

October 2023

“
I was raised
by a checklist”



Queensland
Family & Child
Commission



Queensland
Government

Too often, we forget or fail to acknowledge that young people in care are indisputably the experts of the Child Safety system.

As part of our role in overseeing the Queensland Review of Residential Care, the Queensland Family and Child Commission (QFCC) sponsored a forum to hear from young people with lived experience of residential care. The forum provided a space for young people to share their ideas about the improvements needed for the residential care system and to engage in solutions-mapping discussions with me and Tom Allsop, CEO of PeakCare.

The group included 11 young people who have lived in residential in Toowoomba, Mooloolaba, Rockhampton, Cairns and Brisbane. The participants were passionate, thoughtful and honest in their sharing. It was the most profound and powerful event I have attended this year.

The forum was scheduled for six hours, but the young people's passion and enthusiasm to make a difference for the children still in residential care saw our discussions continue for another hour past our expected finish time.

The forum was facilitated by the Next Step Plus program run through Life Without Barriers. Next Step Plus is a specialised program for young people transitioning from care. The program works with 15- to 25-year-olds who are transitioning out of care and provides intensive support options in a young-person led approach to promote self-determination and independence. It supports young people across Queensland with practical assistance as well as providing a mentoring support network.

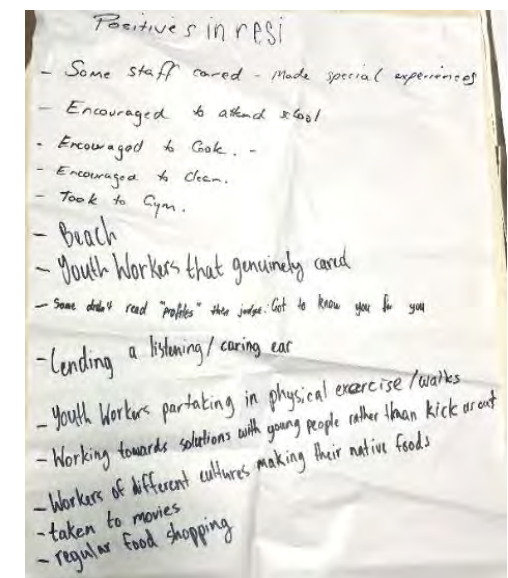
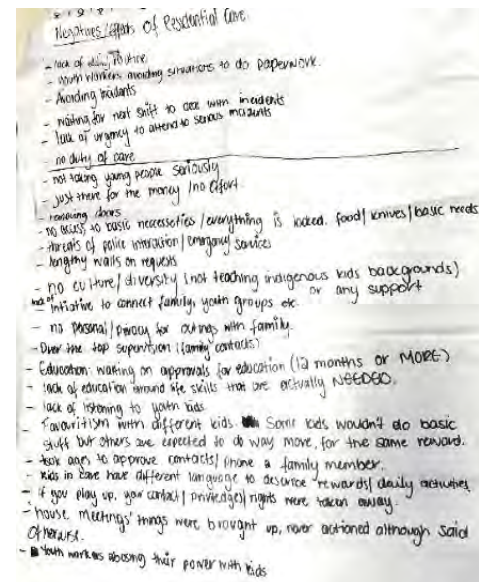


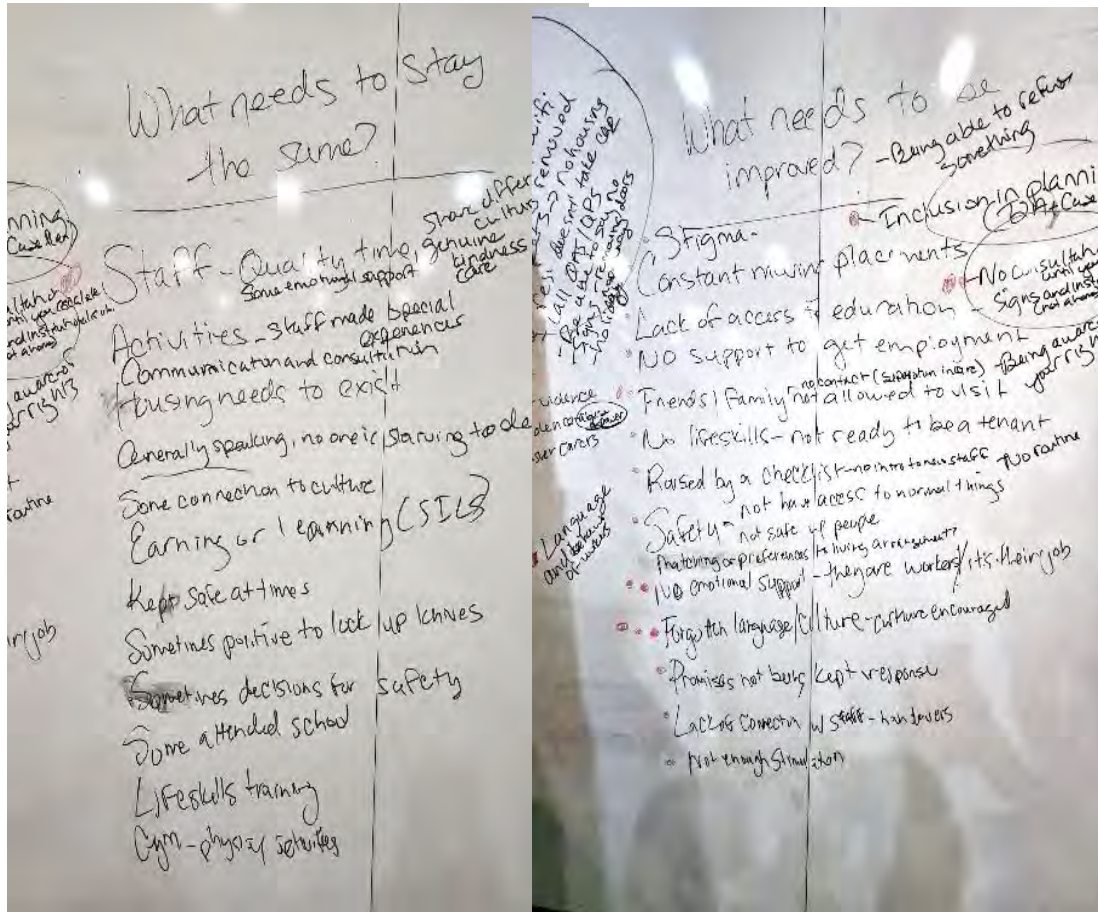
Luke Twyford
Principal Commissioner
Queensland Family and Child Commission

What we heard

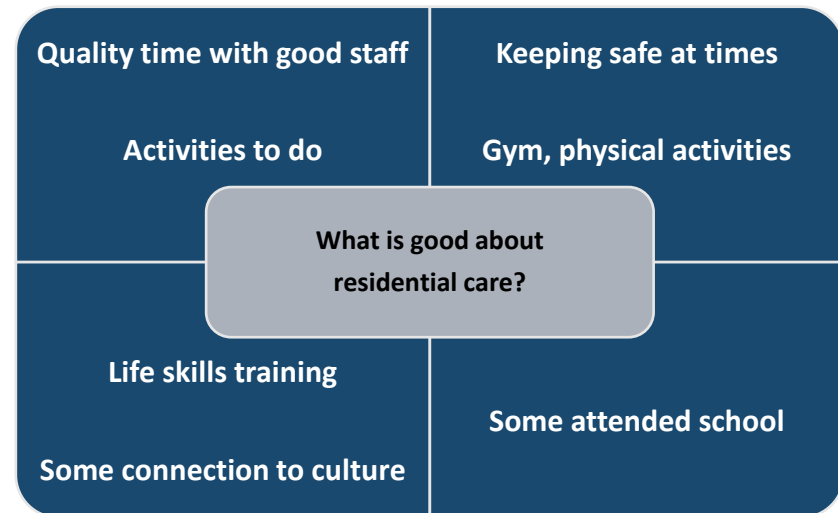
The group had completed an earlier workshop session to capture experiences and develop ideas for change. The QFCC and PeakCare attended the afternoon session where the participants shared their stories, their thoughts on the current system, and their vision for change into the future. They discussed what needs to be improved and what needs to stay the same, as well as other specific themes that came through from the group's consultation.

There were many thought-provoking contributions shared throughout the day. We have included individual submissions from two young people as case studies in this report. These statements reflect the individual ideas for improvement identified by these young people based upon their experiences and the stories shared by the group during the forum.





What was good about residential care?



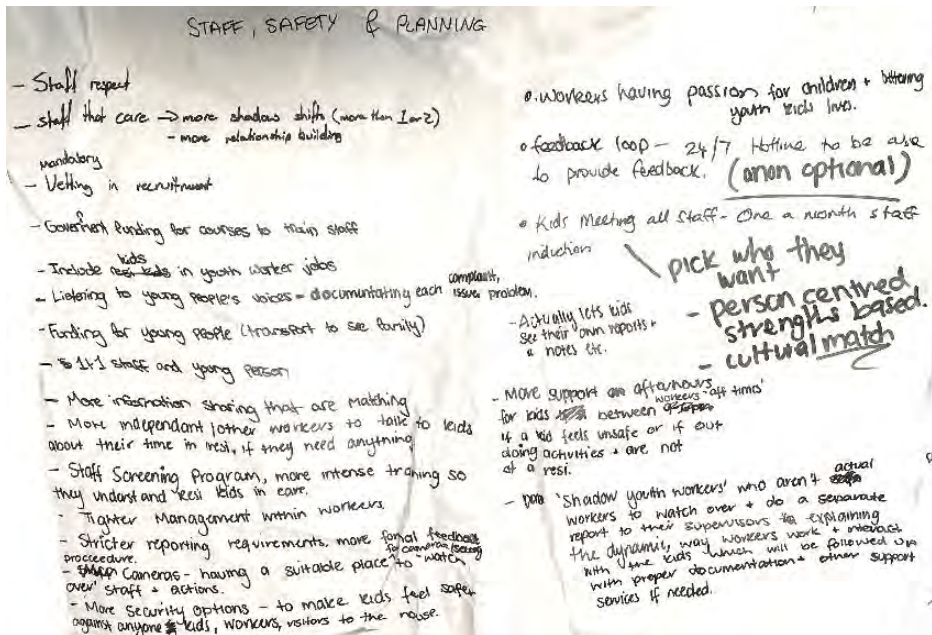
Under this topic, two comments speak loudly to the standard of expectations we have on the system. When asked what was good the initial response was:

- “It was better than being homeless” and
- “Having food”

What needs to change?

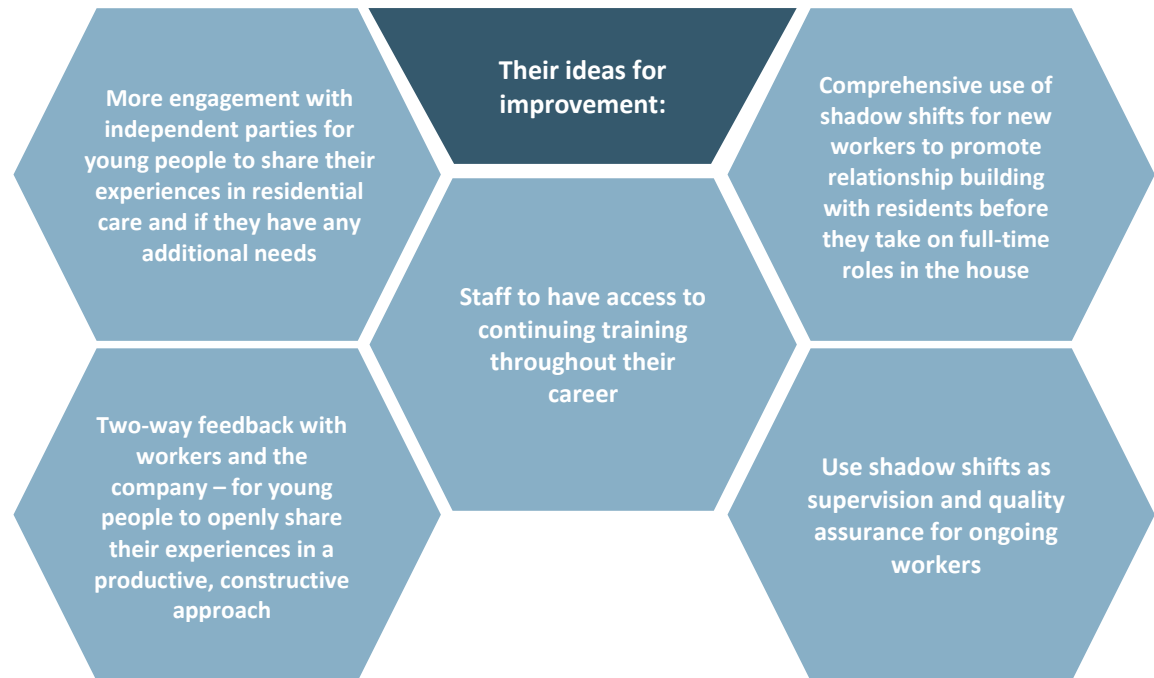
This question prompted large, profound, poignant discussion and informed solutions that form the basis of this report.

Engagement by youth workers can make or break the experience in residential care. The young people shared that the overwhelming difference between a good and bad residential care experience was the staff. We heard the importance of a worker showing that they genuinely care about the kids in the house, taking the time to listen to the young person, and working with the young person to understand their experiences, their needs, and their behaviours before making decisions about their care.

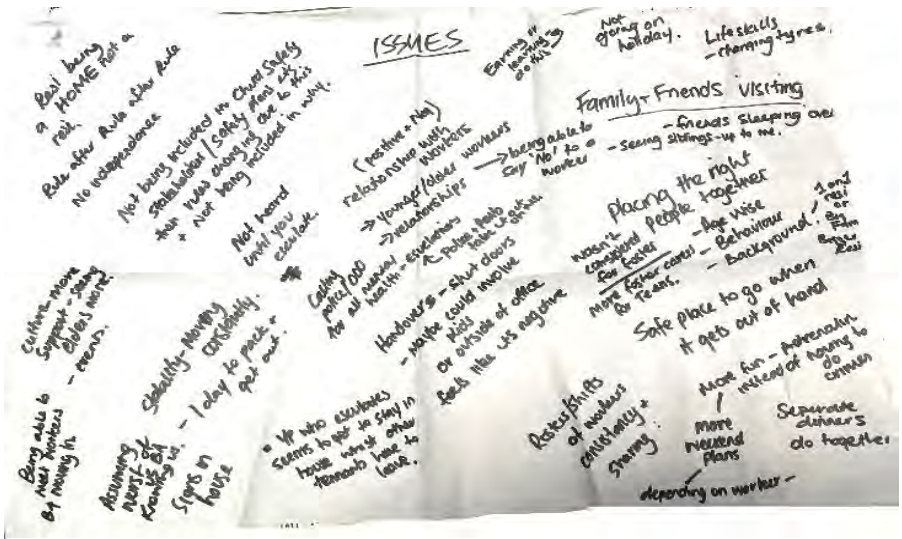


"You can tell the workers who are there for the money or the ones who actually care – you can tell from their energy when you meet them."

"One of my best experiences in resi was just going to the gym with a youth worker because that was something he was interested in, and it was something I could do, too."

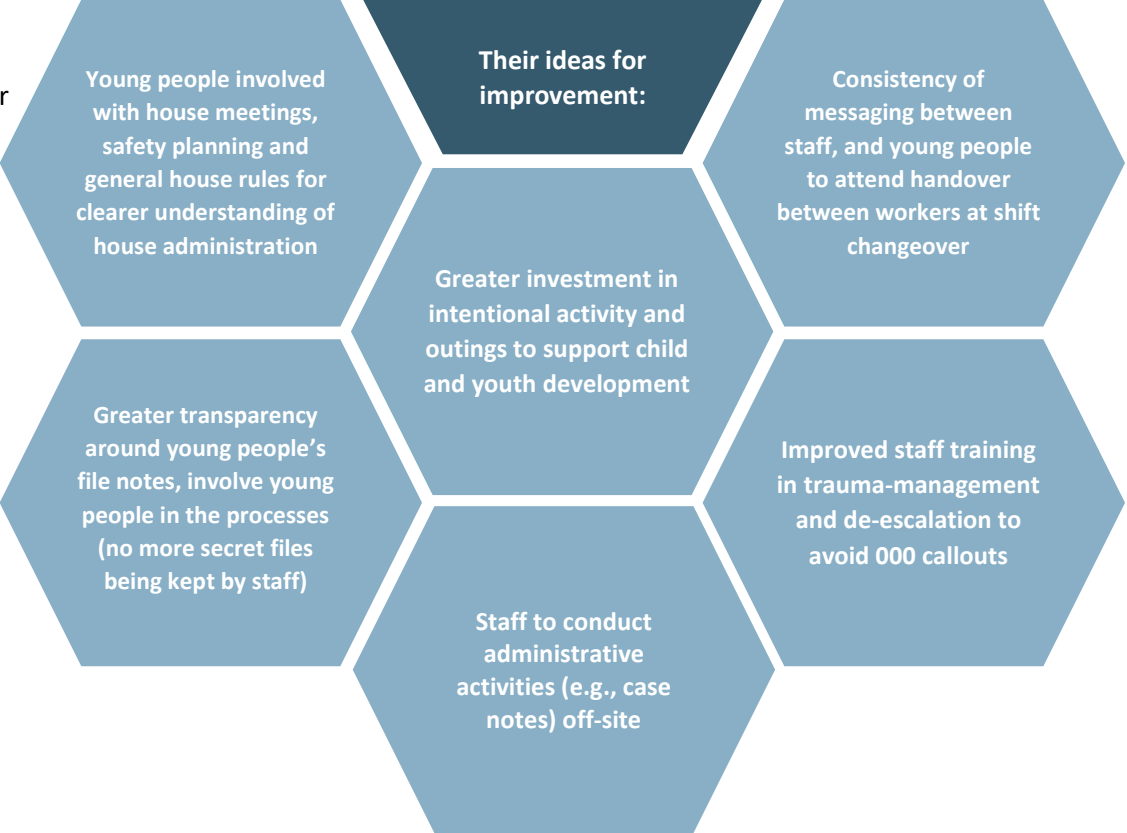


Policies and procedures often restrict young people from living a ‘normal’ life. Young people said they felt they were living their lives by stringent policies and procedures and that their lives were risk-assessed and incident-reported. Young people highlighted that children are children, not procedures and, for young people who have complex traumas, living under onerous rules and structures can lead to acting out and disproportionate consequences. We heard of the ‘system-language’ that becomes normalised for children in care, and how this moves the model further from a child-centred approach to a system-led approach. The concept of a system approach resonated with the group. They felt their significant life events were procedural and process-driven; they shared that their transition to adulthood consisted of a checklist confirming they have a birth certificate, tax file number and Medicare card, rather than working through the experience of feeling prepared to live independently after leaving care.

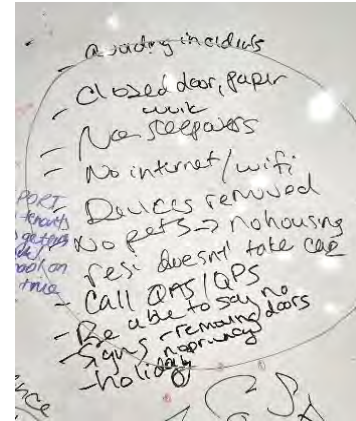
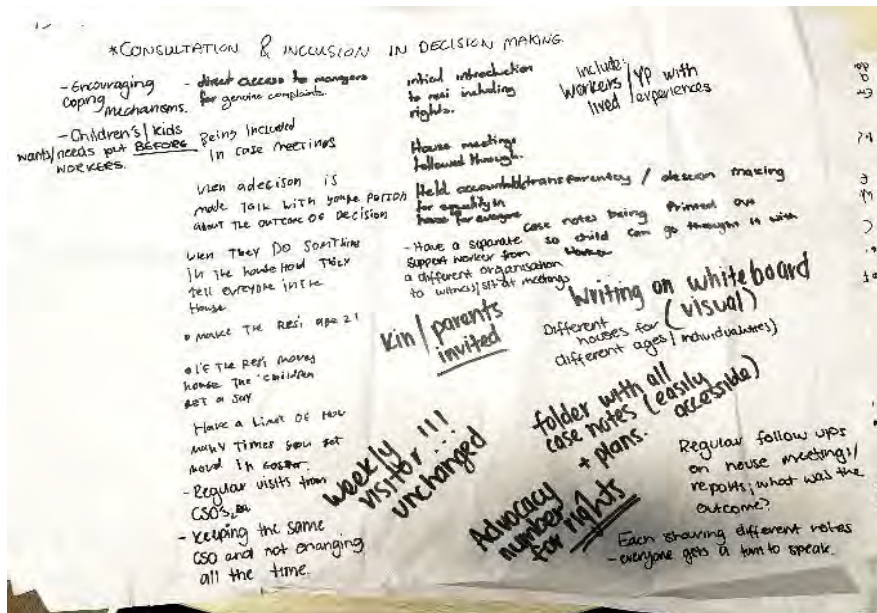


"It's hard to feel at home when there are exit signs above every door – too many signs in the houses."

"Why are kids using these big technical words to talk about their lives? Why does a 14-year-old talk about "family-contact" instead of saying "seeing my mum"."

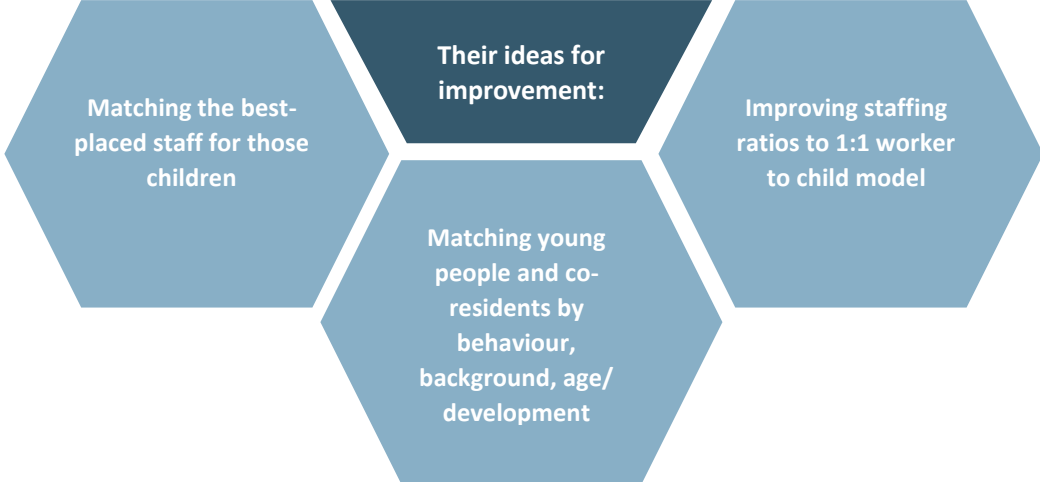


Placement matching between young people and workers, as well as co-residents, would improve experiences in residential care. Placement matching should consider the young person's interpersonal needs, as well as their medical, mental health and other needs. The young people suggested that placement matching should consider the youth workers in the home as well as the young person and the co-residents to ensure that everyone who would be staying in the house can work together.

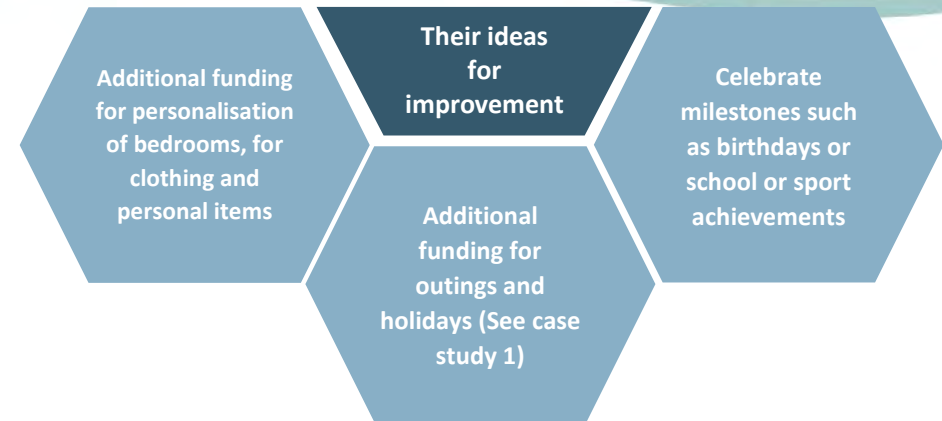


"It would be good if we could meet the youth workers before being placed in the resi, so that we knew them."

"You never really feel at home."



Children and young people need a home, not just a house. The young people shared their stories of living in residential care houses where they did not feel ‘at home’. They described the various safety signs, policies and procedures posted on walls and doors, and the separate locked staff offices as immediately standing out as ‘not a home’. They also described the need for personal effects and personalisation in a residential care home to support young people to establish their own space and to feel connected to where they are staying.



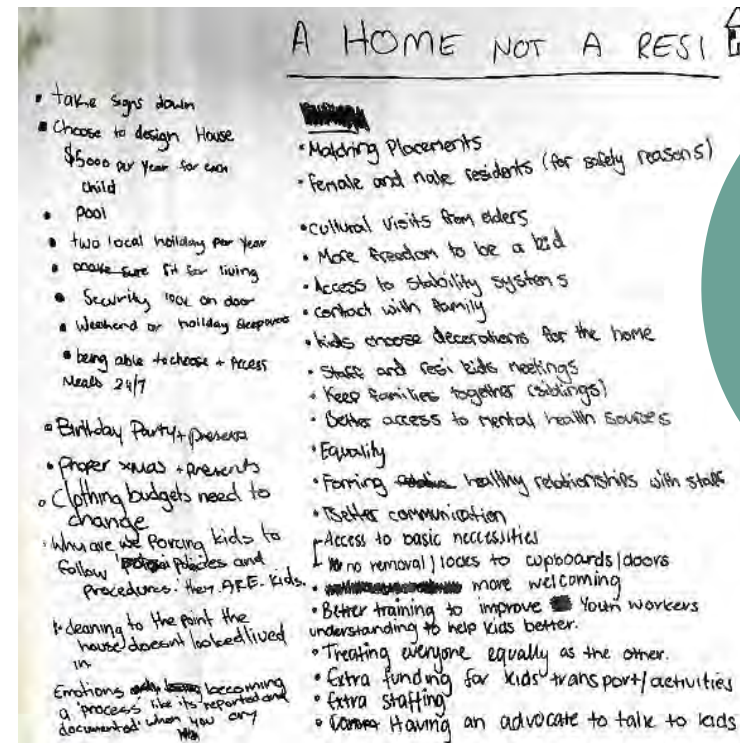
Case Study 1: The Speech

“\$5000 per annum per child for holidays: Looking back, I find it odd how we never seemed to leave the house at all for overnight trips. Too much time at a place can be very overwhelming for a person, so holiday can be quite relieving for people’s mentalities. A constructive way to go about planning these holidays is definitely including the young person in the brainstorming process.

\$5000 annually for room design: In my personal experience, my bland room could not become more homey or reflect who I was in the slightest. Trinkets and items can really make a major impact in how your room makes you feel. If your bedroom is not even an enjoyable room to be in, how can you expect the young people to be happy to comply with or be comfortable living in a residential situation.

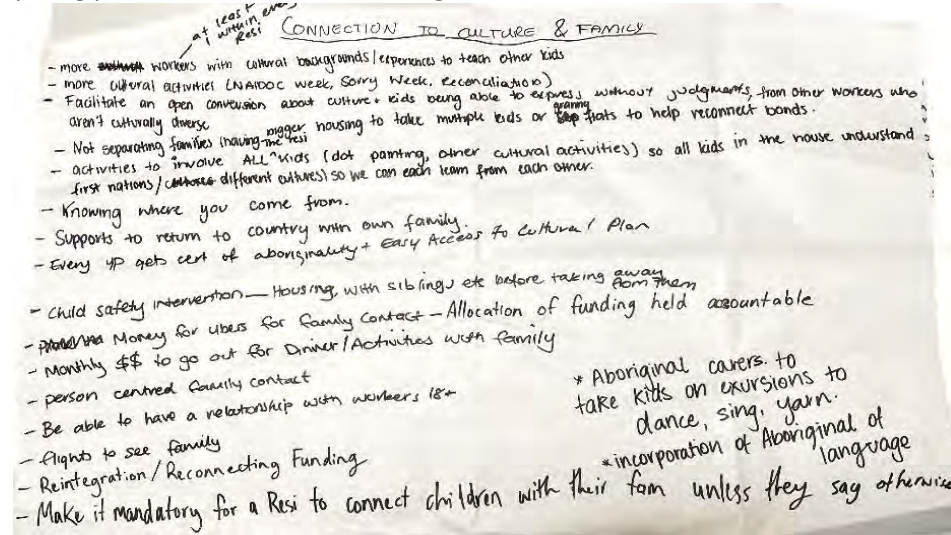
The third and last subject I’ll be touching down on is more annual funding for clothing. Being able to purchase clothing only twice a year is unrealistic. Young people are growing and they may not fit clothes after a short period of time. The opportunity to be able to purchase more clean clothes should present itself more often because of my point that young people can outgrow or be too small for current clothing they have, and also growing up my style of clothing would change quite often, as I’m sure is the case for all other young people.

Thank you, guys, heaps for taking the time and making the efforts toward making significant changes in these young people’s lives.”



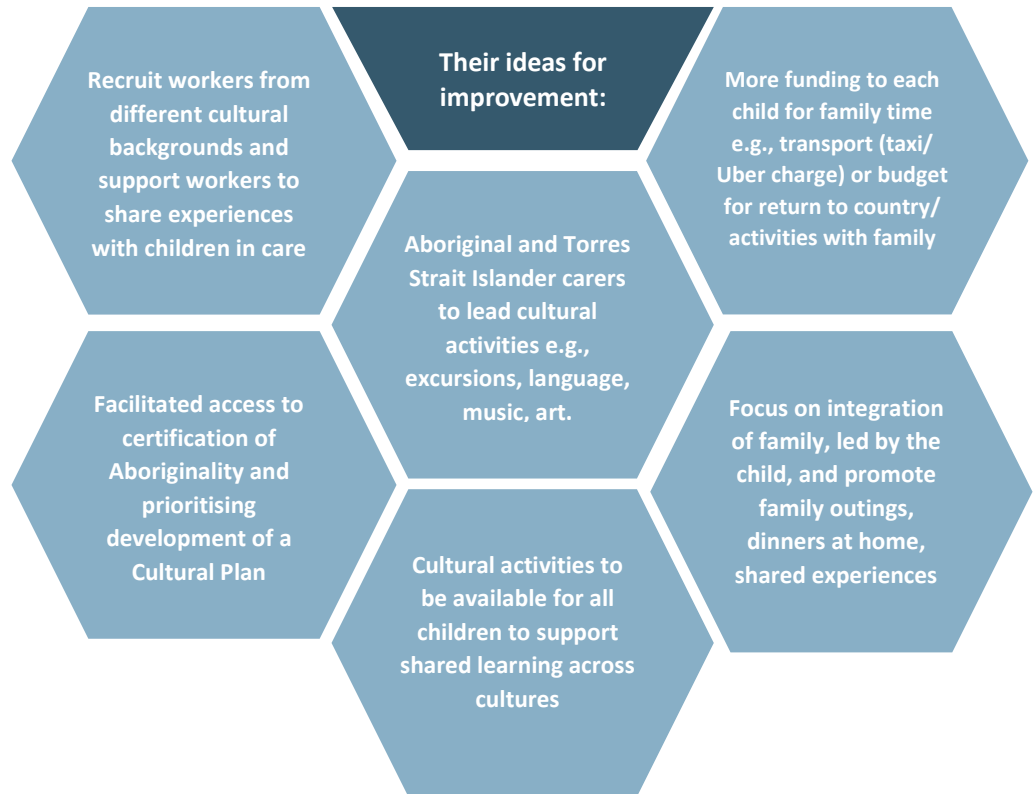
“There’s the same signs on the walls, the same K-Mart furniture and décor - it’s familiar to you, but it’s familiar as a resi, not as a home”

Cultural Connection and expression should be encouraged and championed by residential care services. First Nations children continue to be over-represented in the child protection system, including residential care. Young people spoke about the importance of cultural connection in identity building, emotional and mental wellbeing, and restoring familial engagement. We heard that, at times, there are barriers to cultural practices and the administrative processes for activities, excursions or visitors makes it difficult for children to proactively engage with their culture and community. One young person shared their story of barriers to family contact. Although approved for regular visits, the residential care model dictated these visits could only occur if the co-tenant also attended. As a result, many visits were cancelled due to issues with the co-tenant. The young person did not see their siblings for over two months. The provider did not have reasonable contingencies to ensure family contact could proceed for this young person whilst still considering the needs of the co-tenant.



"I didn't know much about my culture at all, because I didn't have anyone to talk to about it."

"Where it's safe, and kids want to, it shouldn't be so difficult to see and spend time with family."



Reflections from PeakCare Queensland

Reasonable, practical, tangible and achievable ideas and solutions grounded in living experience. This is what I heard from 11 amazing young adults during this session.

The Queensland residential care review will succeed if those with the authority to act rise to the occasion and embrace this opportunity with the openness and energy it deserves. It will succeed if the system designed to protect children and young people listens to them, rather than speaks for them. It will succeed if those empowered to make the required changes are brave enough to share their power and resilient enough to remain committed in the face of the inevitable setbacks that these changes will bring.

What I took away from this session was a clear understanding that we have a system which has evolved to protect itself at the expense of the children, young people and families it was intended to support and protect. We have a system that has evolved to devalue relationships and relational permanence as a key driver of quality care. We have a system that has bureaucratized caregiving to such an extent that children and young people now must adapt to meet the needs of narrowly defined funded services, rather than services being adaptable to best meet the needs of children and young people over time.

Listening to these 11 young people, it is clear to me that children in care do not want services. They want relationships, connection, consistency, trust, respect, and love. Imagine if our child protection system was designed for and held accountable to meeting these basic human needs.

While there were many stories of anger, pain and heartbreak, there were also stories of hope shared by these young people. These stories centred on relationship and their experiences when relationship was kept at the centre by youth workers and others who took the time, created the space, and genuinely

listened to and cared for them. We can and must change the system to put relationship back in the centre where it belongs.

Thank you to every young person who shared your story in this session. Your voice is making a difference, and I could not feel more privileged than I do in having had the opportunity to share this space with you.

Tom Allsop
Chief Executive Officer
PeakCare Queensland

Final thoughts

The stories shared by the young people were raw and honest but important for shaping this journey towards an improved approach to out-of-home care for Queensland’s children and young people.

Although some experiences we heard described a broken system, the message of optimism from these young people could not have been clearer. These young people each shared some of the toughest moments of their lives with us—a few strangers—and trusted us to with their stories to help build a better system for children in Queensland.

Each of us in the room was moved by the enthusiasm and commitment of the young people in contributing to systemic improvements for those children currently in state care and to shaping a sustainable and safe system for future generations. It was inspiring to sit with a group of young people and engage in meaningful brainstorming and hear their recommended practical strategies to improve Queensland’s residential care system.

I want to thank the young people for their openness throughout this process and recognise the ingenuity and innovation in their ideas for a better child and family system.



Luke Twyford
Principal Commissioner
Queensland Family and Child Commission

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Case Study 2: A note for the Principal Commissioner

