

# QCOSS Commentary State Budget 2015-16

The 2015-16 State Budget revealed positive signs the Queensland Government is listening to the community services sector, however it is essential the sector and the community is engaged and consulted to ensure the needs of Queenslanders are adequately met.

It is a budget with many reform measures and pilot programs. To ensure the community gets the best possible value from this investment it is critical that these reforms and pilots are coordinated; learnings from them are shared; and the sector is integrally involved in codesigning and implementing them.

Managing the place-based approach evident in the budget measures will provide the ability to achieve better outcomes but will add another level of complexity. QCOSS would like to see governance structures at local levels that empower communities to find the best possible solutions to their unique situation.

These responses will rely on working together across agencies and sectors toward a shared community goal. While this is challenging the most successful approaches have an external coordinating body or role that can bring together the right people, at the right time, in the right place. One that can link and analyse needs, highlight gaps, and leverage existing investment to ensure value for money.

This budget has identified a broad array of initiatives aimed at improving social and economic outcomes for many, such as the Skilling Queenslanders for Work program, the Triple P Positive Parenting Program, domestic and family violence programs, and better health outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families.

QCOSS is pleased to see the reinstatement of programs such as Skilling Queenslanders for Work, which maximise social and economic participation of people on low incomes and people with complex needs, and has been proven to work. QCOSS is pleased to see that our call for programs to support transition to work in our election campaign has come to fruition.

The \$2 million to establish a maintenance and upgrade program for multipurpose and neighbourhood centres (\$12.2 million over four years) is the first step in further strengthening these essential community hubs. These centres have and will continue to provide a vital resource in communities, ensuring social connectedness and inclusion, service integration and community resilience.

The government's commitment to plan for financial resilience is also pleasing however funding is needed to ensure effective assistance is provided to low-income and vulnerable communities struggling with cost-of-living pressures.

The investment of \$31.3 million over four years, including \$5.2 million in new funding, to implement high priority recommendations of the *Domestic and Family Violence Taskforce Report* is welcomed. We look forward to the government's full response to this taskforce's recommendations and trust it will be influenced by their engagement with the sector.

QCOSS supports the funding of \$2 million over two years to establish three Social Benefit Bond (SBB) pilots and a further \$1 million in 2015-16 for a Readiness Fund to assist service providers to prepare for contracting through the SBB pilots. Piloting SBBs to tackle the issues of re-offending and homelessness and to fund services for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples using a payment by outcomes contracting approach will provide an opportunity to leverage private investment to tackle social issues. What will be critical, though, will be ensuring that target populations are included in the planning processes to guarantee that the outcomes that are used to define success are the things that those groups really need. Selecting the right outcomes is essential to ensure that short-term perverse outcomes are not achieved.

With so many positive measures QCOSS looks forward to working closely with the government to ensure codesign and implementation is done in a way that meets the need of Queenslanders.

## **Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples**

QCOSS welcomes the new initiatives and ongoing commitment of funding to strengthen discreet Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, including those listed below. It is positive to see the Department of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Partnerships listing its priorities in 2015-16 to include: employment and career opportunities; home ownership; reduction of alcohol-related violence; and wages reparations. Of most interest is the priority to “support communities in restoring social norms, re-establishing local authority and maximising local decision-making through the delivery of programs including Welfare Reform” and “leading the implementation of a whole-of-government Cultural Capability Framework”. These can only be achieved through close consultation with the communities and people whose lives are most impacted by the current environment.

Funding initiatives include:

- \$21 million over three years to establish a Stolen Wages Reparations Fund
- An additional \$8 million per annum for the continuation of the Welfare Reform initiative, including the Family Responsibilities Commission
- An additional \$7.3 million over four years for continued employment of 15 Indigenous rangers to work across the protected area estate
- \$805,000 for remote Indigenous service delivery to establish child safe houses in the communities at Torres Strait and Lockhart River
- \$1.4 million for remote indigenous communities in Coen and Bamaga to add and upgrade safe haven service infrastructure and improve child safe house service facilities
- \$5.6 million for the Local Fare Scheme for Cape York and Torres Strait Air Services, reinstating cheaper flights for Far North Queensland residents.

## **Child protection**

QCOSS is pleased the government is continuing to fund and support the implementation of child protection reform. It is vital that funding for prevention and early intervention programs remain at the heart of the reform process to see children and young people, and their families reach their full potential. We are hopeful the reform process will continue with a collaborative and codesign approach, underpinned by a sound understanding of the needs of families and children.

QCOSS welcomes the additional funding of \$500,000 for the development of a comprehensive workforce development strategy for the child protection and family support systems and for the development of a capacity-building strategy for non-government organisations as part of the Stronger Families Reforms. QCOSS also welcomes the state government’s plans to invest in a range of other areas related to child protection, such as intensive mental health care for young people, integrated housing, health and welfare support for social housing tenants, tenant advisory support services and parenting support programs which will have impacts on families and children at risk of coming into contact with the child protection system.

## **Community resilience**

QCOSS welcomes the \$40 million investment in 2015-16 to establish a Community Resilience Fund to support local governments in mitigating the impact of natural disasters and better protect vulnerable communities.

The government will also invest \$875,000 in maintaining an online Community Services Directory to provide social services sector professionals and individuals and families with easy access to information about services and referral points.

The Queensland Government has extended existing drought relief arrangements with a \$52 million Drought Assistance Package over four years to support drought affected communities across the state. This includes: \$1.5 million to continue community support measures such as mental health support workshops and interventions; \$2.5 million in increased funding for relief from fixed charges for electricity accounts that are used to pump water for farm or irrigation purposes during periods of drought; rebates for land rental and waiving of water licence fees for drought affected landholders and lessees; and freight subsidies and emergency water infrastructure rebates for producers and communities across the state.

## **Cost of living (including financial resilience and essential services)**

While no funding has been allocated to financial counselling or financial resilience programs this year, it is promising that the government has committed to developing and rolling out a \$16 million *Queensland Financial Resilience and Inclusion Action Plan* from 2016-17. QCOSS, Financial Counsellors Association of Queensland, Indigenous Consumer Assistance Network and the community sector look forward to working with the Queensland Government to develop this plan during the next year, to ensure effective assistance is provided to low-income and vulnerable communities experiencing financial stress and cost-of-living pressures.

It is also fantastic to see funding reinstated for an independent advisory service for Queensland tenants. This has been a critical gap in recent years, and the ability for vulnerable tenants to access independent information, advice and advocacy services will assist many experiencing problems around energy, water and cost-of-living issues associated with their tenancies.

However, it is disappointing cost-of-living outcomes in relation to electricity, water and transport are likely to remain static or worsen for many vulnerable people.

Electricity concessions remain poorly targeted with Queensland's most vulnerable households (including single Newstart recipients and other Health Care Card holders) continuing to miss out altogether. The electricity concessions have not been increased this year for eligible Seniors and Pensioner Concession Card holders, as they have been in previous years. This is despite the fact that many eligible concession card holders will be paying higher electricity bills in 2015-16, due to the 40 per cent increase in the fixed charges from 1 July this year.

The \$1 per annum increase in the Gas Rebate is unlikely to make a difference to households hit by increases in both electricity and gas fixed charges.

While QCOSS is supportive of actions to assist low-income people through energy efficiency and access to alternative technologies, these rising fixed charges are leaving people increasingly powerless to take action to control their bills.

With new energy market reforms such as network tariff reform and electricity price deregulation on the horizon for Queenslanders, it is critical that there is sufficient investment in education, support and technology to assist vulnerable Queenslanders with rising costs and growing complexity. The budget papers reveal the former government spent \$3.3 million on a Consumer Education Campaign for electricity price deregulation which has not gone ahead this year. It will be important in future years for investment in this area to be directed towards achieving sustainable outcomes for consumers and communities who are most vulnerable to change.

Water concessions for pensioners in South East Queensland have also not changed despite the state government's South East Queensland Bulk Water Price increasing by 8 per cent in some council areas and continuing to rise until 2017. This concession remains poorly targeted as it excludes Health Care Card holders, regional households and tenants who are increasingly being billed by landlords for the cost of their water usage.

### **Culturally and linguistically diverse peoples**

While QCOSS welcomes progress on the multicultural recognition legislation, with additional funding of \$770,000 per annum set aside, the establishment of a multicultural advisory group structure ensuring all state government policy, programs and service responses comply with cultural diversity policy is critical. The commitment from the Department of Education and Training to developing a needs-based allocative model is welcomed and QCOSS strongly recommends that there be a consistent, state-wide approach to this task.

Additional funding of \$293,000 over three years for community engagement by the Anti-Discrimination Commission of Queensland is also welcomed, as is the continuation of \$1 million in funding per annum to support diverse cultural celebrations and events across the state.

### **Disability**

In keeping with the election commitment, the government is providing additional funding of \$1.9 million in 2015-16 to fund a National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) launch site in Queensland which will enable up to 600 people with disability to progressively commence access to reasonable and necessary services and fund NDIS participant and provider readiness activities for the launch.

The launch will provide an opportunity to test the scheme outside a metropolitan centre and while we are still waiting on further detail about the location we welcome the opportunity to work with the Department of Disability Services and local communities as they prepare for the changes the NDIS will bring.

We remain attentive to ensuring there is no gap in service delivery for Queenslanders with disability prior to the full national rollout in 2019.

Other highlights of the 2015-16 Disability Services Budget include:

- \$9 million to build or upgrade accommodation for people with an intellectual or cognitive disability and severely challenging behaviours.
- \$6.6 million to continue the Elderly Parent Carer Innovation Trial aimed at assisting elderly parent carers to organise accommodation for an adult son or daughter who has a disability and they can no longer care for them.
- \$6 million to build or purchase supported accommodation for people with disability living in inappropriate settings.
- \$3.1 million for supported accommodation in Cairns, Townsville, Wynnum and Banyo.

### **Domestic and family violence**

QCOSS welcomes the whole-of-government investment of \$31.3 million over four years in initiatives to address the high priority recommendations of the Domestic and Family Violence Taskforce. We are pleased that this includes \$5.2 million in new funding but are concerned that a large share of the total funding involves the reallocation of existing funds. We would be concerned if any reallocation of funds negatively impacts existing services for domestic and family violence victims and would argue that this requires a level of transparency to ensure this does not occur. Any reallocation of internal funding should involve consultation with the sector to ensure there aren't any unintended negative consequences.

Within the funds allocated to address the taskforce's recommendations are a number of measures specific to relevant government departments, including:

- The Department of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Partnerships have allocated additional funding of \$131,000 in 2015-16 to coordinate work with other agencies to develop an integrated service delivery response model for domestic and family violence services in a discrete Indigenous community.
- The Department of Communities, Child Safety and Disability Services have reprioritised \$4.2 million over four years from 2015-16 to develop integrated service delivery responses, review of domestic violence among people with disability, review of elder abuse and establish the Domestic and Family Violence Taskforce Response Team.
- The Department of Communities, Child Safety and Disability Services have reprioritised \$8 million of funding over two years from 2015-16 to meet the capital costs of establishing two 72-hour crisis shelters in Brisbane and Townsville for women and children escaping violence.
- The Department of Housing and Public Works have internally reallocated \$300,000 in funding in 2015-16 to develop integrated service delivery models in three locations (one urban, one regional and one discrete Indigenous community).

- The Department of Housing and Public Works have also internally reallocated \$11.9 million in funding over four years from 2015-16 to establish two additional 72-hour crisis shelters in Brisbane and Townsville.
- The Department of Justice and Attorney-General have allocated \$3 million over four years from 2015-16 comprising \$2.1 million of additional funding to establish an independent Domestic and Family Violence Death Review Board and expand the Domestic and Family Violence Review Unit. \$888,000 of funding has also been reprioritised to review the *Domestic and Family Violence Protection Act 2012* and support integrated service responses.
- The Department of Premier and Cabinet have allocated funding of \$3.3 million in 2015-16 of which \$3 million is additional funding for Queensland's contribution to a national communication campaign to reduce violence against women and their children. \$327,000 of funding has been reprioritised for a six-month trial of a specialist domestic and family violence Magistrate.

To ensure that each of these measures are effective we recommend that genuine consultation and codesign with affected stakeholders is undertaken to be certain that service models or institutional arrangements are effective in meeting the needs of women and children impacted by family and domestic violence.

QCOSS welcomes the increased investment of \$1.1 million in 2015-16 to expand the Domestic Violence Duty Lawyer Service across Queensland. We are concerned, though, that this appears to only commit funds for one year for the expansion. A lack of certainty about funding beyond 2015-16 makes it difficult for organisations to plan service delivery and makes it difficult to retain experienced staff. QCOSS strongly supports the use of longer-term service agreements to enable greater certainty for service providers.

## **Early childhood**

QCOSS welcomes significant additional investment of \$53 million over the next four years in education and training across Queensland for early childhood education and care, school education and training and skills development, particularly where support is provided to those who need it most.

Over the next four years, \$14.2 million will be allocated to ensure kindergartens have access to additional support and resources to include children with complex disabilities in kindergarten programs. This is an important investment for children with additional needs in accessing early childhood education and meeting targets for universal access for all children. We would like to also see an ongoing commitment to promoting the inclusion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and migrant and refugee children and families in early childhood and kindergarten programs and increasing participation rates.

Also allocated is \$1.6 million to support early childhood educators to provide inclusive care to children with social, emotional or behavioural needs. This is an important initiative to support the inclusion of children with additional needs, such as children affected by domestic and family violence and child protection issues.

We welcome additional investment of \$10 million to establish much needed early years service in high-need areas such as Redlands, Inala, Gordonvale and Tara.

Investment of \$11.5 million in capital works expenditure to renew early childhood facilities, including \$3.3 million for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities' schools delivering the pre-prep program and \$8.2 million for 44 early childhood services across Queensland, will also assist in ensuring that no matter where a child lives they will have access to the same resources, supports and opportunities for education and learning.

Investment in innovation in early childhood through a number of pilot projects aimed at integration of services in family support and early childhood, with \$2.3 million invested over six locations, is also positive. Additional innovation in learning support for prep year in school has been highlighted. We look forward to understanding more detail around these pilots as they are initiated and hope that they are community-driven in their implementation. We also welcome the ongoing attention on transition to school through the continuation of resources and initiatives focused on ensuring continuity of learning.

## **Employment**

There is a strong focus on employment in the budget with a mix of programs and funding targeted to immediate assistance for vulnerable people, as well as a series of programs investing in creating future jobs in new and growth industries, such as research and development and innovation.

QCOSS is particularly pleased with the \$240 million investment announced to reinstate the successful Skilling Queenslanders for Work program, which assists in the transitioning of vulnerable Queenslanders into work through a suite of targeted skills and training programs. This program represents a positive return on investment to the state and will start having an impact from August 2015 when successful projects begin to be announced.

Opportunities for apprentices and trainees are also being expanded through payroll tax rebates and exemptions, representing \$15 million in foregone revenue.

## **Families**

QCOSS welcomes the investment of \$6.6 million to deliver free parenting support programs for Queensland families through the Department of Communities, Child Safety and Disability Services. The Triple P Positive Parenting Program (PPP) has a strong reputation as a program that offers structure and strategies to families to assist them in parenting from birth to early adulthood.

While PPP is beneficial as a program and has been rigorously evaluated, it is important to remember that one-size does not fit all. Families in Queensland come in all shapes and sizes and embrace a lot of diversity and cultures. Parents need access to flexibility in terms of support that acknowledges their individual needs and context.

QCOSS is pleased that the state government is providing the money to meet the funding shortfall to continue the operation of the existing Queensland Children and Family Centres. The additional investment of \$38.8 million over four years will ensure that families in areas of high socio-economic disadvantage continue to access a range of services to support their child's development. QCOSS strongly supports initiatives that are targeted at the early years of a child's life, as these have been shown to be the most effective in achieving better outcomes for people experiencing disadvantage.

## **Health**

The Queensland Government will invest \$14.2 billion in health in 2015-16 to meet growth in demand for services, an increase of \$2.3 billion over four years.

It will refocus the health system on patient safety and look to employ more nurses and midwives. It will also invest record amounts in health and the ambulance services to address key areas of demand and reverse cuts to frontline services.

It is good to see a focus to rebuild preventative health programs that have suffered from a lack of investment. The budget contains \$27.2 million over four years to take action against Type 2 diabetes and chronic disease through the Health for Life program. It also sees an investment of \$46.1 million over four years for the Healthier Queensland Action Plan which includes a Queensland Health Promotion Commission and select committee, reinvigorating the Biala Sexual Health Clinic in Brisbane and also to develop a statewide sexual health strategy. Over three years \$2.5 million will also be spent to enable Health Consumers Queensland to independently advocate for patients and their families.

A new Enhancing Regional Hospitals program has been introduced which will address some of the state's declining regional health infrastructure, with \$180 million over four years to upgrade and repair the Roma, Hervey Bay, Gladstone and Caloundra hospitals.

Another \$361.2 million over four years will go towards reducing the number of people waiting longer than recommended to see a specialist.

## **Housing and homelessness**

QCOSS applauds the Department of Housing and Public Works and Queensland Health for their commitment to work collaboratively to deliver an integrated health, housing and support program to address service gaps experienced by social housing tenants experiencing mental health issues. This project will receive a total of \$2.1 million over two years in internally reallocated funds, with approximately \$1.2 of that coming from Q Health and the remainder from Housing and Public Works. It is imperative that this project is evaluated for its effectiveness and ability to be replicated in design.

We are delighted to see delivery of another election promise in the \$26.4 million commitment over four years to fund tenancy advice services.

Such a service is crucial to assisting people to access and sustain housing, and we would ask the government to ensure that the successful tenderer or tenderers can provide a service which is truly independent and tenant-focused.

The Department of Housing and Public Works has also committed \$12.2 million over four years to fund its component of the response to the Domestic and Family Violence Taskforce Report. This includes the provision of two crisis shelters for women and children in immediate need in Brisbane and Townsville and to develop three integrated service delivery programs in various locations. We encourage the Department to work closely with the sector in the design and development of these programs to ensure their appropriateness and effectiveness.

While we are pleased to see the state matching the Commonwealth's National Partnership Agreement on Homelessness funding over the next two years, now more than ever, with the Federalism review underway, it is important for the states to advocate for continued long-term federal support for these vital services. We urge the Department of Housing and Public Works to grant minimum two year contracts to services who have been struggling to retain staff and maintain efficient service delivery after a number of years of transitional arrangements. Any future negotiations with the Commonwealth should focus on a commitment to five year service agreements with inbuilt flexibility to deliver outcomes innovatively.

Finally, though we welcome the commitment to frontline service delivery addressing the needs of women and children escaping domestic violence, and young people, we urge the department to work closely with the sector to ensure that changes to the funding mix don't result in new and different gaps in services.

## **Justice**

QCOSS welcomes the Department of Justice and Attorney General's commitment of \$8.7 million over the next four years to reintroduce the Special Circumstances and Murri Courts, and the Drug Diversionary model, which offer alternatives to prison sentences for people who are disadvantaged or who have complex needs. We also support the significant investment of \$23.6 million over four years to reinstate court ordered youth justice conferencing, and to research enhanced models of delivery. We hope that in future budgets, with a commitment to such programs, there will be no further need for investment in prison beds.

We are also delighted to see that \$11.8 million will be invested over four years to continue the delivery of prisoner reintegration services to reduce re-offending. We note with interest the request for an additional \$3 million from the Commonwealth National Partnership Agreement on Homelessness funds, and support this request in acknowledgment of the need for specialised support services to establish and sustain tenancies for people exiting prison, and the crucial importance of housing in reducing recidivism.

More than \$4 million is being invested over four years across a number of justice initiatives that will form part of the response to the *Not Now, Not Ever Domestic and Family Violence Taskforce Report*.

This includes \$1.1 million to expand the Domestic Violence Duty Lawyers Service through Legal Aid, and the establishment of the Domestic Violence Court at Southport. QCOSS also welcomes the re-funding of five Environmental Defenders Offices, which will offer free legal support to individuals and groups seeking to protect the environment in the public interest.

QCOSS supports many of the legislative reviews and amendments put forward by the Department of Justice and Attorney General, and would welcome the opportunity to work with the department to ensure diverse input into consultation, including proposals to improve access to interpreters in the justice system.

QCOSS also supports the investment of additional funding of \$3.1 million over three years for an independent body to publish crime statistics for all criminal offending across Queensland. It is critical that these statistics show demographic characteristics to enable us to better understand the risk factors for offending and victimisation. The availability of quality statistics will enable evaluation to ensure that we can track our performance in achieving better outcomes for disadvantaged Queenslanders.

## **Mental health**

The government has provided an additional \$11.8 million over four years to Rebuild Mental Healthcare for Young People. This will include additional day services and expanded youth residential mental health services in Townsville. The service will provide contemporary and appropriate care to young people in a setting that is closer to their family, friends and support networks and will also see young North Queenslanders cared for in an environment that is less restrictive than an acute mental health environment.

It is critical to ensure that ongoing funding is directed to the right areas and for the government to work closely with the sector to ensure appropriate responses for young people.

## **Transport and infrastructure (regional)**

QCOSS welcomes the additional funding of \$60 million over two years for the Transport Infrastructure Development Scheme to provide targeted investment in local government transport infrastructure. We also welcome the reallocation of \$24.1 million over two years towards regional transport.

This will provide important additional resources to support employment throughout Queensland and improve road infrastructure to ensure improved road networks in the regions.

QCOSS notes the government's commitment to continue to provide public transport concessions for interstate seniors card holders to the value of \$15.3 million over four years. While we support the delivery of public transport concessions to seniors we would argue that a review of concession eligibility should be undertaken as a priority to ensure that all concessions are targeted at those who need them the most and that concession products are well designed.

Additional funding of \$140 million over two years for the Building Our Regions - Regional Infrastructure Fund will be provided for critical infrastructure in regional Queensland. Funding will be targeted to meet the specific needs of communities and support economic development.

While QCOSS recognises the economic benefits of providing targeted infrastructure at a regional level, we would be keen to ensure that project selection and spending is aligned with the broader socio-economic objectives of community development and cohesion. We consider that a 'networked' approach – making holistic decisions as part of a system and considering potential network effects – is required to ensure effective project selection.

## **Seniors**

QCOSS welcomes the government's commitment to covering the federal shortfall in pensioner concessions, but is disappointed the opportunity has not been taken to review this funding and better target it to those most in need.

Funding of \$2 million over four years has been provided to implement the Queensland Government's election commitments to establish:

- a one-stop shop for seniors to provide them with access to information on services available
- an Advisory Taskforce on Residential Transition for Ageing Queenslanders which will report on the housing options for older people that enable improved choice, less complexity, affordability, fairness, and independence in ageing.