

# State of the Sector 2022

Floods, COVID-19, cost of living pressures and the housing crisis:  
supporting Queensland's communities through a year of immense challenges



## About QCOSS

We are QCOSS (Queensland Council of Social Service), Queensland's peak body for the social service sector. Our vision is to achieve equality, opportunity and wellbeing for every person, in every community.

We believe that every person in Queensland – regardless of where they come from, who they pray to, their gender, who they love, how or where they live – deserves to live a life of equality, opportunity and wellbeing.

We are a conduit for change. We bring people together to help solve the big social issues faced by people in Queensland, building strength in numbers to amplify our voice.

We're committed to self-determination and opportunity for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

QCOSS is part of the national network of Councils of Social Service lending support and gaining essential insight to national and other state issues. QCOSS is supported by the vice-regal patronage of Her Excellency the Honourable Dr Jeannette Young AC PSM, Governor of Queensland.

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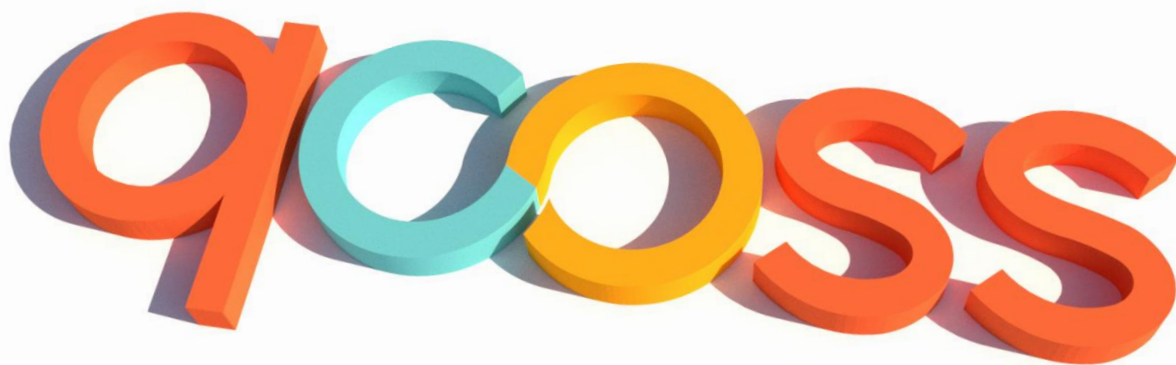
*QCOSS acknowledges Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people as the original inhabitants of Australia and recognises these unique cultures as part of the cultural heritage of all Australians. We pay respect to the Elders of this land; past and present.*

# Acknowledgements

This report relies on data from the 2022 Australian Community Sector Survey (ACSS). The ACSS was conducted by the Social Policy Research Centre at UNSW Sydney, as part of a partnership between the Australian Council of Social Service, the COSS network, and Bendigo Bank.

ACOSS have commissioned reports in connection with the ACSS data from the Social Policy Research Centre at UNSW Sydney. Those reports provide in-depth analysis on the ACSS in the national context, and will be available online as they are released progressively, (<https://www.acoss.org.au/australian-community-sector-survey/>).

In 2022, QCOSS conducted several in-depth interviews with community organisations working across Queensland. These interviews were developed into a series of case studies, and are featured throughout this report to profile particular ideas and challenges. QCOSS also conducted a series of 'town hall' workshop events throughout Queensland, which were attended by 180 social service professionals. We are very grateful to the people who generously gave their time to speak with us, and who shared their insightful reflections.

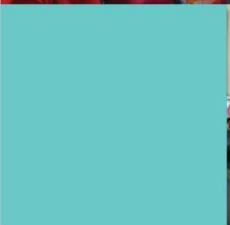
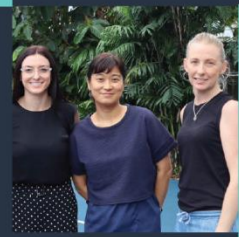




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## ■ Introduction

The social service sector is at the heart of every community across Queensland. We are part of the largest employer group in Queensland, with more than 131,000 dedicated staff working across more than 8,500 charities. The sector's essential work is supported by more than 328,000 volunteers.

The purpose of QCOSS' annual State of the Sector Report is to highlight emerging ideas, issues, and challenges identified by the social services sector, based on recent feedback and engagement.

This year's report paints a complex picture. The deepening cost of living and housing crises have had an undeniable impact. From the end of 2021 through to December 2022, there were roughly 1.7 million reported COVID-19 cases in Queensland.<sup>1</sup> Major flood events caused vast amounts of damage and destruction, which further compounded the worsening cost of living and housing pressures for many.

Queensland's communities struggled under the cumulative weight of these challenges, and community sector workers have reported a shift and expansion in the demographics of those in need. People with reliable incomes found it difficult to make ends meet and, in some circumstances, maintain housing. People already struggling with housing and cost of living pressures navigated increasingly complex personal and financial situations.

In light of these challenges, demand for services and complexity of need increased, while funding challenges remained. Community service providers had difficulty attracting and retaining employees and reported high levels of staff burnout. Many had to maintain service delivery while experiencing and recovering from natural disasters, and staff absenteeism due to COVID-19.

Workers assisted clients affected by floods, even while their own homes were at risk. They supported clients vulnerable to the impacts of COVID-19, while managing their own exposure to the virus. They helped members of the community navigate the housing and cost of living crises while, at times, feeling the

pressure of inflation, mortgage stress, low rental vacancy, and energy prices, themselves.

“...[the housing crisis] is impacting my staff. I've got staff that have struggled with homelessness. They've been in long term tenancies, had to leave, couldn't get accommodation, so they had to live with family or in temporary accommodation until they could find something. So that's continuing to impact on people who have jobs. Secure jobs.”

– Community sector senior manager

Difficult times, however, also brought communities closer together. We consistently heard that where services and members of the community joined together to provide support, the outcomes were powerful and effective:

“[The pressures faced by the communities we support are] really challenging for individuals but [it's] remarkable where communities have rallied around those who are vulnerable.”

– Community sector frontline worker

This report explores recent significant government investment into communities and the sector, along with data gathered on issues impacting service users, sector demand, service delivery, the workforce, disaster resilience and the role of the community sector. This report also asks, “where to from here?” In response to immense challenges, many in the sector emphasised the importance of collaboration, harnessing best practice and innovation, strategic advocacy and research, and sector capacity building. Throughout this report are real-life examples demonstrating how organisations in the sector are working together to help communities thrive.

## Government investment in 2022

In the face of considerable challenges throughout 2022, both the state and federal government made substantial commitments on housing, gender equality, human rights, and the social service sector. Such measures have highlighted how government can provide effective and much-needed reform and social support for communities and the social service sector.

Queensland's neighbourhood and community centres received a one-off funding boost early in the year to assist with increased demand as a result of COVID-19. The Queensland Government also announced an ongoing increase to funding for 127 neighbourhood and community centres from a minimum baseline of \$124,000 to \$230,000 per year.

In light of the rising costs of service delivery, community service providers across Queensland secured a significant funding boost when the Queensland Government announced an indexation rate of 5.07 per cent to be applied to service delivery agreements with non-government organisations. This was a considerable increase upon the initially proposed rate of 2.88 per cent. The Australian Government has also made significant commitments aimed at further supporting the community sector.<sup>2</sup>

In response to the housing crisis, and following ongoing advocacy from QCOSS together with other stakeholders, the Queensland Government convened a Housing Summit in October where they announced an increase of \$1 billion to the Housing Investment Fund. This was followed by the *Housing Summit Outcomes Report*, which announced a range of further housing relief measures including expanded tenancy sustainment responses, targeted loans and grants, and further funding to support temporary and emergency accommodation, homelessness outreach services, community engagement and awareness, cost of living relief, and funding to

support the review of the South-East Queensland Regional Plan.

These measures were in addition to those previously announced in the 2022-23 Queensland Budget and also coupled with the Australian Government announcement of the National Housing Accord and associated investment to boost social and affordable housing supply.

There were further steps taken to directly assist individuals. Households across the state received a one-off \$175 rebate applied to their electricity bills, along with other ongoing cost of living financial supports. Queenslanders affected by flooding events welcomed disaster recovery efforts, relief grants, and home buy-back offers. The Australian Government announced the establishment of an Economic Inclusion Advisory Panel, which will "provide advice to Government on economic inclusion, including policy settings, systems and structures, and the adequacy, effectiveness and sustainability of income support payments ahead of every federal Budget".<sup>3</sup>

QCOSS welcomed the efforts of the Queensland Government and other independent bodies to support the social service sector and Queensland communities. For example, in moving forward with the Path to Treaty; releasing the *Local Thriving Communities Action Plan*, the *Communities 2032* plan, the *Queensland Energy and Jobs Plan*, the *Good people. Good jobs: Queensland Workforce Strategy 2022-2032*, and the *Queensland Women's Strategy 2022-27*; addressing police responses for domestic and family violence victims; improving women's safety by beginning to implement recommendations from the *Hear Her Voice* report series and working towards better mental health systems for Queenslanders. We also strongly support the Queensland Human Rights Commission's recommendations for the Anti-Discrimination Act reform.

## Methodology

Qualitative and quantitative data for this report was obtained from a series of community sector engagement workshops (town halls) led by QCOSS, and the 2022 Australian Community Sector Survey (ACSS). QCOSS staff also conducted interviews with Queensland social service organisations, featured as case studies throughout this report.

### QCOSS town halls

The QCOSS town halls were held throughout July and August 2022 in Brisbane, Ipswich, Gold Coast, Gympie, Toowoomba, Rockhampton, Mackay, Townsville, and Cairns. A total of 180 community sector employees participated. This was nearly double the participation rate of 2021.

More than two-thirds of town hall participants were from regional areas. Participating organisations represented a diverse range of service areas, including neighbourhood centres; housing; child, family, and youth services; ageing; disability and community development.

Guided discussions focussed on sector impact, emerging issues, and capacity building needs. Participants were divided into small groups to respond to the following questions:

1. What are the biggest issues you are responding to in your community?
2. What are some examples of best practice/innovative service delivery in the way your organisation/community respond to issues/service gaps?
3. What's the sector's role in supporting community disaster resilience?  
How are you doing this now and what do you think is needed?

Responses from the small groups generated larger discussions within the room. Notes collected from these discussions were collated and themed using qualitative data analysis software, NVivo. The theming process was completed by QCOSS staff.

### Australian Community Sector Survey

This report also relies on data from the 2022 ACSS. The 2022 ACSS was conducted by the Social Policy Research Centre at UNSW, in partnership with the Australian Council of Social Service (ACOSS), the broader Council of Social Service network, and Bendigo Bank. The survey was open for response for a 5-week period from September 2022.

The Australian Council of Social Service (ACOSS) commissioned reports in connection with the ACSS data from the Social Policy Research Centre. Those reports will provide in-depth analysis on the ACSS in the national context. At the time of writing, the first report regarding sector demand was available for download from the ACOSS website.<sup>2</sup>

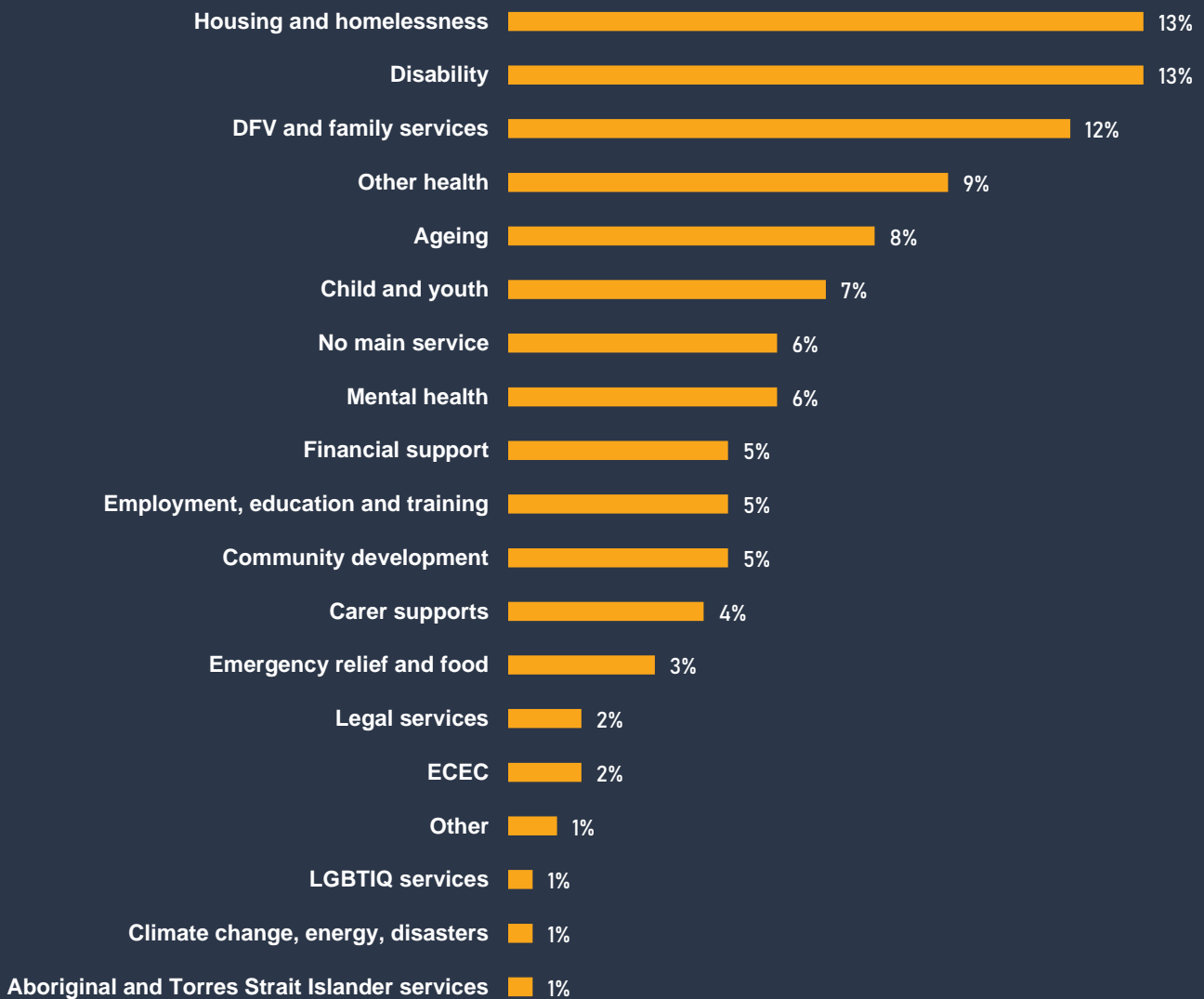
Small cell counts in the ACSS data were suppressed. Some of the total percentages within this report do not equate to 100 due to rounding. Some questions were optional or targeted towards specific respondents, and so response rates for specific questions varied.

Of the 1,476 ACSS respondents nationally, 327 respondents work in Queensland. While the Queensland response rate was significantly lower than the year prior (722), Queensland respondents made up 22.2 per cent of the national survey sample; the highest number of respondents compared to all other states and territories. Within this report, only data representing respondents who identified as working from Queensland was reviewed.

Respondents represented a wide range of organisations with respect to service delivery, with the top three providing services relating to housing and homelessness, disability, and domestic and family violence (DFV) and family (Figure 1).



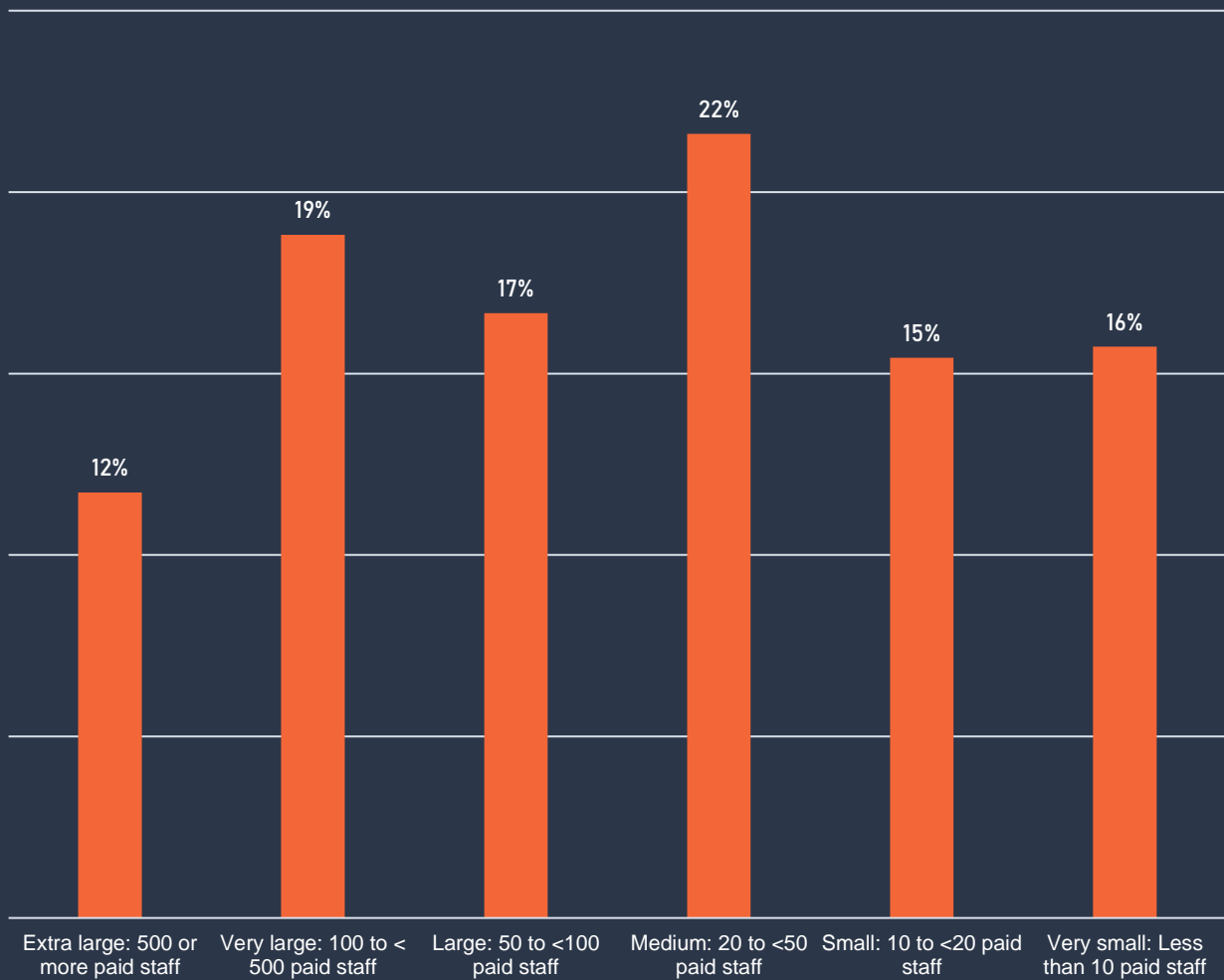
**Figure 1: Main service type of ACSS survey respondents**



Of the Queensland survey respondents, 12 per cent were CEOs, executives or general managers, 10 per cent were senior managers, 19 per cent were team leaders or program co-ordinators, 41 per cent had a position with a focus on frontline services. The Queensland sample also included people working in policy, projects, or research (8 per cent), office support or central services (6 per cent), on the board or governance committee of a community organisation (3 per cent), and 1 per cent identified their position as “other”. Of the Queensland respondents, 80 per cent reported that they have regular, direct contact with clients and service users and 72 per cent responded they had worked in the community sector for five years or more.

When asked where they worked, 51 per cent indicated they provide services in regional areas. Of the remaining Queensland respondents, 20 per cent worked in capital cities, 10 per cent worked in rural or remote areas, and 19 per cent indicated they worked across all areas of Queensland.

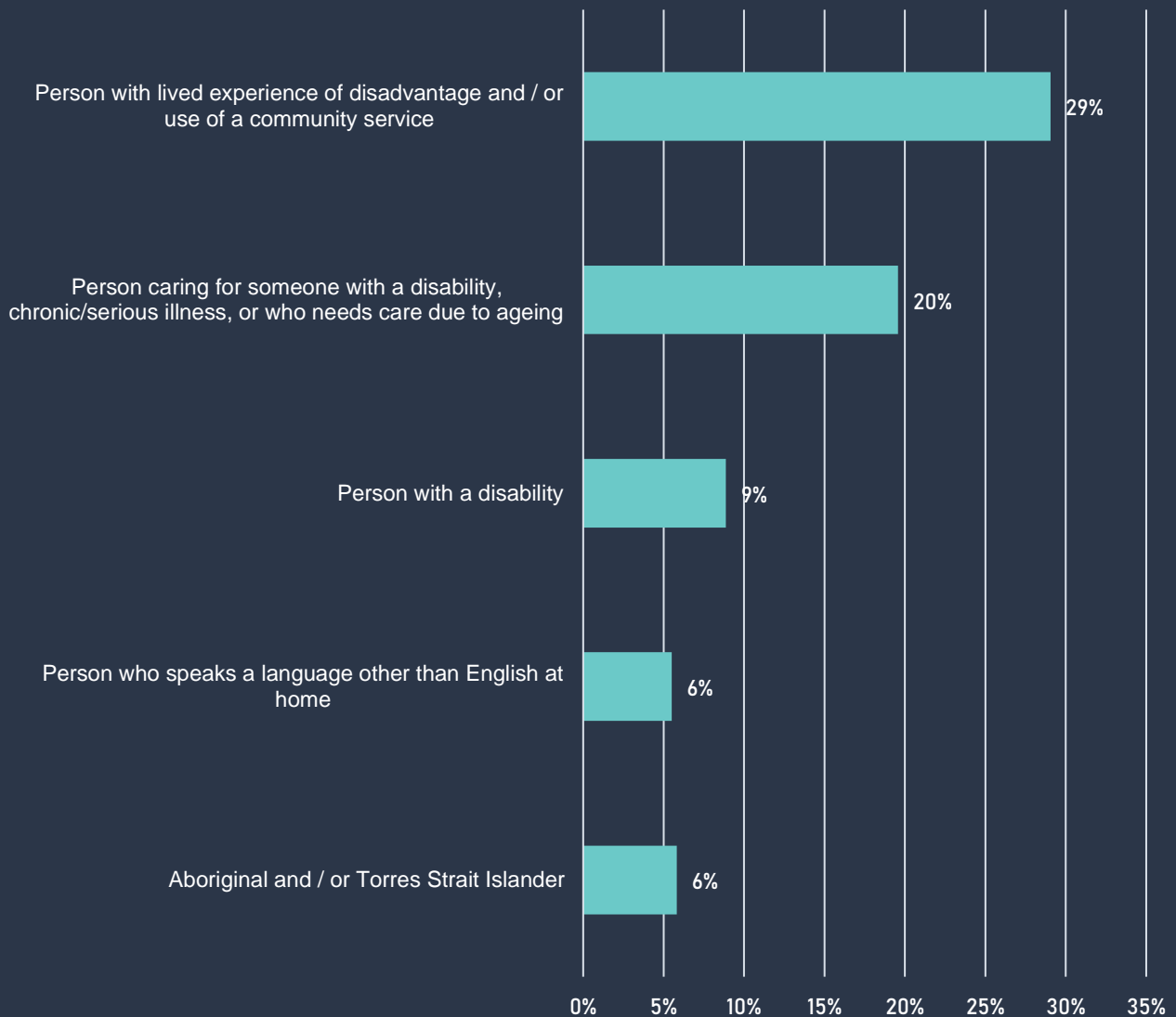
Figure 2: Approximately what size is your organisation?



Queensland respondents worked in a range of organisations, from “very small” to “extra large”, (Figure 2).

Of the Queensland respondents, 29 per cent identified as a person with lived experience of disadvantage and/or use of a community service (Figure 3). A further 20 per cent identified as a person caring for someone with a disability, chronic / serious illness, or who need care due to ageing, 6 per cent identified as a person who speaks a language other than English at home, and 6 per cent identified as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander.

**Figure 3: Do you identify as any of the following?**



ACSS respondents were also reflective of the highly feminised social sector workforce, where 75 per cent of the Queensland respondents identified as “female / woman”, 22 per cent identified as “male / man”, and 2 per cent identified as “Nonbinary, genderqueer, or not exclusively male or female”.

## ■ Issues impacting service users

This section provides a snapshot of key issues impacting service users, as identified by community sector workers. It was noted that for many in the community these issues are overlapping and compounding.

Themes include living affordability, housing, physical and mental health, unsafe home environments, transport, the digital divide and youth wellbeing. Ongoing disasters and extreme weather events were also raised as key issues. These, and the role the sector plays in developing community disaster resilience, are explored in a later section of this report.

### Living affordability

In 2021, 66 per cent of ACSS respondents indicated that cost of living pressures affected the people and communities their organisation supported. In 2022, this had leapt to 81 per cent, making it the biggest reported issue impacting service users. Most town hall participants also raised cost of living as a key issue for service users. Along with this, 39 per cent of ACSS respondents reported service users were impacted by inadequate support from Centrelink, and 31 per cent reported service users were impacted by difficulty accessing decent employment.

“ The growing cost of living, limited rental properties and the increasing cost of rentals has developed a whole new cohort of homelessness with families and employed people not being able to find housing as well as the unemployed. This in turn affects business as there are less employees available for work as they have nowhere to live... ”

- Community sector senior manager in a rural or remote area

“ The biggest pressure at the moment is the cost of living... Inflation is affecting many, many people in our community. ”

- Frontline community sector worker in a rural or remote area

“ Clients are going without medication, food, [and] school resources for their kids to pay electricity bills. ”

- Community sector team leader/co-ordinator

“ Sometimes the decision is whether to buy chilled food or not as [people] can't afford to keep the fridge on. We decided to extend the scope of financial assistance to include gas bottle refills so clients could cook on their BBQ. We have been supporting homeless families with tents and gas camping supplies. ”

- Frontline community sector worker in a rural or remote area

Sector feedback about ways to alleviate cost of living pressures included expanding mechanisms for targeted bill relief; increases to government pensions, payments and allowances; and reducing barriers to access emergency relief and other financial supports along with lowering eligibility criteria for those supports.

Findings about cost-of-living pressures were consistent with those outlined in the QCOSS [2022 Living Affordability in Queensland report](#), which found that low-income households were experiencing severe financial pressure due to significant inflation, rising housing and energy costs and lagging wages. It reported that many households cannot make meaningful savings to cover unplanned expenses and emergencies and become “...vulnerable to increasing levels of debt, often from predatory lenders”.<sup>4</sup>

## Housing

Data from the QCOSS Queensland Social Housing Register 2022 Data Release Evidence Brief<sup>5</sup> showed that, as of June 2017, the total number of household applications for social housing was 15,657. As of 30 June 2022, that figure had risen to 27,437 total household applications, representing 958 individuals. Of those, 12,326 applications were from households that included one or more people who identified as living with a disability. There were 14,605 household applications where the applicants were flagged as homeless or at risk of homelessness. Over five years, the number of applicant households which included persons who identified as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander increased from 3,545 (22.6 per cent of applications) to 9,676 (35.3 per cent of applications). The average number of months an application was on the register increased from 15.5 months in 2017 to 27.9 months in 2022.

The number of Queenslanders experiencing homelessness has increased by 22 per cent over the past four years.<sup>6</sup> Vacancy rates across the state are at historic lows, and low-income households spend a large percentage of their income on housing costs. Community sector workers consistently raised housing as a key challenge, with 77 per cent of ACSS respondents indicating that access to affordable housing / homelessness affected the people and/or communities their organisation supports.

“ I've been doing this sort of work for about 18 years now, and this is the hardest I've ever seen it... I know it'll get better, but I don't know when because it feels like it's been hard for a long time... you get opportunities to ease the pressure for a certain period of time... but we used to get people walking out of here and we'd help them get a lease in place. That's really hard to do now. ”

- Frontline community sector worker from regional Queensland

“ We live in a flood zone with crocodiles, and people are sleeping next to rivers because there's nowhere else for them to go. ”

- Frontline community sector worker

Feedback received through town halls and the ACSS painted a complex situation where service providers are finding it harder to secure housing for Queensland's most vulnerable communities, and where service users are increasingly distressed or without hope.

“ It's really hard to get into housing at the moment. A lot of people don't have enough money to get by, especially if you're on JobSeeker. ”

- Frontline community sector worker

“ The rental and accommodation crisis is hitting hard, with people now amongst the "lucky" if they are able to secure a tent or caravan. ”

- Community sector team leader/co-ordinator

“ [There's a] significant increase in young people sleeping rough with no hope for accommodation in 2022 or the foreseeable future. ”

- Community sector executive

Respondents stated that unaffordable or insecure housing was often the root cause of other compounding challenges, and housing concerns impacted particular people in challenging ways.

**“ The pressure on people to access or maintain affordable housing is impacting on all other areas of people’s lives. Housing instability has increased mental health presentations, [DFV], financial distress, [and the] inability to afford basic needs such as medications, food, [and] transport. ”**

- Frontline community sector worker

**“ Service providers in the disability field are finding it increasingly difficult to find suitable housing for people with disability. ”**

- Community sector team leader/co-ordinator

As highlighted in other sections of this report, the housing crisis is also impacting community sector staff personally.

Town hall participants and ACSS respondents called for more affordable housing stock, better avenues to access suitable long-term housing for people living with a disability, and the establishment of more purpose built emergency and transitional housing.

Secure housing across Queensland is an ongoing focus for QCOSS. We will continue to work with the sector and government to end Queensland’s housing crisis. QCOSS welcomes recent commitments from both the federal and state governments to invest in housing supply and notes the growing willingness to address the crisis. However, it remains the case that much more rapid planning, investment and action is required.



# Case study 1 | Winter Shelter

Insights from Lifeline Darling Downs and Southwest Queensland, Toowoomba

A few years ago, staff working from the Toowoomba Housing Hub wanted to find a way to do more for their clients.

People who were experiencing homelessness in the region were struggling to navigate the cold in Toowoomba's icy winter months. Anna Falconer, Lead Assessor with Lifeline Darling Downs who works from within the Housing Hub,\* said, "...they wanted to be warm, they wanted to be safe, and they wanted to be seen."

From there, Winter Shelter Toowoomba was launched in 2021. The program is affiliated with Stable One, who co-ordinate a similar program in Victoria. The program operates with the support of about 250 volunteers and eight churches. With the churches' combined resources across the week, they provide shelter for up to ten people throughout winter. People referred into the program can enjoy dinner, a space to socialise, a warm bed, breakfast, and shower and laundry facilities.

Anna explained, "...the volunteers cook incredible home cooked meals... and you know, sometimes it's the simple things. One lady said to me, *'It's just so nice to eat something hot... and something that has been cooked, and it's not take away, or sort of rubbish food.'*"

With more stability, safety and healthy routines in place, Anna said it became easier to support clients and help them to achieve good longer term outcomes, "...they're getting that good sleep, then we're able to get things done, like getting their ID sorted, getting housing

applications finished – having really good conversations about what the options actually are for them, whereas we couldn't do that before because they were just so exhausted all the time."

Along with the Winter Shelter Toowoomba program, further collaborative and generous efforts from the community helped to establish a local caravan model for 2022. One caravan was donated by a local community charity, and a further two were donated by members of the community for the duration of the three month 2022 Winter Shelter program. The caravans catered to women and children, who were also linked with case management services as part of the initiative.

The Toowoomba Housing Hub covered the weekly rent owing to the caravan park through their brokerage funds, and the case management service covered cleaning and maintenance costs associated with use of the van. The Housing Hub, the case management service, and the caravan park maintained good relationships with one another and worked respectfully together to ensure smooth operation of the initiative.

\*Since the time of writing, Anna Falconer has moved on to a new role with a different organisation within the community sector, and no longer works with Lifeline.

## Health

As communities continued to live with COVID-19, health concerns were front of mind. Of the ACSS respondents, 47 per cent reported that the people and communities their organisation supports were impacted by sickness and/or chronic health conditions, and 40 per cent reported impacts from a lack of health services. Qualitative feedback included concerns about the lack of health services in regional, rural and remote areas.

Substantial wait times to see doctors, and health issues going untreated are central concerns raised by the community services sector. There were also concerns about the ability of community members to access basic health services where transport was unavailable or difficult to access.

**“...health access is really difficult. There’s not a lot of allied health services or other resources for people in need, but there’s a high percentage of need. So, lots of people with diabetes, renal failure... complex health needs that just continue to get worse and worse with no kind of ongoing support for them available.”** - Frontline community sector worker

Survey respondents and town hall participants also spoke about barriers to access NDIS assistance including slow application processes, inflexibility, insufficient funding, and sometimes concerns around the quality of services provided under the NDIS program.

Many respondents commented that the impacts of COVID-19, the housing crisis, living affordability issues, and recent extreme weather events, had profoundly affected mental health in their communities. Of the ACSS respondents, 59 per cent reported that their organisation assists people and communities who were impacted by a lack of mental health support, and 59 per cent also reported social isolation as a major impact.

**“Issues with suicide ideation and powerlessness have increased in relation to housing.”** - Frontline community sector worker

**“I see people daily that are feeling overwhelmed with the consistent issues they are dealing with whether they be disasters, housing, cost of living, food insecurity etc. It appears that many people are at breaking point.”**  
- Frontline community sector worker

**“Regional areas don't have the capacity to support clients requiring assistance with mental health conditions.”**  
- Regional community sector team leader/co-ordinator working in DFV and family services

Concerns about worsening mental health in Australia were also reflected in Suicide Prevention Australia research published in December 2022. It found that as at November 2022, the cost of living and personal debt were the number one issues driving elevated distress nationwide, followed by family and relationship breakdown, and social isolation and loneliness. Distress over housing affordability also increased significantly, and about one-in-three Australians knew someone in their personal life or networks who had died by or attempted suicide in the past 12 months.<sup>7</sup>

Social isolation of service users was also a large concern for the sector. This came up particularly in the context of living in regional, rural or remote areas where transport can be difficult to access, and also in the context of the pandemic.



**“The flow on effects from COVID to the influenza season [have] seen clients take a very cautious approach about reengaging back into their communities.”** – Community sector executive working in ageing

Sector feedback raised concerns on access to mental health care support, and lengthy referral processes. It was raised that more mental health care services are especially needed for children, and for people experiencing addiction to alcohol and other drugs.

## Unsafe home environments

Of the ACSS respondents, 54 per cent reported the communities and people their organisation supported were impacted by unsafe home environments. A number of town hall participants and ACSS respondents raised concerns about domestic and family violence in relation to the broader context of the housing crisis.

**“Housing has impacted safety for women by requiring them to remain in unsafe homes...”**  
– Community sector senior manager

**“The impact on inadequate and inappropriate housing has significant flow on impact on our demand for services in the DFV space and inability to support people effectively.”**  
– Community sector worker in DFV and family services

Respondents were concerned about, low capacity in domestic violence refuges, difficulties securing affordable ongoing accommodation for people seeking to leave situations involving DFV, and a skills shortage in the DFV sector. Qualitative feedback suggested a general increase in people experiencing domestic and family violence.

### Background:

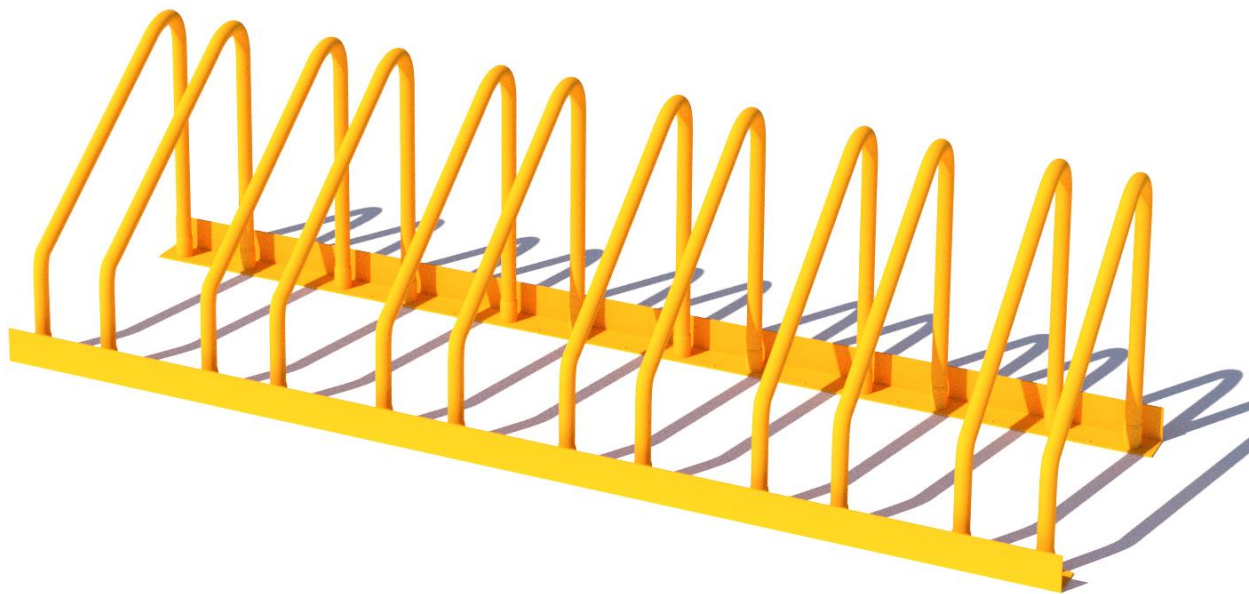
The Queensland Audit Office Report, “Report 5: 2022-23, Keeping people safe from domestic and family violence,”<sup>8</sup> outlined that in 2021-22, 139,000 DFV occurrences were recorded by Queensland police—an increase of nearly 48 per cent in the last 6 years. It noted that up to 80 per cent of DFV occurrences are not reported to police, and acknowledged it is unclear whether increased reporting to police is an indication of an increase of DFV in the community, or more willingness to report. The QAO warned of an overloaded system under pressure and urged for a more holistic case management approach to DFV, along with more collaboration and co-ordination between government and non-government entities. The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare also raised concerns about the potential increase in incidences of DFV because of the COVID-19 pandemic in their report “Family, domestic and sexual violence service responses in the time of COVID-19”.<sup>9</sup>

## Transport

Across Queensland, a common challenge was reliable access to transport. Feedback indicated that transport access challenges are particularly pronounced in regional, rural and remote areas where key services are also often further away from residences than they are in urban areas. One service provider explained that when you don't have access to transport, 25 kilometres can feel like "a different country".

**“ You get people [engaging in] risky behaviour like hitchhiking... and driving unregistered unroadworthy cars and all those things that happen in a remote community... and they're just getting from home to their doctor's appointment... it's not as though they're going for any kind of enjoyment... they're just doing their weekly shopping.”** – Frontline community sector worker

Without transport options, accessing essential services, school, social engagements, and employment opportunities is difficult, and this can significantly compound feelings of social isolation. Sector workers reported that finding accessible and appropriate transport was particularly challenging for people living with a disability across both cities and regional areas.



# Case study 2 | Community bus service

Rollingstone Community Centre, Rollingstone

The Rollingstone Community Centre serves a district of roughly 1500 people stretching from Leichardt Creek in the south to Crystal Creek in the north and Paluma in the west.

Approximately one hour from Rollingstone, district residents can access major supermarkets, hospitals, medical specialists and other key service providers in Townsville. One hour, that is, if you have access to transport.

Like many rural and remote places in Queensland, Rollingstone and its surrounds, has no public transport. Taxis and other transport options in the area can be too expensive for many, so getting to a major service hub like Townsville can be costly and difficult.

In 2007 the Centre received a one-off government grant to cover the cost of a weekly bus-hire service. The initiative was hugely successful and, when the funding ended in 2009, "...there were a lot of sad, disappointed people," said Rollingstone Community Association President, Sue von Wald.

Knowing the community's significant need, in 2011, the Centre used \$15,000 of its own funds to buy a second-hand bus. A small grant covered the initial operating costs. The bus service is driven by volunteers and fully managed by the Centre. Proceeds from the service, alongside other Centre income and savings, help to ensure that it's sustainable; when the first bus needed to be replaced in 2021, the centre was able to cover its costs.

The bus offers a weekly service for the Rollingstone and Northern Beaches community, and its impact has been profound. The bus is available for private hire at a rate of \$50 per day plus fuel. It is regularly hired by local schools, and is also made available to a local youth group at no cost (other than the fuel). A return ticket to Townsville on the weekly Community Bus Service is \$20, and it offers a parcel pick up service for \$5. To travel the same route to Townsville in a taxi, it's up to \$300 one way.

Chris Martin, Centre Manager, described receiving a call from a member of the community recently, "...they said to me, 'I've got no transport, I've got a young child, and I've got appointments that I need to go to.' By the end of the conversation the angst in the woman's voice had gone and she had booked herself in every fortnight for the bus".

Over time, the bus has become a key asset for the community, supporting access to fundamental services, creating stronger community connection, and reducing the risk of social isolation. For this reason, the Centre works hard to ensure the bus can be relied upon year-round. Chris explained "...basically the only time the bus doesn't run is on the week of Christmas".

The regular bus service passengers have now formed a closeknit community and take group trips together. One upcoming trip is to see a musical followed by a meal, while another is to the markets and Aviary at Queens Gardens in Townsville. For Sue, the bus provides "an exercise in enjoying life, and a nice life".

## Youth wellbeing

In the midst of unprecedented challenges, many in the sector expressed alarm for Queensland's young people. Concerns about youth wellbeing ranged from developmental delays and difficulties accessing education due to the impacts of COVID-19 to disengagement, mental ill-health, suicide, alcohol and other drug use, impacts of the youth justice system, youth homelessness, and child protection matters arising in connection with the housing crisis.

**“ Covid realities have made education more challenging for kids from troubled families. ”**

- Community sector worker in child and youth services

**“ The cost of housing plays a major part in young people moving forward, especially those who are on Centrelink. They don't get a look in when applying for private rentals. ”**

- Frontline community sector worker in housing and homelessness services

**“ The biggest issue I think is chronic and that's about the trauma that's behind that. Another issue we have is suicide. Suicide is pretty prevalent in our community and it is always the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people that are taking their own lives. So I think we need to address the trauma and... grief and loss. We don't deal with that well as a culture... I don't know how we fix that, but we need to do something around that. ”**

- Sector worker in community controlled youth services

Feedback highlighted a need for further funding for existing youth specialist services, more specialist services such as counselling specifically for children, and a need for more preventative and wrap-around services for young people who need support or who are engaging in harmful or dangerous behaviour.

**“ [The] youth homelessness sector requires a significant injection of investment to ensure continuation of service delivery and access to housing... ”** - Community sector executive in a regional area

As outlined in the [QCOSS Queensland State Budget ask for youth services](#), the Queensland Government allocated funding to 65 programs in 2020-21 aimed at “young people aged 10-17 years who are in or at risk of entering the youth justice system”.

Of these programs, only four operate state-wide. This means that only a limited number of programs are available to young people in any part of Queensland. Furthermore, not all of these programs are available to children under the age of 14-years old. Due to the lack of available data, it is not clear how many of these programs, if any, would be able to offer emergency accommodation to children under the age of 14-years old or accept referrals from the policy or other agencies on a 24/7 basis.

## Digital divide

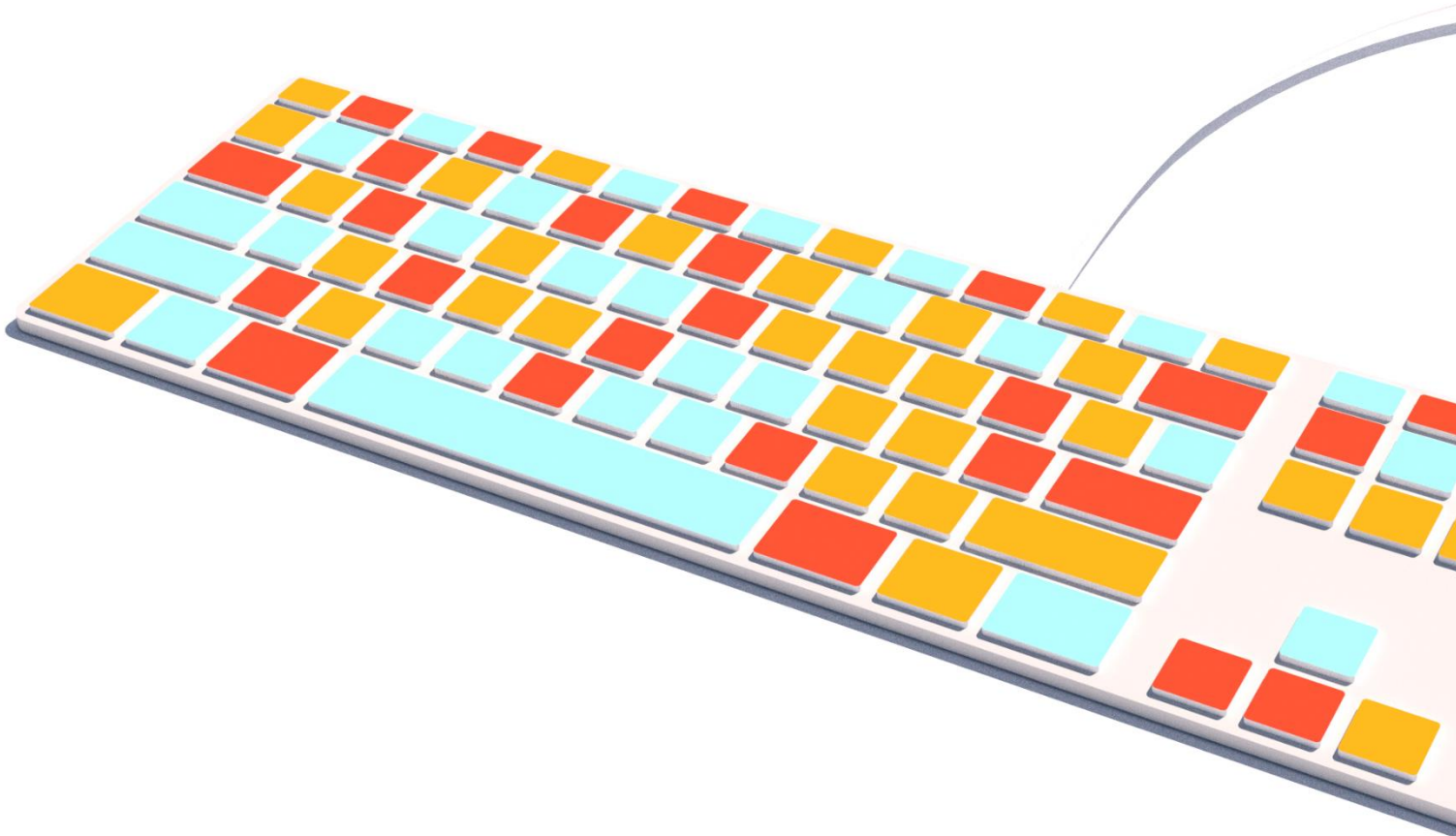
Of the Queensland respondents to the ACSS, 31 per cent reported that service users were impacted by a lack of access to digital technology. Town hall participants explained that people who were not digitally connected during the pandemic and major weather events were not receiving emergency messages and important information. Sector workers also mentioned that digital literacy education programs were often tailored towards either younger people or seniors, but that initiatives aimed at other types of people would also benefit communities.

A number of organisations spoke about their very successful digital navigation assistance programs and indicated that further funding for this kind of assistance would help the sector better bridge the digital divide. The need for these programs has become more pronounced as government and essential service providers have increasingly adopted telephone or web-based models for completing forms, making enquiries, and engaging in administrative processes.

QCOSS received feedback of one situation where a community worker was assisting a member of the community to navigate a telephone-based process with a business. The phone call was terminated, due to concerns that the community worker was an un-authorised third party, present in the conversation. Scenarios such as this highlight an opportunity for government, non-government organisations, and the business community to establish clear guidelines and protocols that better facilitate this important assistance from the sector.

Sector feedback often highlighted the widespread benefits of adopting new technology in service delivery, but also emphasised the importance of maintaining face-to-face services and good local connections to ensure community members can access comprehensive support.

Further QCOSS reading: [Bridging Queensland's Digital Divide](#) developed in partnership with the McKell Institute of Queensland.<sup>10</sup>



# Case study 3 | Closing the digital divide and connecting with communities in regional, rural and remote areas

Basic Rights Queensland

“Basic Rights Queensland [is] a state-wide phone-based service providing legal services for social security, disability, discrimination and women's employment. We realised that, as a mainstream organisation, we weren't necessarily linking with the communities we needed to when we analysed our data. So we started to engage with local community controlled organisations and neighbourhood centres to hear from them what the needs were in their places around Queensland.

“When we did that, we learned that the situation of people in communities in regional and remote Queensland is very different than in urban environments. There may be no Centrelink office, there may not be legal services, there may not be internet, or they [may only have] intermittent electricity or phone [access]. So for our digitised system, people found it very difficult to access the help that they deserved and needed, so we have really focused our efforts on taking our services to community and working with people in place and with the services that are already there and have the relationships and local knowledge. We are trying to build the

capacity of other services that do fantastic casework and know their communities and know their people.

“We've been visiting lots of places in the far west and north of Queensland and found incredible levels of need. It's like there's... three Queenslanders and they're not equal and we need to address that. I would say that for people living in remote and regional communities, they're not even sure what they're entitled to, what their rights are or what services are available to them. I think that, as community services in Queensland, we can assume that everyone knows who we are and what we do because we've been around for so long and that's not necessarily the case. It's part of our work to ensure that every Queenslanders has the same access and the same assistance to enjoy the economic security and basic rights that other Queenslanders have. And that's what we're aiming to do.”

Fiona Hunt, Basic Rights Queensland

## Story from the sector: assisting communities with complex challenges in Mossman

**When so many in the community are experiencing overlapping, multi-layered, and compounding challenges, the Community Connect Program at Mossman Support Services provides vital assistance. We have chosen to profile this work as it touches upon the many issues impacting service users, and exemplifies how place-based, face-to-face services harnessing local knowledge and sector experience can change lives during difficult times.**

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“When you don’t know where to begin, start here.” This is how the Mossman Support Services website introduces its vital Community Connect program. The person-centred program helps people with multi-layered issues with referrals to a range of supports. In 2022, it was needed more than ever.

“Every single thing is happening at the same time to this tiny community”, Mossman Support Services Community Development Officer, Erica Mast said.

“We’re losing resources. We’ve got too many people coming [into the region]. The housing crisis hit a peak. Rents are through the roof. The cost of living is next to insane. People are frightened, and all of those things are then impacting mental health... They’re experiencing learned helplessness no matter what they do... So we have these people who have always been really functional, hitting these deep states of depression and anxiety.”

The increasing complexity of issues faced by members of the community highlights the importance of services such as the Community Connect program. Clients receive face-to-face support, which facilitates opportunities to provide more holistic and comprehensive assistance.

Erica described a recent client who came to the Mossman Support Services community centre seeking financial assistance. They were

overwhelmed, run down, and struggling to afford food for their family.

The community centre addressed their immediate need for food, “...but in that conversation it was identified that there was lots of other stuff happening in the background... [Therese Maloney, Community Connect support worker] can then sit with them and kind of unpack each one of those individual hardships that’s creating this big barrier for them, and then help them navigate the systems and access those services”.

A key function of the Community Connect program is to develop and maintain strong relationships throughout the wider social service sector to support improved referral pathways and remove silos. It also relies on and benefits from creative and resourceful thinking. When the centre identified significant delays in accessing clinical mental health support, they responded by allocating a portion of their funding to cover the fee for people to see a counsellor for immediate help. This meant clients could access urgent care while they continued to navigate the process of accessing Medicare subsidised mental health support.

As Therese noted, it’s important to try and “...think of other ways to be able to support people without going through the traditional channels as well... that’s my role; to see what is the need for people right now, and to make things happen so that they are serviced now”.

## ■ Community sector issues and themes in focus

This section focuses on issues and themes for community sector organisations and employees. The primary issues identified include sector demand; service delivery; workforce wellbeing, recruitment and retention; and the role of the community service sector in disaster resilience.

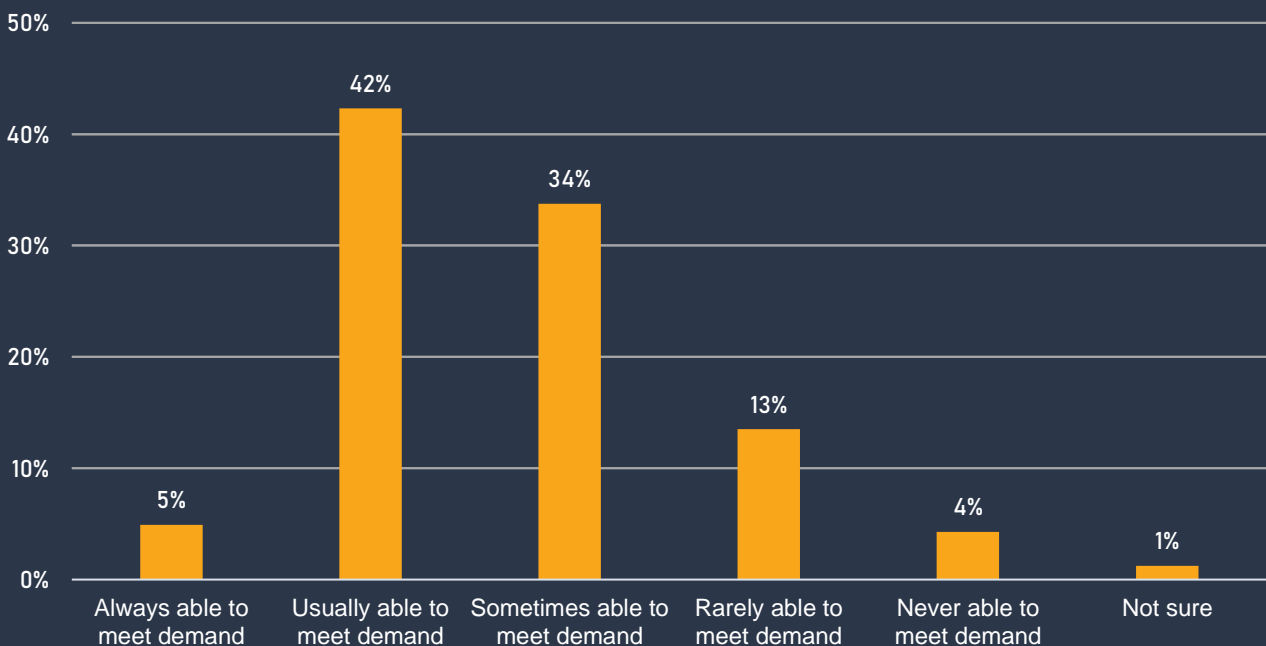
### Sector demand

The sector continued to face significant demand for services. Among ACSS respondents only 5 per cent felt their service could always meet demand, while a concerning number of respondents (51 per cent) felt their service could never, rarely or only sometimes meet demand (Figure 4).

“  
It's like we're standing in front of an enormous leaking dam and we have run out of fingers and toes to plug the leaks, and yet the rain just keeps on falling.”

- Community sector executive

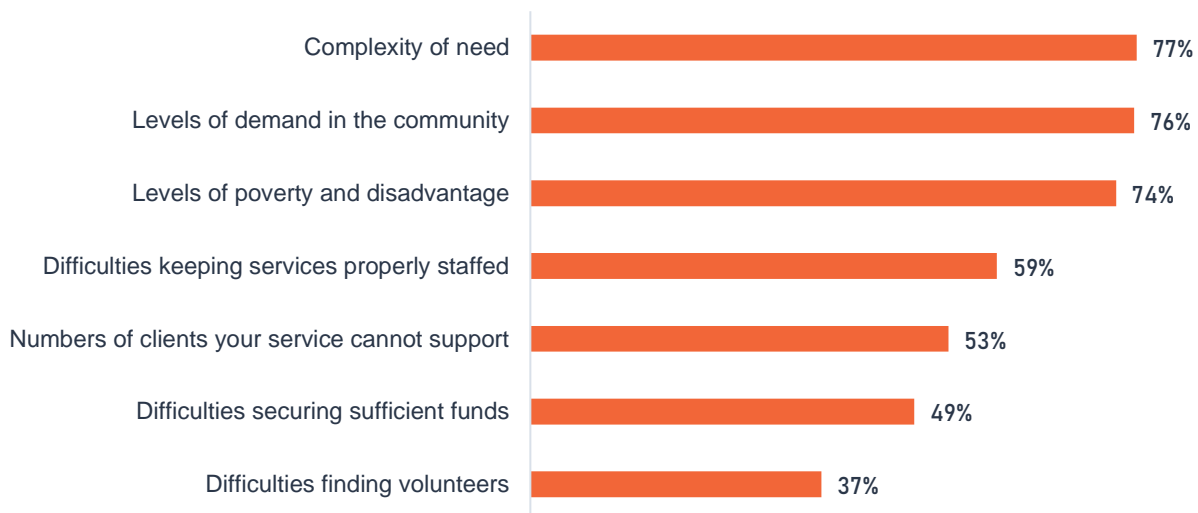
**Figure 4: Which statement reflects the ability of your service to meet community demand, so far in 2022?**





These challenges are consistent with the number of respondents who reported increases in key indicators of service demand, such as complexity of need (77 per cent), levels of demand in the community (76 per cent) and levels of poverty and disadvantage (74 per cent) (see Figure 5).

**Figure 5: Since the beginning of 2022, would you say the following things increased, decreased or stayed the same? (percentage of respondents who reported an increase)**



“ Staff continue to struggle with capacity due to the increased demand on services. The increase in DFV, lack of affordable housing, homelessness and mental health issues is unprecedented. ”

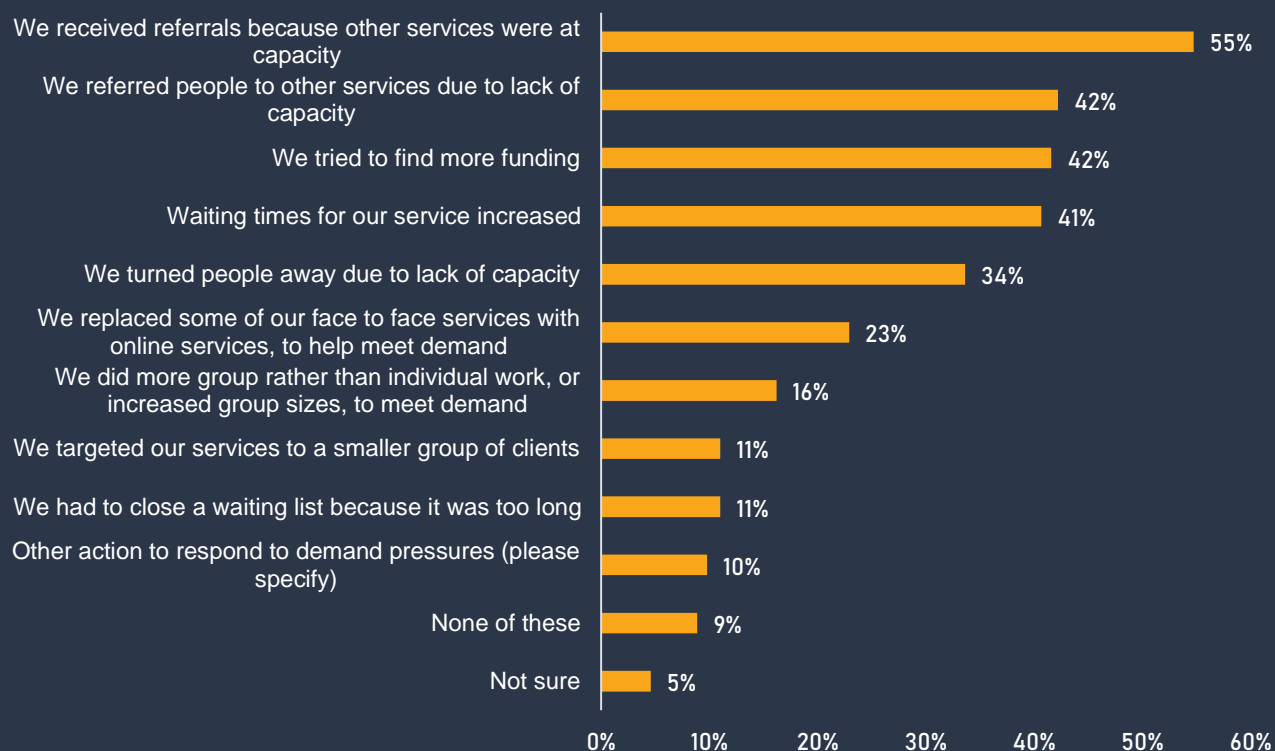
-Community sector executive

“ Demand for support has increased exponentially with combined pressures of COVID-19, inflation, [the] housing crisis and natural disasters, resulting in very high rates of homelessness and housing distress in our community. At the same time, we're seeing increasing numbers of women experiencing high risk domestic and family violence seeking crisis support at a time where refuge vacancies are few and far between. ”

- Community sector team leader/co-ordinator working in DFV and family services

Increases in service demand have a direct impact on service users and communities. Of the ACSS respondents, 42 per cent reported that they needed to refer people to other services due to lack of capacity (Figure 6). Additionally, 41 per cent reported that waiting times had increased for their service, 34 per cent needed to turn people away due to lack of capacity, and 11 per cent of respondents made the difficult decision to close a waiting list because it was too long.

**Figure 6: Which of these has occurred in your main service or program during 2022?**



A number of town hall participants and survey respondents reported a noticeable shift in the demographics of those seeking their services. Service providers frequently reported that people who would not have typically needed assistance in the past were now seeking help.

“ We have an increased number of people who are over the age of 50, married, with retirement funds, that are facing homelessness. People who have gone into rent arrears because their rent has increased. People who have had businesses their whole lives, that don't know how to navigate the Centrelink system because they never used it... Our demographic has changed to include a lot of people who should be well into their silver years and happily retiring. ” - Frontline community sector worker

“ The housing crisis is extreme, and older women are experiencing this in greater numbers than ever before. ”  
- Frontline community sector team leader/co-ordinator

The ability to meet service demand has inherent flow-on effects to all other aspects of an organisation's health and effectiveness. It directly impacts service delivery and the workforce. These impacts are explored further in this report.

## Service delivery costs

[The Challenge of Sustainability, Queensland's Not-for-profit Sector and the Impact of Growing Financial Pressure](#)<sup>11</sup> report analysed the financial data of selected Queensland not-for-profit organisations for the financial years 2019, 2020 and 2021. The report indicates that Queensland's not-for-profit sector is likely suffering from significant financial pressure.

This pressure is a result of increasing costs of inputs – 19 per cent of total cost increases – in the context of an economic and funding framework that places considerable pressure on service supply and, therefore, on income. Any increase in costs without a commensurate increase in income will place the sector under considerably more financial strain at times when its profitability is already compromised.

### Key findings from this report include:

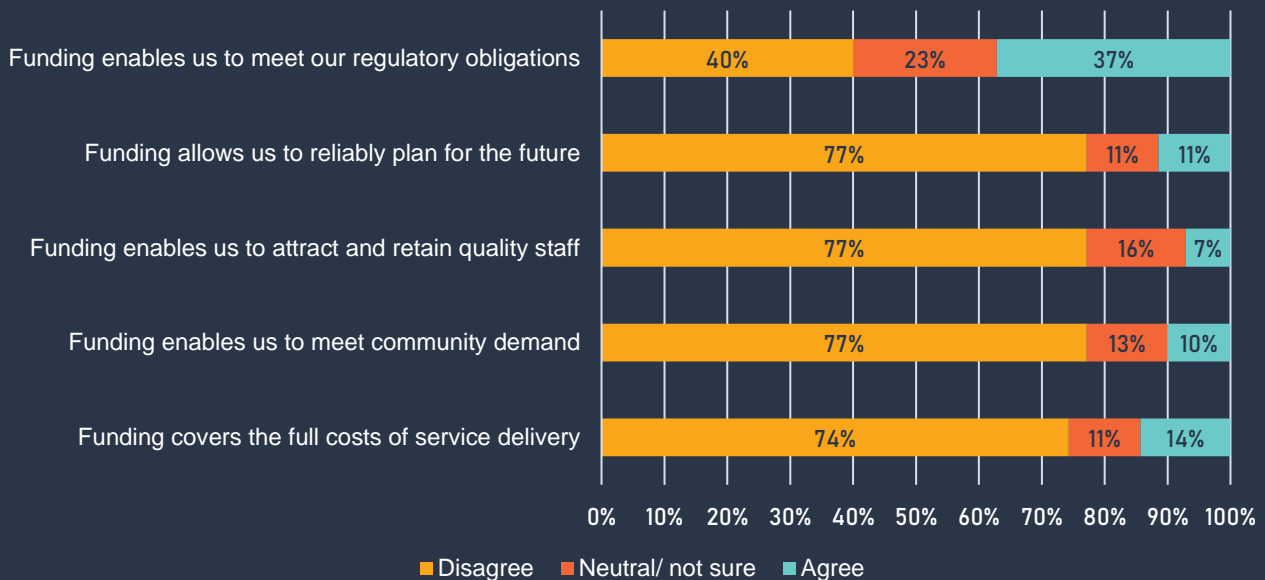
- Once adjusted for service growth, superannuation and the portable long service leave (PLSL) levy changes impose significant unfunded cost increases. In some cases, labour on-costs outpaced both direct labour and service income growth. For this cohort, total labour costs increased by 30 per cent between 2019 and 2021.
- Staffing vacancies and low employee retention have exacerbated costs relating to staff deployment, with training increasing by 49 per cent and recruitment costs increasing by 15 per cent. This raises concern around the sector's capacity to continue to deliver critical services within the current funding rationing regime.
- Vacancies and retention issues have seen a 32 per cent increase in the engagement of agency staff across the cohort to ensure continuity of services. Another component of staffing issues explored was the significant reduction in volunteering capacity across providers.
- Other key cost increases include:
  - Quality control (increase by 21 per cent)
  - ICT costs (increase by 29 per cent).

A number of the ACSS questions regarding service delivery were only asked of executives and senior managers. When considering questions regarding government funding, ACSS respondents were asked to answer in relation to the stream of government funding which was most important to their organisation. Of the respondents, 68 per cent received their most important funding source from state government, 13 per cent from the Australian Government and 8 per cent from the NDIS.

Service delivery was heavily impacted by greater difficulty obtaining funding, short staff contracts and insufficient funding. Of the ACSS respondents, 49 per cent reported more difficulty securing sufficient funds in general (Figure 5). Contract length was highlighted as a limiting factor affecting service delivery, where 50 per cent of ACSS respondents indicated they worked in organisations that did not have any contracts, grants or funding arrangements with a duration of five years or longer.

A significant number of respondents felt that their most important government funding stream was not sufficient in a number of areas. Of the ACSS respondents, 40 per cent believed that particular funding stream did not enable them to meet their regulatory obligations, 77 per cent did not believe it allowed them to reliably plan for the future, retain quality staff, or meet community demand, and up to 74 per cent did not feel that it covered the full costs of service delivery (Figure 7).

**Figure 7: Adequacy of funding from government. Answer in relation to the stream of government funding which is most important to your organisation.**

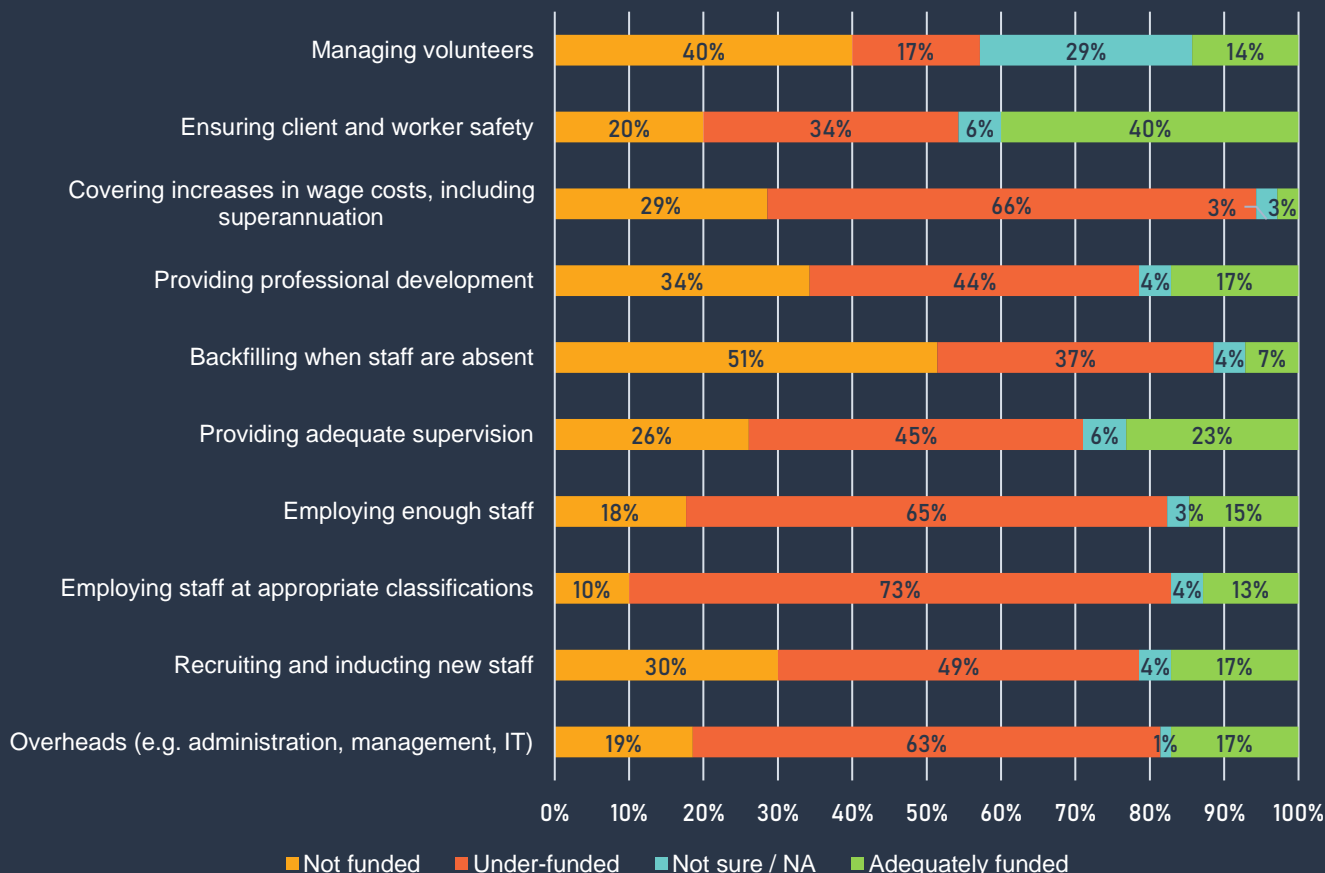


Additional questions explored the adequacy of an organisation’s most important stream of government funding to cover other essential operational costs (Figure 8).

- up to 95 per cent of respondents reported that covering increases in wage costs, including superannuation, were either not funded or underfunded
- 82 per cent of respondents reported that basic overheads such as administration, management and IT were either not funded or under-funded
- 71 per cent of respondents reported that providing adequate supervision was either not funded or under-funded
- 54 per cent of respondents reported that ensuring client and worker safety was either not funded or under-funded.

Important costs relating to service quality, business overheads, staffing, supervision, and safety were frequently reported as either not funded or under-funded by organisations’ most important stream of government funding. This means organisations were absorbing significant expenses while also facing an increase in service demand.

**Figure 8: Still thinking about your most important stream of funding from government... are these costs not funded, under-funded or adequately funded?**



**“ Funding across the board is insufficient to cover rising costs including wage increases ”**

– Community sector senior manager

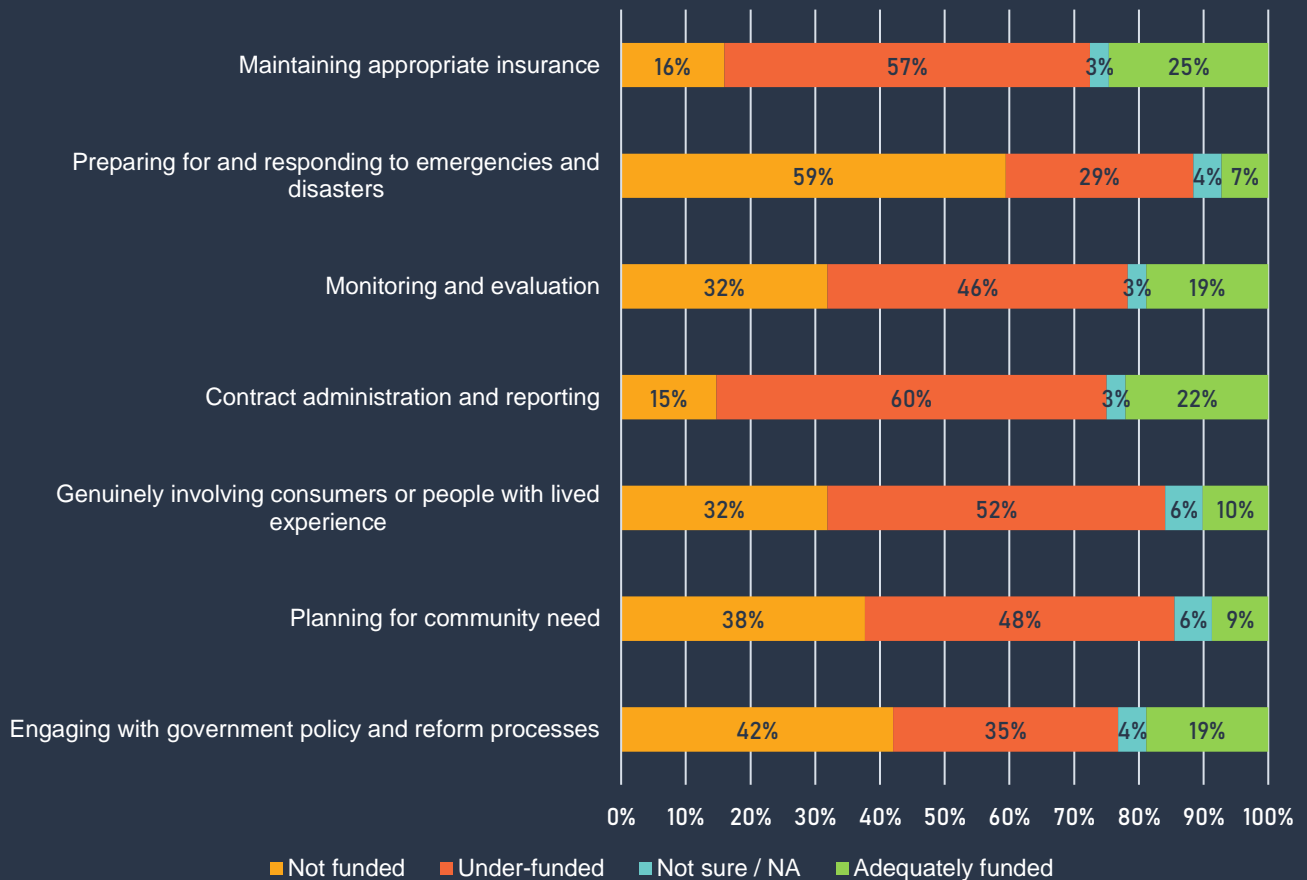
Roughly three quarters of respondents reported that their most important government funding stream did not cover or did not adequately cover appropriate insurance (73 per cent), preparing for and responding to emergencies and disasters (88 per cent), monitoring and evaluation (78 per cent), contract administration and reporting (75 per cent), genuinely involving consumers or people with lived experience (84 per cent), planning for community need (86 per cent) or engagement with government on policy and reform processes (77 per cent) (Figure 9).

These activities constitute fundamental elements of good strategic planning, good program design, and engagement with broader systemic change, and should be fully covered by funding arrangements to ensure best practice and good outcomes for communities.

**“ Governments appear to only want to fund front-line direct service delivery with no consideration of how organisations providing these services become and remain viable and undertake core business service requirements including reporting governments themselves require. ”**

– Community sector executive.

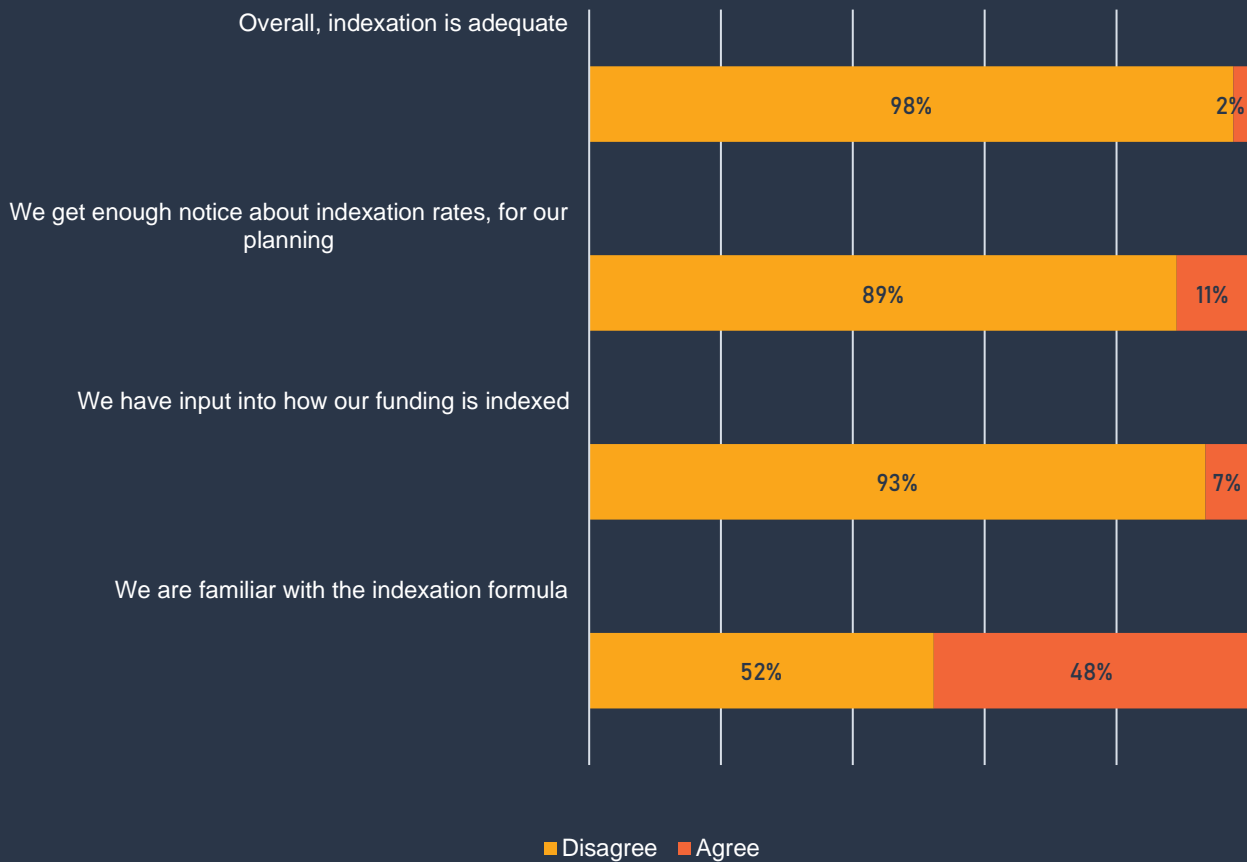
**Figure 9: How would you say these functions are covered by your most important stream of government funding?**



The ACSS sought feedback from the sector regarding indexation. Of the respondents, 49 per cent indicated that all or most of their government funding is indexed. In reviewing the feedback and related data on indexation, it is important to understand the context. In September 2022, the Queensland Government NGO indexation rate was raised from 2.88 per cent to 5.07 per cent for the 2022-23 financial year. The Queensland Government also committed to work with QCOS to review the methodology for setting the indexation rate. The ACSS had already been active for 10 days when these commitments were announced, and so some responses to questions on indexation would have been provided before those developments took place.

Respondents who answered questions on indexation were not all primarily state funded; ACSS questions regarding indexation refer to both state and federal indexation processes.

**Figure 10: Do you agree or disagree with these statements?  
Answer in relation to indexation of your most important stream of funding.**



Feedback received regarding indexation generally flagged a need to address the way in which the indexation rate is applied.

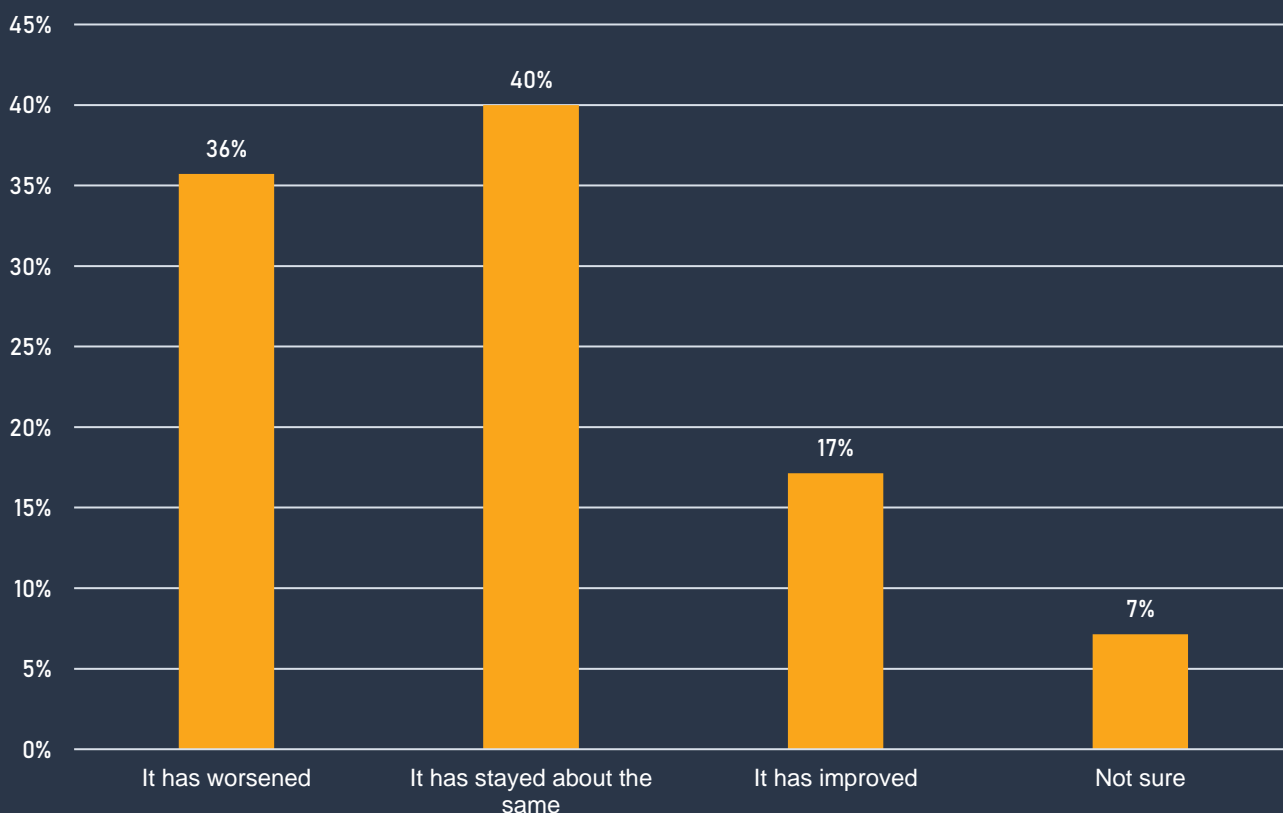
“**Indexation never covers increased costs.**” – Community sector senior manager

“**Indexation is a joke in the current inflationary context. The reliance on NFPs’ balance sheets and goodwill is no longer a viable strategy for any of us.**” – Community sector executive

“**This year, Treasury provided notice of indexation for whole of government. This was a much simpler process than waiting for each department to make separate announcements and also provides more transparency knowing all departments are providing an equal percentage.**” – Community sector executive

In 2022, 36 per cent of ACSS respondents reported that their organisation's financial position had worsened over the year (Figure 11); 36 per cent of respondents also expected their position to worsen in 2023.

**Figure 11: What has been your organisation's financial position during 2022?**



“ We will be extremely lucky to break even this year. ”

– Community sector executive

“ We are managing to keep our heads above water operationally, but only through sheer hard work and determination. The real concern is that we haven't got the money available to invest in the future, or to put money back into our depleted balance sheet and assets to ensure ongoing financial stability. ”

– Community sector executive

“ Operational costs have increased but the income has stayed the same to deliver more services to more clients. ”

– Community sector executive



A smaller number of organisations (17 per cent) reported that their financial position improved in 2022. Due to the Queensland Government commitment to raise funding for 127 neighbourhood and community centres from a minimum baseline of \$124,000 to \$230,000 per year, QCOSS received positive feedback from neighbourhood centres in particular.

**“ As a neighbourhood centre we are very excited about the increase in funding announced in the June state budget and are in the process of planning how to best use this resource to support our community. ”**

– Community sector senior manager

Some organisations were also exploring new avenues to expand income streams.

**“ Donations and philanthropic support has declined and the cost of living increased. Underfunding has required us to access reserves to meet the needs of young people. Obviously this is not sustainable. We are moving into new territory and developing a social enterprise to support an income stream. ”** – Community sector executive



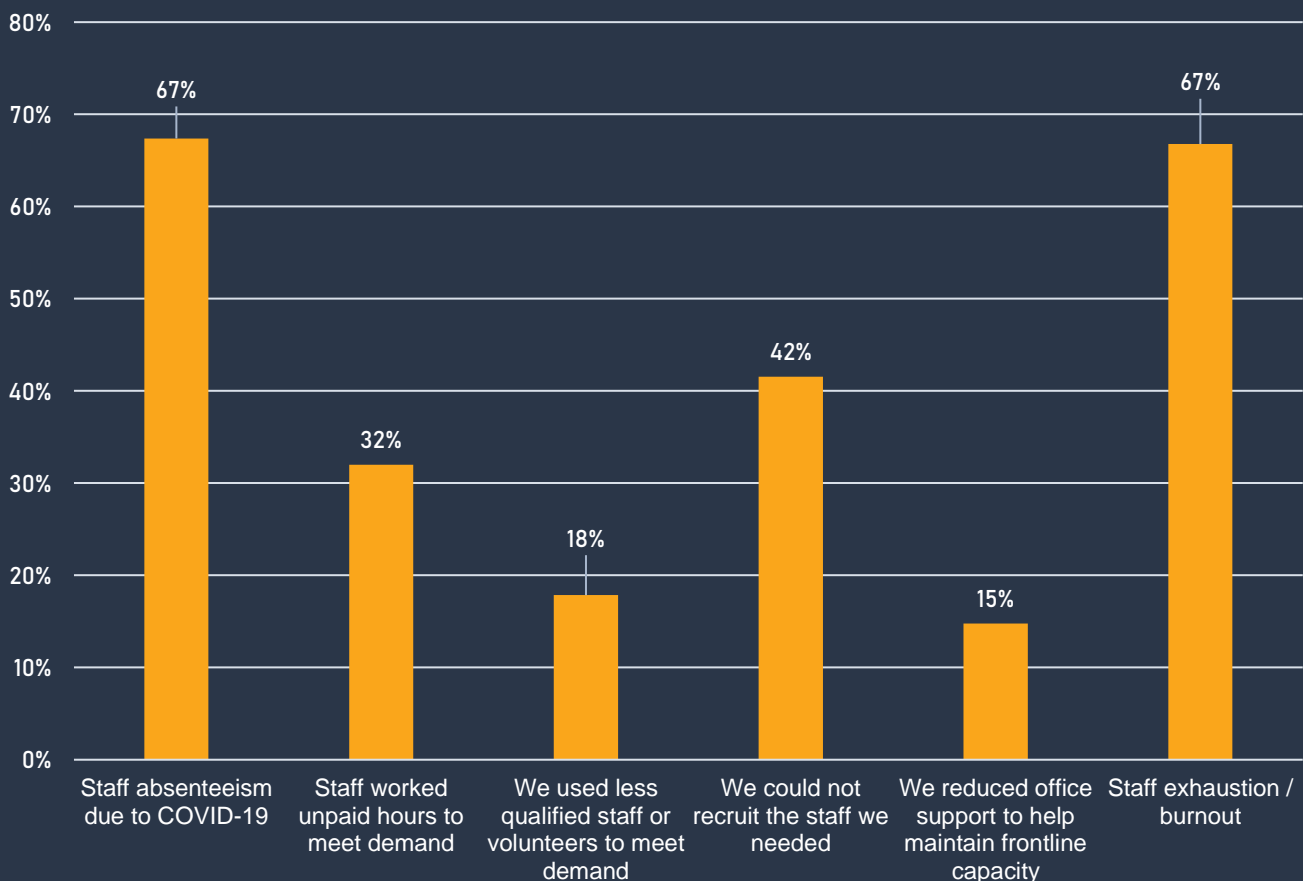
## Workforce wellbeing, recruitment and retention

A number of the ACSS questions on staffing were only asked of executives and senior managers. When asked about common staffing challenges, ACSS respondents noted, in particular, staff exhaustion/burnout (67 per cent), absenteeism due to COVID-19 (67 per cent), and challenges in recruiting and retaining staff (42 per cent) (Figure 12). As well as this:

- 18 per cent reported using less-qualified staff or volunteers to meet demand
- 39 per cent felt staff turnover was too high
- 36 per cent indicated that full time equivalent staff numbers reduced
- 77 per cent felt that it had become more difficult to attract and retain staff
- 59 per cent found it difficult to keep services properly staffed
- 37 per cent reported finding it increasingly difficult to attract volunteers
- 32 per cent reported that staff worked unpaid hours to meet demand.

When asked how many additional unpaid hours they had personally completed in the past week, individual ACSS respondents reported an average (mean) of 6.67 hours extra.

**Figure 12: (Staffing challenges) Which of these occurred in your main service or program during 2022?**

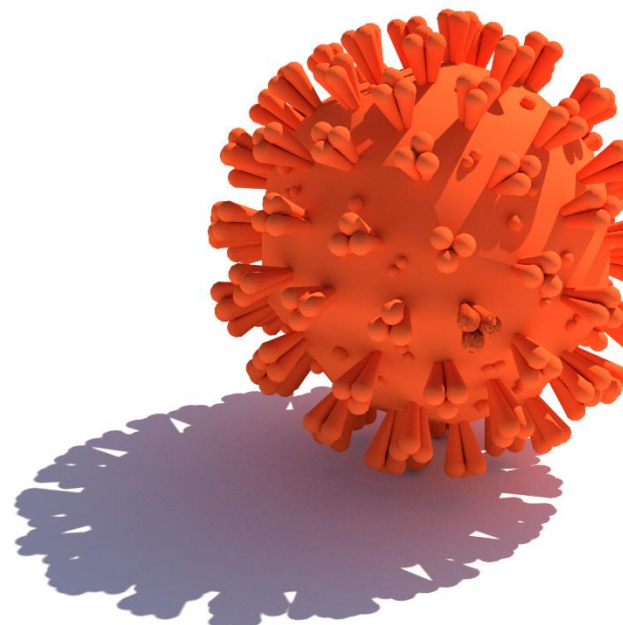


“One of the challenges that we've had over time is trying to find the right staff with the right skills. When you're talking about rural and remote areas, particularly in southwest Queensland and I'm sure in other areas... you're trying to find highly skilled staff to work with increasingly complex people. One of the problems is trying to incentivise someone to come and work in those really remote areas. You're moving to an area where you might be paying a lot more rent, you'll be paying more for... just the food, your groceries... And if you're being paid the same amount of money as someone that's working in a city, I guess it's reasonable someone would say, 'Why would I do that?'” – Community sector executive in a regional area

“Often we get staff, who do one day, five days, three months, who have cost us \$700 to induct, employ, you know, put through training, and then they move out of the sector and we haemorrhage a lot of money because of that inability to maintain staff.” – Community sector manager in a regional area

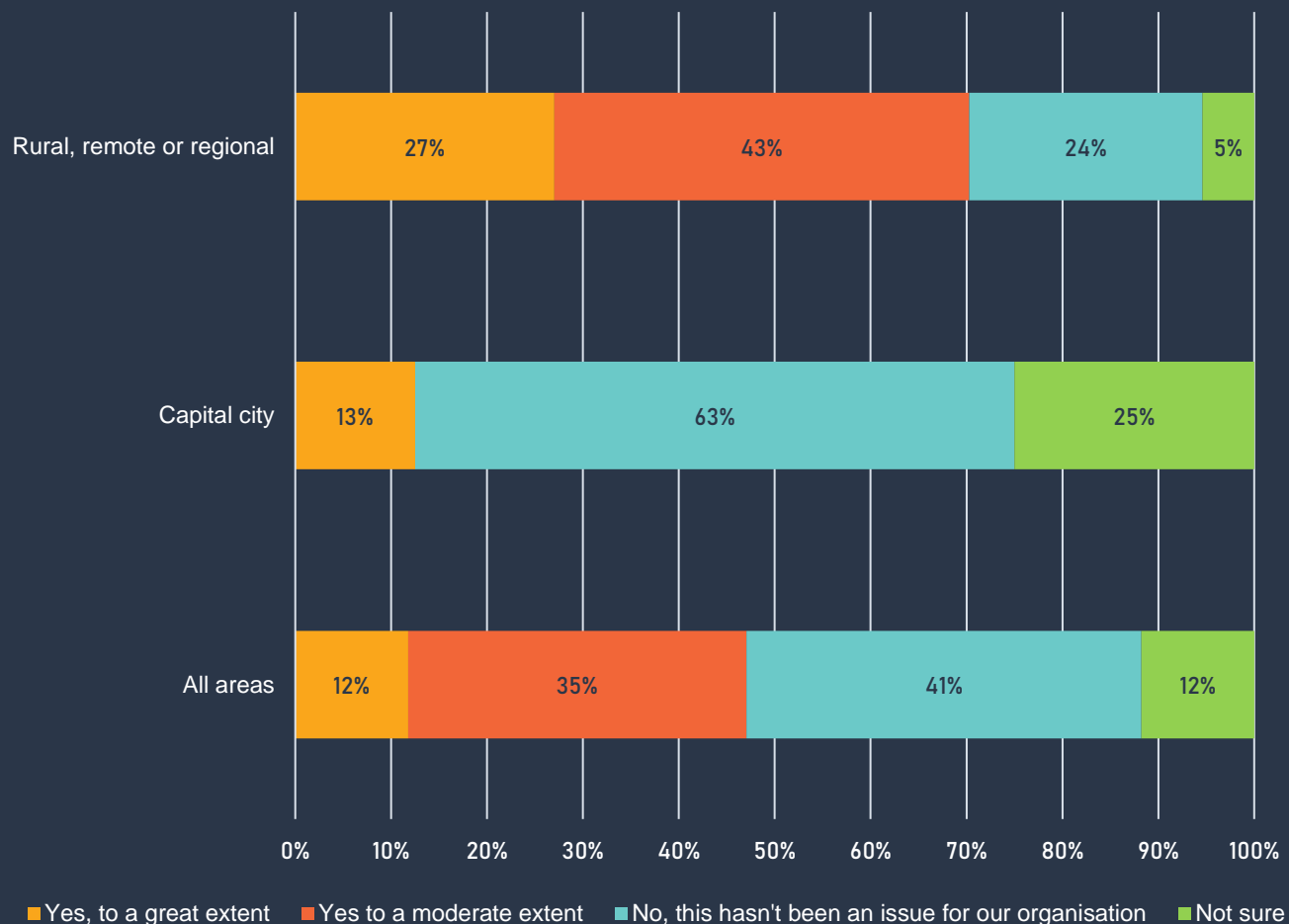
Furthermore, typical workforce challenges have been compounded significantly by issues including the pandemic, the housing crisis, the cost of living, and a wave of natural disasters.

“For us this has been the hardest year of COVID... in our small team I've had 14 people away in one week, and we're just trying to keep all the doors open... Not only are we trying to prop up all the people who are living in poverty and are dealing with the housing crisis and dealing with their small businesses shutting down because of COVID; we're also having to prop up our staff and our volunteers who are also impacted by the housing crisis, and COVID, and all of the cost of living issues.” – Community sector manager



Alarming, when asked whether poor availability of affordable housing in the local area had made it difficult for organisations to attract and retain staff, 27 per cent of ACSS respondents from rural, remote or regional areas responded “yes, to a great extent” (Figure 13)

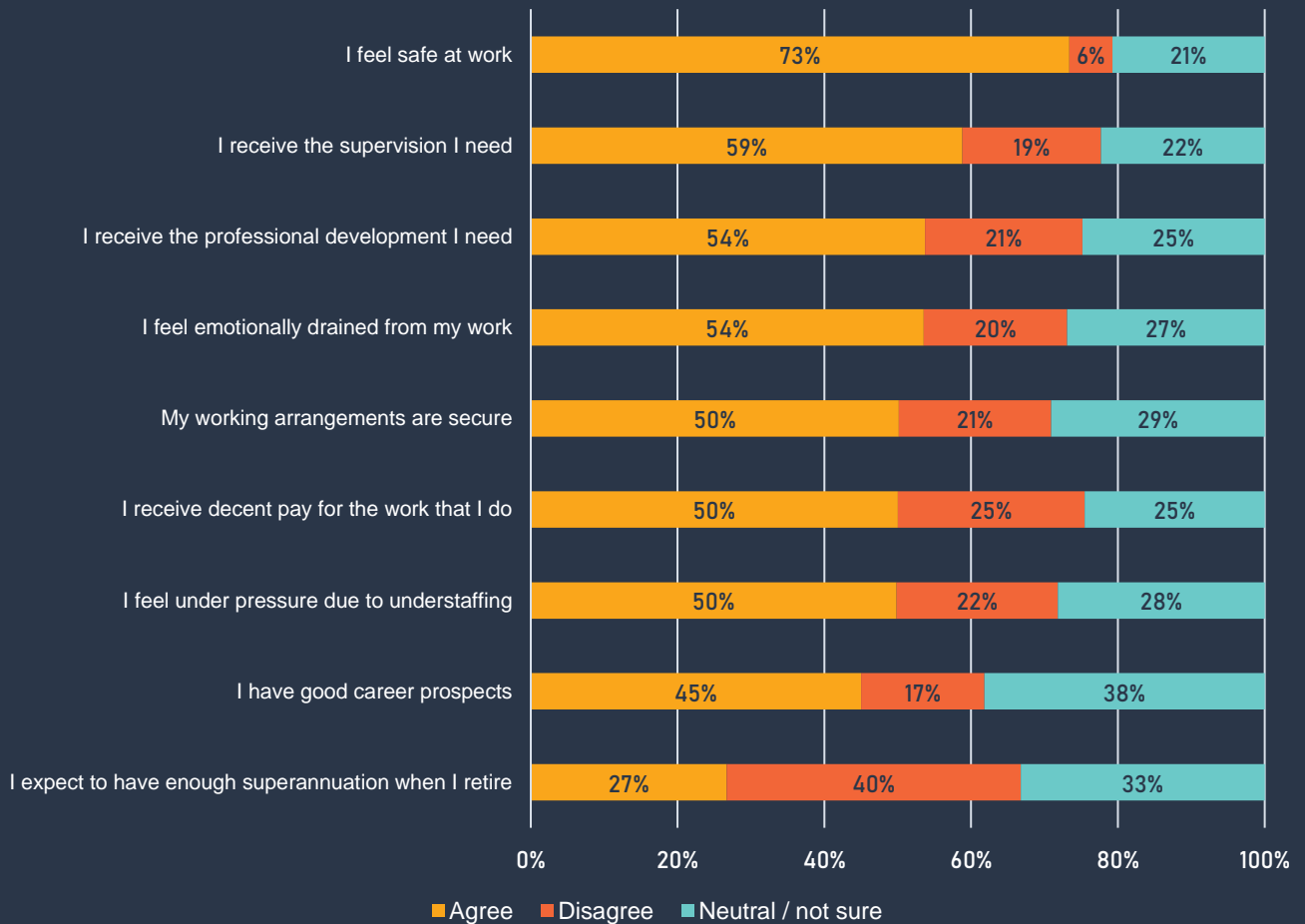
**Figure [13]: During 2022, has poor availability of affordable housing in the local area made it difficult for your organisation to attract and retain staff?**



Respondents generally reported feeling safe at work, but results on supervision and professional development indicate staff may need more support (Figure 14). The mixed responses to questions regarding secure work arrangements, remuneration, pressure due to understaffing, career prospects, superannuation, and emotional status, are consistent with reports of staff burnout, and difficulties in recruiting and retaining staff.



**Figure 14: How strongly do you agree with the following statements [based on your experiences of working in the community sector]?**



Despite reported challenges, 68 per cent of ACSS respondents planned to remain in their current role in 12 months' time, 13 per cent planned to be in a different role but within the same organisation, 7 per cent intended to be working in a different community sector organisation, only 8 per cent intended to leave the community sector for a different organisation, and 5 per cent intended to retire or leave the workforce generally.

## Case study 4 | Navigating workforce burnout and challenges in staff retention and recruitment

QCOSS spoke with a practice manager from a regional area. Their organisation provides support in areas including disability, aged care, and child and youth services.

Despite staff numbers more than tripling in the past decade, demand for services has continued to rise. While the practice manager would like to recruit new staff, it can be hard to fill vacancies.

The practice manager ensures conversations about the nature of the work are very open and honest from the beginning, but it's not uncommon for new staff to quickly realise the role isn't for them.

"It's not an easy job... it's challenging for people to cope with internally... and that burns people out. There are 10-year-olds doing drugs daily and that's very challenging for my support workers to see, knowing the impacts... people start to think 'well, there are easier ways to make money, you know? I could go and work in the mines, and when I finish my 12-hour shift that's it for the day'."

The practice manager outlined that some of the industry training requirements can be a deterrent for new staff. Entry level support workers are required to enrol in, or have completed, a minimum of a Certificate 4 in the community services area in order to maintain employment. They commented, "there's just a massive amount of training that somebody's got to do, to even get into the industry," while also noting that their organisation's staff induction process is very comprehensive. There are also specific ongoing industry training requirements, but not enough funding to cover them, which can be difficult to manage operationally.

The organisation has a comprehensive range of staff supports in place including regular supervision, access to counsellors, debriefs after significant events, and the practice

manager's door is always open. Managing vicarious trauma, however, is another concern. "You can't always forget about the things that have happened; even just some of the case notes and information we read about the kids that we work with," the practice manager said. "It's not as physical as some of the jobs that I've done, but it's very mentally draining. I see people with great care and great passion for helping other people going, 'you know what, it's not worth it. It's not worth my family life'."

A high turnover of support workers can also impact the children themselves. "They have no trust for adults. They don't care about making relationships because they've tried to make those relationships, and those relationships have failed over and over and over again."

While challenges in the child protection space, in particular, can be immense, the practice manager also talks about how rewarding the work can be. "I've been around for long enough and I've seen kids... grow and develop, and I've been able to say I was a part of that change in their life." They feel it can help when staff stay on a little longer and can start to connect their work with those positive outcomes.

Reflecting on the kinds of issues prevalent within the community, they feel there is a need for more services aimed at supporting younger children who are engaging in risky or harmful behaviour. The practice manager also thought better funding mechanisms to accommodate changing operational expenses, more funding for industry required training and funding flexibility measures to provide tailored or increased support for clients where appropriate would help foster a more sustainable sector. This would help to ensure clients' needs are met and would also help to ensure support workers are able to work more safely and effectively.

## Disaster resilience and the role of the community sector

In light of the external challenges faced by the sector in 2022, participants at town halls were asked “What’s the sector’s role in supporting community disaster resilience? How are you doing this now and what do you think is needed?” This question prompted reflections on recent experiences assisting communities through the COVID-19 pandemic, and recent extreme weather events across Queensland. Disasters also came up during reflections on major impacts upon service users. Qualitative and quantitative feedback on similar subject areas was received from ACSS respondents as well, where 30 per cent of respondents reported their service users were impacted by disasters and extreme weather events in 2022.

**“ Our region has been impacted by three unusual and unplanned floods this year already, along with COVID implications for all staff and clients. ”**

- Community sector executive working in a regional area

**“ It’s been hard - six floods (thankfully all minor), COVID, massive fuel costs, lack of housing/expensive housing, the list goes on and the pressure on us is relentless. ”**

- Community sector executive in a rural or remote area

A recent joint report from CSIRO and the Bureau of Meteorology warns of a projected increase in extreme weather events more generally in the coming decades due to climate change.<sup>12</sup> It is expected that disasters will continue to impact upon communities, who will naturally seek support from the social service sector. The sector also continues to navigate the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic.

QCOSS received consistent feedback that the sector could not continue to absorb these extra areas of responsibility within existing capacity and resourcing frameworks. QCOSS heard from a number of organisations who felt that a lot of support in the wake of disasters was coming from staff and volunteers who were going “above and beyond” while navigating difficult personal circumstances themselves. While there is often a willingness to help communities when faced with disasters, many in the sector felt that significant changes are needed to ensure the ongoing sustainability of workforce demands, especially given the forecasted increase in severity and frequency of extreme weather events.

Town hall participants and ACSS respondents reported that disaster funding is often provided on a reactive basis after an event occurs, making it difficult to use the money thoughtfully and effectively. If more proactive disaster-response funding was available, organisations would be better able to build capacity, staffing and resources, which would assist in their disaster readiness efforts.

Over three quarters of ACSS respondents (88 per cent) reported that they were either not funded or under-funded by their main source of government funding for emergency and disaster preparation and response work. Feedback outlined that proactive and long-term funding is needed to help develop workforce skills and capacity to respond to disasters as they happen in the future. This would, in turn, assist with better forward planning and sector readiness.

**“ [We need] specific funding to help communities prepare for future disasters, (it’s not if, it’s when). When disasters strike, a key issue for us is quickly and safely mobilising extra workers to deliver support on the ground, which is often a struggle. ”** - Worker in the DFV and family services sector

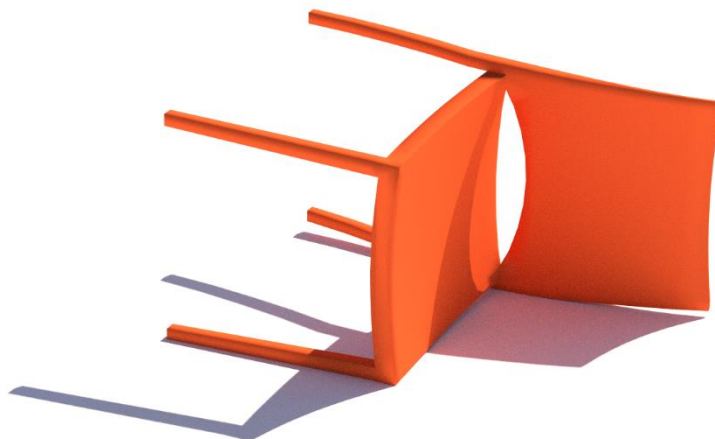
The kinds of disaster resilience supports provided by the community sector, as reported through sector feedback, were extensive. They included: disseminating information, assisting with referrals to other key services, providing access to essential resources and facilities, and providing significant mental health support. Some organisations also spoke about their ability to identify and assist particularly vulnerable members of the community. The community sector also reported a large body of ongoing and long-term support work as communities move through different stages of disaster response and recovery.

Feedback regularly outlined the need for increased levels of co-ordination and collaboration within the sector, with other responders, and with different levels of government. Many felt there were opportunities to further develop relationships and enhance co-ordinated strategic planning in relation to disaster response. It was also raised that increased clarity and co-ordination is particularly needed in areas close to jurisdictional borders, where roles and responsibilities can be unclear. Feedback regularly highlighted opportunities to share knowledge, and to model ideas and disaster response mechanisms across different localities. Initiatives and tools identified as particularly helpful included vulnerable persons registers, place-based local disaster management groups, comprehensive and inclusive disaster management plans, centrally managed online disaster information dashboards, ongoing training tailored to build community sector workforce skills and capacity in disaster response, and resources dedicated to communicating key messages in a range of languages.

**“ It would be great to see more work in the prevention and preparedness space rather than having to constantly “react” and “recover “. ”**

- Frontline worker in the community sector from a regional area

It was also raised that, while there is a considerable level of interest in the community to provide volunteer assistance during disaster response periods, there needed to be more effective models for harnessing and managing volunteers. Other points of feedback included a need for increased external support from other emergency responders trained in disaster response, a need for centralised points of access when seeking emergency information and various government assistance mechanisms, and a need for mechanisms enabling faster and easier access to financial support for individuals during and following disasters. Feedback also outlined that communities have a high need for increased mental health supports following disaster events, and concerns have been raised regarding service users who continue to live in uninhabitable spaces, or who are experiencing homelessness, following recent extreme weather events.





# Case study 5 | Natural disaster response and the role of the community sector

North Townsville Community Hub, Townsville

The North Townsville Community Hub, NOTCH, is a busy neighbourhood centre with a particular focus on providing disaster recovery and readiness assistance to their community in times of need.

In 2019, the Townsville community was badly affected by flooding, and NOTCH was in one of the worst impacted areas. Manager Sandra Elton said, "...that one event changed our organisation permanently..."

"We were thrown into disaster response", Sandra said. "I honestly thought it would be for a month or two... It was probably 18 months to two years where we were heavily embedded in just trying to get people back up on their feet."

NOTCH provides a wide range of disaster recovery services such as laundry facilities, basic food supplies, generators, and quiet calm spaces to sit during the day. Workers and volunteers disseminate important information, refer users to other essential services, and give critical support to people experiencing significant crisis. NOTCH has also developed their internal materials to ensure their own response readiness, with well-documented organisational knowledge of systems, protocols, and key contacts.

Since 2019, along with other key organisations, NOTCH have also been building sector capacity for disaster resilience. "We've just finished [hosting] a two-day trauma informed care course that had representatives from right across the region. It's the third one we've done... and we had a wait list out the door," Sandra said. Funding for the training was sourced through disaster resilience grants.

Sandra feels strongly that comprehensive capacity building in between disasters is crucial for service providers to ensure they have more "...skills in their toolkit..."

"They've got some first aid, and mental health first aid up their sleeve. They're not going in blind doing what they think is right and hoping for the best," she said.

NOTCH was particularly pleased to receive funding for an ongoing staff member and welcomes the establishment of the National Emergency Management Agency, but as Sandra explained there are still gaps at NOTCH and in other organisations.

"The trouble with disaster funding is it's too intermittent, it's too unreliable... [during and after the disaster] staffing was our number one problem. The other thing is we can't capacity build the staff if we're not allowed to keep them." Sandra notes one solution could be to develop more funding for positions which are designed to essentially establish a "sleeper workforce", operating in a particular area day-to-day, but ready to pivot to disaster response work when the time comes.

As well as funding for regular and on-going capacity building, Sandra would like to see increased co-ordination between different levels of government, key responder organisations, and the social service sector as well as more funding for place-based community organisations, especially to hire staff. "Communities can overcome capacity and capability constraints with adequate training and staffing. There is a place for procurement of fly-in-fly-out workers in the immediate disaster response, however the medium and long-term recovery should be integrated into local place-based community organisations. Existing social capital needs to be included in this work."

## Story from the sector: Gympie and the case for community led place-based solutions

Feedback received throughout the town halls was often consistent, with each community raising similar issues, concerns, and ideas. Feedback received from the Gympie town hall, profiled below, particularly highlighted a considerable number of themes explored throughout this report. Town hall participants regularly reinforced the fundamental need for community-led and place-based initiatives.

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Community organisations are the connecting point of government systems that, at times, can operate in a siloed way. For all levels of government and across government departments, community organisations act as an intermediary, seeking to support marginalised people as they navigate systems and ensure access to social services.

In recent years, with increased severity and frequency of weather events, the COVID-19 pandemic and the housing and cost of living crises, more people have needed assistance and the pressure on community organisations and the wider community has grown. This is particularly apparent in the Gympie regional area.

In the last five years, the Gympie region has been drought declared (2017), experienced significant bushfires (2018), been hit by a hailstorm (2018), and lived through the COVID-19 pandemic (2020 to present). Since the initial COVID-19 lockdowns, the Gympie region has also been hit by five floods. In February 2022, the flood level was the highest in 120 years.

Throughout the post-COVID-19 recovery and then flood recoveries, community organisations have been central to keeping the community connected and assisting service users to access a mix of short-term government interventions. The network of community organisations in Gympie demonstrates the need for place-based and person-centred approaches to social service provision. This is highlighted by a Gympie-local and employee of a community organisation:

“We are aware of strong references to being a resilient community and mindful also of the considerations of trauma resulting in trauma-informed practices following the events. However, our reflections have also alerted us to consider to what degree “grief” is an intrinsic emotion... Not recognising bereavement is a significant issue in this context.

Emphases on the “re” words such as recovery and restoration for example, can imply that... there can be a return to pre-disaster conditions for the community. However, considerations of grief, bereavement and loss focus more on “moving forward” by taking into account the impact and implications of individuals’ and communities’ experience/s. This temporal element is also significant especially considering the length and types of support; and also understanding the cumulative impact when there are repeat events such as what has happened here in 2022.

Recognition of grief, bereavement and loss processes, along with other community-based post-disaster activities, can be more of a positive way forward for individuals and communities than pronouncements and expectations of resilience, as is often the case in Gympie.

For Gympie, investment into human and social capital was foundational in building and maintaining community resilience. Community resilience is highlighted as an enabler of community connectedness and resourcefulness. However, there is a general belief among members of Gympie’s community service sector that the community’s social capital has reduced in recent times. The increasing pressure on communities and households has led to sector staff indicating that people are now ‘...falling and breaking, not getting back up.’ Within the Gympie community, this is believed to be linked to reduced investment into services and activities that support community development, which then limits the community’s capacity to respond in times of crisis.

Like the rest of Queensland, Gympie is experiencing a housing crisis. While Gympie was once relatively affordable compared to the Sunshine Coast, now long-term residents are struggling to remain in the area due to rising house prices and rents. An influx of short-term workers from a highway project close by are also contributing to the upward pressure on the rental market. When long-term residents can no longer remain in the area, they face the personal impacts of enormous upheaval—moving away from their community, support networks, and routine. They also take with them significant local knowledge and local connections, further fracturing the community.

As government entities and essential services become more centralised, key organisations are moving out of regional communities, a trend that has accelerated since the COVID-19 pandemic began. Gympie is no different. Sector workers in Gympie feel that significant changes to service provision, and the removal of key supports, are not reflective of “a rights respecting culture” that supports community development. This further reduces the community’s social capital. For instance:

- the Civic Centre, a key pillar of social connection, has not been open for three years
- there has never been funding for a generalist specialist homelessness service
- transport available between regional centres is insufficient, increasing barriers for people to find employment
- there is a lack of clinical and allied health providers. People are not able to access government supports, such as the NDIS, because they cannot access required clinical and allied health service
- the Housing Service Centre have only provided phone support since COVID-19, removing the fortnightly visits to Gympie
- when electricity and telecommunication networks went down in the 2022 flood, many services were completely inaccessible as they had all moved to online service provision
- services based in the Sunshine Coast provide valuable outreach support in Gympie during business hours, but a more local workforce would be better placed to appropriately identify true community need.

QCROSS received specific feedback that young people experiencing or at risk of homelessness need more support. There is also demand for more alternative educational supports for young people whose needs are not being met in mainstream schools.

In considering government service provision, residents believe they are “treated by government as an issue and an object. They do something in an objective way, we are not treated subjectively.” Services that come and go do not recognise the uniqueness of a place and its culture. Inaccessible service provision has a huge impact on smaller communities, particularly as it removes the ability for services to be responsive, and local organisations felt this either wasn’t understood or acted upon by government.

During the 2022 floods, place-based community organisations shouldered a significant amount of the initial community response. Some government systems were inaccessible, and multiple council and government responders were unable to access physical centres, calling on community organisations to fill the gap. Funding agreements, however, did not match community need in relation to disaster response and recovery, and community services were already delivering funded services which were at capacity. In 2022 disaster response work was unfunded in many organisations, or not adequately funded.

In response to the flooding crises, the community sector workforce continued supporting service users, while also supporting their colleagues as well as themselves. Many staff were unable to get to their workplace. Those who could access services, were under increasing threat of burnout, as they saw the devastation and were unable to provide the required supports to their local community.

Gympie community sector workers commented that while many of them are not mental health trained, in recent times, a large part of their role has been responding to service users’ mental health needs. The recent disasters have particularly impacted long-term residents, and the recurring floods have kept people in a state of unrest; anxiety rises as soon as it starts to rain heavily. Local workers indicated that the increase in suicidal ideation since the floods has been “intense” and believed that the “true ramifications of the floods will not be known for 18 months”.

To rebuild social connectedness and ensure appropriate responses to local issues, local place-based community organisations need to be enabled to maintain and build community cohesion using a community development framework. Listening to local communities and creating longer-term and connected systems that are rights-respecting will ensure community knowledge is maintained and respected, thereby increasing social capital and enabling community capacity for effective local responses in times of crises.



## ■ Best practice and collaboration

To better address the challenges faced by the Queensland social service sector and the communities it supports, ACSS respondents and town hall participants spoke about the importance of community led place-based initiatives, facilitating and enabling best practice models, increased collaboration between the sector and government and co-ordinated service delivery.

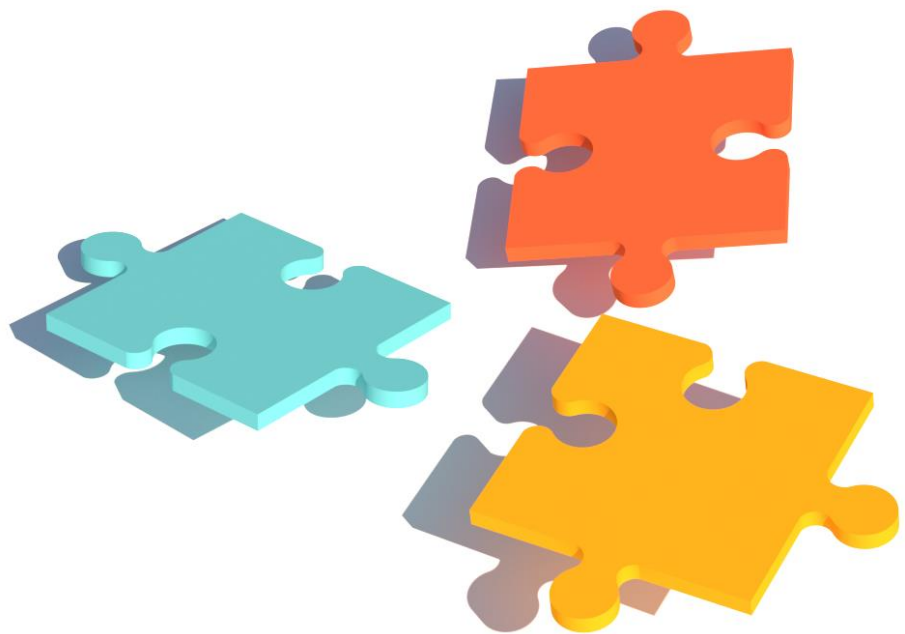
Feedback highlighted how the sector continues to work in agile ways; quick to implement creative, resourceful, and practical mechanisms in the communities it supports.

### Best practice

When asked to reflect on examples of best practice within the sector, many organisations commented on the continued significance of their face-to-face service delivery options. Organisations also emphasised the value of their no-wrong-door approaches, and supported referral pathways, ensuring clients can receive integrated wrap-around supports. ACSS respondents and town hall participants often gave feedback that program design based on local community need is critical, noting that service delivery based on “top-down” agendas can prove challenging and less successful.

Feedback highlighted the value of Queensland’s highly skilled social service sector providing assistance such as therapeutic crisis intervention in often complex situations. Feedback also emphasised the value of maintaining practical supports such as food programs, providing safe community spaces, or assisting clients with digital navigation and access to digital processes.

Many organisations have been quick to adopt and use new technology while still remaining approachable and accessible. A number of ACSS respondents and town hall participants highlighted how recent developments in technology have helped to provide flexible service delivery options and increase opportunities for regional and rural organisations to participate actively in state-wide and national processes or meetings.



## Collaboration

Collaboration and co-ordinated service delivery was also discussed as an important best practice tool.

It was acknowledged that collaboration can be difficult when organisations are competing for the same grants or tenders. Some outlined that measures to move away from competitive processes could provide a solution in this respect.

**“ Collaboration is so important to helping people but I don't know how truly collaborative organisations can be when they are constantly competing for funding. I think it can generate toxicity in the sector which ultimately takes away from the clients. ”** – Frontline worker in the community sector from a regional area

Difficulties aside, opportunities for collaboration and collaborative learning can help to foster strong professional connections, enhance referral pathways and facilitate mentoring relationships. The sector clearly wants to learn from one another, work with one another, and co-ordinate better within the sector, with business and other relevant organisations and agencies, and with different levels of government. Collaborative activities were also often brought up as examples of best practice and innovative ideas

**“ When we support each other, we're stronger as a sector. ”**

– Senior manager from a regional area

Many respondents identified the high value of peer-led learning environments, especially where organisations face similar challenges and can freely share knowledge on topics which do not pose any conflicts with respect to confidentiality or competition. Feedback also identified the powerful networking opportunities presented through training programs.

The benefits of increased collaboration and co-ordination between sector organisations, other frontline responders, local business communities, and government, in the delivery of essential support services to the community were also mentioned. The need for increased collaboration and co-ordination was also explored more specifically in this report in the context of responding to extreme weather events and disasters.

**“ Local area planning forums [are needed]. [They] draw local agencies together to openly identify emerging or unmet issues, [and we] would be able to better connect communities and facilitate effective referrals. ”**

– Community sector executive

Powerful examples of good collaboration and co-ordination punctuate many of the case studies and stories featured throughout this report. The Community Connect Program at Mossman Support Services harnesses a strong professional network along with sound sector knowledge. The Winter Shelter Program in Toowoomba relies on community members and local organisations who pool their resources together to provide a warm place to sleep for people experiencing or at risk of homelessness during the coldest months of the year. Basic Rights Queensland are working with local organisations to ensure their state-wide service remains accessible and relevant to those in need. NOTCH in Townsville are focussing on increased co-ordination, collaboration, and capacity building in relation to disaster readiness with the broader social service sector, all levels of government, and other key emergency responders.

# Case study 6: Collaborative relationships

## Red Cross, Townsville

Townsville is currently facing record low rental vacancy rates, along with sharp increases in rents, compounding an ongoing housing crisis – a familiar story across much of Queensland.

Gabrielle (Gay) McCosker, Acting Regional Operations Manager Red Cross Townsville, feels that in the last 12 to 18 months, demand for emergency and transitional accommodation assistance has noticeably increased.

Gay said that although the Department of Communities, Housing and Digital Economy is working closely with homelessness services to prioritise those in greatest need, the demand far exceeds the properties available and wait times for a Department property have increased considerably. “That’s had an impact on our most vulnerable people... we’re finding that people in this situation lose hope and stop working with services if they can’t see a timely path out of homelessness.”

While not a perfect solution, budget motels can play a valuable role in providing a safe place to stay and hope for the future. Staying at a motel addresses the immediate need for shelter, and can also help people build a rent history. Motel receipts are valuable evidence when applying for rental properties. Gay commented, “...often people are paying more for motel accommodation than what is considered affordable in the rental market, landlords are recognising this and several families have been approved for a rental after staying in a motel for an extended period of time.”

A number of service providers in Townsville have established a unique and collaborative connection with one motel owner, in particular, who now primarily makes their rooms available through organisations that are helping to address homelessness.

Gay explained, “...we haven’t got a contract with [the motel], but we have agreed to work together closely... if a homeless family presents to the motel looking for accommodation, they’re directed to Red Cross and other homelessness services for support during their stay in the motel.”

The referral process ensures that people in need of emergency accommodation relief are also receiving ongoing support and case management. With information sharing consents in place, the service providers now also meet weekly with the motel manager. Gay describes the meeting as “...a general quick catch up. *How’s everything going? Are there any issues we need to resolve?*”. From there, the case managers check in with their clients on site.

Gay explained each service is still operating within their normal funding guidelines and program requirements, and the motel owner continues to operate independently as a commercial enterprise. The idea is essentially about relationship building, where service providers and the property manager can work in a more co-ordinated way. “We’ve built a relationship with this property owner, and we’ve also built a relationship within the homelessness support sector... we’re getting together to collaborate and we’re also getting together with an accommodation provider to provide support for our clients who live in their property”.

Pre-existing case management strategies and funding guidelines have not changed, but Gay says “...the relationship building has enabled us to provide a much more structured manner of support, which has led to better outcomes.”

Gay would like to see more in the way of purpose built emergency and transitional accommodation, among other things. In the meantime, Gay explained, “...we just try to do the best we can, including exploring creative ideas, to get people housed”.

# Case study 7: *Toowoomba Housing Hub*

Insights from Lifeline Darling Downs and Southwest Queensland, Toowoomba

Launched in 2018, Toowoomba's Housing Hub brings the Department of Communities, Housing and Digital Economy together with a range of not-for-profit community partners, including Lifeline Darling Downs and South West Qld, YellowBridge Queensland, Australian Red Cross, Salvation Army, St Vincent de Paul, Mission Australia, Richmond Fellowship Qld, Act for Kids and YouTurn.

A number of organisations and agencies including Uniting Care Financial Counselling, My Aged Care, Carers Queensland, Life Without Barriers, Hearing Australia, Next Step Plus and Mind Australia, also deliver their services from the Hub on a regular rotation as part of the Housing Hub's roster of 'In-Reach' support. Lifeline Darling Downs is engaged as the Community Connections partner for the Hub, responsible for co-ordinating service delivery between the contributing organisations.

Anna Falconer is a Lead Assessor with Lifeline Darling Downs and South West Qld.\* During an interview with Anna, she explained "the Housing Hub was set up as a one-stop-shop, where people could go to get the right information at the right time, and be referred to the right places."

Anna commented the Hub has been well received by the community, noting that structured and regular access to a range of service providers and organisations has been particularly helpful. "The people that come in are getting to know what days [the different service providers] are here and when they can drop in if they've got paperwork or questions around what's happening with their situation."

Having a variety of service providers operating in the one space is immensely positive. Professional connections have grown deeper while staff learn more about each other's

service areas, developing a better understanding of effective referral pathways. The physical proximity of the different service providers also leads to good outcomes for clients, enabling more co-ordinated responses. Anna explained, "...there's no opportunity for missed phone calls. You're connecting people right there, which I think can be a really positive thing for people to keep the ball rolling." Anna also noted that the collaborative environment is a great setting for new ideas to develop.

Along with its reputation of nimble efficiency in delivering integrated wraparound services, the Housing Hub has established itself as a compassionate place with heart.

Anna described an encounter at the Hub's previous location, where a client seemed to have a lot on their plate. "I asked her if she wanted a cup of tea, and you could see she was going '*oh I don't want to be a hassle*', and I said '*please say yes, because I really want one too*'. We had a great chat and we didn't even actually end up doing an assessment but she talked through everything and she came to her own conclusions about what she was going to do... we try to make people really comfortable."

Another time, Anna recalled, "...one of the first assessments I did was with a fellow who was rough sleeping. We started and he was literally falling asleep in front of me. I said, '*why don't you just lay down, have a sleep and then we'll come back and do this later*'. So he slept for a couple of hours in the hub and then we did the assessment after."

\*Since the time of writing, Anna Falconer has moved on to a new role with a different organisation within the community sector, and no longer works with Lifeline.



## ■ Conclusion

In 2022, the Queensland social sector, and the communities it serves, dealt with high COVID-19 infection rates, flooding, a housing crisis, and the soaring cost of living. Service users found it challenging to access health and allied health services, transport and digital technology. Significant concerns were raised about youth wellbeing and service users impacted by unsafe home environments. These pressures compounded upon prior and ongoing challenges.

As they held themselves and their communities together, sector workers experienced fatigue and burnout. Increased levels of service demand, increased complexity of need, and challenges recruiting and retaining employees and volunteers strained the capacity of community service organisations across Queensland. A significant number of organisations reported finding it hard to cover their operating and service delivery costs in addition to their compliance and governance costs.

In light of recent extreme weather events, a key theme of the report was disaster resilience and the role of the community sector. Community sector workers particularly called for flexible and long-term approaches to disaster resilience funding. They also called for additional mental health support for communities and sector workers following disasters, more disaster response knowledge sharing, and increased co-ordination between the sector, all levels of government, and other key response agencies and organisations. As a central point of community connection and assistance during the COVID-19 pandemic and 2022 floods, many organisations felt they were well placed to play a significant and ongoing role in disaster response and resilience, if appropriately supported through funding and capacity building mechanisms.

Despite immense challenges, there is still cause for optimism. As always, the sector was quick to implement creative, resourceful, and practical mechanisms to support the community. We regularly heard about service providers trying new things, engaging with new platforms, and delivering innovative programs with great outcomes.

The powerful results of collaborative and co-ordinated service delivery were frequently raised by ACSS and town hall respondents. There was keen interest in further developing collaborative opportunities within the sector, with government, other organisations and the business community.

In 2023, QCOSS will seek to use and harness the insights reflected in this report, which provides QCOSS with a Queensland specific evidence-base that identifies themes for further analysis, as well as issues which require a strategic response. We will continue to shine a light on emerging issues, trends and ideas, and use key points of feedback to help inform our own program of policy, research, member engagement and capacity building.

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