

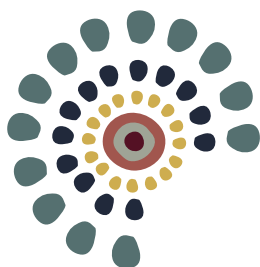
Youth CONNECT Annual Investor Report

March 2024



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ACKNOWLEDGEMENT TO COUNTRY

Churches of Christ acknowledges the traditional custodians of the different lands on which we live and work every day. We pay our respects to Elders past, present, and emerging for they hold the memories, traditions, cultures and hopes of First Nations People. We further acknowledge and recognise the resilience of First Nations People.

Message from Executive Director Grant Hawgood.



It is with mixed feelings we present the 2023 Youth CONNECT Annual Investor Report. Our final report for this program wraps up a 6-year journey of incredible results and stories of transformation in the lives of vulnerable young people in Queensland.

This world first program, funded by our social investors and backed by Queensland Government has impacted the lives of 297 young people transitioning out of statutory care into adulthood. Research from the Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute shows that 44% of young people leaving statutory care experience homelessness within 4 years. Providing one-on-one support in all the facets of life that young people encounter as they grow, Youth CONNECT offers an integrated approach to reducing this risk, and setting them up for success. I am incredibly proud of our participants, for taking the journey, working with our team to find stable housing, improve with personal development and education, and prepare for employment.

Our partners at University of Sunshine Coast (UniSC) have not only been independently researching the outcomes of the program, but collaborated with us to improve the service as it matured. The evaluation they have produced is invaluable in telling the detailed story of how early intervention and support impacts youth homelessness.

Over 6 years, we've seen 86% of young people who graduated from our Youth CONNECT program complete 12 months of work, study or personal development activities as they transitioned from care into becoming an independent adult. This is support and activities they may not have had access to otherwise.

Facilitating cultural connection for our First Nations participants proved to be very beneficial, with many reconnecting with country and kin. The UniSC research shows those who were involved in these activities were more likely to meet the formal success criteria and complete the program.

However, the results go beyond statistics. Due to the drive and commitment of a team of passionate and caring professionals, we have many stories of support and success. The trajectory of life has been drastically changed for many, even where success criteria have not been technically met. Young people having every opportunity to pursue goals, engage in meaningful personal development activity, gain employment or education, and find pathways to stable and secure housing is crucial for them as individuals, and for the broader community.

My heartfelt thanks to all those who have been involved in this extraordinary program. I am proud and grateful for our investors and Queensland Government, the University of Sunshine Coast, Churches of Christ staff, and most of all the courageous young people who sought to actively make changes in their lives with their participation.

Grant Hawgood

Executive Director – Children, Youth and Families

Introduction.

The 2023 Youth CONNECT Annual Investor Report marks a significant milestone in our program's journey. This was the last year that the Youth CONNECT program was funded, culminating in a transformative era for both our clients and staff. We end 2023 with all clients graduated from the program, which is a fantastic achievement.

Over the past 12 months, we have witnessed the exit of 90 young people from the program. While not every exit meets the formal criteria for 'success' in terms of outcome payments, each of these young people has made commendable strides towards more independent and stable living. Their progress reflects not just their own resilience and determination but also the effectiveness and adaptability of the individualised Youth CONNECT approach.

This year has also been a period of transition for our team, with the majority of our dedicated staff moving on to new opportunities as the program drew to a close. Despite these changes, the focus remained on ensuring warm handovers and maintaining transparent communication between clients and the program. This effort was reflected in the remarkably low number of disengagements this year, with only one person disengaging in the past 12 months.

The evolution of Youth CONNECT is further underscored by a striking decrease in incidents. From more than 100 incidents annually in the program's early years, we saw a significant reduction to just three incidents in 2023, indicating a more settled and engaged cohort. This change not only highlights the program's adaptability and responsiveness but also the tremendous growth of the young people we serve.

As we reflect on the year and the program as a whole, we are reminded of the journey we have undertaken together—a journey marked by challenges, growth, and most importantly, the positive transformation in the lives of young people who needed it the most.

Impact summary.



From 2018 to 2023, Youth CONNECT has provided ongoing case management and support for young people at the intersection of homelessness and care experiences. During this period, we extended our support to 297 unique individuals, resulting in a total of 300 program referrals. This cohort, aged 15–25, largely emerged from the out-of-home care system, often grappling with the instability of numerous placements throughout their childhoods.

Throughout these years, our clients have journeyed through challenges to reach remarkable milestones. Many found the first home they could call their own, pursued academic studies, secured employment, and embraced the responsibilities of parenthood. The program also played a pivotal role in facilitating vital support for those requiring extra care, including access to NDIS disability support.

Our cumulative success rate, as of March 2024, stands at 52.77%, significantly outstripping our initial goal of 35–40% success rate. This figure reflects not just the measurable outcomes but also the less tangible yet equally important personal growth and resilience developed by our clients. It's important to note that the final Performance Payment Period has not yet occurred, but we are optimistic about maintaining similar levels of success as in previous years.

The wind-down of the program this year saw 90 young people exit, each leaving with their own unique story of progress and perseverance. Despite a higher than expected disengagement rate of 22.7%, the reduction in incidents through the years and the increased stability of our clients underscore the program's positive impact.

For our staff, Youth CONNECT has been more than a program; it has been a journey of professional and personal fulfillment. Witnessing the innumerable achievements of our clients has been a highlight of our careers, reminding us of the profound impact dedicated support can have on young lives.

As we reflect on the journey of Youth CONNECT, we are filled with pride for what has been achieved and hope for the continued success and growth of every young person who has been part of this world-first program. Their stories and progress will remain a guiding inspiration for future endeavours in this field.

Acknowledgements.

As we look back on the journey of Youth CONNECT, our deepest gratitude extends to all 297 young people who have worked with the program. Your courage and commitment have not only shaped your own paths but have also profoundly influenced the evolution of Youth CONNECT. We are especially humbled by your willingness to participate in interviews, focus groups, and action research, lending your voices to enhance the program for future clients.

Our heartfelt thanks go to every member of the Youth CONNECT staff team. Each one of you, regardless of your role, has brought a unique blend of professional expertise and a shared passion for empowering young people to achieve their goals. Your dedication and the countless instances where you have gone above and beyond for your clients has been the backbone of this program's success.

We extend our sincere appreciation to the leadership at Churches of Christ for your unwavering support and for championing the vision and values of Youth CONNECT. Your guidance has been invaluable in navigating the challenges and celebrating the triumphs along this journey.

Our program has thrived thanks to the support of numerous stakeholders. A special mention to the Department of Housing for their consistent support and partnership, and the Queensland Treasury for their collaboration and belief in our mission.

Our gratitude also goes to Sandy Blackburn from Social Outcomes, who has been with us since the inception of Youth CONNECT, and to the investors whose belief in the potential of this program has been a driving force.

Lastly, we extend a profound thank you to the team at the University of the Sunshine Coast for their tireless efforts in the evaluation and research aspects of Youth CONNECT. The comprehensive Youth CONNECT Outcome Evaluation Report, which will be publicly available in early 2024, is a testament to the commitment the University has shown in understanding and documenting the impacts of our work.





Program phases.

Youth CONNECT operated on a four-phase model of service delivery, each phase underpinned by the goal of ensuring access to safe and stable housing and progressing in employment, education, and personal development goals. The focus was on moving young people from reliance to resilience and from dependence to independence/interdependence. The graphic below illustrates these four phases and the journey participants undertook within a maximum three-year period.

Figure 1: Youth CONNECT FOUR-PHASE MODEL OF SERVICE DELIVERY



Program referral numbers.

As we look back on the referral process that has been pivotal to the success of Youth CONNECT, it's important to understand the foundational role played by the Department of Housing. From the outset in 2018, the Department provided us with a nominal referral allocation number each quarter. This structured approach enabled us to methodically work towards our goal, ultimately meeting our quota of 300 referrals by May 2021.

Youth CONNECT's referral system was designed to cater to the needs of diverse communities within our reach. Our referrals were strategically divided among three catchment areas: Logan/Gold Coast, Ipswich/Toowoomba, and Townsville. These areas formed the core of our operations however, we also welcomed and accommodated referrals from surrounding areas that were accessible to these locations. This geographical spread allowed us to extend our support to a wide range of young people, each with their own unique backgrounds and challenges.

As we conclude this final year of the program, it is remarkable to note that all referred clients have completed their journey with Youth CONNECT. The last participant graduated in the first week of December 2023, marking a significant milestone in both their personal journey and the program's history.

The table below provides a breakdown of the spread of referrals by year and service location, illustrating the geographic distribution of Youth CONNECT's reach and impact.

Table 1: Total number of service users by service location of the Youth CONNECT program

Service Location	Year 1 Service Users	Year 2 Service Users	Year 3 Service Users	Year 4 Service Users	Total Service Users
Logan	28	49	60	29	166
Ipswich	19	28	26	14	87
Townsville	12	13	15	7	47
Total	59	90	101	50	300

Final exit figures.

From its inception in 2018 to its conclusion in 2023, Youth CONNECT journeyed with numerous young people, guiding them towards independent living. Below, we provide the final statistics that reflect the outcomes and pathways of those we had the privilege to support.

- Program Completions:** In total, 217 young people completed the Youth CONNECT program. This number includes not only those who graduated having met all the outcome criteria but also those who completed the program journey, regardless of the formalised success measures. Each completion represented a unique story of effort, resilience, and personal growth.
- Non-Engagements:** There were 15 cases of non-engagement throughout the program's duration. These instances occurred when attempts to engage a referred individual were unsuccessful, or when the individual opted not to participate after initial contact.
- Disengagements:** The program recorded 68 disengagements. These cases involved individuals who initially engaged with the program but later withdrew or could not be contacted within a three-month timeframe.

In summary, Youth CONNECT processed 300 referrals, with three individuals being referred twice. These referrals spanned our three main catchment areas—Logan/Gold Coast, Ipswich/Toowoomba, and Townsville. As the program drew to a close in 2023, our last remaining participant completed their journey in the first week of December.

Performance payment periods.

As Youth CONNECT approaches the conclusion of its funded period in 2023, the program continues to focus on delivering substantial outcomes for its clients. The dedicated efforts of our team in obtaining and organising evidence for clients who successfully met the program outcomes were integral to this process.

Table 2: Success rates of the program

Performance Payment Period	Success Rate Goal	Success Rate Outcome	Result
Period 1 2021	35-40%	37.14%	On target
Period 2 2022	35-40%	46.3%	+6.3%
Period 3 2023	35-40%	52.31%	+12.31%
Period 4 2024	35-40%	52.77%	+12.77%

These success rates are a testament to the resilience and progress of our young people, as well as the effectiveness of the program in fostering housing stability and consistent engagement in education, employment, and personal development activities.

The final Performance Payment Period, traditionally scheduled for March 2024, is being moved up to December 2023 and January 2024. This change is due to all clients having graduated, allowing us to begin the auditing process earlier. We will notify investors of the final certified success rate once this assessment is completed. Despite the earlier assessment, the payment timeline will be the same as in previous years, ensuring continuity and consistency in our financial processes.



Embracing culture and motherhood through loss.

Lauren*, a proud Aboriginal woman, was referred to Youth CONNECT by her Youth Justice Case Worker at 19. Facing significant housing instability and the tragic loss of both parents, she had become disconnected from her culture.

Despite her involvement with Youth Justice for theft charges, Lauren met all her bond conditions and joined Youth CONNECT on the brink of exiting the Youth Justice system. As an expectant mother without a permanent residence, her Youth Justice worker sought to bolster her support through the program.

Paired with an older, experienced female Youth CONNECT case manager who shared Lauren's cultural heritage, they quickly established a strong working relationship. Together, they explored housing options, with Lauren expressing a desire to live with extended family during her baby's early months. The chosen housing solution involved residing with her then-partner's family, providing a supportive environment through her pregnancy.

After relocating interstate to seek better employment opportunities, Lauren welcomed a healthy baby boy. However, two months postpartum, her partner passed away unexpectedly, plunging her into single parenthood and housing challenges again. Lauren resorted to emergency housing services, before reaching out to her Youth CONNECT case manager for support. This led to her return to Queensland, where she moved in with extended family.

Back in Queensland, Youth CONNECT assisted Lauren in securing vital documents for herself and her son and connecting with local services, including a job active provider. Throughout 2020, Lauren and her son moved between various family members on her late partner's side for support, with the challenge of housing uncertainty compounded by COVID-19 restrictions.

A pivotal moment in her journey occurred at the end of 2020 during a Youth CONNECT Cultural Tour. Lauren actively participated in the yarning circle, where she shared her aspirations for her son's cultural connection.

A significant highlight was discovering that the cultural guide was actually her Aunt, leading to meaningful connection and ongoing support. She reconnected with cousins, received help with child care and a detailed family history from her Aunt, filling a void left by the loss of her parents.

In 2021, Lauren made the decision to explore independent housing, now ready to move out of the umbrella of family support. Lauren worked with Youth CONNECT to explore options, including the Head Lease process and an Aboriginal mothers' housing program. By March 2021, just two weeks after solidifying her goal for independent housing, Lauren happily signed a private rental lease. Youth CONNECT facilitated funding for furnishings, and her new residence in NSW became a reality. With border restrictions easing, her case manager was finally able to visit Lauren's new home.

In early 2022, having secured child care, Lauren obtained employment, working two jobs to ensure financial stability. By February 2022, Lauren completed her journey with Youth CONNECT, having fulfilled the program's continuous participation requirements. Through successfully managing her tenancy for 12 months and her engagement with a parents' job agency and employment, life was transformed and on track.

Lauren's story, marked by resilience and determination, exemplifies the positive impact of support and cultural reconnection. Her journey with Youth CONNECT highlights the profound difference that understanding and tailored support can make in navigating life's challenges.

* Name changed for privacy



Youth CONNECT demographics.

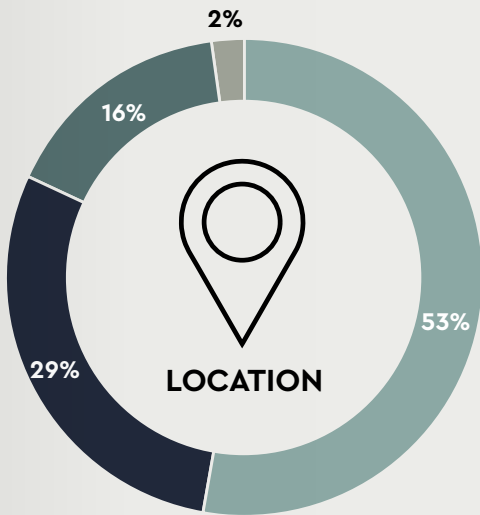
Youth CONNECT engaged with a diverse group of young people, each facing unique challenges and a variety of backgrounds. The program received 300 referrals, encompassing 297 unique young people. Below is a breakdown of their demographic characteristics, including regional distribution.

- **Gender:** Of the participants, 53% (160 young people) were female, 44% (131) were male, and 3% (9) identified as non-binary or transgender.
- **First Nations status:** A significant 42% (126 young people) identified as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander.
- **Disability and NDIS support:** 19% (59 young people) had a disability impacting daily functioning, with 8% (25) receiving NDIS support by the end of the program.
- **Parental status:** Approximately 20% (61 young people) of the participants were parents at entry or became parents during the program. A further 2% (6) were pregnant with their first child upon exiting.
- **Regional spread:** The participants were distributed across three regions, with 53% (166 young people) located in Logan, 29% (87) in Ipswich, and 16% (47) in Townsville.

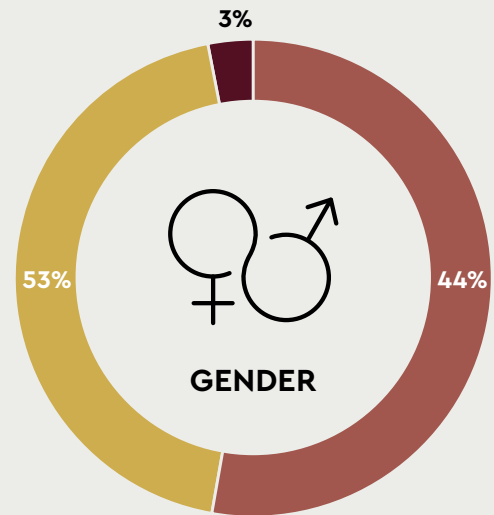
This demographic data highlights Youth CONNECT's commitment to inclusivity and flexibility, accommodating a wide array of young people each with distinct needs and characteristics.

300

referrals to the program



- Located in Logan
- Located in Ipswich
- Located in Townsville
- Undefined



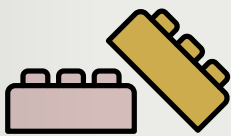
- Male
- Female
- Non binary or transgender

297

unique young people considered for the program - 217 completed the program.

20%

young people were parents at entry or became parents during the program. An additional 2% (6) of the participants were pregnant with their first child upon exiting



42%

Young people identified as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander



19%

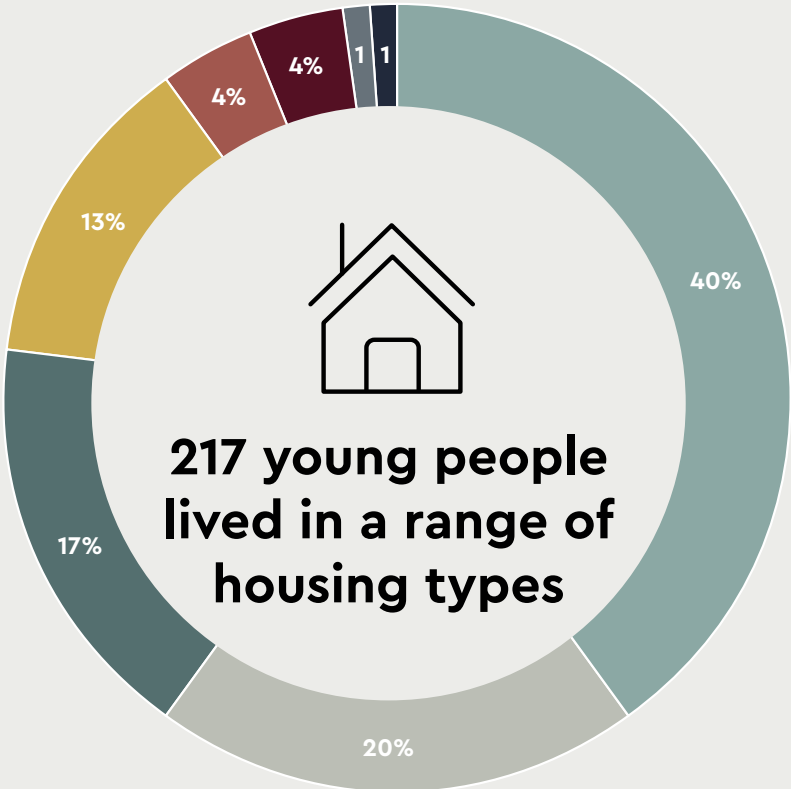
of active clients had a disability impacting daily functioning

8%

of active clients receiving NDIS support by the end of the program

Housing strategy and final housing types.

Through Youth CONNECT, we learned valuable lessons about housing strategies and the intricacies of supporting young people in various living situations. Upon exiting the program, the combined cohort of 217 young people who completed Youth CONNECT were living in a range of housing types:



- 40% lived with their support networks
- 20% lived in the private rental market
- 17% lived in public/social housing
- 13% lived in a share house
- 4% lived in supported accommodation, often NDIS-funded, catering to those with specific needs
- 4% were incarcerated upon program exit
- 1% were couch-surfing
- 1% lived in transitional accommodation, such as DFV homes



The program embraced a flexible approach to housing, prioritising the agency of our clients when seeking accommodation and adapting our strategies to their individual needs and preferences. This approach evolved from the initial concept of providing share housing through head-leases by Churches of Christ to a more encompassing case management model. This shift enabled us to better support young people in accessing housing outside of the program, reflecting our learning that one housing model does not fit all.

The data revealed significant flexibility and creativity in our support for young people to access and sustain housing. However, it also brought to light the challenges of limited timely and accessible housing options. Factors like the COVID-19 pandemic and the escalating housing crisis compounded these difficulties, underscoring the need for transitional services to have their own housing stock or reliable access to housing, coupled with adequate ongoing support to maintain tenancies.

More than half of the young people in Youth CONNECT navigated through a series of housing changes, with many experiencing between four to seven different living situations during their time in the program. This frequent shifting of homes was a common experience for participants, regardless of whether they formally succeeded in the program or not. These transitions often arose from one or more of the following factors:

- financial constraints limiting affordable housing options
- specific eligibility requirements for different housing types
- the diverse housing models we supported at various times and locations
- the capacity for young people to make their own housing choices
- the challenges faced in being accepted as tenants due to their age or background.

Each move represented not just a change in residence but also a step in their journey towards stability and independence.

Many young people also utilised their social networks for accommodation, which provided stability for a significant proportion of those who completed the program successfully. Supporting young people in exploring these possibilities proved crucial, though such placements could be time-limited and challenging. For many, staying with their support networks was a step in their journey towards other housing types. It became clear that young people accessing accommodation through their networks needed ongoing support, given their level of need and the likelihood that a single move would not suffice.

We learned that young people aspire to housing that allows them to build their lives in communities of their choice. They seek autonomy in making decisions about where, how, and with whom they live. These insights are invaluable for future programs focused on transitioning young people from care, highlighting the importance of client-centred approaches in housing strategy.

Navigating NDIS pathways and rebuilding family bonds.

17-year-old Jake* was residing in a Churches of Christ residential placement when he joined Youth CONNECT.

Jake had recently begun working with an NDIS team for his multiple disabilities and was taking steps to address his substance misuse, which had greatly affected his mental health and self-regulation abilities. In need of support in his transition from youth to adulthood, the team recognised the need for a collaborative approach to effectively meet his needs.

Exploring various housing options, public housing emerged as the most suitable due to Jake's higher level of need, leading to Jake successfully obtaining a departmental property. Despite being unemployed, Jake was intensively supported by Youth CONNECT and his NDIS support workers to engage with his Disability Employment Services provider, ensuring he could sustain his Centrelink payments, rent, and daily expenses.

With the help of Youth CONNECT and NDIS, Jake's independent living skills improved remarkably, and he expressed enjoyment in his newfound independence. A combined stakeholder group formed around Jake, focusing on his journey to independent living. Jake played an active role in meetings, articulating his goals and contributing to the direction of his support.

Part of the case management approach from Youth CONNECT for Jake involved navigating complex interpersonal relationships, notably with his grandmother. Their relationship, while strong, faced challenges due to her protective nature and difficulty recognising Jake's transition into adulthood. To address this, Jake's grandmother was invited to one of the stakeholder meetings. This move proved to be a turning point, allowing her to witness Jake's capability and progress, resulting in her expressing pride in his growth.

Encouraged by this success, Jake sought assistance from Youth CONNECT to reconnect with his mother. Their relationship was

complicated, and included a history of childhood neglect. Rebuilding this bond while processing past traumas proved very difficult for Jake, impacting his mental health. In response, Youth CONNECT successfully lobbied for his NDIS plan to be adjusted to include mental health support. Unfortunately, during this challenging period, Jake's depression led to him missing job agency appointments, resulting in the loss of income and subsequent eviction from his Departmental home.

Faced with limited housing options, Jake decided to live with his mother. His case manager was concerned about this choice but respected Jake's decision. The case manager facilitated communication between Jake and his mother, visiting their home and helping them address issues and conflicts. This intervention saw Jake's relationship with his mother strengthen, and his mental health improve significantly.

Youth CONNECT assisted Jake in re-engaging with his job agency, leading to the reinstatement of his payments. His mental health continued to improve as he worked with his therapist, and he began setting career goals, with his job agency supporting an enrolment in a certificate course aligned with his career aspirations.

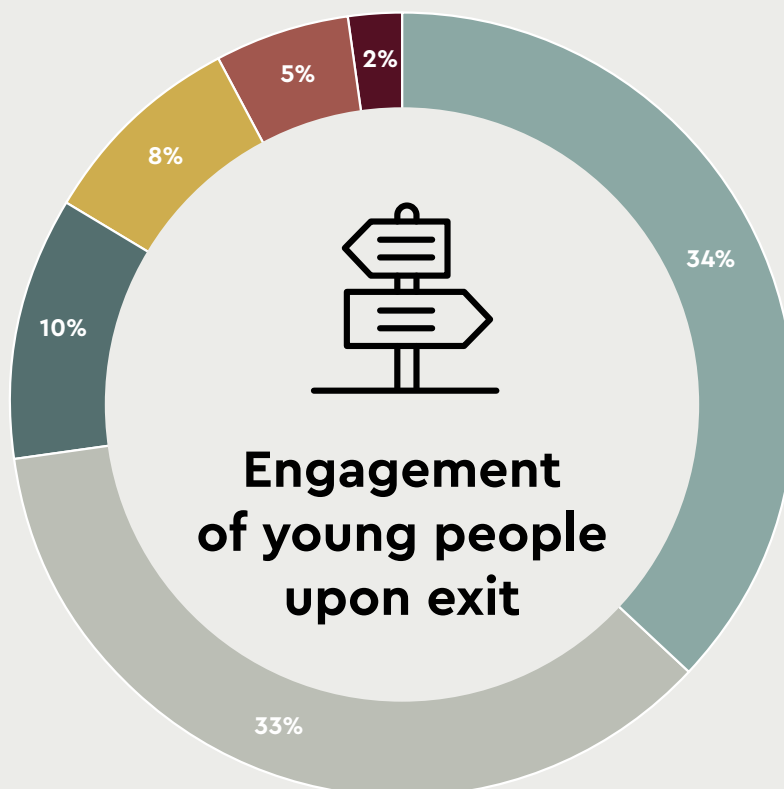
Jake's journey with Youth CONNECT concluded as a 'non-successful' outcome in terms of the program's formal criteria, due to his housing instability and non-compliance with job-seeking requirements. However, Youth CONNECT supported Jake to navigate complex challenges and he emerged with a strengthened relationship with family, stable income, and a robust support system through NDIS. Jake's story illustrates significant triumphs beyond the formal outcome measures, and the importance of comprehensive client care.

* Name changed for privacy



Engagement in activities: Final figures.

As Youth CONNECT concluded, the engagement statistics of our young people in various activities provided valuable insights into their progress and areas of development. A breakdown of engagement upon exiting the program is detailed below.



- 34% were employed in full-time, part-time, or casual capacities, showing significant strides in gaining employment
- 33% were engaged in formal job-seeking, actively working with a Workplace Australia provider to develop their employment skills
- 10% were engaged in parenting programs and responsibilities, all being primary caregivers
- 8% were engaged in formal education, including TAFE courses, Bachelors degrees, or completing their high school certificate
- 5% were involved in other formal personal development programs, most commonly regular therapy sessions
- 2% were not engaged in a formal activity type upon program completion, typically due to incarceration



EMPLOYMENT AND JOB-SEEKING

Employment emerged as a central activity, strongly correlated with formal program success. Nearly 85% of those who engaged in work achieved success in the program. Our experiences highlighted the importance of staff support in helping young people envision and realise their employment goals over time. Employment preparation extended beyond direct job-seeking activities, encompassing the development of broader qualities necessary for sustained employment. The journey to employment was typically marked by various steps and experiences, underscoring the need for continued support as young people build confidence, seize opportunities, and navigate the employment landscape.

EDUCATION

While the formal result for engagement in education upon program completion was 8%, a substantial one third of Youth CONNECT participants engaged in at least one educational activity during their time in the program. Notably, about half of those who were formally successful in meeting the program's goals had educational experiences, compared to just over a quarter for those who did not meet these formal success criteria. Significantly, those not undertaking any education were more than twice as likely to be non-successful in formal program goals compared to those who participated in educational activities. This disparity highlights the critical role of education in supporting young people's overall success and underscores the value of integrating flexible and varied educational opportunities, tailored to individual needs and aspirations.

PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT

Approximately two-thirds of the entire cohort engaged in some form of personal development throughout the program, a key component that often supported their journey towards employment. Personal development activities were not only about immediate skill-building but also about fostering qualities like confidence and resilience, which are essential for both personal growth and professional success. These activities, strategically aligned with employment goals, play a pivotal role in preparing young people for the workforce.

These insights from our engagement statistics illustrate the importance of a holistic approach in youth support programs. It is imperative to offer a wide spectrum of activities and supports, encompassing education, employment, personal development, and family responsibilities. Recognising and responding to these varied needs ensures that young people are provided with comprehensive support on their journey to independence and self-sufficiency.

Outcomes Star.



WHAT IS THE OUTCOMES STAR?

From its inception, Youth CONNECT utilised the Outcomes Star—Young Person's Star as the primary case management and goal-setting tool, as well as an outcome measurement tool across various domains. The Young Person's Star was specifically developed for use with young people aged between 15–25 transitioning to independent living, including those leaving care or detention, and those with an experience of homelessness.

HOW IS THE OUTCOMES STAR APPLIED?

This collaborative tool involved young people and workers jointly identifying progress opportunities across key domains: accommodation, work and learning, people and support, health, how you feel, choices and behaviour, money and rent, and practical life skills. The assessments provided a comprehensive picture of how the young person, and their support network, assessed achievement and progress throughout their journey to independence.

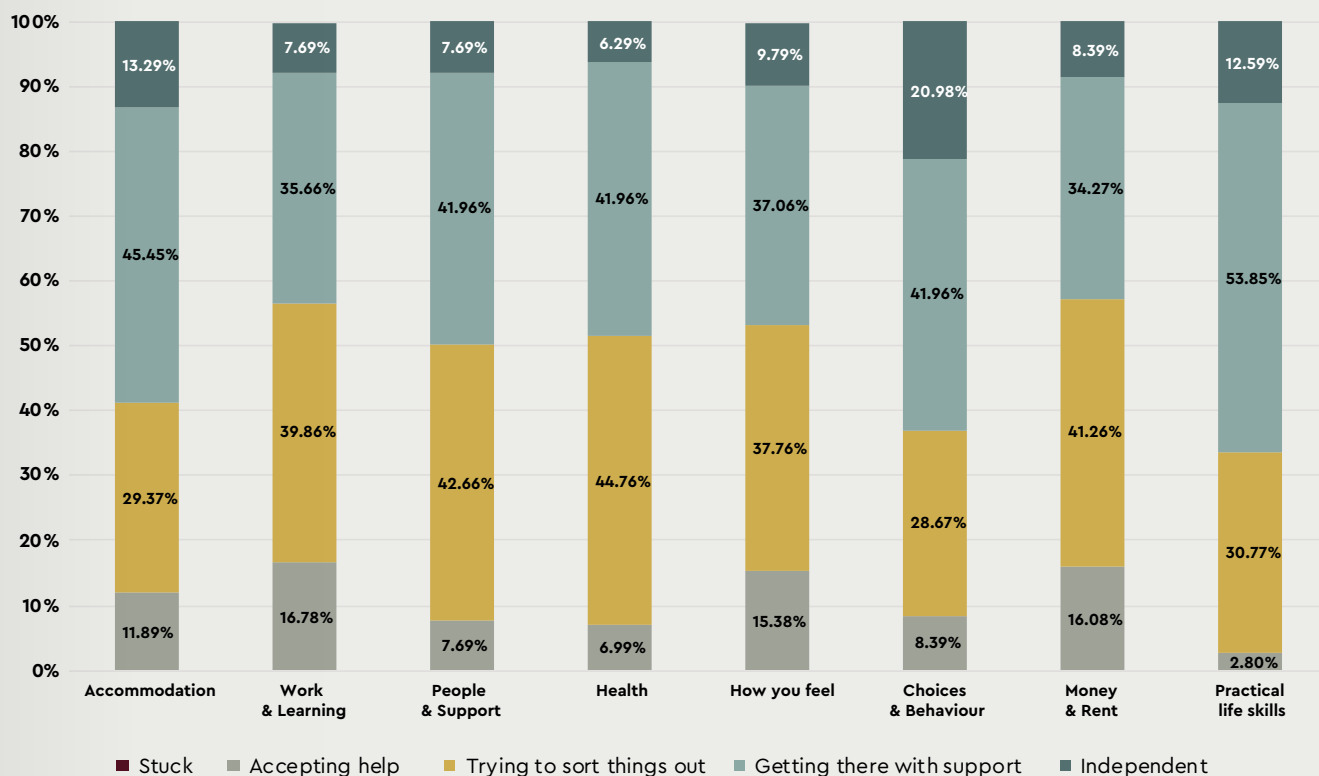
The first Star for a client was typically conducted about three months into the program, designed to establish the current state of need for the young person and inform the development of initial goals. Subsequent Stars, completed at a minimum every six months, served as a measure of progress. Workers utilised motivational interviewing techniques to support the client's 5-scale journey of change, moving from 'stuck' to 'independent'.

HOW DID THE OUTCOMES STAR HELP THE PROGRAM?

These Stars were instrumental in guiding the program's approach to supporting each young person, offering a snapshot of their evolving needs and achievements. The tool's flexibility and the depth of insights it provided were pivotal in shaping the tailored support strategies that Youth CONNECT employed throughout our operation.

The graph on the opposite page shows a snapshot of where young people rated themselves in the last Star they completed before exiting the program during 2023.

Figure 2: What stage are people at on the Journey of Change, completed on exiting in 2023



THE FINDINGS: GROWTH

This tool highlighted key areas of growth and challenges among the young people in the program. The overall highest rating in the Outcomes Star was in **Practical Life Skills**, a trend that may be attributed to the rapid skill development in managing independent living, particularly tenancy management. This finding resonates with the experiences of many young participants entering independent living for the first time.

Significant growth was also observed in the **Accommodation** domain during the early stages, reflecting the program's effective 'housing first' approach. This early focus on housing was positively associated with the program's overall success.

THE FINDINGS: CHALLENGES

Conversely, **Work and Learning** emerged as the overall lowest-rated area. This outcome could reflect the nature of young people's experiences within the program, where they often explored various avenues in work and learning. Such exploration likely resulted in them predominantly remaining at the 'trying to sort things out' stage of their journey of change. Youth CONNECT also worked with many young people who had barriers around education/employment engagement, such as a mental health and addiction.

However, as the program progressed, there was an increase in positive changes in the **Work and Learning** domain of the Outcomes Star scale ratings.

THE FINDINGS: GENDER DIFFERENCES

Gender differences in the program outcomes were subtle but important. Males showed lower ratings in **Money and Rent** during the early engagement phase, while females had consistently lower ratings in **Feelings** across all phases. These differences point to the necessity of considering gender-specific needs and experiences in programs like Youth CONNECT and warrant further investigation into their underlying causes.

The feedback from participants about the Outcomes Star tool was overwhelmingly positive. One young participant in the outcome evaluation notably expressed that the tool was instrumental in keeping them focused and mindful of their goals, stating: "It keeps me on track and keeps me mindful about what my goals were previously and what I've succeeded at within many months."

Outcomes Star in practice.

When Parker*, 17, was initially referred to Youth CONNECT, they were facing a multitude of challenges, including preparing to leave their long-term foster home, completing Year 12, and experiencing bullying due to their sexuality and gender expression.

Despite these stressors, Parker's vision for their future shone through. They had clear goals, which they began to map out their first Outcomes Star: secure housing post-graduation, pursue higher education, and seek LGBTQIA+ specific mental health support.

Initially, Parker rated themselves as 'trying to sort things out' in the **Accommodation** domain of the Outcomes Star. They had a definitive idea of the kind of housing they wanted and, with the guidance of their case manager, navigated various housing options. This diligence paid off when they finally found and moved into a share house with a friend.

Next, Parker focused on higher education, aspiring to one day run their own restaurant. They enrolled in a Diploma of Hospitality at their local TAFE, a significant step closer to this dream. This was a big step for Parker, who was nervous after their bullying experiences in high school. Youth CONNECT supported Parker to attend the TAFE's open day, which included meeting the LGBTQIA+ student alliance. This experience proved pivotal in alleviating Parker's anxiety post-school bullying, leading to an application and acceptance into the course. To further support Parker's educational journey, Youth CONNECT facilitated the Parker getting a laptop and stationery through a brokerage application. In terms of employment, Parker displayed considerable independence, yet Youth CONNECT continued to offer support. Assistance with resume updating, mock interviews, and finding suitable employment ensured Parker could balance work with their studies. Their employment at a local café provided valuable experience, and Parker's increasing responsibilities there were indicative of their elevated goals, which was captured in the Outcomes Star's **Work & Learning** domain, moving from a '5' to a '4'.

Parker also engaged in driving lessons through Youth CONNECT and the Braking the Cycle



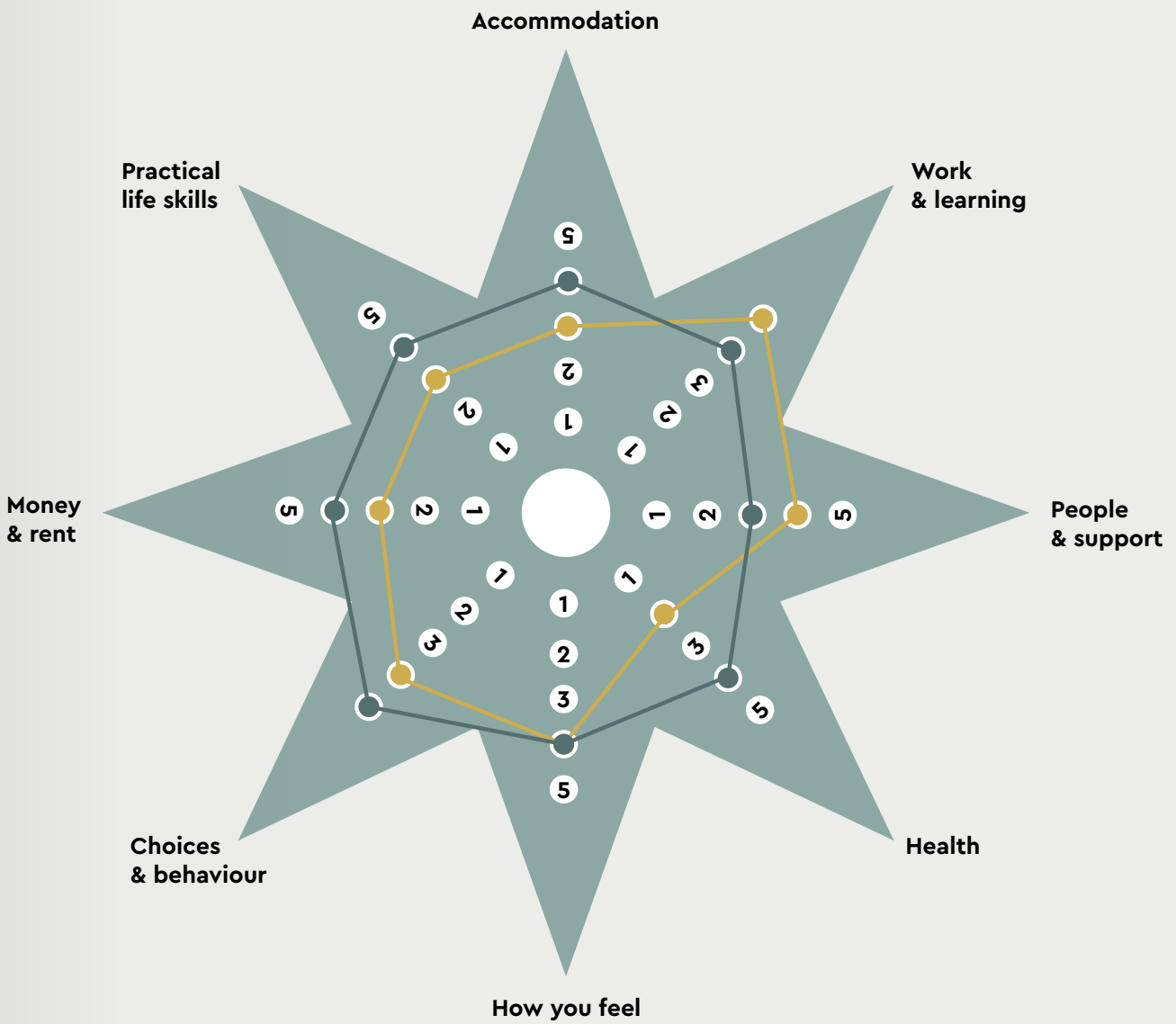
program. This support enabled Parker to successfully obtain their provisional license, reflecting growth in their **Practical Life Skills** domain.

With stable housing and employment, Parker felt more prepared to explore their sexuality and identity. Youth CONNECT's referrals to LGBTQIA+ organisations provided Parker with counselling and healthcare tailored to their needs. Embracing their non-binary identity, Parker's confidence and connections grew, positively influencing their social network. The significant improvement in Parker's health, especially following the commencement of hormone therapy, was a profound leap, mirrored in the **Health** domain of their Outcomes Star.

Parker's journey, through the lens of the Outcomes Star, is one of steadfast pursuit of their goals and growing independence. Navigating the complexities of exiting foster care, claiming their independence, exploring their identity, and overcoming mental health challenges, they have emerged stable and independent. Now in steady work, holding a diploma, in a nurturing relationship, and with newfound self-esteem, Parker's story is a testament to their determination. Youth CONNECT celebrates the significant strides Parker has made, as captured by the Outcomes Star's comprehensive view of their path to autonomy.

* Name changed for privacy

Figure 3: Parker's* Outcomes Star



● E1: 1st Star – Collaborative ● E1: 4th Star – Collaborative

Feedback from Youth CONNECT participants.

Youth CONNECT has always placed a high value on the perspectives and experiences of the clients we support, embedding the value that young people's voices are pivotal to shaping the program model and our practices. True to this commitment, we established multiple channels for participants to offer candid feedback on their experiences with Youth CONNECT. The most comprehensive of these feedback mechanisms has been the evaluation conducted by the University of the Sunshine Coast (UniSC). Through this collaboration, independent researchers facilitated anonymous interviews and focus groups, ensuring that participants could share their insights freely. **This method of gathering feedback has not only been crucial in understanding the experiences of young people but has also been instrumental in driving continuous program refinement and development.**

The insights gathered from the 2022–2023 interviews and focus groups, which informed the Youth CONNECT Outcome Evaluation Report, provide rich insights into the lived experiences of participants. The following quotes from these young people serve as a testament to the program's impact and the importance of their voices in both affirming the program's successes and identifying areas for improvement in future programs.

"I've been working alongside Youth CONNECT to get into rental...I'm trying to get a bit more financially stable so that I can move into rentals... I was given information in regard to different types of housing, facilities I could go to, advice on private rentals to move into private rentals, advice on what to wear. All those kinds of things, how to do applications, what to add on applications, what not to put on applications... They've given me a boost of confidence to go into the rental market and have a look around, things to look out for, things to take note of. And just been there to take me to those inspections. The moral support was there as well. They've given good moral support."

Young person, active, outcome evaluation

"I've recently got a job and already become manager...I went through a lot of work experiences and went through some training courses that Youth CONNECT has put me through for. And eventually I just learnt the skills and eventually I was able to get a temporary job, that didn't last long but I was still able to have a job for a bit, and then I ended up with this job now."

Young person, graduated 2022

"I'm a job seeker right now... I have anxiety around public transport, which Youth CONNECT helped me with but they were able to pick me up and take me there [to job active provider]. Which was really good and that enabled me to find more job offers...I've always been a more hands on learner, so they helped me. But every job needs basic math and English. So they helped me with that, which I thought was really useful...It's kind of hard for me to focus. But they were willing to take time out of their day with my visit, and help me...They were able to make it topics that I found interesting. Which I thought was really good. And that helped me to stay focused more."

Young person, active, outcome evaluation



"I'm currently studying a cert three in health services...I had some discussions with my worker about what course to get into because there was a couple of courses that I wanted to do. And he's they're very encouraging to go into the courses, given me information about what courses there are around that are cheaper or free. Yeah, he's been very supportive around it...They've helped me with my schooling so I graduated a year 12 equivalent last year. They helped me pay for my fees when I was struggling a bit financially. And then yeah, it just some moral support around the current course I'm doing."

Young person, active, outcome evaluation

"They were always there if I needed a call. And they were willing to go out with me to help me with my social anxiety. When we're going to certain places they'll be there with me and back and help me get used to being at a facility...I'm now able to go out more. I used to just hide in my room. I'm now able to sit in open areas comfortably. So I'm able to just in general able to do a lot more than that I wasn't able to in the past, which is making me feel more alive... I used to struggle because I was really bad. I used to struggle to fight for a reason to live. But now I feel like I have like I have a purpose now... [Case manager] used to take me outside a lot. He also told me good places that help with him in the past... [Youth CONNECT has] made me more happy, made me more confident in my abilities."

Young person, active, outcome evaluation

"They always make sure that they understand what I need... They've pretty much been able to help with everything that I've asked for, and if they weren't able to help me, whether it be financially through YHARS, they would point me in a direction of how to get the help that I may have needed. So they were very, very resourceful."

Young person, active, outcome evaluation

"I'm able to cook for myself because they helped me learn some easy recipes."

Young person, active, outcome evaluation

"It's set me up and taught me some goal planning. They've been showing me things that can help me through to a better future, those kinds of things like setting me up for a better future...They've been absolutely amazing. I wouldn't change a thing."

Young person, active, outcome evaluation

"I appreciate everything you guys are helping me with and if I could give back to all of you guys in the office I would! You guys are awesome and I'm grateful to have you there to support me when I need it. I'm loving it [Youth CONNECT]. I had no idea at first what to expect. I was surprised at what it could provide. I'm a lot more confident in doing what I want and getting myself together, everyday I'm stronger in myself...I'm proud of them... I appreciate everything they've done."

Young person, active, outcome evaluation

"They were just really nice, and respectful and good to talk to. They went out of their way to help me."

Young person, graduated 2022, outcome evaluation

"They helped me get on my feet...And I guess I had that, you know, connection or like, support that us kids in care don't really have once we leave care, you know?"

Young person, graduated 2022

"Honestly, I just want to see it keep going. I know it's helped me and I can imagine how much it's helped everyone else."

Young person, active, outcome evaluation

Financial update.

Youth CONNECT 1 December 2022 – 30 November 2023

The below table outlines the quarterly budget and expenditure across the final year of the program.

Table3: Youth CONNECT Operating expenses: 1 December 2022 – 30 November 2023

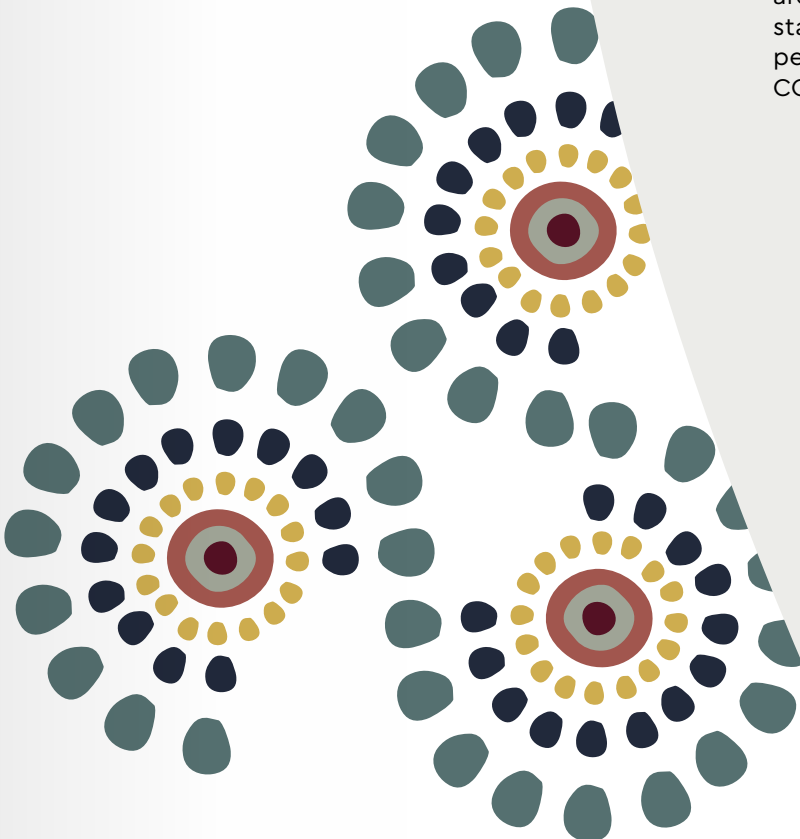
Year Six						
Operating Expenses	This Quarter actual	Budget/plan this Quarter	Last Quarter actual	YTD actual	YTD Budget	Cash in Reserve for program needs
Quarter 1	\$194,912	\$294,247	\$255,283	\$1,508,334	\$1,799,035	\$290,702
Quarter 2	\$213,159	\$337,240	\$194,912	\$1,721,492	\$2,136,275	\$414,783
Quarter 3	\$166,228	\$169,646	\$213,159	\$1,887,720	\$2,305,921	\$418,201
Quarter 4	\$111,183	\$112,901	\$166,228	\$1,998,903	\$2,418,822	\$419,919

Contract risk management.

The Youth CONNECT program has continued to employ a robust governance framework to ensure the sound and effective management of the program throughout Year 6. Risk management is a shared responsibility of the following governance bodies:

- Youth CONNECT Internal Reference Group (Churches of Christ Queensland [CofCQ])
- Youth CONNECT Joint Working Group (CofCQ and State Queensland/Queensland Treasury)
- Youth CONNECT Research and Evaluation Reference Group (CofCQ and University of Sunshine Coast)

The Joint Working Group meeting is scheduled quarterly to align with reporting. Any areas of risk are raised and discussed at these meetings as a standard agenda item along with the program performance measures as agreed in the Youth CONNECT Operations Manual.



Lessons learned and recommendations.

Since the inception of Youth CONNECT, we have been in close partnership with the University of the Sunshine Coast (UniSC) to methodically evaluate the program's effectiveness in supporting young people transitioning from care to independent living. The year 2023 has been marked by intensive collaborative efforts between UniSC and Youth CONNECT, focusing on the final evaluation of the program's outcomes.

This comprehensive evaluation process encompassed a detailed analysis of an array of data, including referrals, case notes, Outcomes Stars, exit reasons, and formal program outcomes. This was augmented by a series of in-depth interviews and focus groups engaging staff, clients, and stakeholders, providing a multifaceted view of the program's reach and impact.

As we await the full report's publication in 2024, we are privileged to share some of the main findings within this report. These insights not only reflect the program's achievements and areas of strength but also highlight opportunities for further enhancement and innovation for future programs.

OVERALL OUTCOMES

The evaluation of Youth CONNECT reveals a heartening picture: the majority of young people who completed the program achieved its core objectives. These goals, focusing on the sustained stability of housing and the pursuit of education, employment, or personal development, were met by many participants in the concluding phases of the program.

Success within the program often extended beyond a simple 'yes or no' program success. Many young people who did not meet the strictest definitions of outcome success still engaged in meaningful education, employment, job-seeking, or personal development activities. This suggests that stability in housing and growth in personal capacities often extended beyond the binary outcome measures in the program.



HOUSING AND ACCOMMODATION

Youth CONNECT recognises that stable accommodation is crucial for fostering resilience and achieving positive outcomes for young people, particularly regarding employment. However, the concept of 'home' extends beyond just a physical place. It's about a young person-centred understanding of 'homefulness' that incorporates relational and critical awareness.

Young people within the program often navigate multiple housing transitions—typically between four and seven over three years—each with its unique challenges and support requirements. Acknowledging the individuality of these housing pathways, there's a need for program logic to adapt, potentially requiring additional funding to support young people in these dynamic situations.

The interplay between housing stability and other facets of support—education, employment, and personal development—is undeniable and cannot be overlooked. Housing instability is problematic, especially when it leads to periods of homelessness. Such instability is more manageable early on but can become detrimental over time. Likewise, experiences of incarceration interrupt the trajectory towards independence.

The evidence suggests that while some housing instability is expected for young adults leaving care, there must be reliable housing options available. A lack of such options leads to increased instability and poorer outcomes. Public and social housing have been positive solutions in most cases, providing either long-term stability or a stepping stone as young people build economic independence.

Data shows that a single instance of housing instability can be overcome with effective support, but repeated instability poses significant challenges. It's clear that shared housing with strangers is not a successful model for young

people leaving care. Instead, housing situations within their social networks should be considered potential opportunities for continued support, helping young people either sustain or transition from such arrangements.

EMPLOYMENT AND JOB-SEEKING

Not all young people follow the same timeline in developing employment skills; individual circumstances, regional labour market variations, and strategic planning all play roles in shaping employment opportunities. It's important to recognise these differences and create employment experiences that align with the unique contexts of each young person and the regions they inhabit.

Engagement in employment within Youth CONNECT wasn't just limited to those who completed the program. While there was a clear link between sustained paid employment and successful program outcomes, the extent of job-seeking did not necessarily predict success, as it was a common activity among all participants.

However, there were noticeable trends affecting employment engagement. Young people experiencing a higher number of housing transitions often had fewer employment days. Additionally, while individual early assessment risks had marginal effects on employment engagement, a cumulative presence of these risks led to a decreased likelihood of engaging in paid employment. This points to the need for a nuanced approach that considers the interconnected nature of housing stability, early risk assessments, and employment engagement in supporting young people's pathways to success.



EDUCATION AND PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT

Many young people in out-of-home care experience obstacles in accessing consistent state education. Education not only equips people with the skills for better future employment opportunities, higher pay, and increased autonomy but also enhances overall satisfaction and wellbeing. Within Youth CONNECT, a significant portion of participants pursued qualifications through TAFE, with a smaller group accessing higher tertiary education. The question of why there is differential access to higher education levels is crucial and can be explored in future to better support young people's educational aspirations.

Barriers such as substance abuse can hinder young people's ability to engage continuously in education. To support their educational endeavours, financial backing is essential, not only for covering direct educational costs but also for offsetting the opportunity costs of not working. This often places young people at a crossroads, having to choose between education and employment.

Nevertheless, education can be a strategic choice, particularly within the Youth CONNECT program, which offers specific support to young parents and those with an NDIS plan. It's evident that support workers need to tailor their approach, strategically deploying resources to meet the individual needs of each young person.

Personal development activities are vital for life skills enhancement, with the evaluation showing a clear link between personal development engagement and employment experience. Importantly, cultural strengths planning was also considered a form of personal development, acknowledging the unique needs of First Nations young people in fostering cultural connections. Ensuring that First Nations youth have access to both general personal development and culturally enriching activities is paramount for their holistic growth and connection.

CULTURAL SUPPORT

The evaluation report, while quantitatively focused on formal outcomes, recognises the indispensable role of cultural connection and continuity for First Nations young people. Beyond statistical outcomes, it's vital to embrace a qualitative approach that honours the spirit and integrity of these young people as initiated by the Youth CONNECT program.

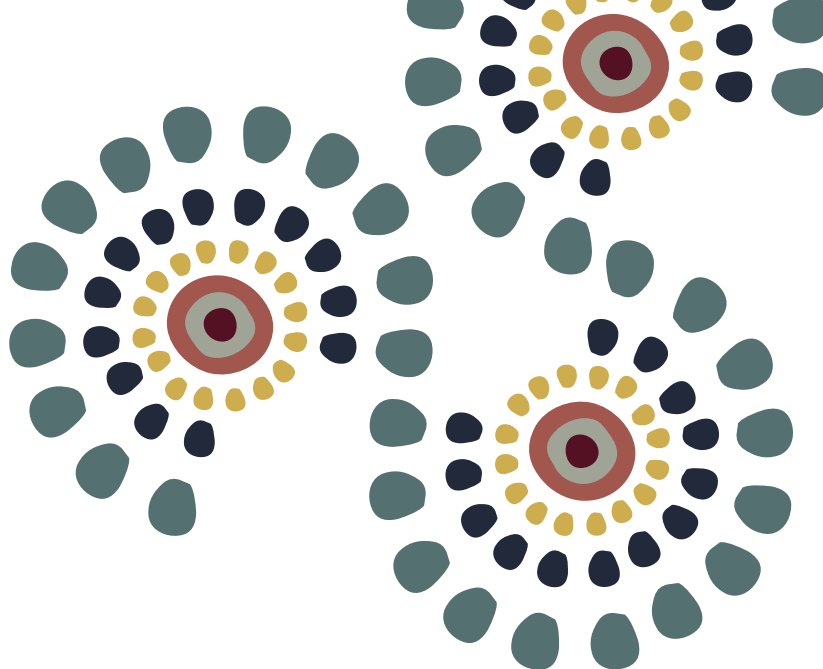
It has been observed that First Nations young people were slightly less likely to meet formal program success criteria compared to their non-indigenous peers. Youth CONNECT adapted its approach by embracing First Nations practice leadership to guide policy, staff engagement, and training on cultural practices. This integration of participatory action research with yarning opened up organisational space for building culturally informed and competent staff, enhancing the delivery of cultural connection activities.

The commitment to identifying and nurturing cultural strengths has shown a beneficial influence on program success. The **Connection to Culture Scale** reveals increases across cultural knowledge, identity, active involvement, and spirituality among First Nations participants. These measures underscore the organisation's dedication to cultural reflection and learning, upheld by First Nations staffing and leadership, and have significantly contributed to the establishment of culturally safe, trauma-informed, and authentic practices.

The recommendation is clear: support services for First Nations young people transitioning out of care must prioritise cultural connection and responsiveness as essential components of service delivery.



About us.



Churches of Christ in Queensland have been an active part of the community since 1883. We have a significant presence across Queensland, as well as Victoria, with over 300 services in more than 100 communities. Thanks to the support of almost 3700 staff and 1000 volunteers, we impact tens of thousands of lives through our services to assist families, the elderly and people in need.

Since 1970, we have responded to community needs and grown into a leading service provider of early childhood education, family-based care, transition to adulthood and family support services. Through each of these services, our dedicated staff strive to give voices to the children, young people and families who are experiencing vulnerabilities and calling on us in their time of need. Through listening to their experiences and understanding their journey, we support them to belong, grow, connect and thrive.

We are currently one of the largest providers of alternative care in Queensland, supporting over 20 per cent of children and young people in state care.

We are also a leading provider of housing solutions for those facing housing stress and homelessness. As a registered housing provider, we have been delivering responsive housing outcomes for people and communities for over 35 years. We currently manage a portfolio of more than 1300 properties in Queensland, accommodating an estimated 3000 people.

Youth CONNECT supports young people who have exited or are exiting statutory care and are homeless or at risk of homelessness to build their resilience to homelessness. The program has a housing-first approach and emphasises education, employment and connection to community, which can influence their individual future trajectory towards achieving sustainable 'homefulness'. Through our team's dedication to providing holistic case management, housing, education and workplace support, we support this cohort of vulnerable young people as they transition to adulthood and independence.

Social Outcomes have acted as the intermediary for the design and development of the Social Benefit Bond. Social Outcomes are managing the registry and are the point of contact for investors.

Churches of Christ in Queensland ARBN 147 481 436 (incorporated in Queensland) is a legal body incorporated under the Letters Patent issued pursuant to the Religious Educational and Charitable Institutions Acts 1861-1959. Churches of Christ Housing Services Limited ABN 25 604 517 026 and is a not-for-profit company limited by guarantee and is a wholly owned subsidiary of Churches of Christ in Queensland.



Every child, young person and family deserves to grow, belong, connect and thrive in their community.

Connect with us at
cofc.com.au/youthconnect
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