care models. Without adequate financial, therapeutic and respite support, kinship placements are placed under unnecessary strain.



Lighthouse established a specialist Kinship Care Program in response to growing demand and system gaps. Key features include:

- A **Hub Home model** that reduces isolation and provides access to training and peer support
- **Therapeutic respite**, delivered by known and trusted carers
- **Clinician-led reflective practice** to support carers to understand trauma-driven behaviour and sustain caregiving relationships

At Lighthouse, placement breakdown in kinship care is extremely rare. Our program is currently being evaluated through a partnership with Monash University and the Brockhoff Foundation.

### **3. Foster Care as a Critical Step in the Care Continuum**

Lighthouse submits that kinship care and foster care should be understood as part of a continuum of family-based care, positioned well before residential care wherever it is safe and appropriate to do so.

Where kinship care is not viable or sustainable, well-supported foster care provides an important next step that can preserve relational stability and reduce escalation into residential placements. From a trauma-informed perspective, foster care is most effective when it is:

- Adequately resourced to support children with complex trauma
- Supported by therapeutic services and clinical oversight
- Provided with access to respite and reflective practice
- Recognised as a skilled and supported caregiving role

Where foster care is unsupported placement breakdown becomes more likely, contributing to instability and increased reliance on residential care.

### **4. Placement Stability: A Foundational Requirement for Healing**

Placement instability is one of the strongest predictors of poor outcomes for children in out-of-home care. Frequent moves disrupt attachment, compound trauma and undermine a child's capacity to trust adults and systems.



Many placement moves are not driven by child need, but by system pressure — workforce shortages, crisis-driven decision-making and insufficient support for carers and providers.

From a trauma-informed perspective, stability is essential. Relational permanence — enduring, safe relationships with caring adults — provides the foundation for recovery, identity formation and long-term wellbeing.

Systems that embed stability as a core principle are better positioned to improve outcomes and reduce long-term social and economic costs.

### **5. Residential Care: Safety Through Therapeutic Integrity**

There is credible evidence that residential care continues to present heightened risk for some children, particularly where models are under-resourced, staff are inadequately trained, or therapeutic oversight is limited.

Lighthouse's experience demonstrates that residential care can be safe and effective when it is:

- Clinically led and trauma-informed
- Staffed by well-trained and well-supported practitioners
- Grounded in consistent relationships
- Embedded within a broader continuum of care

Residential care should not function as a default response to system pressure, but as a purposeful, therapeutic intervention to enable transition to more mainstream arrangements.

### **Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children and Young People**

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children continue to be significantly overrepresented in out-of-home care systems across Australia. This overrepresentation reflects the ongoing impacts of colonisation, intergenerational trauma, family separation and systemic disadvantage — not individual or cultural deficit.

Placement instability disproportionately affects Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, disrupting cultural identity, community connection and belonging, and undermining the intent of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Placement Principle.

A trauma-informed and culturally responsive system benefits from:



- Genuine partnership with Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations
- Family-led decision-making and early support
- Priority for keeping siblings together
- Resourcing kinship and foster carers within community
- Recognising culture, Country and identity as protective factors

Improving outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children requires system reform that centres self-determination, relational permanence and culturally safe practice at every decision point.

### **The Lighthouse Model of Care**

The Lighthouse Model of Care is grounded in trauma-informed practice, attachment theory, interpersonal neurobiology and psychodynamic frameworks. It operates across four integrated domains:

1. **The Home** – safe, nurturing environments that support attachment and belonging
2. **Young Person Interventions** – therapy, family work and individual development planning
3. **Staff and Carer Support** – clinical supervision, reflective practice and workforce sustainability
4. **Community Connection** – identity, culture and social inclusion

Care is offered for as long as needed, including through Lighthouse's *On for Life* program, which supports young people beyond care exit — a period of heightened vulnerability that is often under-resourced.

Independent evaluations have shown that 75–80% of young people supported through the Lighthouse Model of Care do not return to homelessness, significantly outperforming system averages.



## Conclusion

Lighthouse Foundation respectfully submits that Queensland has a significant opportunity to strengthen its child safety system by embedding trauma-informed principles, prioritising relational stability and investing in families and carers.

We offer these learnings in the spirit of shared purpose and continuous improvement and would welcome the opportunity to contribute further to the Commission's work.

As CEO, I would be happy to speak directly with the team if you think that would be of benefit, and would happily provide further information if requested.

## Brenda Boland

Chief Executive Officer

## Key References (Selected)

Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW)

- *Child Protection Australia 2022–23*
- *Permanency outcomes for children in out-of-home care*

Commissioner for Children and Young People (Victoria) (2020)

- *Leaving Care Outcomes Report*

Kääriälä, A. & Hiilamo, H. (2017)

- Children in out-of-home care as young adults: population-based study

Maclean, M., Taylor, C. & O'Donnell, M. (2016)

- Placement instability and long-term outcomes

Pathways of Care Longitudinal Study (Australia)

Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse (2017)

Social Ventures Australia (2011); Ernst & Young (2018)



- Independent evaluations of the Lighthouse Model of Care

Tomlinson, P., Gonzales, R. & Barton, S.

- *Therapeutic Residential Care for Children and Young People*