



Our Ref: CTS 01222/22

Department of
Environment and Science

Committee Secretary
Mental Health Select Committee
Parliament House
George Street
BRISBANE QLD 4000

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Dear Mental Health Select Committee Members

Thank you for the opportunity to provide a submission to the Inquiry into the opportunities to improve mental health outcomes for Queenslanders. These are matters of importance within the Department of Environment and Sciences (DES) portfolio of work, particularly as they relate to the experience of and impacts on young Queenslanders.

While DES does not have lead responsibility for direct strategies, policies, programs, or funding that directly address mental health, the department has a remit for whole-of-government youth policy and delivers a youth engagement Speak Out series to hear experiences and ideas directly from young Queenslanders on a range of important topics.

DES welcomes the Terms of Reference in examining aspects of mental health and recommends the Committee considers young people as a vulnerable group at significant risk. Mental health is a complex issue with a range of inter-related factors, and I thank the Committee for examining these important matters and I look forward to the findings of the Inquiry.

I have enclosed a detailed submission at Attachment 1 related to my department's Youth Engagement remit for the Committee's consideration.

Should the Committee require any further information, please contact Ms Susan Chrisp, Deputy Director-General, Corporate Services on telephone [REDACTED] or by email at [REDACTED]

Yours sincerely

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Attachment 1 – Submission from the Department of Environment and Science

The *Queensland Youth Strategy: Building young Queenslanders for a global future* (the strategy) sets the Queensland Government's vision for young people to thrive and actively contribute to Queensland's economic, civic, and cultural life. The strategy includes key priorities including mental health and an overarching commitment to meaningful and purposeful engagement with young people to hear their voices and actively involve them in shaping policies, programs and services that impact them.

Through the Speak Out events held across the State to date, young people have told us that mental health continues to be an important issue for them. Young people have also told us the importance of having their voices heard by decision makers and in shaping government business, and I take this opportunity to share the feedback heard from young people with the Committee.

Undoubtably, the primary concern of young people is the lack of accessible and affordable mental health services, including the hurdles young people must navigate to access them. These hurdles range from privacy concerns (parental consent, small communities, trustworthy GPs) to physical barriers such as transportation options, lack of bulk-billing GPs for referrals and long waiting lists.

Young people also told us that the stigma of poor mental health makes it difficult for a 'soft-entry point' to get help, be it with a friend, a teacher, or a family member. They felt that there is poor acknowledgement or understanding of the impacts to those suffering mental health issues particularly in the education sector, where it was felt greater responsiveness and flexibility in teaching expectations is required.

We also heard that discrimination was a driver to mental stress. Racism, homophobia, a non-conforming gender identity, and socio-economic factors can play a part in both causing poor mental health and as a barrier in seeking help. Services which can provide tailored support are limited, particularly in regional and remote Queensland.

Young people shared their ideas and needs to support better mental health outcomes, including:

- more affordable options for young people to get help
- the need to actively work to remove the stigma of mental health at all levels of the community to open doors to healing
- removal of barriers for young people to seek help, particularly in small communities – services outside the community which are easily accessed without the requirement of parental consent
- ensuring people who support young people are trained/competent in the needs of First Nations people, LGBTIQ+ people and other diverse groups or that they can refer to another service
- developing a policy in schools where poor mental health is recognised as a barrier to learning, and education staff are equipped to direct to support
- educating young people on mental health, such as how to identify if you have a problem and how to seek help
- reducing the wait times or offer an intermediate option until space is available
- introducing a Mental Health Week in schools to build awareness.

The impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic have exacerbated the prevalence and impacts of these issues for young people, particularly with eating disorder behaviours being used to self-manage heightened psychological distress associated with the pandemic.

Presentations to mental health services during the 2021 Safer Schoolies Gold Coast response saw an increase in eating disorders and disordered eating in young people. This is reflected in research by the Butterfly Foundation that found that "people living with diagnosed eating disorders, along with children and adolescents, were at highest risk of relapsing into eating disorders during the pandemic"¹.

¹ <https://butterfly.org.au/news/worlds-most-comprehensive-literature-review-on-eating-disorders-and-disordered-eating-during-covid-reveals-high-prevalence-of-bingeing-and-restrictive-eating/>

While the impacts of COVID-19 for young people continue to be felt across all aspects of life, we acknowledge the resilience demonstrated by our youth in their ability to get through these tough times.

Our young people play a significant role in shaping our future, and through our networks, the department has actively encouraged young people to come forward and have their say through the Committee's public submission process, to ensure their stories and ideas are heard and valued in responding to these important matters. I encourage the Committee to also consider opportunities to engage young Queenslanders throughout the Inquiry process to enable their stories and voices to be heard.