

# Stories of change

Translating evidence  
into action

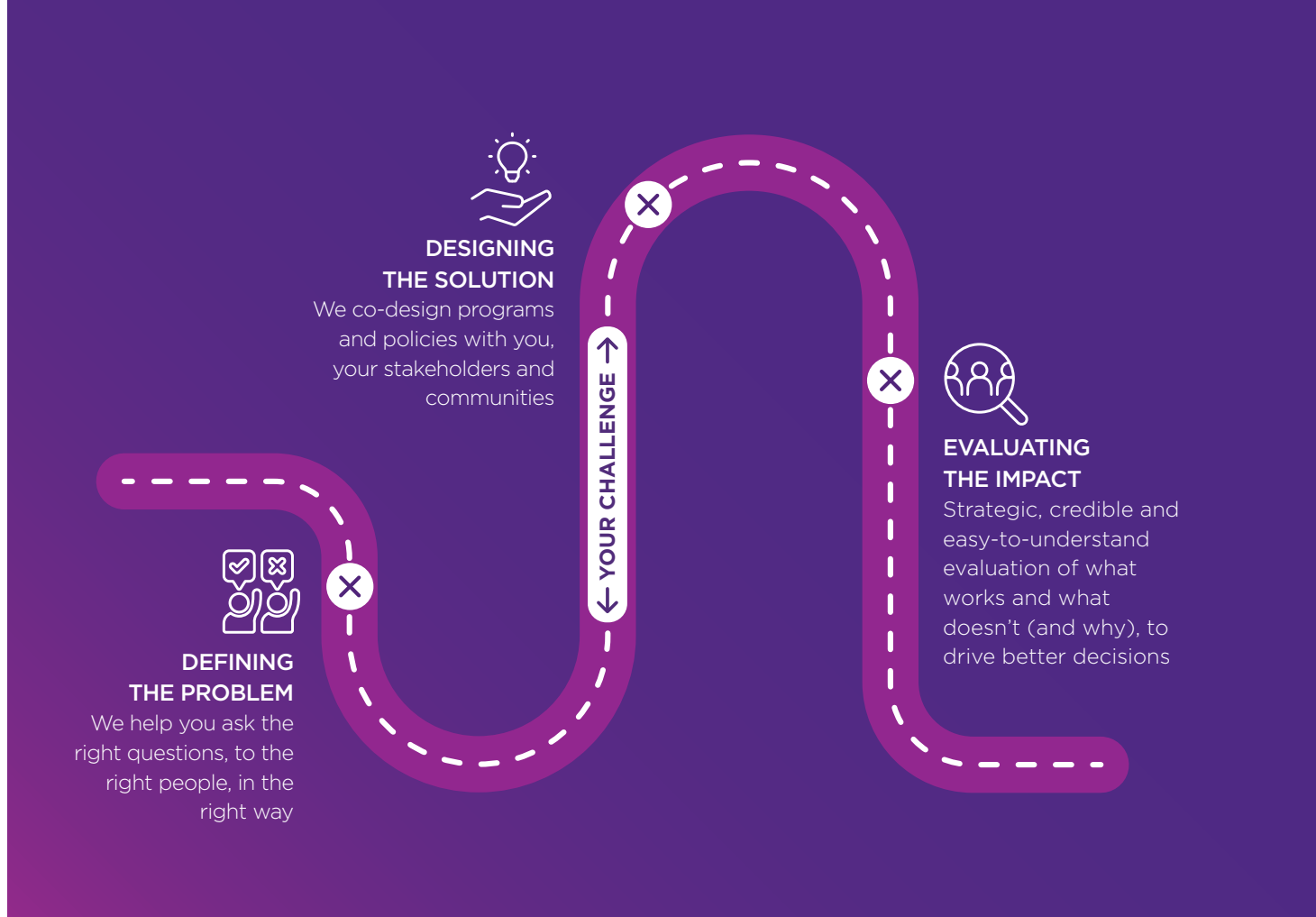




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The Institute for Social Science Research acknowledges the Traditional Owners and their custodianship of the lands on which The University of Queensland operates. We pay our respects to their Ancestors and their descendants, who continue cultural and spiritual connections to Country.



# Research that helps our partners make more informed decisions



**The Institute for Social Science Research (ISSR) at The University of Queensland uses data and evidence to understand what's working, what's not, and what to do next on big issues like health, education, housing, justice, and employment.**

For almost two decades, ISSR has partnered with a range of stakeholders including the health sector, community organisations and Commonwealth and state government departments to build the impartial, robust evidence needed

for confident decision-making across some of the country's most complex policy areas including housing, education, health, justice, and many others.

No two projects are ever the same. Sometimes we're brought in before a policy or program has been designed to help understand the challenge and identify the best way forward. Sometimes we're asked to independently evaluate major initiatives. Increasingly, we're working alongside government and communities to co-design solutions that combine research, lived experience and local knowledge.

**Whatever the challenge, our goal is the same...**



to help government and non-government partners make confident, evidence-informed decisions that improve the lives of Queenslanders and all Australians.

**The case studies in this booklet are a small sample of that work. They all began with a conversation about a complex challenge and a shared commitment to finding a better way forward.**



# Building evidence before the first children arrive



## SECTOR

- Children and family services
- Indigenous



## PROJECT

Bindi Bindi Place Framework



## CLIENT

Bindi Bindi Place/Community



## RESEARCH TEAM

**Associate Professor Emily Yorkston**  
(Institute for Social Science Research)

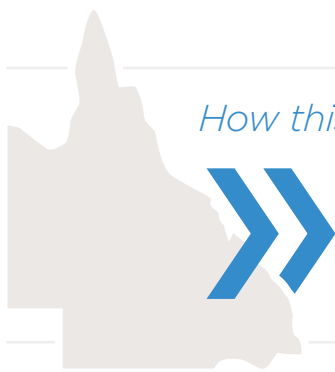
**Associate Professor Stephanie Wyeth**  
(School of Architecture, Design and Planning)

**Some organisations need support to prove their impact. Others need help making their vision visible.**

Bindi Bindi Place was created by Community to offer a different future for children aged 0–6 who are at risk of entering, or are already in, out of home care. Bringing together therapeutic early learning, family strengthening and cultural leadership in a purpose built environment, the model is designed to interrupt cycles of intergenerational trauma before families reach crisis.

**The vision was clear.**

The challenge was communicating how such a complex model creates change, and ensuring that learning and evaluation were embedded from the beginning, not after the service opened.



## How this supports **Queensland's priorities**

Queensland's *Our Way* strategy recognises the importance of earlier intervention, culturally responsive practice and stronger evidence to improve outcomes for vulnerable children and families. By embedding learning and evaluation **from the outset**, Bindi Bindi Place is building the foundations for continuous improvement and future evidence generation as the model grows.

Working alongside Communitify, ISSR co-designed a theory of change, program logic and Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning Framework that reflected the organisation's philosophy, values and practice wisdom.

Rather than imposing an external model, ISSR worked with founders, practitioners and partners to translate years of experience into a shared understanding of how Bindi Bindi Place is expected to improve outcomes for children, families and communities.

The resulting framework does more than support evaluation.

It provides a common language for communicating the model to governments, funders, researchers and future staff. It embeds continuous learning into the service itself and creates a foundation for understanding not only whether the model works, but how, for whom, and under what circumstances.

*"Communitify already had the knowledge and experience. Our role was to translate that into a clear roadmap for measuring impact, learning from experience and building the evidence needed to support the model into the future."*

**Associate Professor Emily Yorkston,**  
Institute for Social Science Research.

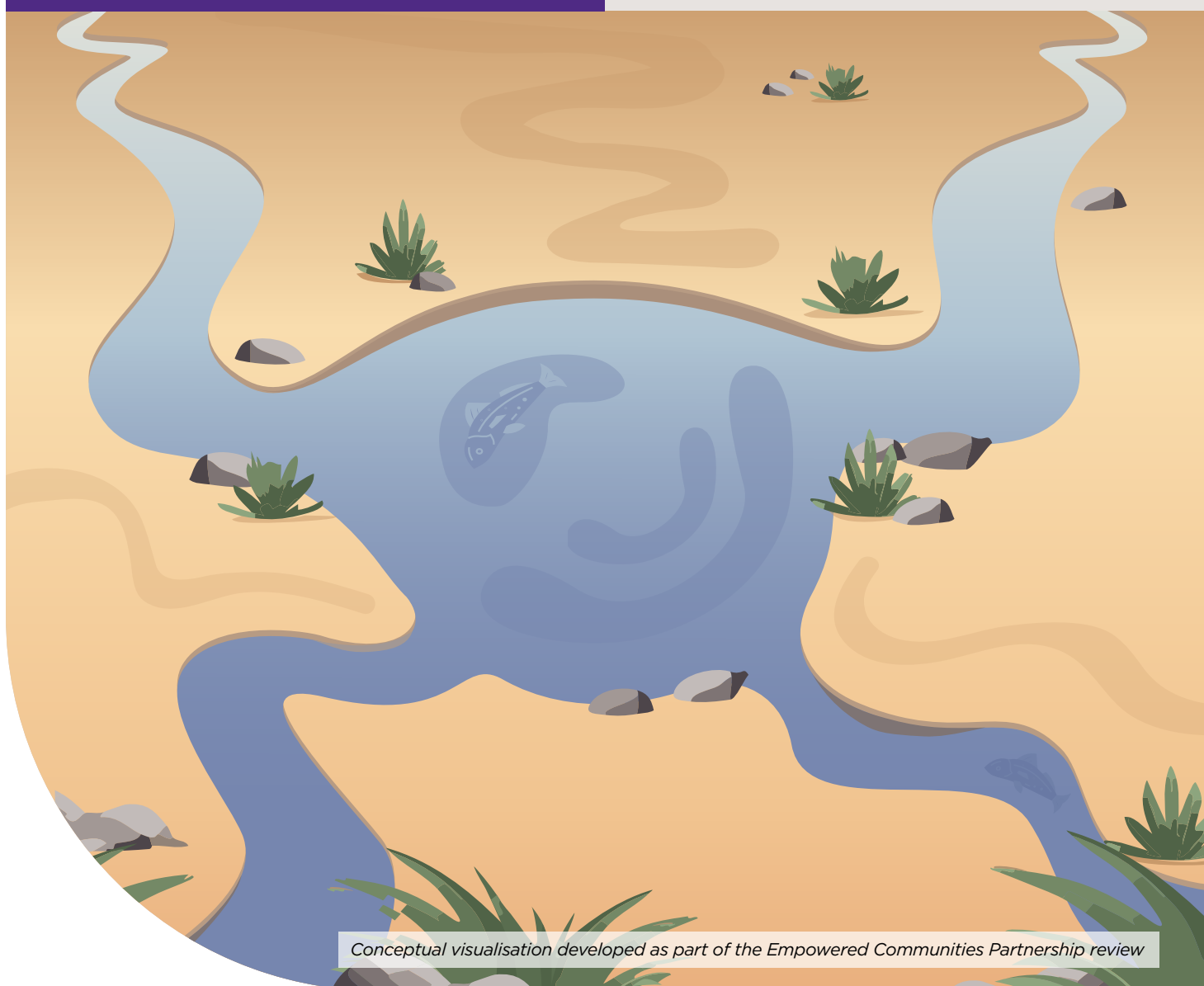


As Bindi Bindi Place moves into implementation, **monitoring and evaluation are already part of the model**, not simply a way of assessing it. This creates opportunities to strengthen practice over time, while contributing to broader understanding of culturally responsive, trauma-informed early intervention.



*“Every recommendation was accepted. Rather than simply documenting what had happened, the review captured the practical conditions that make shared decision-making work. Those lessons are already **helping governments build stronger partnerships with Indigenous communities.**”*

Professor Tim Reddel, Institute for Social Science Research



Conceptual visualisation developed as part of the Empowered Communities Partnership review

# Sharing decisions, strengthening Indigenous communities



**SECTOR**  
Indigenous



**PROJECT**  
Lessons learned from the Empowered Communities Partnership



**CLIENT**  
National Indigenous Australians Agency (NIAA) and Empowered Communities National Leadership Group



**INSTITUTE FOR SOCIAL SCIENCE RESEARCH TEAM**  
Professor Tim Reddel, Dr Laurel Johnson, Dr Jenny van der Arend, Dr Maram Shaweesh

*“Previously, it was difficult to talk to the government and be taken seriously. By being part of the decision-making process, we felt that our opinion was valued.”*

A community panel member

For generations, decisions affecting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities have largely been made *for* communities rather than *with* them.

But what happens when communities are given real influence over the decisions that affect them?

That’s the idea behind the Empowered Communities Partnership. Across 10 Indigenous regions, community members sit on local decision-making panels—much like citizen juries—to review evidence, discuss local priorities and make recommendations to government about funding and programs in their region.

For many participants, it was the first time they felt they had a genuine say in decisions that affected their lives.

The National Indigenous Australians Agency (NIAA) and Empowered Communities National Leadership Group wanted to understand what was making the model successful, and how it could be strengthened and expanded across government.

## ISSR was commissioned to find out.

Working alongside Indigenous leaders, community representatives and government partners, ISSR interviewed more than 100 people across the 10 regions. The review identified the partnerships, capabilities and conditions that enable successful shared decision-making, along with practical ways to strengthen and expand the model.

The review leaves behind more than recommendations. It shows that the Empowered Communities approach is more than a successful local initiative—it is a model for how Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and governments can make decisions together.

## How this supports **Queensland’s priorities**

Queensland’s *Closing the Gap Implementation Plan* identifies Formal Partnerships and Shared Decision Making as its first Priority Reform. The Empowered Communities Lessons Learned review provides practical evidence of what successful shared decision-making looks like, **helping governments build stronger partnerships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.**

# Why the barriers to university begin long before university



## SECTOR

Education



## PROJECT

Accord Report: A Targeted Review of Student Equity in Higher Education Programs and System Level Policy Levers



## CLIENT

Australian Department of Education



## INSTITUTE FOR SOCIAL SCIENCE RESEARCH TEAM

Professor Wojtek Tomaszewski, Dr Melissa Johnstone, Associate Professor Mark Robinson, Dr Matthew Curry, Matthias Kubler

Australia has no shortage of university equity programs. But despite decades of investment, some students remain less likely to enroll, succeed and graduate than their peers.

To understand why, the Australian Department of Education commissioned ISSR to review Australia's higher education equity system as part of the Australian Universities Accord—the once-in-a-generation review of Australia's higher education system.

Drawing on international evidence, Australian data, and extensive consultation across the sector, ISSR examined whether current policies and programs were giving every student a fair chance to succeed.



The review found the barriers ran much deeper than expected.

By the time many students think about applying for university, the odds have already been stacked against them. Family income, school experiences, geography and disability all influence the opportunities available to them long before they reach campus.

Fragmented, complex. Universities were doing more than ever, investing significant amounts of their own funding alongside Commonwealth programs. But the evidence showed the overall approach still lacked the scale, coordination and evaluation needed to create lasting change.

The review called for a long-term national equity strategy, stronger and better-targeted investment, improved evaluation, and greater accountability across the higher education system.

*"This review shifted the conversation from individual equity programs to system-wide reform. It showed that if we want fairer outcomes, equity can't be an add-on—it has to be built into the education system from the earliest years right through to university graduation."* **Professor Wojtek Tomaszewski, Institute for Social Science Research.**

### How this supports **Queensland's priorities**



Queensland's *Department of Education Strategic Plan 2026–30* prioritises stronger pathways into higher education, training and employment, and better outcomes for diverse learners. The ISSR review shows that those pathways are shaped long before students leave school, providing evidence to **identify disadvantage earlier and improve outcomes** across the entire education journey.



**Many of these reforms are already underway,** reflecting a broader shift in thinking: equity isn't just a university issue—it's a whole-of-system responsibility.

# Building a fairer path through university



## SECTOR

Education



## PROJECT

The Student Equity in Higher Education Evaluation Framework (SEHEEF)



## CLIENT

Australian Department of Education



## INSTITUTE FOR SOCIAL SCIENCE RESEARCH TEAM

Professor Wojtek Tomaszewski, Associate Professor Mark Robinson, Mr Matthias Kubler, Dr Melissa Johnstone, Dr Denise Clague, Dr Tomasz Zajac, Associate Professor Jenny Povey, Associate Professor Caroline Salom

Everyone deserves the opportunity to access and succeed at higher education, but for many Australians, university access, participation and success is shaped by postcode, resources and opportunity.

For more than a decade, the Australian Government has invested in equity initiatives through the Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program (HEPPP). Universities delivered outreach, mentoring, financial support, enabling courses and other programs designed to open doors for students facing the toughest barriers and to support them to succeed while studying.

Yet the national picture remained fragmented. Universities measured their work differently, making it difficult to see which approaches genuinely improved equity.

SEHEEF changed that.

**SEHEEF is now embedded in national equity reporting.** The Australian Centre for Student Equity and Success has aligned its **\$20.5 million expansion** with the framework, and universities have created dedicated roles to lead implementation.

*“We analysed years of HEPPP activity, and spoke with universities, government and communities to understand what was happening on the ground. The resulting evaluation framework is rigorous, practical and genuinely usable in real university settings — supporting both day-to-day learning in institutions and national decision-making.”*

**Professor Wojtek Tomaszewski,  
Institute for Social Science Research.**

SEHEEF gives the sector a shared language, a clear map of the student pathway, and practical tools for planning, data collection and reporting.

Beyond improving reporting, the framework has strengthened evaluation capability across the sector and given the government, for the first time, a national view of impact and where investment should go.

Evaluation is now more consistent across institutions, showing what works and why.

And stronger pathways mean a student's circumstances no longer decide their access to and success at university, and the futures it makes possible.



## How this supports **Queensland's priorities**



Queensland's *Department of Education Strategic Plan 2026–30* calls for stronger post-school pathways, better outcomes for diverse communities, improved monitoring and evaluation, and a clearer evidence base. SEHEEF advances these goals by opening clearer, **evidence-based pathways for disadvantaged communities** and **strengthening national evaluation practice**.



# Empowering young mums to give their babies a safe start in life



## SECTOR

- Housing
- Domestic and family violence
- Child and family wellbeing



## PROJECT

Safe Young Mums and Bubs Program Evaluation



## CLIENT

Brisbane Youth Service (BYS), supported by funding from the Queensland Government



## INSTITUTE FOR SOCIAL SCIENCE RESEARCH TEAM

Dr Laurel Johnson, Professor Lisa McDaid,  
Dr Alex O'Donnell, Tayla Barber

**Every parent deserves the chance to give their child a safe start in life.**

But for young mothers experiencing domestic and family violence, that chance is often threatened by an impossible choice: stay in an unsafe home or leave with nowhere to go. With limited affordable housing and rising rental costs, escaping violence can mean homelessness rather than safety.

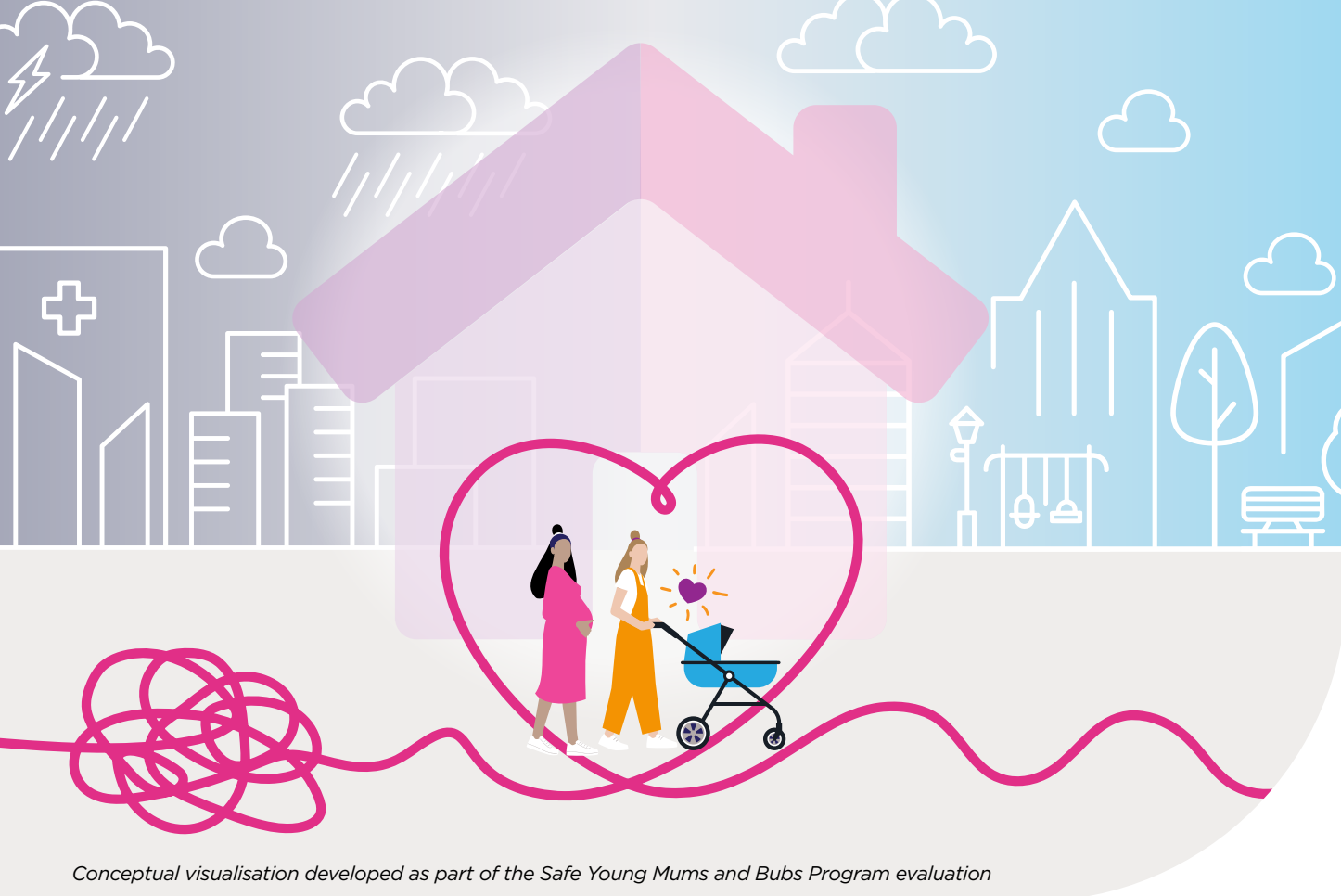
Safe Young Mums and Bubs offers a different future.

Delivered by Brisbane Youth Service, the program provides young mothers and their babies with a safe home for up to 18 months, alongside 24-hour support, counselling, parenting guidance and practical life skills that support them to thrive.



*"I'm confident as a mum now. I can comfort my child, meet her needs, and stay focused on what matters most – being there for her."*

A SYMB program participant



Conceptual visualisation developed as part of the Safe Young Mums and Bubs Program evaluation

ISSR evaluated the program through interviews with young mothers, family support workers and service partners, alongside analysis of more than 2,000 data points.

Young mums reported greater parenting confidence, improved mental health, healthier relationships, stronger life skills and increased confidence for living independently.

These outcomes were driven not simply by safe accommodation, but by long-term, wrap-around support and a non-judgemental, youth-centred approach.

Every young mother deserves the opportunity to build a safe future for herself and her child. Safe Young Mums and Bubs shows what is possible when that opportunity is backed by the right support.

## The evaluation provided more than just evidence

*“The evaluation provided the evidence needed for continued investment, but just as important is that it gave young mothers a voice, and staff the confidence that their work makes a difference. By making them true partners in the evaluation, we captured not only what changed, but what young mothers and their babies need to thrive.”*

Dr Laurel Johnson, Institute for Social Science Research

## How this supports **Queensland’s priorities**



A key implementation principle of Queensland’s [Domestic and Family Violence Reform Strategy](#) is to be led by evidence and lived experience. This evaluation puts that principle into practice, combining rigorous evidence with the voices of young mothers and frontline staff to **strengthen future services and help those who need it most.**



THE UNIVERSITY  
OF QUEENSLAND  
AUSTRALIA

Together, we can turn evidence into impact and build a fair and just society.

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