

**CAIRNS SOCIAL RESILIENCE STRATEGY**

L&amp;C | 52/2/4-02 | #7894620

**RECOMMENDATION:****That Council:****Endorses the Cairns Social Resilience Strategy 2026–2030.****INTERESTED PARTIES:**

CRED Consulting

**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:**

The Cairns Social Resilience Strategy maps the status of social resilience across the Cairns Local Government Area (LGA) and provides a roadmap for Council to increase social resilience. The Strategy's vision is for a socially resilient Cairns where communities are connected, inclusive, healthy and equipped to adapt to shocks and stresses.

The Strategy identifies opportunities for Council to collaboratively work towards building social resilience across four key focus areas:

1. Local housing solutions: Local responses to housing and homelessness that support everyone having access to adequate, safe and secure housing.
2. Engaged and empowered young people: Making sure our young people are healthy, engaged and empowered to contribute to a socially resilient community.
3. Inclusive and welcoming communities: Creating a place where people feel connected to each other, to their neighbourhoods and have the opportunity to contribute to decisions that affect them.
4. Safe and respectful relationships: Supporting healthy relationships and access to networks and services that keep people safe.

The Strategy term is four years, with an annual report card to be produced mapping progress against the four focus areas.

**BACKGROUND:**

A socially resilient community is one where people support each other, have access to the resources they need and feel a sense of belonging, with strong connections between individuals, groups (like neighbourhood groups, sporting clubs or local services) and institutions (including Council and other government agencies). By creating a socially resilient community, our city will be able to better prepare for, respond to and recover from shocks, such as natural disasters, and ongoing longer-term stressors, such as

financial or housing stress.

In late 2023, Council Officers identified a need to better understand the complex nature of social resilience in our region, including unique challenges and opportunities, and to develop a more strategic approach to building social resilience in the community. Cred Consulting were engaged via a Request for Quotation process to undertake the project, which was split into two deliverables; the development of a Social Resilience Baseline Report which provided an evidence-based analysis of social resilience indicators, strengths and challenges; and the subsequent development of a Cairns Social Resilience Strategy. The project involved extensive research, data analysis, targeted internal and external stakeholder interviews, strategic alignment with key Council strategies and plans and benchmarking against other Councils.

The Baseline Report identified over 1,400 social assets like community groups and services, a wide network of service providers and community facilities, a local economy driven by small businesses and strong social networks, all of which make our community more socially resilient. However, it also identified new and ongoing challenges putting pressure on our communities, including cost-of-living, housing and rental stress, social inequity, mental health challenges, high rates of domestic and family violence (DFV), growing social isolation and disharmony and a lack of public transport. In addition, our region is experiencing increasing risk of natural disasters, with catchments experiencing different threats including bushfire, flooding and coastal hazards.

Following the presentation of the Social Resilience Baseline Report, Cred Consulting analysed Councillor and Officer feedback to refine the four key areas of focus which were incorporated into a draft Social Resilience Strategy, which was finalised internally by Council Officers.

### **COMMENT:**

Covering a term from July 2026 – June 2030, the Cairns Social Resilience Strategy articulates key social resilience strengths and challenges facing the Cairns region and defines Council's role in addressing and increasing social resilience across four key focus areas:

1. Local housing solutions: Local responses to housing and homelessness that support everyone having access to adequate, safe and secure housing.
2. Engaged and empowered young people: Making sure our young people are healthy, engaged and empowered to contribute to a socially resilient community.
3. Inclusive and welcoming communities: Creating a place where people feel connected to each other, to their neighbourhoods and have the opportunity to contribute to decisions that affect them.
4. Safe and respectful relationships: Supporting healthy relationships and access to networks and services that keep people safe.

The Strategy provides evidence-based data on current challenges, and a summary of the work Council is already undertaking in each of the four area of focus. The Strategy then identifies opportunities to inform future efforts to address challenges and increase social resilience under each focus area, including the role of Council (including advocate, partner, facilitator, provider and funder). Implementation of the Strategy will support the prioritisation and investment of existing Council resources to ensure social resilience is a

key consideration across a range of Council functions, as well as inform key advocacy priorities pertaining to social resilience.

An annual report card will be produced mapping progress and outcomes against each focus area of the Strategy, as well as future opportunities for consideration.

### **OPTIONS:**

#### Option 1 (recommended):

That Council endorses the Cairns Social Resilience Strategy.

#### Option 2:

That Council defers adoption of the Cairns Social Resilience Strategy pending further information being provided.

### **CONSIDERATIONS:**

#### Risk Management:

Relevant Council functional teams were consulted in the development of the Strategy to ensure alignment without duplication. The Community Development Unit will incorporate the Strategy into core business, collaborating with other teams as required.

#### Council Finance and the Local Economy:

The intent of the Strategy is to guide and prioritise investment of existing operational resources as well as the pursuit of grant funding and advocacy opportunities to support building social resilience across the four key areas of focus. There is no additional financial budget required to support the Strategy implementation.

#### Community and Cultural Heritage:

Adoption and implementation of the Cairns Social Resilience Strategy will strengthen Council's response to key community challenges and opportunities and prioritise efforts to increase social resilience, enabling the community to better withstand shocks and stressors.

#### Corporate and Operational Plans:

Adoption of the Cairns Social Resilience Strategy aligns with the following pillars of Council's Corporate Plan 2025-2030:

#### Focus 3: Design for liveability - *A place-based approach that celebrates our community*

- Proactive advocacy and collaboration with state and federal governments
- Address opportunities for connected communities
- Invest in community infrastructure and services
- Promote a vibrant community that supports wellbeing, safety and resilience

Focus 4: Community & culture - *Fostering a vibrant, healthy and inclusive community*

- Support diverse sport, cultural and community groups
- Provide spaces and programs for the benefit of the community

**CONSULTATION:**

Throughout the development of the Social Resilience Baseline Report, Cred Consulting undertook extensive engagement with relevant Council staff, as well as targeted interviews with key social service sector stakeholders, to identify localised social resilience strengths, challenges and opportunities.

**ATTACHMENTS:**

1. Draft Cairns Social Resilience Strategy 2026-2030 (DM# 7879768)
2. Social Resilience Strategy – Baseline Report (DM# 7542969)



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Executive Manager Community Life



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Director Lifestyle & Community

Attachment 1 – Draft Cairns Social Resilience Strategy 2026-2030

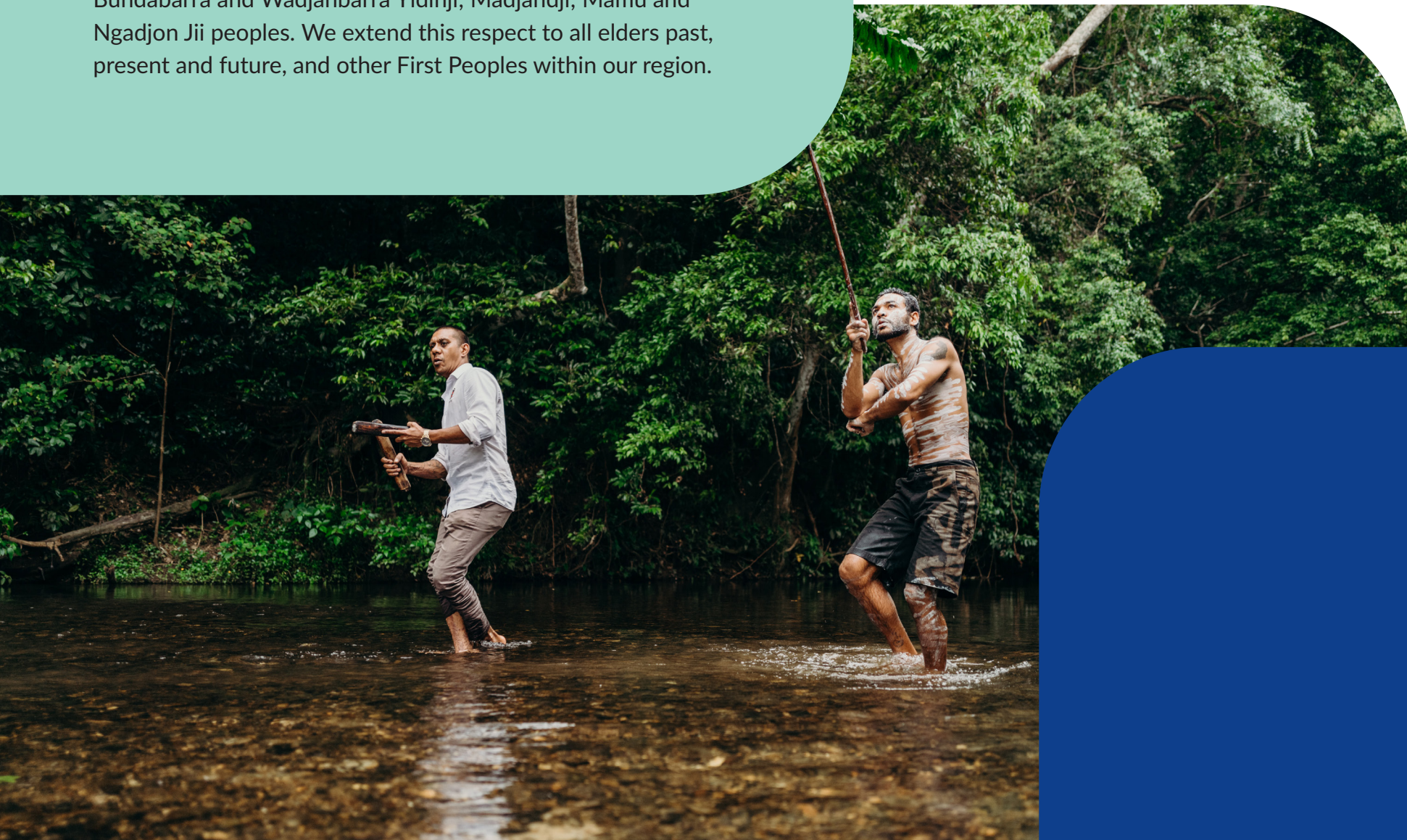
# Cairns Social Resilience Strategy 2026-2030

Cairns Regional Council  
June 2026



## Acknowledgement of country

Cairns Regional Council acknowledges and pays our respects to the Traditional Custodians of our region, the Djabugay; Yirrganydji; Buluwai; Gimuy Walubara Yidinji; Mandingalbay Yidinji; Gunggandji; Dulabed and Malanbarra Yidinji; Bundabarra and Wadjanbarra Yidinji; Madjandji; Mamu and Ngadjon Jii peoples. We extend this respect to all elders past, present and future, and other First Peoples within our region.





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# Message from the Mayor

A resilient city is about more than roads, buildings and infrastructure. It is about people.

It is about whether people feel connected to their community, supported through difficult times and confident about the future.

Cairns is growing. By 2050, our population is expected to increase from more than 179,000 people to around 241,000. Growth brings opportunity, but it also brings responsibility. We must ensure that as our city grows, we remain a place where people feel they belong.

One of the things I love most about Cairns is what I often describe as our “Cairnsness”. It is the willingness to lend a hand, the pride people have in their neighbourhoods, the diversity of cultures and experiences that shape our city, and the strong sense of community that exists across our region.

Those qualities cannot be taken for granted.

Like communities across Australia, Cairns is experiencing pressures associated with housing affordability, cost of living, social isolation, mental health challenges and family violence. We also face the realities of living in a region increasingly impacted by severe weather events.

The Cairns Social Resilience Strategy 2026–2030 recognises that strong communities do not happen by accident. They are built through connection, participation and partnership.

The Strategy focuses Council’s efforts on four key areas: supporting local housing solutions, empowering young people, fostering inclusive and welcoming communities, and promoting safe and respectful relationships.

Importantly, this work is not something Council can deliver alone. It requires collaboration between all levels of government, community organisations, businesses, volunteers and residents themselves.

The good news is that Cairns already has strong foundations. We are home to dedicated community organisations, passionate volunteers, diverse cultural groups and more than 1,400 social assets that help bring people together and strengthen community life.

Our task now is to build on those strengths.

As Mayor, my vision is that as Cairns grows, we become not only a larger city, but a stronger one. A city where people know their neighbours. A city where young people can see a future for themselves. A city where people feel safe, supported and connected. A city that continues to reflect the welcoming spirit that makes Cairns such a special place to call home.

Because ultimately, the success of our city will not be measured by how many people live here. It will be measured by how well we live together.



Cr Amy Eden  
Mayor





# Key definitions

**Community resilience** is the collective ability of the Cairns population to survive, adapt and grow in the face of adverse events.

**Social assets** are the building blocks for social cohesion. They are our community places and space, services and programs, information and communications to connect people with each other, groups, services and institutions.

**Social cohesion** is the extent of shared values, mutual respect and acceptance of difference, as well as trust between people and trust in institutions.

**Social resilience** encompasses the importance of having a socially connected, cohesive and informed social system including social groups and networks, social and health services, community facilities and trusted institutions.

**Shocks** are disaster events with an immediate damaging impact, such as cyber-attacks, extreme storms or flooding. Shocks can have long-lasting, cascading impacts on communities, sometimes affecting people even more so than the initial event itself.

**Stresses** are longer-term issues that make it harder for people to cope during emergencies and day-to-day life, like financial or housing stress, lack of transport options and social isolation.

# Strategy on a page

Social resilience is central to both our individual and community health and wellbeing and our ability to prepare for, respond to and recover from ongoing shocks (such as flood, fires, heat and pandemics) and stresses (such as access to secure housing, cost of living and personal health).

*The evidence is clear that how we plan and manage our places and communities has a direct impact on how socially connected we feel to our neighbours, our local services and agencies.*

## Why this matters for Cairns

Cairns is home to a growing and diverse community built on more than 65,000 years of First Peoples history and heritage. This diversity gives Cairns a unique identity and strengthens our sense of belonging, connection and cohesion.

Research shows that communities with high social resilience and social cohesion recover more quickly and effectively from challenges. As we continue to grow, we will face challenges like social isolation, natural disasters, rising cost of living, declining trust in institutions<sup>1</sup> and social inequity. As such, we need to continue to build social resilience to ensure Cairns continues to be a place where people feel connected, healthy and supported.

## What will this Strategy do

The *Cairns Social Resilience Strategy* (the Strategy) provides a roadmap for Council to facilitate a coordinated and collective approach to social resilience for people and places.



## Our vision

Our vision is for a socially resilient Cairns that is a place where communities are connected, inclusive, healthy and equipped to adapt to shocks and stresses.

## Our focus areas

This Strategy has four key focus areas for Council to collaboratively work towards. Each focus area has a number of opportunities that will guide action planning over the next four years.



**Local housing solutions:** Local responses to housing and homelessness that support everyone having access to adequate, safe and secure housing.



**Engaged and empowered young people:** Making sure our young people are healthy, engaged and empowered to contribute to a socially resilient community.



**Inclusive and welcoming communities:** Creating a place where people feel connected to each other, to their neighbourhoods and have the opportunity to contribute to decisions that affect them.



**Safe and respectful relationships:** Supporting healthy relationships and access to networks and services that keep people safe.

<sup>1</sup> Scanlon Foundation Research Institute (2023), Australian Cohesion Index

# 1. Introduction

*Cairns is already home to 179,330 people and is expected to grow to 241,000 by 2050. Our future community will include people of all ages, backgrounds, cultures, abilities and genders. Research shows that communities with high social resilience and social cohesion recover more quickly and effectively from shocks and stresses. This Strategy seeks to guide, coordinate and align planning and investment in social resilience, social cohesion and connectedness to ensure our community is better equipped to respond to the ongoing change and impacts facing our community.*



## 1.1 Background and purpose

Social resilience is central to our health and wellbeing and our ability to prepare for ongoing shocks (such as flood, fires, heat and pandemics) and stresses (such as personal health, cost of living and lack of services). With increasing social isolation, declining trust in government<sup>2</sup>, and growing threats to social cohesion, it's never been more important to build a socially resilient community.

Social resilience is about having strong connections between individuals, groups (like neighbourhood groups or local services) and institutions (including Council and other government agencies). These bonds are built on principles of equality, justice, respect and care for one another. For communities like Cairns which undergoing change and growth, it's imperative that we deliberately plan for social cohesion.

We know that Cairns faces challenges to social resilience, including financial and rental stress, an increasing number of natural disasters, rapid population growth and growing social inequity while also playing the role as a regional service centre for more remote communities. As our population continues to grow and change, it is essential to facilitate social connections and deliver social infrastructure to build and strengthen social resilience.

Council has already taken steps to strengthen our social resilience, including through the *Towards 2050: Shaping Cairns Growth Strategy*. This *Strategy* builds on these efforts by identifying our social assets, strengths and vulnerabilities and providing a model for a coordinated whole of Council approach to social resilience. It also guides Council's work, in partnership with local organisations, businesses and residents, to:

- build social connections and trust
- improve access to services, particularly for vulnerable groups, and
- foster inclusivity and cohesion across diverse communities.

*“Building resilience is about creating stronger, more connected communities. With focused investment in social cohesion, communities can be better prepared for future challenges, supporting their long-term wellbeing”*

Australian Public Policy Institute (APPI)

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

## 1.2 How we developed this Strategy

This Strategy was developed and informed by:



### Strategic review

Aligning with national, state and local government priorities.



### Social asset review

Mapping social assets that connect our communities.



### Demographic analysis

Analysing social equity, health and wellbeing data from the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) Census 2021 to understand community strengths and vulnerabilities.



### Stakeholder engagement

Engaging with local service providers and Council staff to identify key challenges and opportunities to inform the focus areas.



## 1.3 Strategic alignment

Governments at all levels are prioritising social resilience as a driver of community and economic wellbeing, emergency preparedness, social cohesion and trust.

### Global

- United Nations Sustainable Development Goals
- 100 Resilient Cities Network

### Australian Government

- Measuring What Matters National Wellbeing Framework
- Australian Infrastructure Plan 2021

### Queensland Government

- Communities 2032 Strategy
- Human and Social Recovery and Resilience Plan 2025-28
- Queensland Strategy for Disaster Resilience 2022-2027

### Regional

- Wet Tropics Regional Resilience Strategy
- Far North Queensland Regional Plan (under review)

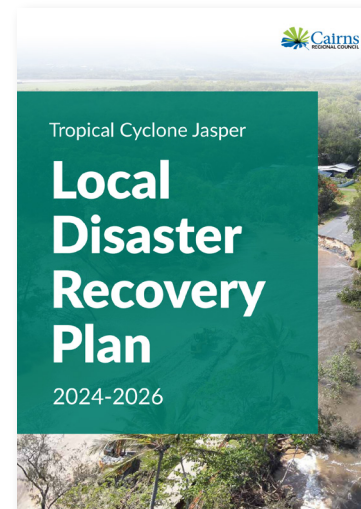
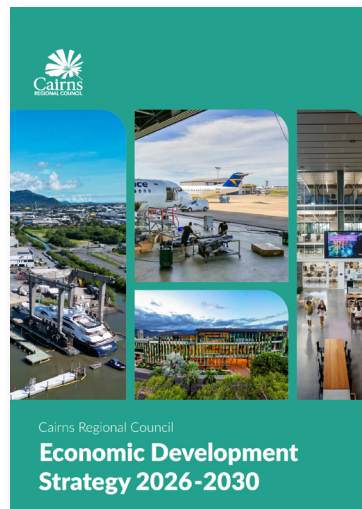
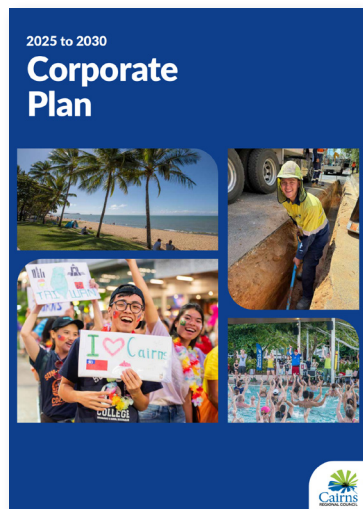
### Cairns Regional Council

- Cairns Regional Council Corporate Plan 2025-2030
- Cairns 2050 Growth Strategy
- Cairns Regional Council Local Housing Action Plan
- Cairns Integrated Resilience Plan (under development)

### Local strategic alignment

This Strategy is embedded within Council's broader long-term planning framework. It builds on the Operational Plan and Corporate Plan, which provide the foundation for future policies and actions and envision Cairns as "a great place to live and visit and Australia's premier wet tropical city."

The Strategy is also aligned with other key plans and strategies responding to social resilience challenges in the community including Climate Change Strategy 2030, Cairns Local Recovery Plan, Disability Access and Inclusion Plan 2024-2026, and the Economic Development Strategy 2022-2026.



## 2. Social resilience in Cairns

*Social resilience is at the heart of a strong and connected community. This section explores what social resilience means and why it is important for our city.*

### 2.1 What is social resilience?

A socially resilient community is one where people support each other, have access to the resources they need and feel a sense of belonging. It is about having strong connections between individuals, groups (like neighbourhood groups, sporting clubs or local services) and institutions (including Council and other government agencies). By creating a socially resilient Cairns, our community will be able to prepare for, respond to and recover from ongoing shocks and stresses.

Social resilience doesn't operate in isolation. It is a core pillar of community resilience alongside economy, infrastructure, roads and transport and environment. Each of these areas contributes to overall community resilience by strengthening the capacity of individuals and social systems to adapt to changes, recover from disruptions and support one another.

*"A resilient community is a connected community, in which everyone knows where to access information and help and is confident that help will be provided when needed. Social resilience might therefore be understood as a collective ability to "bounce forward," rather than bounce back to a previous position."*

Australian Public Policy Institute (APPI)

### 2.2 Why we need a Social Resilience Strategy

With growing cultural diversity and over 1,400 social assets like community groups and services, we have the building blocks to become a socially resilient city. Grassroots initiatives, a wide network of service providers, the local economy driven by small businesses and strong social networks further help to support our community through challenges.

A strengths-based approach to social resilience means recognising and building on these assets, however, as our community grows and changes, new and ongoing challenges are putting pressure on our communities, including:

- **Social inequity** – Growing disparities across social groups<sup>3</sup>, particularly for First Peoples, young people and new arrivals.
- **Housing and rental stress** – Rising housing costs, low rental vacancy rates and limited housing stock are creating challenges for people to find secure, affordable housing, with many households experiencing rental or mortgage stress, prolonged wait times for support and increased risk of homelessness.
- **Mental health challenges** – Natural disasters, financial strain and social stresses can place

increased stress on mental health and wellbeing, but many struggle to access affordable mental health services.

- **Domestic and family violence** – Incidents of domestic and family violence are increasing, placing additional pressure on already strained support services.
- **Social disharmony** – Rapid population growth and demographic shifts can result in increased tensions and disharmony within the community.
- **Social isolation** – Growing numbers of people, including those living alone, older people, disengaged young people, recent arrivals and those with disability, are at risk of social isolation.
- **Lack of public transport** – Limited public transport options can restrict access to health, education, employment and social opportunities.
- **Centralised services** – As a regional service centre, residents from surrounding areas rely on accessing centralised services within Cairns, which can contribute to service system strain, housing issues and temporary displacement.

By strengthening social resilience, we can ensure that Cairns remains a connected, healthy and inclusive community that is ready to face these and any future challenges together.

<sup>3</sup> Queensland Reconstruction Authority (2020), Resilient Queensland in Action

## Some of the things Council is already doing to build social resilience



Community grants that provide funding to community groups and organisations to deliver events and activities that enhance the lives of local communities, celebrate important community occasions and provide opportunities to grow social cohesion and connection across the Cairns region.



Facilitating a First Peoples Advisory Consultants group to advise Council on relevant issues pertaining to First Peoples, including contributing to the development and implementation of Council's reconciliation agenda.



Development and implementation of Council's Disability Access and Inclusion Plan which guides Council's commitment to creating an inclusive community by removing barriers and improving access to services, spaces, and participation for people with disability.



Libraries provide safe, inclusive community spaces that support lifelong learning, digital access and social connection across the region.



Establishment and facilitation of the democratically elected Cairns Youth Council in partnership with the Foundation for Young Australians.



Engaging community members in various volunteer opportunities across the region, including environmental conservation through the Green Space Our Place initiative, cultural and arts support at galleries and events, animal care assistance via the ACE program, and educational outreach through programs like Little Taccas and guided tours, all aimed at strengthening community bonds and promoting active civic participation.



Capacity building for local community organisations and sporting clubs through partnerships with the community sector and peak bodies.



Partnerships with Centacare and TAFE QLD to support newly arrived residents through the delivery of capacity building and education sessions on libraries, disaster preparedness, animal management and waste and recycling.



Delivery of Council's Active Living Program, which provides free physical activity classes across a wide range of public spaces to enhance community wellbeing and connectedness.



Green Space, Our Place community volunteer program with over 400 active volunteers who help contribute to the improvement and upkeep of green spaces, providing a meaningful avenue for skills development and social connection.



Maintaining and activating high-quality public spaces, including parks and the Cairns Esplanade, to provide inclusive, accessible areas for recreation, social connection, community events and active living.



Development and implementation of Council's Reconciliation Action Plan (RAP) supports equitable outcomes for First Peoples by embedding organisational cultural competency, engagement, procurement and employment pathways.



Go Clubs program which strengthens the capacity of local sporting and recreation organisations through tailored training, resources, grant funding and support to foster active, connected communities.



Offering Council grants up to \$5,000 for community-led initiatives that reduce greenhouse gas emissions, restore ecosystem health, or strengthen resilience to climate change impacts.

## 3. Where are we now?

*Building social resilience starts with understanding the unique characteristics of our community. This chapter provides a snapshot of our community today and our strengths and challenges for social resilience.*

### 3.1 Our community

Our community is diverse and growing. Outside South-East Queensland, we have the third-largest regional population. Key characteristics of our community:

- **We are growing** – Cairns is home to 179,330 people and will grow to 241,000 (+35%) by 2051.
- **We have a young, but ageing population** – Our median age is 39 and 23% of our population is aged under 18. However, the number of people aged 65 and over is also increasing, requiring more accessible services, housing and social connections to maintain community wellbeing and reduce isolation.
- **We have a large First Peoples population** – 10% of our population identify as First Peoples, whose heritage continues to shape and enrich our resilience.
- **We are culturally diverse** – 22% of our residents were born overseas and 14% speak a language other than English at home. Languages spoken by our growing community include Nepali, Punjabi, Mandarin and Malayalam.
- **We are experiencing financial and rental stress** – 33% of renters are in rental stress, struggling to afford housing costs. At the same time, 21% of households are low-income, making it harder to keep up with rising living costs.
- **We live in diverse households** – 25% of our households are couples with children and 25% are lone-person households. 12% are single parents with children.
- **Our young people need support** – 11% of young people are disengaged from work and education, highlighting the need for stronger social connections and pathways into employment.
- **We are connected** – 14% of residents volunteer or participate in local groups, creating a strong sense of belonging and support. 10% of our residents undertake unpaid care.



## 3.2 Our social assets

Cairns has a strong network of social assets that support social resilience. However, access is not equitable across all areas, and some facilities and services are under strain due to rising demand.



### Community spaces and places

We have a diverse range of community facilities, including libraries, cultural venues, recreation centres and parks. While these are well located, some facilities are ageing, not fit-for-purpose or do not meet accessibility and floorspace standards.



### Community programs and events

There is a broad program of local activities and major events such as Cairns Festival, Ecofiesta and the Cairns Indigenous Art Fair. Council provides grant funding for community, sport and cultural groups and organisations to deliver community programs and events. These strengthen community identity and provide opportunities for social connection.



### Institutions

Cairns Regional Council, Queensland Government agencies and higher education institutions such as James Cook University and TAFE play a key role in supporting the community and economy.



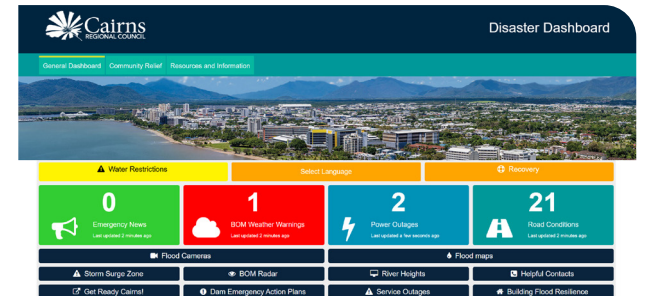
### Community groups and networks

There is a strong presence of a wide range of sporting clubs, multicultural groups and volunteer networks.



### Social and health services

As a regional service centre, we have extensive social and health services, but demand is rising due to population growth and increasing social and economic inequity. Access to some services, such as neighbourhood centres, varies significantly across Cairns. Limited access to public transportation across the region can also contribute to inequality of service access.



### Information and communication

Access to local news, emergency updates and community information is critical to resilience. While we have a range of media and digital platforms, digital equity and inclusion remains a challenge.

### 3.3 Our social resilience strengths and challenges

Through background research to inform this Strategy, we identified the following strengths and challenges for our social resilience:

#### Strengths



- Over 1,400 social assets, including, facilities, community groups, events, and programs.
- A significant First Peoples community with over 65,000 years of cultural strength and resilience.
- A diverse and welcoming community that embraces new arrivals.
- A strong network of grassroots initiatives and service providers supporting those in need.
- A thriving local economy, 97% of businesses being small businesses that build strong community ties.
- Established communication networks, including local radio and social media platforms, helping people stay informed and connected.
- Key regional institutions such as Cairns Hospital, James Cook University, and CQUniversity.



#### Weaknesses

- There is growing social inequity across population cohorts.
- Cost-of-living pressure is increasing financial and housing stress.
- Mental health is becoming a key challenge.
- Incidents of domestic and family violence are increasing.
- There is inequity in health outcomes across population cohorts.
- Social isolation is increasing.
- Population growth can lead to disharmony and discrimination.
- There is a lack of access to public transport.
- Accessing information can be a challenge due to digital exclusion and low levels of digital literacy.
- Some community facilities are ageing and many are located in the central and northern parts of Cairns, with high growth forecast in the south.
- Cairns is a regional service centre that provides services for a broader geographic region (i.e. Cape York and surrounding regions).
- We are experiencing increasing natural disasters, with different catchments experiencing different hazards including bushfire, flooding and coastal hazards.

# 4. Our Strategy

Cairns has the building blocks for a resilient community, but as our community grows and changes, we need a coordinated whole of Council approach to strengthening social resilience. This section identifies our four focus areas to achieve our vision.

## 4.1 Our vision

Our vision is for a socially resilient Cairns that is a place where communities are connected, inclusive, healthy and equipped to adapt to shocks and stresses.

## 4.2 Council's role

Building social resilience is a shared responsibility. A collaborative approach across Council will be key in delivering social resilience action planning in Cairns. We will also need to facilitate strong partnerships with community, service providers, businesses and other levels of government.

Council's roles outlined in this Strategy include:



### ADVOCATE

Championing the needs of the community to state and federal governments, advocating for funding, policy change and investment in social infrastructure, services and programs.



### PARTNER

Working with other government agencies, businesses and non-profit organisations to co-deliver programs and services that build social cohesion and support vulnerable communities.



### FACILITATOR

Bringing stakeholders together to collaborate on solutions, supporting local networks and providing platforms for community voices to be heard.



### PROVIDER

Delivering essential social infrastructure and services, such as libraries, community centres, public spaces, and local programs that foster connection, learning and wellbeing.



### FUNDER

Providing grants and funding programs to support local initiatives, community groups and social services that enhance community connection and resilience.



### REGULATOR

Ensuring planning and policies support safe, inclusive and accessible communities, from social housing advocacy to disaster preparedness and public health regulations.



## 4.3 Our focus areas

Our four focus areas were developed in collaboration with Council staff and are informed by stakeholder engagement and research and align with work Council is already doing to support social resilience.

Delivering on our focus areas will involve a whole of Council approach, alongside partnerships with external agencies and other levels of government. Under each focus area we have outlined why it is important to our community, what we are already doing and where we want to be including future opportunity areas to guide future action planning:



Focus area 1  
**Local housing solutions**



Focus area 2  
**Engaged and empowered young people**



Focus area 3  
**Inclusive and welcoming communities**



Focus area 4  
**Safe and respectful relationships**





## 4.4 Focus area 1: Local housing solutions

### Why this matters

Access to inclusive, affordable and accessible housing is a basic human right, essential to quality of life and social resilience. Without it, people face increased health risks, financial insecurity, social isolation and homelessness. Housing also enables our community to access education, employment and information during emergencies.

Cairns faces significant housing challenges, including rising costs, rental stress, homelessness and a lack of affordable and accessible housing. Over one in three renters (33%) in Cairns are experiencing rental stress. Key cohorts such as First Peoples, older women, people with disability and young people are particularly affected:

- First Peoples are six times more likely to experience homelessness than other Queenslanders<sup>4</sup>.
- Older women are one of the fastest-growing groups experiencing homelessness in Australia, often due to a combination of high housing costs, lower rates of home ownership and reduced incomes<sup>5</sup>.
- People with disability face significant challenges accessing affordable, appropriate housing, with around 5.4% of Cairns, a figure that is growing, living with disability<sup>6</sup>.
- Young people aged 12–24 are overrepresented in homelessness statistics across Queensland<sup>7</sup>.

While Council does not directly provide housing, we play role in advocating, planning and facilitating partnerships to improve access to housing and homelessness support services. State and national policies on housing, employment and infrastructure provide opportunities for Council to advocate for the investment we need to ensure housing supply meets the needs of our growing city.

### What we are already doing

- **Towards 2050 Growth Strategy:** This long-term strategy guides sustainable urban growth, focusing on creating diverse housing options, enhancing public transport, and ensuring access to employment and essential services to meet the needs of a growing population.
- **Cairns City Precincts Urban Regeneration Project:** Provides a framework for Central Cairns to deliver the growth expectation under the Towards 2050 Strategy. It sets out targeted planning and incentives to stimulate infill housing.
- **Local Housing Action Plan:** In collaboration with the Queensland Government, this plan was developed by Council to address immediate and long-term housing challenges, incorporating actions from existing strategies and engaging with stakeholders to improve housing outcomes.
- **Advocacy for Infrastructure Investment:** Council is actively engaging with state and federal governments to secure funding for critical infrastructure projects that support housing development, economic growth, and improved access to essential services.
- **Amendments to CairnsPlan:** Amendments to the planning scheme to remove regulatory barriers to streamline approval processes for housing and to facilitate well designed housing outcomes in the right locations.

### Where we want to be

Cairns is a place where everyone has access to secure, affordable and accessible housing that meets their needs. There are diverse housing options available across Cairns, supported by infrastructure, transport and employment opportunities.

Future action planning should consider the following opportunities:

Opportunities	Council's role
Collaborate with the housing and homelessness service sectors and other levels of government to facilitate access to information and referrals for people at risk of, or experiencing, homelessness.	Partner
Share information and data with key agencies to build awareness of the trends and impacts of homelessness and support the mapping of localised, accurate data	Facilitator Advocate
Work with State Government agencies to advocate for a coordinated and supported exit process for people transitioning from care (including health departments, corrections, institutional living and out-of-home care).	Advocate
Advocate for improved access to affordable housing, transport, employment opportunities and access to essential services such as healthcare.	Advocate
Explore opportunities to build on the outcomes of the Local Housing Action Plan, including regular reporting and updating of the Plan to ensure it remains responsive to opportunities and challenges.	Facilitator
Advocate for policy and planning that addresses economic, transport and housing insecurity for vulnerable populations through partnerships and collaboration.	Advocate

<sup>4</sup> Queensland Government (2025), Our Place: A First Nations Housing and Homelessness Roadmap 2031

<sup>5</sup> Queensland Government (2025), Housing and support for older women, [housing.qld.gov.au/initiatives/housing-older-women](https://housing.qld.gov.au/initiatives/housing-older-women)

<sup>6</sup> Queensland Government (2024), Partnering for inclusive housing with Queenslanders with disability 2024-2027

<sup>7</sup> Queensland Government (2022), Towards ending homelessness for young Queenslanders 2022-2027



## 4.5 Focus area 2: Engaged and empowered young people

### Why this matters

Young people play an important role in cohesive and resilient communities, bringing fresh perspectives and energy. Research shows that young people are highly connected to their communities. Adolescence is an important time for young people. It is often when they find their early independence through experiences like travelling to high school independently, getting their first job and moving out of home for the first time. However, it is also a time of significant change and many young people face challenges that have the potential to negatively impact their future opportunities and long-term wellbeing.

One in ten (11%) of our young people aged between 15 and 24 are disengaged from both work and study, with growing concerns around youth homelessness, unemployment and social exclusion. There can also be negative community perceptions of young people linked to experience and discourse around crime and anti-social behaviour. We know that young people often feel judged or excluded from public spaces and services, while financial stress, housing insecurity, poor public transport connections and a lack of safe, diverse, and youth-friendly activities after-hours, exacerbate disengagement and overall vulnerability.

Young people need access to safe, welcoming and accessible spaces and services where they can connect and express themselves, including youth-friendly spaces, sports facilities and cultural venues. We also need to provide accessible and inclusive programs that promote skill building and opportunities for employment and it is also important to explore ways to improve intergenerational relationships and community attitudes towards young people.

### What we are already doing

- **Cairns Youth Council:** Facilitation of the Cairns Youth Council, in partnership with the Foundation for Young Australians, including supporting the young people to have input in Council projects, develop their priority agenda in response to the needs and aspirations of the young people of Cairns and facilitating partnerships with key stakeholders to achieve outcomes.
- **Youth Urban Art Program:** Delivery of annual youth public art program in partnership with local artists, secondary schools and users of youth activity spaces (such as skateparks).
- **Youth Arts and Cultural Programs:** Council offers a range of youth arts and cultural programs for young people, including the Flame.Arts program for emerging artists and the Cairns Children's Festival.
- **Employment Pathways and Workforce Initiatives:** Council's employment pathways projects support workforce development through student placements, internships, traineeships and apprenticeships, and graduate programs to create inclusive opportunities for skill-building and career pathways.

### Where we want to be

Young people in Cairns are healthy, engaged and empowered to contribute to a socially resilient community. They have access to safe spaces, affordable housing, education and employment opportunities and public transport that connects them to these essential services and opportunities.

Council's community programs and initiatives are tailored to the unique social and economic needs of young people and promoted in a youth friendly manner, ensuring all young people in our community have equitable access to opportunities and support.

Future action planning should consider the following opportunities:

Opportunities	Council's role
Create safe, accessible and inclusive spaces for young people across Cairns. Ensure young people have a say in the planning and delivery of community infrastructure.	Provider Partner Advocate
Partner with industry, government and non-profits to support education and employment pathways that meet the needs of young people.	Partner
Develop campaigns and foster opportunities for positive storytelling that challenge negative stereotypes about young people in our community.	Facilitator
Explore avenues to elevate the voices of young people on issues and priorities that are important to them, including through the development of the Cairns Youth Council priority agenda, and by connecting young people with opportunities to provide input into planning, processes and policies which impact them.	Facilitator Advocate
Deliver events, activities and programs that support young people to connect with, and contribute to, community life.	Provider Facilitator Partner Funder
Advocate for continued investment in transport solutions that cater to the needs of young people, including public and active transportation.	Advocate Provider



## 4.6 Focus area 3: Inclusive and welcoming communities

### Why this matters

Rapid population growth and change can result in disharmony between new and established groups and lead to social tensions. When people feel welcome and included, and can access the services and facilities they need, they are more likely to engage in community life, contribute their skills and connect to their neighbourhoods, services and institutions. This connection and sense of belonging is essential for building social cohesion and resilience.

Our growing community is also socially and economically diverse. We have First Peoples, culturally diverse communities, including new arrivals and people on temporary visas, people with disability, older people and young people who call Cairns home. While this diversity strengthens our community and creates a rich cultural fabric with opportunities for learning and celebration, it can also present challenges to inclusion and social cohesion, including digital exclusion, language barriers, unaffordability, and transport disadvantage. By seeking to address these challenges, we can ensure our community remains strong, connected and able to bounce back from tough times.

As our community continues to grow and change, we need to provide spaces, services and opportunities where people from all backgrounds and experiences can connect, learn and actively contribute. That includes celebrating our diversity through events and programs that support cultural exchange, improving digital and language access and fostering opportunities for civic participation.

### What we are already doing

- **Support for Diverse Community Events:** Recent funding has supported events like the Cairns Indian Festival, Cairns NAIDOC in the Park, and the Babinda Harvest Festival, fostering community connection and celebration.
- **Library Programs and Digital Inclusion:** Cairns Libraries provide a wide range of inclusive programs that foster lifelong learning, connection and inclusion and reduce inequity by supporting early literacy, digital access and skills development.
- **Creative Life Programming:** Delivery of inclusive arts and cultural initiatives and community markets foster community connection, celebrate local identity and diversity, and support participation in creative expression and local enterprise across all ages and backgrounds.
- **Partnerships with Centacare and TAFE QLD:** Council delivers education and capacity-building sessions for newly arrived residents to support their settlement journey, covering key topics such as disaster readiness, waste and recycling practices and access to library services.
- **Disability Access and Inclusion Plan:** Council is committed to a wide range of actions to create a more accessible, inclusive community by reducing barriers to participation and ensuring people with disability can participate in civic, social, and economic life.

### Where we want to be

Cairns is a place where people feel they belong, can contribute and have a say in the decisions that affect them. Social bonds and connections are built through inclusive public spaces, programs and events, strong support networks and opportunities for learning, celebration, civic participation and leadership.

Future action planning should consider the following opportunities:

Opportunities	Council's role
Deliver and support local events, programs and campaigns that celebrate culture and diversity and promote social cohesion by providing opportunities for learning, sharing and connecting.	Provider Funder Facilitator Partner
Improve access to public spaces, facilities and services for people with disability, older people, young people and people who speak languages other than English.	Provider Advocate Partner Funder
Support increased digital access and literacy, particularly for older people, people who speak languages other than English and people at risk of social isolation.	Provider Advocate Facilitator
Support and encourage underrepresented groups to engage with leadership, consultation and participation opportunities.	Facilitator
Provide opportunities for people from a wide range of backgrounds to connect and participate in community activities, such as volunteering programs.	Facilitator Partner
Advocate for investment in services, policy and innovative responses which increase social cohesion.	Advocate



## 4.7 Focus area 4: Safe and respectful relationships

### Why this matters

Being safe and having strong relationships are the foundation of social resilience and wellbeing. When people feel secure and supported, they are more able to face life's challenges, work, learn, and participate in community life.

Just like the rest of Queensland, incidents of domestic and family violence (DFV) are increasing across Cairns. For example, between the 2020-21 and 2024-25 Cairns Magistrates Court reporting periods, there was a 157% increase in the number of flagged DFV offences resulting in charges lodged. The Cairns Magistrates Court has recorded the highest number of flagged DFV offences resulting in charges lodged in Queensland for the last 5 consecutive years. It is acknowledged that this is just one measure of DFV violence in our community, and that occurrences are generally under-reported.

DFV doesn't just hurt individuals, it ripples through families, disrupts communities and impacts our collective wellbeing:

- **For individuals and families** - DFV causes deep trauma, mental and physical health issues, housing instability, financial insecurity, and can disrupt children's development, education, and sense of safety. The effects can last for generations.
- **For communities** - When people don't feel safe at home or in their relationship, they are less likely to participate fully in community life - in school, work, sport, and social settings. DFV places pressure on local services, like police, health, housing and weakens social cohesion.

- **For society** - DFV contributes to gender inequality, economic disadvantage, homelessness, and intergenerational cycles of violence. It also costs billions in lost productivity, healthcare, legal costs, and support services.

While Council does not deliver specialist domestic and family violence response or intervention services, we play a key role in advocacy and fostering collaboration. We can also support domestic and family violence prevention, to address its underlying causes, change attitudes and work towards creating safer and more respectful communities.

### What we are already doing

- **Workforce DFV Awareness:** Partnering with DFV organisations to deliver prevention and awareness raising activities within the Council workforce.
- **Local Government DFV Prevention Champions Network:** Participation in local government collective as a key initiative of the Queensland Government's Domestic and Family Violence Prevention Council, providing opportunities to collaborate with, and learn from, other Councils.

### Where we want to be

Cairns is a place where everyone feels safe, respected and is connected. People have access to the information, support, services and networks they need to build healthy relationships and to seek help when experiencing domestic and family violence. Council plays a leadership role in prevention, working in partnership with the community and service sector to drive collaboration, advocacy and long-term change.

Future action planning should consider the following opportunities:

Opportunities	Council's role
Collaborate with the Queensland Police and service and community sector representatives to understand local data, challenges and needs to inform advocacy efforts and raise awareness with decision-makers.	Partner Advocate
Advocate for improved crisis housing/accommodation	Advocate
Support awareness raising and education opportunities to promote respectful relationships.	Facilitator Partner Funder
Leverage opportunities to advocate for increased funding to support local domestic and family violence services	Advocate
Advocate to other levels of government for policy reform to address the complex nature of DFV and the ways in which systems and institutions respond, for example courts and policing.	Advocate
Support Council staff to undertake DFV training	Facilitator

## 5. Implementation and reporting

This Strategy provides a roadmap for improving social resilience in Cairns across four focus areas over the next four years. Under each focus area we have identified opportunities for Council and our partners to work towards over the next four years. To translate these opportunities into actions, Council will embed social resilience across Council business to ensure a whole-of-Council approach. This includes incorporating social resilience considerations into planning, infrastructure, community development, and service delivery, and capturing social resilience outcomes of a broad section of aligned Council strategies and plans.

Council will produce an annual scorecard detailing progress and outcomes against each of the four focus areas. To track progress and ensure the Strategy delivers meaningful change, Council will monitor a range of social resilience indicators over time. Where possible, data will be drawn from existing sources such as the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), partner organisations, and Council's Our Cairns Survey.



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## Attachment 2 - Social Resilience Strategy – Baseline Report

# Social Resilience Strategy

Baseline report



Cairns Regional Council

**Report title:** Social Resilience Strategy -  
Baseline report

**Client:** Cairns Regional Council

**Version:** Final

**Date:** October 2024

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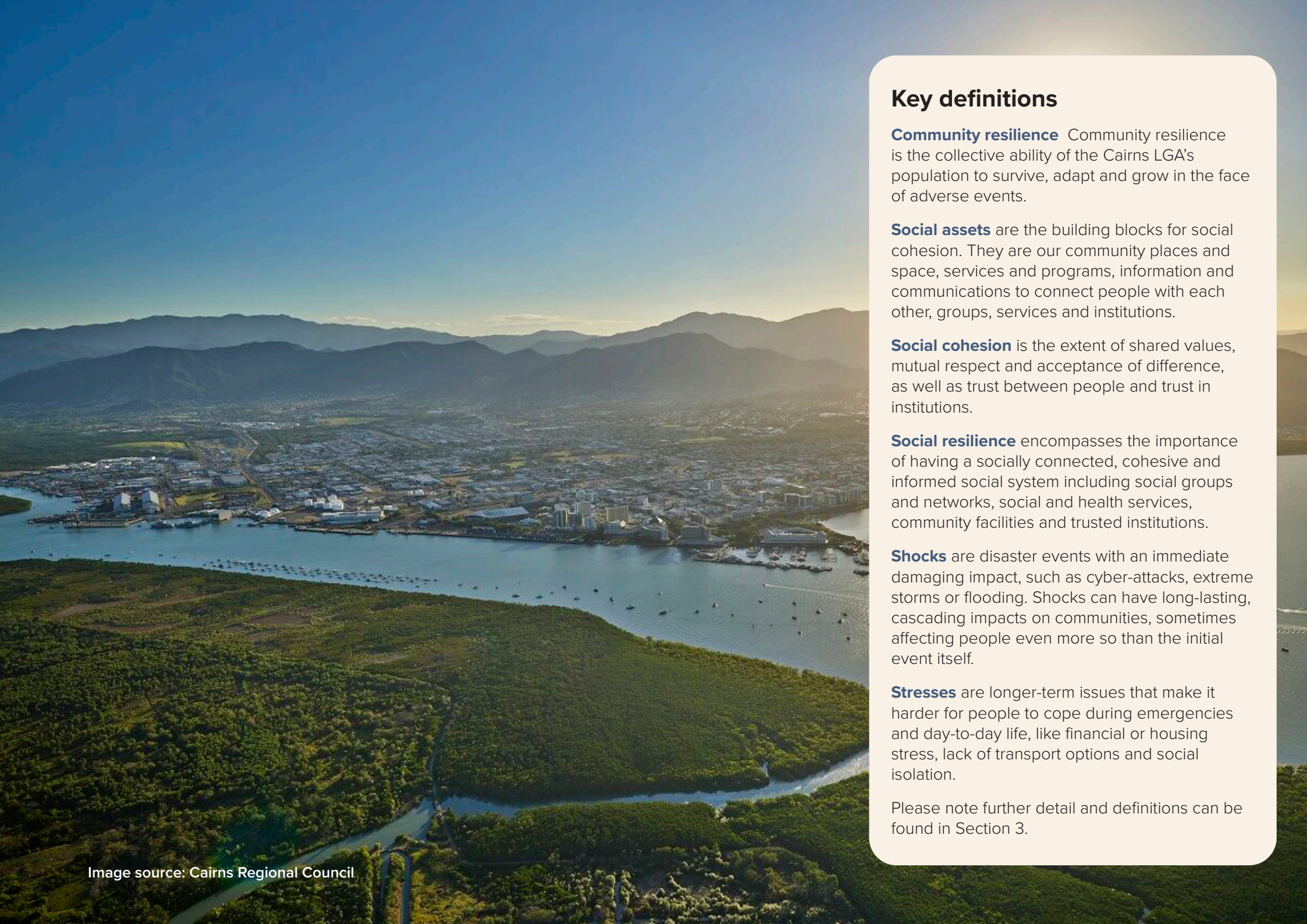


## Acknowledgment of Country

Cred Consulting acknowledges the Traditional Custodians of the lands on which we operate. We pay our respects to the Traditional Custodians Ancestors and Elders, past and present. We recognise the strength, resilience and contributions of First Peoples, and the eternal and spiritual connection held in the lands, skies and waters, through cultural practices and beliefs.

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## Key definitions

**Community resilience** Community resilience is the collective ability of the Cairns LGA's population to survive, adapt and grow in the face of adverse events.

**Social assets** are the building blocks for social cohesion. They are our community places and space, services and programs, information and communications to connect people with each other, groups, services and institutions.

**Social cohesion** is the extent of shared values, mutual respect and acceptance of difference, as well as trust between people and trust in institutions.

**Social resilience** encompasses the importance of having a socially connected, cohesive and informed social system including social groups and networks, social and health services, community facilities and trusted institutions.

**Shocks** are disaster events with an immediate damaging impact, such as cyber-attacks, extreme storms or flooding. Shocks can have long-lasting, cascading impacts on communities, sometimes affecting people even more so than the initial event itself.

**Stresses** are longer-term issues that make it harder for people to cope during emergencies and day-to-day life, like financial or housing stress, lack of transport options and social isolation.

Please note further detail and definitions can be found in Section 3.

# 1. Introduction

## 1.1 Background

Over the past few years, Cairns Regional Council (Council) has developed and endorsed key pieces of policy that aim to strengthen social resilience across the Cairns Local Government Area (Cairns LGA). This work is informed by key strategic planning processes including the *Towards 2050: Shaping Cairns Growth Strategy* and the *Cairns Local Disaster Resilience Strategy*.

Like other cities and regions in Queensland and Australia, Cairns has faced a growing number of shocks and stresses in recent years, including climate disasters, the COVID-19 pandemic, rapid growth and social change and challenges relating to housing affordability. These shocks and stresses are increasing both now and into the future, intensifying the impacts on communities.

Social resilience is fundamental to a community's ability to prepare for and recover from these ongoing shocks and stresses. As such, Council has identified the need for a comprehensive strategy to guide, integrate and align planning and investments in social resilience, cohesion and connectedness across all Council teams. This will be known as the *Cairns Social Resilience Strategy* (the Strategy).

### What is social resilience?

A resilient city begins with its people. Social resilience encompasses the importance of having a socially connected, cohesive and informed social system including social groups and networks, social and health services, community facilities and trusted institutions. A more detailed description can be found at Section 3.

### Why is it so important?

Research shows that communities with high levels of social resilience can recover more quickly and effectively from shocks and stresses<sup>1</sup>. For example, during natural disasters or economic downturns, socially connected and cohesive communities are better equipped to mobilise resources, support each other and rebuild.

As Cairns continues to grow and become more socially, economically and culturally diverse maintaining social resilience is critical. Rapid urban expansion and demographic changes can result in disharmony between newly arrived groups and established communities, leading to social tensions in the wider community.

Additionally, the increasing frequency and severity of natural disasters and hazards underscores the need for robust social resilience.

Addressing these challenges involves addressing social vulnerabilities, building social cohesion between individuals, groups and government institutions, enhancing social services and ensuring effective support systems, information and trust in government are in place. By focusing on these areas, Cairns Regional Council can build a more resilient community that is prepared to face both current and future challenges.

*“A resilient community is socially connected and has infrastructure that can withstand disaster and foster community recovery. Resilient communities promote individual and community well-being and cohesiveness to strengthen their communities for everyday, as well as extreme, challenges.”*

*- Australian Local Government Association*

<sup>1</sup>Resilient Cities Network, *Social Cohesion: A Practitioner's Guide to Measurement Challenges and Opportunities*, 2019.

## 1.2 Purpose of this report

The Cairns Social Resilience Strategy Baseline Report (the Report) aims to provide an evidence-based analysis of the current state of social resilience in the Cairns LGA across a range of objective and subjective indicators. This analysis will inform the future *Cairns Social Resilience Strategy*.

This Report analyses and highlights the ongoing social strengths and vulnerabilities (or stresses) that need attention and impact the social resilience of the Cairns community.

This Report:

- defines social resilience for Cairns, including place-based social resilience catchments
- defines the role of Council, and its partners, in facilitating social resilience
- outlines definitions and objectives around social resilience from international through to local documents and strategies
- audits social assets and identifies gaps
- analyses social equity, health and wellbeing vulnerabilities across cohorts, and
- identifies the key social strengths and vulnerabilities for the Cairns LGA.

The future Strategy will guide Council's efforts to strengthen social resilience in the Cairns LGA, aligning with the 100 Resilient Cities Framework. It will identify the needs of cohorts and communities along with key themes and activities that can be actioned by different Council teams or facilitated in partnerships.



## 1.3 Methodology

This Report is based on detailed analysis and research including:

- Review and analysis of relevant strategic documents including at an international, national, state, regional and local level.
- Audit of Council and non-Council social assets that enable social connection and resilience including:
  - community places and spaces
  - community groups and networks
  - community programs and events
  - social and health services
  - institutions, and
  - information and communication sources.

- Analysis of Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) Census data for 2016 and 2021 (sourced via the id.community). We analysed 25 indicators of social equity, health and wellbeing in Cairns (see **Appendix 2**). For the purpose of this Report, we have provided an in-depth analysis of the 14 indicators most relevant to Cairns (see Figure 1).
- Interviews with external service providers and Council teams.



Figure 1 - Social vulnerability indicators analysed in this report

## 1.4 Place-based catchments

Cairns LGA spans approximately 1,687 square kilometers between the Great Dividing Range and the Coral Sea. The region includes a diverse range of areas, from highly urban suburbs to lower density and rural communities.

Planning for social resilience is nuanced, place-based and localised. Therefore, a place-based approach has been used to audit, map and analyse social resilience data. Figure 2 shows the 11 resilience place-based catchments for the Cairns LGA, along with the suburbs located in each catchment. These catchments were chosen based on geographical location and similarity in terms of socio-economic indicators and vulnerabilities. These areas also align with ABS Census data boundaries at a suburb level.

Taking a catchment approach allows for more localised insights. It ensures the data and analysis around vulnerabilities and barriers to achieving social resilience is not skewed by being grouped with neighbouring areas (e.g. an area which may have a much higher Socio-Economic Indexes for Areas (SEFIA) score).

Figure 2 - Place-based catchments for community resilience planning in Cairns LGA (Source: Cairns Regional Council and ABS Census)

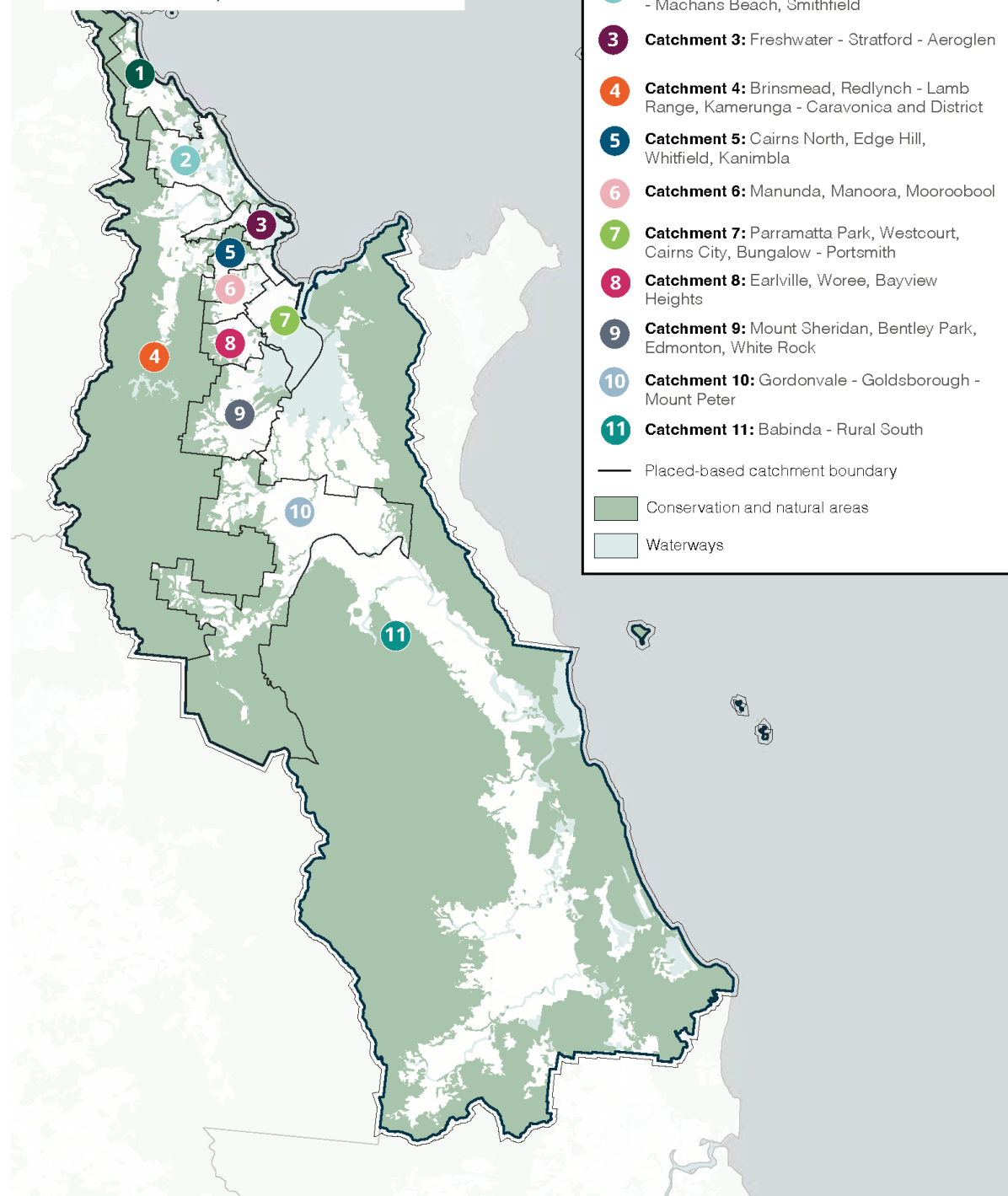




Image source: Cairns Regional Council

## 2. Summary of findings

*The more socially cohesive and resilient a community is, the better its ability to prepare for, respond to and recover from ongoing shocks and stresses. Alongside Queensland being the most disaster-affected state in Australia<sup>2</sup>, Cairns is undergoing population growth and change, increasing cost of living and growing inequity. At the same time, it is a culturally diverse and naturally beautiful regional centre nestled between world heritage areas.*

### Cairns has many strengths for social resilience

- Significant **First Peoples community** with over 65,000 years of culture and resilience.
- A **culturally diverse community** of overseas arrivals, residents from other parts of Australia and temporary visa holders, creating a vibrant and unique atmosphere that the community loves. It also creates a rich cultural fabric that can enhance belonging and cohesion.
- Over **1,400 social assets** including community facilities, community groups and services, events and programs, and government institutions, that **connect the Cairns community** to each other and to the services and opportunities they need.
- A strong community with **grass-roots community led initiatives** that adapt to meet community needs during shocks and stresses.
- An **extensive network of service providers** that address key chronic stresses in the community including housing, disability, health and social isolation.
- Many **small businesses** (97%) that help build strong local connections, provide essential services and sustain the local economy.
- A number of **LGA-wide communication channels**, and some localised Facebook pages and community radio channels. This ensures that information, both during emergencies and during steady states is efficient and reaches a broad audience, whilst still being tailored to local communities.
- Cairns is the **gateway to the Far North Queensland region** and serves as a regional service centre with significant institutions like the Cairns Hospital, James Cook University and CQUniversity.
- Research across Australia suggests **community connection to local neighbourhoods is high**. This is valuable to recovering from and responding to shocks and stresses.
- A **strong local, regional and state-based focus on resilience** that recognises the importance of social cohesion and community connections in helping communities respond to and recover from shocks and stresses.
- A **Human and Social Sub-Committee** that collaborates and shares information during disasters. There are also a number of place-based groups addressing social resilience such as the Cairns Safer Streets Network.

*“The Babinda District Community Association had conversations locally and developed community-led plans with community-led priorities. Now the community has a new museum, beautification, street activation and a heritage walk all led by the task force which is community members who get funding from Council.”*

- Stakeholder

*“We have lots of cultural festivals in Cairns which bring diverse groups together, as well as the broader community.”*

- Stakeholder

<sup>2</sup> Queensland Reconstruction Authority, *Resilient Queensland in Action*, 2020

## However, there are also a number of social vulnerabilities impacting social resilience

All data in this section is from the ABS 2021 Census unless otherwise stated.

### Social and economic equity vulnerabilities

#### There is growing social inequity across social cohorts in Cairns

First Peoples make up a significant proportion of the Cairns population (10%). However, stakeholder feedback indicates they are more likely to experience inequitable access to education, employment and housing. They are also more likely to experience discrimination when accessing services. Similarly, according to the ABS 2021 Census, almost one in ten young people in Cairns are disengaged from education and employment which can make them more vulnerable to involvement in anti-social behaviour and crime, which can further isolate them from participation in life.

#### The cost of living crisis is increasing financial and housing stress

Across all of Australia, the cost of living is rising and leading to increased financial and housing stress. In Cairns, 33% of households that are renting experience rental stress, meaning they pay over 30% of their income on rent. Alongside rental stress, financial pressures are putting upward pressure on demand for social housing across Queensland, including Cairns, leading to increased waiting times (from 11 months in 2017 to 27 months in 2023). Typically, there

is high need for social housing across older single women, single parents, First Peoples and people with chronic health conditions. There is also an increasing number of people experiencing homelessness (currently between 130 and 240 people sleeping rough each night). These people are more vulnerable to extreme weather, health risks and social exclusion. Cairns is also seeing a rise in individuals who have never been homeless before experiencing homelessness, further straining local support services and highlighting the growing housing crisis.

### Personal health and wellbeing vulnerabilities

#### Mental health is becoming a key challenge

Cairns is experiencing an increasing number of natural disasters. The compounding and cumulative nature of these shocks, alongside the cost of living crisis, are impacting the community's mental health. However, we heard from service providers mental health services are often not accessible or affordable to many people in the community.

### Cairns has a high incidence of domestic and family violence

Between 2023 and 2024, Cairns had the highest incidence of domestic and family violence in Queensland (2,000 charges between May 2023 to May 2024, Queensland Courts 2024<sup>3</sup>). However, it is possible charges processed by the Cairns Magistrates Court may include charges from outside the region.

Cairns' role as a regional service centre also means people from neighbouring LGAs experiencing domestic violence may seek out services in Cairns, placing additional pressure on the services and housing available in Cairns. Domestic and family violence can increase the likelihood of depression, homelessness and drugs and alcohol abuse.

*“The cost-of-living crisis is having a big impact. People feel hopeless when opportunities become fewer and this creates tensions in the community, particularly as we grow. This often impacts the more disadvantaged such as those fringe communities down south.”*

- Stakeholder

<sup>3</sup> Queensland Courts, 2024

### **There is inequity in health outcomes across social cohorts in Cairns**

First Peoples community members are more likely to experience chronic health conditions, and they have a lower life expectancy. They are also more likely to experience discrimination when accessing services.

### **Social isolation is increasing**

There is a growing number of people experiencing or at risk of social isolation. This includes people living alone (25%), disengaged young people (11%), recent arrivals (15%) and people needing assistance due to disability (5%).

### **Social belonging and engagement vulnerabilities**

#### **Population growth can lead to disharmony and discrimination**

Cairns is expected to grow considerably between now and 2050, particularly across place-based catchments 1, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10 and 11. Rapid growth and demographic changes can result in disharmony between newly arrived groups and established communities and social tensions in the wider community can also play out at the local level. In particular, First Peoples and culturally diverse community members may experience more racism and discrimination in everyday life.

#### **There is no baseline for social cohesion and resilience in Cairns**

There is no baseline and index to monitor and track changes in social cohesion and social resilience in Cairns.

### **Social asset vulnerabilities**

#### **There is a lack of access to public transport**

There is a lack of public transport which impacts access to health, education, employment and leisure. In particular, it can be hard for young people to be engaged in education and employment if there is no easy way for them to access these.

#### **Accessing information can be a challenge**

Some stakeholders advised that some people in the community don't know where to access information on disasters, community events, spaces and programs (particularly new arrivals). On top of this the digital inclusion score for Cairns is low (54.3), compared to both Queensland (60.9) and Australia (61.9)<sup>4</sup>. It is also below the rural Queensland average. This means that a significant portion of the community is at a disadvantage when it comes to staying informed and connected, particularly during emergencies. The lack of digital access and locally relevant information further isolates vulnerable populations, limiting their ability to respond effectively to crises and participate fully in community life.

#### **Some community facilities are not fit-for-purpose**

According to the *Towards 2050 Community Infrastructure Plan* there are a number of community facilities that are not fit-for-purpose, aging and not flexible to meet the changing needs of the community. Future community facilities must be flexible and able to adapt their use in and out of disasters.

### **Leadership and partnership vulnerabilities**

#### **Cairns is a regional service centre that relies on centralised services**

Cairns' role as a regional service centre creates a vulnerability because the community relies heavily on centralised services. With transient populations travelling to Cairns to access essential services this places additional pressure on service providers. It also means people who don't live centrally, own a car or have easy access to public transport may struggle to access services.

This also means that any disruption to these key services can have widespread negative effects, leaving the community with limited alternatives and exacerbating the impact on residents across the region.

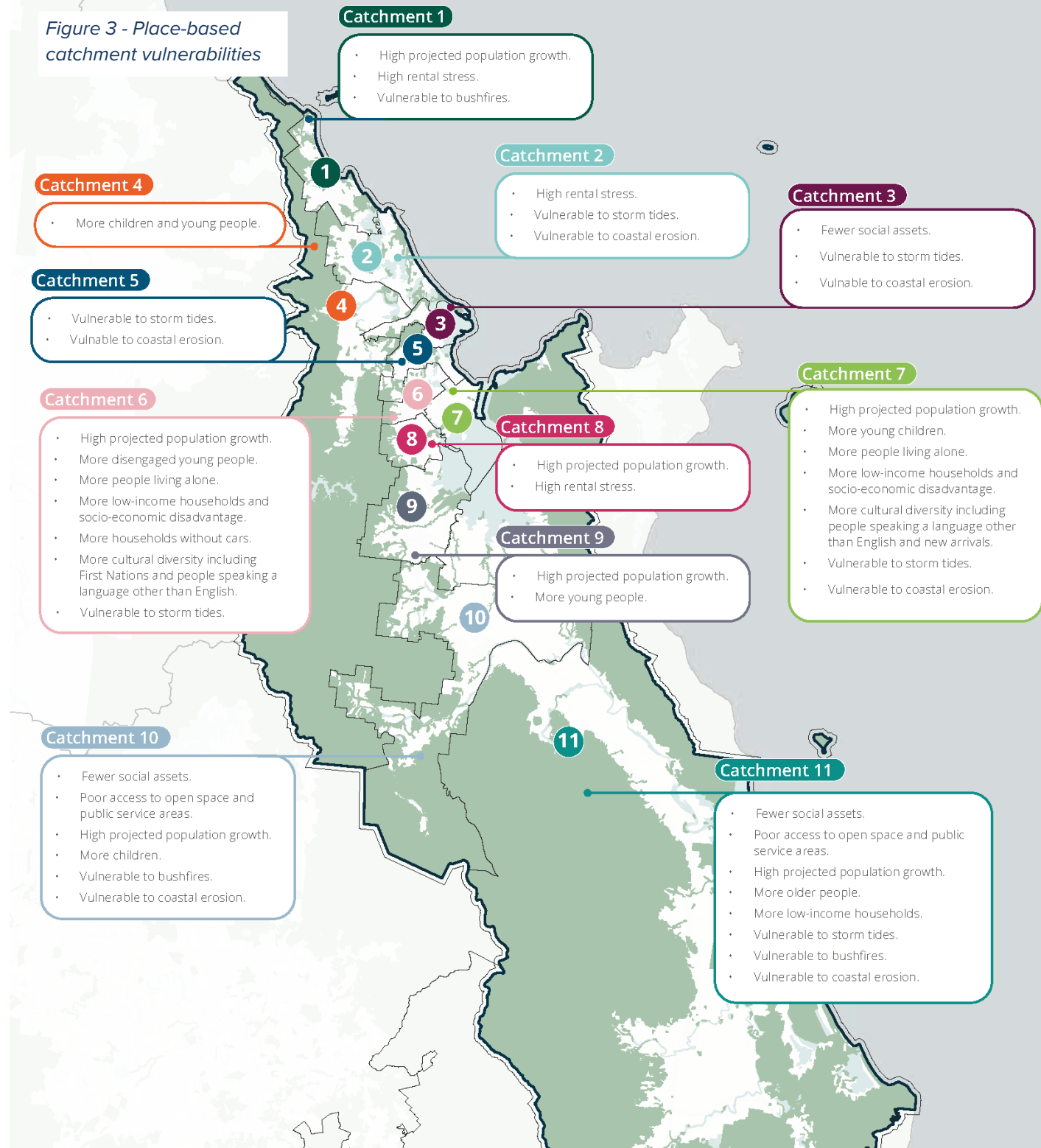
#### **There can be miscommunication between service providers, Council and other government agencies**

There is sometimes reported improvements needed around communication between service providers and Council, and between different levels of government. This could result in confusion between the different roles and responsibilities, particularly during emergencies when social cohesion is so important. According to service providers, there is also fatigue within the social services sector. This can impact their ability to provide support to the local community.

<sup>4</sup>Babacan, H, McHugh, J and Dale, *Cairns Local COVID-19 Social Needs Assessment*, 2020

This Report also found there are differing social vulnerabilities depending on where people live. This highlights the importance of taking a localised, place-based approach to social resilience. Figure 3 shows that:

- Catchments 6, 7, 10 and 11 are socially and geographically vulnerable, making these communities more susceptible to chronic stresses and increased risks during shocks. Additionally, Catchments 6, 7 and 10 are projected to experience significant population growth, which could further strain existing infrastructure and services.
- Catchments 1, 2 and 3 are particularly vulnerable to natural hazards and also face high levels of housing stress, making residents more susceptible to displacement and financial instability.
- Catchments 3 and 10 have fewer social assets and limited access to open spaces and public services, potentially leading to reduced community cohesion and inadequate support during emergencies.



## This Report has identified a number of needs for social resilience planning in Cairns

Although some identified needs may not fall directly within Council's responsibilities, Council can take on an advocacy role to help progress them.

The Social Resilience Strategy will clearly define Council's role—whether as advocate, facilitator, funder, partner, provider, or regulator—along with potential partners and stakeholders for each action. Further engagement with Council staff will help determine the actions in the Strategy.

- A definition of social resilience for the Cairns community that emphasises its importance in helping respond to and recover from both shocks and stresses.
- Equitable access to programs, services and infrastructure for different cohorts including First Peoples, people with disability, people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, young people and older people.
- Recognise and draw on the unique strengths and experiences key cohorts bring to the Cairns community.
- Investment in digital infrastructure, technology and digital literacy to increase levels of digital access and inclusion, particularly for vulnerable cohorts.
- More public transport connections across Cairns.
- Ensure findings from *Towards 2050 Community Infrastructure Plan* are implemented in line with the role they play in building social resilience.
- Support for young people to access education and employment in Cairns, including through safe and accessible public transport and communications around skills development opportunities.
- Access to mental health services, affordable healthcare and community wellness programs.
- Access to information on disasters, along with information on community groups, events and activities available, including for new arrivals, visitors and seasonal workforce.
- Community events focused on neighbourhood building, harmony and inclusion and connection to services.
- Social assets that are activated for the community and social resilience outcomes.
- Place-based neighbourhood level projects and research on social resilience.
- Community-led place-based plans that ensure a bottom-up approach is taken to social resilience and cohesion.
- Affordable and secure housing.
- Collaboration with all levels of government and the private sector.
- Engage and collaborate with First Peoples communities to integrate their knowledge and leadership into planning and decision-making processes.
- Address key challenges to service providers and Council in achieving social resilience including funding, collaboration and timing.
- Outreach services to ensure there is access to support services across the region.

See **Appendix 1** for some relevant case studies that can provide inspiration for the future Strategy.



Image source: Cairns Regional Council

# 3. Cairns social resilience framework

*This section provides the framework and language for which Council can plan for social resilience, including key definitions.*

*“Higher levels of social cohesion and positive social interactions serve to strengthen the overall fabric of a city, allowing communities to bounce back faster, and rebuild more efficiently after experiencing major shocks and stresses.”*

*- Resilient Cities Network<sup>5</sup>*

## 100 Resilient Cities Framework

This Report aligns with the principles and intents of the *100 Resilient Cities Framework*<sup>6</sup>, which aims to enhance the capacity of cities to survive, adapt and thrive despite experiencing chronic stresses and acute shocks. The framework includes:

- **Chronic stresses:** Ongoing issues that weaken the fabric of a city on a day-to-day or cyclical basis.
- **Acute shocks:** Sudden, short-term events that threaten a city.
- **Steady state:** Recognises the importance of maintaining stability during periods of relative calm.
- **Institutional capacity:** Emphasises the critical role of institutions in resilience.
- **Power and equity:** Considers how power dynamics and equity impact resilience.

Figure 4 over the page shows the key characteristics of a resilient community adapted from the 100 Resilient Cities Framework.

<sup>5</sup> Resilient Cities Network (2019).

<sup>6</sup> Rockefeller Foundation, *City Resilience Framework*, 2015.

## What does a resilient community look like?

The Resilient Cities Framework identifies seven characteristics that foster a resilient community. The diagram below has been adapted from the Resilient Cities Framework.

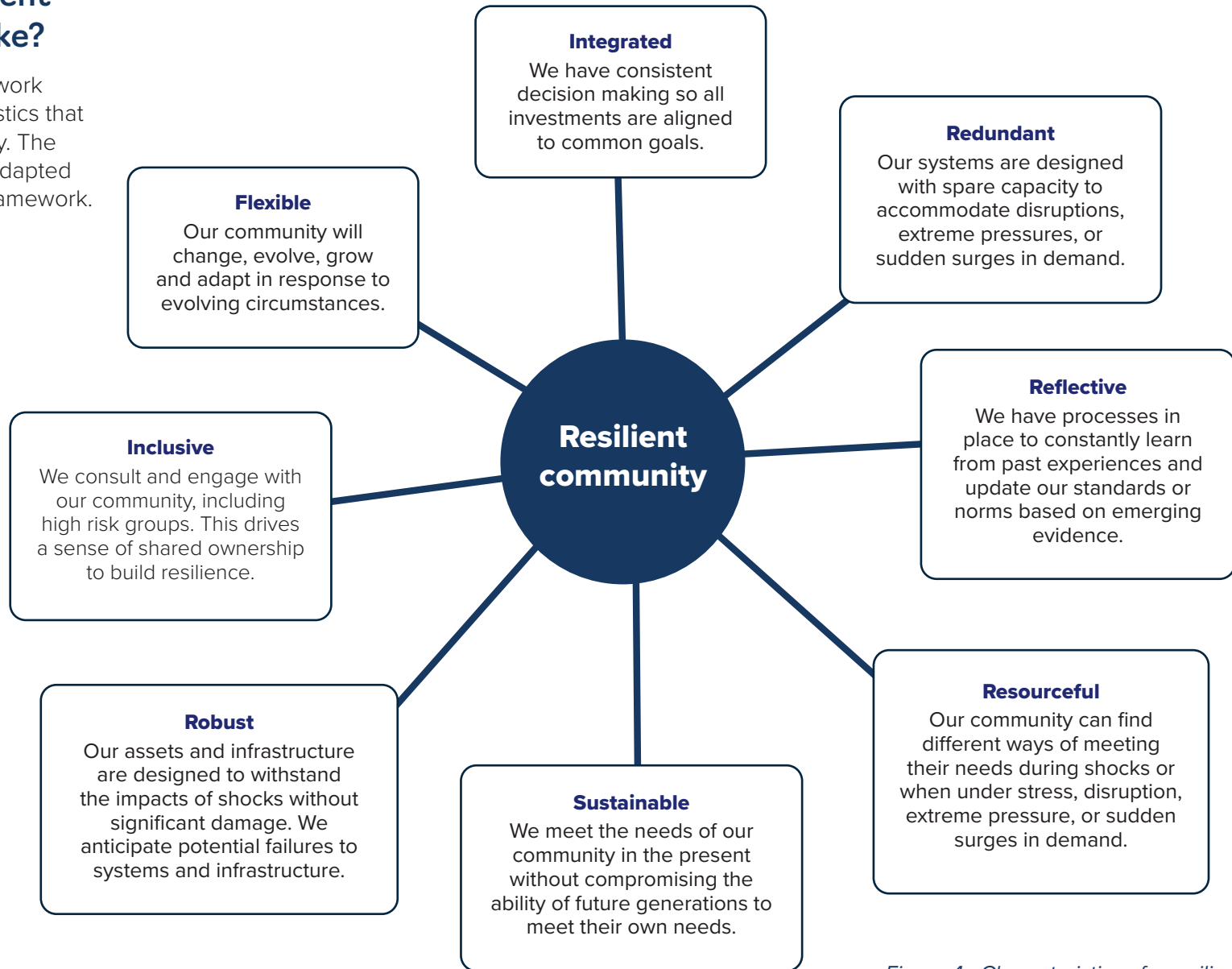


Figure 4 - Characteristics of a resilient community (source: Adapted from the Resilient Cities Framework)

## 3.1 Social resilience inclusions

### Community resilience

Community resilience is the collective ability of the Cairns LGA to survive, adapt and grow in the face of adverse events. By achieving community resilience the Cairns LGA will become more connected, cohesive, safe, inclusive, resourceful and prepared. It will also see the community work collaboratively and have greater control over its circumstances.

### Social resilience

As shown in Figure 5 from the *Queensland Strategy for Disaster Resilience*, social resilience is a core pillar in achieving community resilience. Social resilience focuses on the personal health and wellbeing, social networks, economic security and preparedness of individuals, social groups and institutions.

Social resilience is impacted by power dynamics, inequities and disadvantage within society, with a particular focus on vulnerable cohorts. It also encompasses the importance of having a connected and informed social system including social support networks, social services and governmental agencies.

### Communities of interest

The Cairns community includes communities of interest and partners, who must work together within trusted networks to build social resilience. This includes:

- individuals and their communities of interest
- community groups
- local businesses
- social and health services, and
- institutions (e.g. government agencies).

### Pillars

Social resilience requires the following:

1. **Social and economic equity:** Social and cultural diversity, individual and household economics, labour market and access to housing.
2. **Personal health and wellbeing:** Life expectancy, general health and wellbeing, health inequalities and social isolation.
3. **Social belonging and engagement:** A communities sense of social cohesion, belonging, trust and connection to people, places and government.

4. **Social assets:** Accessible community places and space, services and programs, information and communications to connect people with each other, groups, services and institutions.

5. **Leadership and partnership:** Government and institutional partnerships in social resilience and cohesion planning, response and recovery.



Figure 5 - Five pillars for community resilience (source: *Queensland Strategy for Disaster Resilience*, 2024)

## 3.2 Foundational concepts

### Shocks and stresses

**Shocks** are disaster events with an immediate damaging impact, such as cyber-attacks, extreme storms or flooding. Shocks can have long-lasting, cascading impacts on communities, sometimes affecting people even more so than the initial event itself. Research shows that more socially cohesive societies are better able to adapt, cope and recover from shocks<sup>7</sup>.

**Stresses** are longer-term issues that make it harder for people to cope during emergencies and day-to-day life, like financial or housing stress, lack of transport options and social isolation.

### Vulnerabilities

**Social vulnerabilities** are socio-economic circumstances that impact an individual or community's resilience to ongoing shocks and stresses. For example, newly arrived migrants who speak limited English may find it difficult to access essential services and employment, leading to financial stress and social isolation.

**Place vulnerabilities** are specific environmental risks and hazards which certain locations face. These vulnerabilities are shaped by geographic, climatic and infrastructural factors that increase the risk of shocks such as floods, coastal erosion and bushfires.

<sup>7</sup> Resilient Cities Network (2019).

<sup>8</sup> O'Donnell, J, *Mapping Social Cohesion*, 2021.

### Social cohesion

Social cohesion is the extent of shared values, mutual respect and acceptance of difference, as well as trust between people and trust in institutions.

Research highlights that social cohesion is central to building social resilience. Strong social networks, a sense of belonging and increased trust enables communities to support one another during challenging times. Social cohesion depends on equity and the inclusion of all groups in society. It also depends on people's sense of connection to each other, to their neighbourhoods and communities, and their trust in government.

### Social assets

Social assets are our social connectors. They are essential for building social cohesion and capital, and include:

- community places and spaces
- community programs and events
- community groups and networks
- social and health services
- institutions, and
- information and communication sources.

Social assets are essential to building social cohesion and connections and helping communities prepare for, respond to and recover from both shocks and stresses.

### Social capital

Social capital includes three elements that are important to have within a socially cohesive society (see Figure 6 over the page):

- **Bonding** social capital refers to ties between individuals within the same social group, for example based on ethnicity, religion, locality or other interests.
- **Bridging** social capital refers to ties between individuals from different social groups with similar levels of socio-economic power.
- **Linking** social capital refers to connections between communities and leaders, organisations or governments that allow them to leverage resources, ideas and information<sup>8</sup>.

## Social capital, social connectors, and complete communities

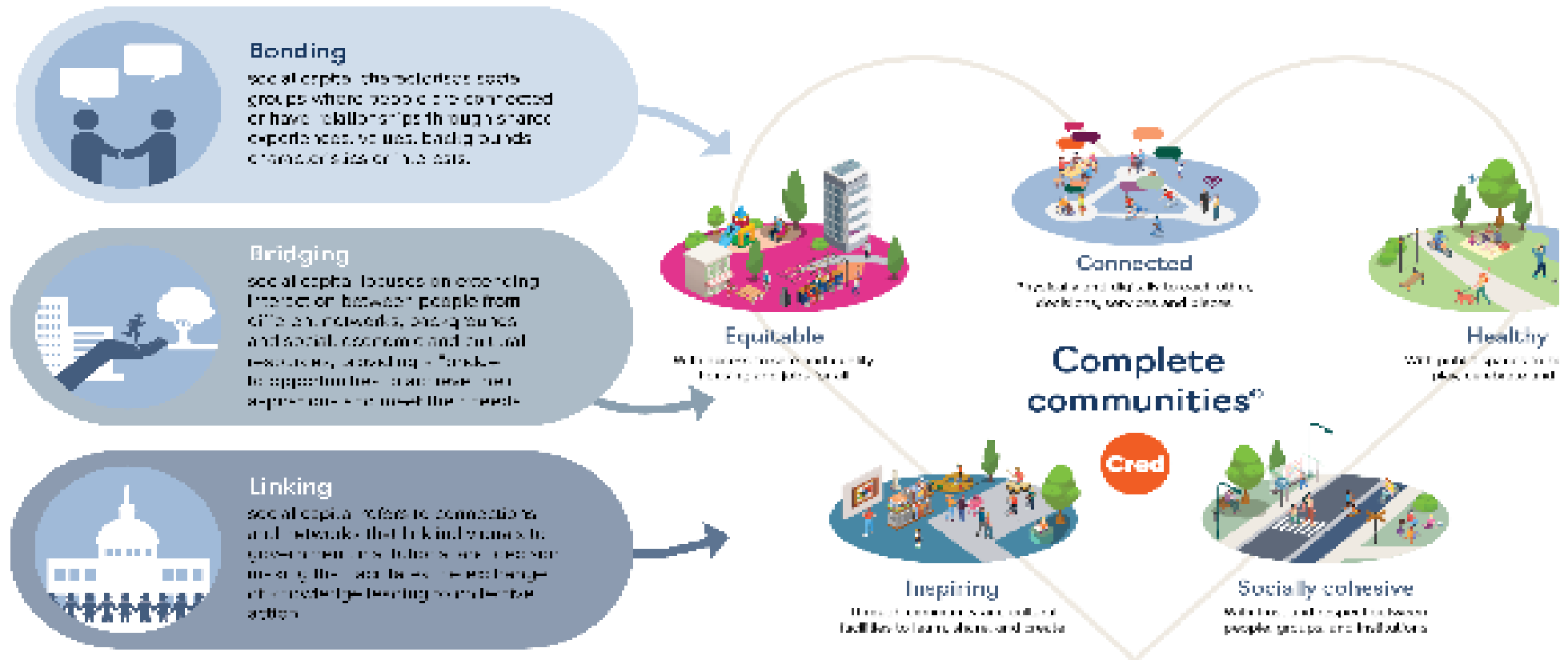


Figure 6 - Social capital and how it creates social cohesion and complete communities (source: Cred Consulting)



Image source: Cairns Regional Council

# 4. Council's role in social resilience

*While governments, emergency services and health workers primarily handle initial responses and short-term responses to shocks and stresses, non-government organisations, the community sector, business owners and individual citizens are essential for building long-term social resilience. Each of these players have different roles and varying levels of impact. This section provides an overview of the different roles and responsibilities in social resilience, with a particular focus on the role of Cairns Regional Council.*

## 4.1 Government

### Australian Government

The Australian Government plays a key role in shaping resilience by providing funding for health and social services, community programs and social infrastructure needed for social resilience. It also plays a role in disaster resilience through the *National Strategy for Disaster Resilience*.

### Queensland Government

The Queensland Government is responsible for planning and funding the health and social services, community programs and social infrastructure essential for social resilience. It also plays a role in disaster resilience through the *Queensland Strategy for Disaster Resilience*, with a focus on locally-led solutions and implementation.

### Local Government

Local governments are uniquely positioned to lead partnerships and create opportunities that enhance long-term relationships, build trust among stakeholders and improve communication across local, state, and national levels. With deep knowledge and existing connections to their communities, local governments already deliver services, spaces and facilities that influence social resilience outcomes, both directly and indirectly.

Building on existing services and working in partnership across government, businesses, services and communities, local councils are well placed to deliver place-based initiatives that address local challenges and build stronger, more resilient communities. *The NSW Government Building social cohesion: A resource for local government*<sup>9</sup> identified the following roles that local government can play in strengthening social cohesion and social resilience:



**Civic engagement and participation**



**Social and cultural inclusion**



**Leadership, strategy and planning**



**Public spaces**



**Partnership, collaboration and networks**



**Tracking and monitoring**

However, local governments in Queensland can face regulatory and financial challenges in addressing social resilience.

<sup>9</sup>Cred Consulting and Department of Premier and Cabinet  
*Building social cohesion: A resource for local government*, 2022.

## The role of Cairns Regional Council

Council has developed and endorsed key pieces of policy that aim to strengthen social resilience across the Cairns LGA, including *COVID-19 Rapid Social Needs Assessment (2020)*, *COVID-19 Human and Social Cairns Local Recovery Plan (2021)*, *Cairns Community Safety Plan (2022-2026)* and *Cairns LGA Social and Affordable Housing and Homelessness Plan (2023-2026)*.

This work has occurred alongside other strategic planning processes including the *Towards 2050: Shaping Cairns Growth Strategy* and the *Cairns Local Disaster Resilience Strategy*.

Alongside this strategic planning journey, the Lifestyle and Community Directorate, the Community Life Branch and a dedicated Community Resilience Unit was created. Although the Unit no longer exists, it focused on the social dimensions of social resilience.

While Cairns Regional Council cannot directly deliver all the actions that may be needed to improve social resilience outcomes, it can be an advocate, facilitator, funder, partner, provider and regulator. (see Figure 7).

Further insights into what Council is doing in the social resilience space can be found in Section 4: Policy and strategic context.

### CAIRNS REGIONAL COUNCIL HAS MULTIPLE ROLES IN DELIVERING THE OPERATIONAL PLAN. THESE ARE:



#### **ADVOCATE**

Promoting the interests of the community to other decision makers and influencers.



#### **FACILITATOR**

Assisting others to be involved in activities by bringing groups and interested parties together.



#### **FUNDER**

Funding other organisations to deliver services.



#### **PARTNER**

Forming partnerships and strategic alliances with other parties in the interests of the community.



#### **PROVIDER**

Delivering services.



#### **REGULATOR**

Regulating activities through local law or policy.

Figure 7 - Role of Cairns Regional Council as defined in the Cairns Regional Council Operational Plan

## 4.2 Institutions and services

Alongside governments, institutions and services play a crucial role in fostering social resilience by providing support, resources and leadership. These entities work alongside governments and communities to build the capacity of individuals and groups to withstand and recover from challenges. Some of the key institutions and services with a role in social resilience include:

- **Social and community services** offer support to mitigate the impacts of stresses and shocks to key cohorts including people with disability, people at risk of homelessness, older people, First Peoples or young people. They also help to mitigate the impacts of stresses and shocks.
- **Educational institutions**, such as schools and universities, can help equip individuals with knowledge and skills for social mobility. They also offer spaces for social interaction and the provision of information.
- **Health services**, such as hospitals, medical centres and mental health services help maintain public health and wellbeing both during emergencies and during steady states.
- **Emergency services**, such as police, the Rural Fire Service (RFS), State Emergency Services (SES) and paramedics. They are often first responders in emergencies and disasters and also provide important insights into resilience challenges and needs.

## 4.3 Communities

Local communities are at the heart of social resilience. Strong, connected and engaged communities that bring together diverse experiences are more socially resilient.

- **Individual community members** take carriage of their own personal resilience, check in on their family and friends and can volunteer for resilience building initiatives.
- **Community groups** connect people to each other, services and programs. They can drive grassroots resilience efforts and can advocate to governments for improved outcomes.
- **First Peoples community members** offer unique perspectives, traditional knowledge and cultural heritage that can improve social resilience.
- **Culturally diverse community members** offer unique perspectives and cultural heritage that can improve social resilience.
- **Local businesses** provide places for information, services and collaboration.

# TRADITIONAL FOODS



Image source: Cairns Regional Council

# 5. Policy and strategic context

*From the United Nations (UN) to the Australian and Queensland governments, there is growing strategic focus on the importance of social resilience and cohesion.*

*To inform this Report, international, national, state, regional and local literature, policies and plans were reviewed to understand emerging strategic drivers for social resilience in Cairns. A full list of documents reviewed can be found at Appendix 3.*

## 5.1 International

The UN plays a significant role in promoting resilience-building efforts. *The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)*, particularly Goal 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities), underscores the need for inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable urban environments.

### The 100 Resilient Cities Network

The Resilient Cities Network, building on the 100 Resilient Cities initiative by The Rockefeller

Foundation, supports cities worldwide in developing resilience strategies using the City Resilience Framework (CRF). The CRF identifies drivers of resilience across areas of infrastructure and environment, economy and society, health and wellbeing and leadership and strategy.

Many of the 100 Resilient Cities Network strategies focus on the importance of social cohesion and community connections in building resilience. Key examples of actions around social cohesion can be found at **Appendix 3**.

## 5.2 Australian Government

The *Measuring What Matters National Wellbeing Framework* is Australia's first national wellbeing framework aimed to create a more healthy, secure, sustainable, cohesive and prosperous Australia. *The Australian Infrastructure Plan 2021* identifies that social assets (including community facilities and community groups and networks) are essential infrastructure to building social cohesion and resilience.

The *Australian Cohesion Index* is published every two years, combining attitudinal data gathered through the Mapping Social Cohesion Survey with objective indicators from the Australian Bureau of Statistics and other sources.

The report revealed that social cohesion in Australia is under pressure and declining, with the Scanlon-Monash Index of social cohesion reaching its lowest score on record. Key social cohesion issues in Australia include:

- Economic pressures and financial strain
  - Economic and housing affordability issues are the most important concern for 62% of Australians.
  - The proportion of people satisfied or very satisfied with their finances declined from 73% in 2020 to 61% in 2023.
  - Financial pressures are significantly impacting social cohesion, particularly among young people.
- National pride and belonging
  - There is a decreasing sense of national pride and belonging among Australians.
  - Declining trust in government and concerns about inequality are contributing to this trend.
- Multiculturalism and diversity
  - Australians generally have positive views on multiculturalism with 78% agreeing that accepting immigrants from many different countries strengthens Australia and 86% believing multiculturalism has

been good for the Australian economy.

- However, discriminatory attitudes persist, varying based on immigrants’ countries of origin.

- Community connection and local engagement
  - Strong connections in neighborhoods and communities remain a positive aspect of Australian society.
- Young people
  - 30% of young people report being unhappy.
  - 47% of young people say the things they do in life are worthwhile only a little.
  - Young people experiencing financial difficulties are among the least trusting in society.

### 5.3 Queensland Government

The *Communities 2032 Strategy* is Queensland’s first long-term, holistic strategy for supporting and empowering people to connect, participate, contribute and thrive. The *Our*

*Future State: Advancing Queensland’s Priorities* document also includes relevant priorities around employment, health and safety.

Queensland is the most disaster affected state in Australia, experiencing 97 significant disaster events since 2011. Through the *Queensland Strategy for Disaster Resilience 2022–2027* the Queensland Government is also committed to strengthening disaster resilience and emergency preparedness.

### 5.4 Regional

*The Wet Tropics Regional Resilience Strategy* focuses on supporting local government in the areas of connectivity, infrastructure resilience, social wellbeing, natural resource management and disaster management.

The *Far North Queensland Regional Plan* is currently being reviewed. The review will provide a framework to guide growth, support future jobs, and assist in Queensland’s decarbonisation journey.

## 5.5 Local (Cairns)

Cairns Regional Council has a number of documents that are relevant to social resilience. This includes:

- *Your Community Plan 2011 – 2031* that recognises the importance of equitable access to programs and services for different cohorts, including First Peoples, refugees, people with disability, people experiencing homelessness and low-income households.
- *Towards 2050: Shaping Cairns Growth Strategy* aims to create a prosperous, resilient and sustainable Cairns through protecting the natural environment, improving quality of life, addressing housing and creating spaces for the community to interact.
- *Cairns Community Safety Plan CBD Pilot 2022-2026* aims to position Cairns CBD as a place where people feel safe through addressing anti-social behaviours and building community safety and wellbeing.
- *Cairns LGA Social and Affordable Housing and Homelessness Plan 2023-2026* outlines Council's position on responding to housing and homelessness to ensure everyone in Cairns has access to adequate, safe, affordable and secure housing.
- *Cairns Regional Council submission to the Inquiry into Social Isolation and Loneliness in Queensland* notes that social isolation is a problem in Cairns.

- *Cairns Regional Council submission to Youth Justice Reform Select Committee* notes that many young people in Cairns experience disengagement from education, employment and other opportunities.

An analysis of 19 Council documents found the following insights:

- There is **no Cairns-wide definition of social resilience**, nor are there any consistent frameworks used across Council.
- Cairns Regional Council recognises **social cohesion is an indicator of resilience and has many strategies and actions focused on building social cohesion** and community connections to address social isolation, improve health and wellbeing and improve the quality of life of people in Cairns.
- Council documents highlight that the **key chronic stresses** facing the Cairns community include **housing affordability, homelessness, safety, social isolation and climate change**.
- Council also has a **strong focus on building disaster resilience and emergency preparedness**, with an understanding of the role of social resilience and cohesion in this space.

A full list of documents, along with relevant analysis on specific actions under the City Resilience Framework can also be found at **Appendix 3**.

### Some of the things Cairns is doing in the social resilience space

- Developing a First Peoples Advisory Consultants committee that pays participants for their time and contribution.
- Partnerships with Centacare and TAFE to deliver adult migrant English programs along with education sessions on libraries, disaster preparedness and waste and recycling.
- Delivering capacity building workshops with the Queensland Ethnic Communities Council.
- Running a Young Mayors program for young people in Cairns to develop a priority agenda.
- A community partnerships grant program that provides funding to community-based groups and organisations to deliver events and programs that drive community and social outcomes, celebrate the rich traditions of communities and improve the capacity and wellbeing of vulnerable groups.
- Green Space, Our Place community volunteer program with around 400 volunteer, who help contribute to the improvement and upkeep of open spaces.

## 5.6 What does this mean for social resilience planning in Cairns?

The strategic context analysis reveals the following needs for social resilience planning in Cairns:



Confirm a **definition of social resilience** for the Cairns community that emphasises its importance in helping respond to and recover from both shocks and stresses.



**Prioritise equitable access to programs, services and infrastructure** for different cohorts including First Peoples, people with disability, people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, young people and older people.



**Link already existing social cohesion and connectedness actions and strategies to social resilience** and educate Council teams on the role these actions play in helping to both strengthen community, and bounce back.



Invest in **digital infrastructure**, technology and literacy to increase levels of digital access and inclusion, particularly for vulnerable cohorts.



**Partner with stakeholders** from the Australian Government through to local community groups to build social resilience.



**Improve access to community facilities** with upgraded amenities and local programs that support social resilience.



**Identify and address key chronic stresses** in the Cairns community identified by existing plans including housing affordability, homelessness, community safety, social isolation and youth disengagement.

# 6. Social assets

*This section reviews Cairns LGA's social assets, based on the Cairns Suburb Profiles document and online information available as of August 2024. While not benchmarked against specific standards, this audit highlights key assets that contribute to social resilience in the region, and any gaps.*

## 6.1 What is a social asset?

Social assets are our social connectors that help create socially resilient communities. They provide the physical places and spaces for communities to connect, access services and be happy and healthy. They are where we meet and bond, build bridges into new opportunities and link to social and daily services. Social assets are essential to build social cohesion and create social capital, which is central to our ability to prepare for, respond to and recover from disasters. However, your access to these social assets depends on who you are and where you live.

Cairns has an extensive network of social assets which are highly valued by the community and contribute significantly to the local community, economy and environment.

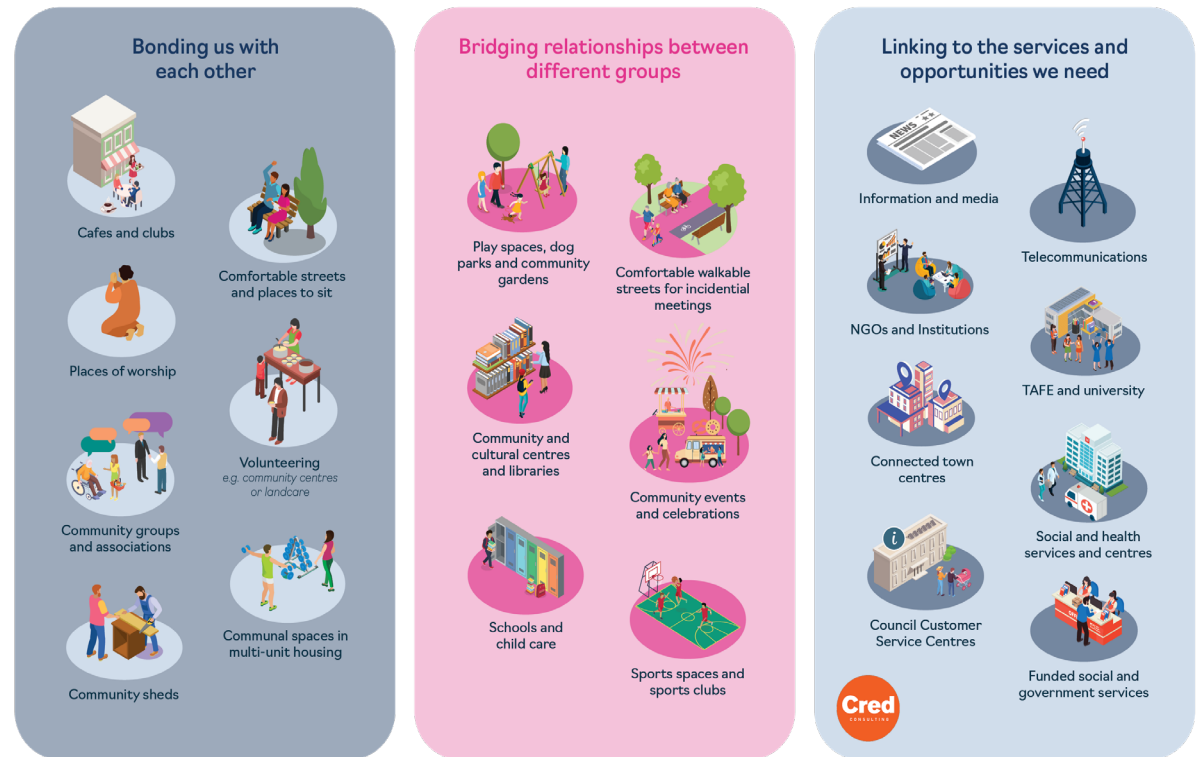


Figure 8 - How social assets built social capital (source: Cred Consulting)

## Social assets in Cairns LGA

For this Report we categorised social assets in Cairns into six categories outlined in Table 1. Please see **Appendix 4** for a breakdown of the social assets in Cairns across each of these categories.

Table 1 - Social asset categories in Cairns LGA

Social asset type	What this includes	Examples
<b>Community spaces and places</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>community facilities, including libraries and community centres</li> <li>parks and open spaces</li> <li>schools and early learning facilities, and</li> <li>churches and religious institutions.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Trinity Beach Community Centre</li> <li>Gordonvale Community Hall, and</li> <li>Munro Martin Parklands.</li> </ul>
<b>Community groups and networks</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>volunteer or community-led community groups and associations, and</li> <li>sporting groups and clubs.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Cairns Multicultural Leaders Network</li> <li>SES, and</li> <li>Lions Club.</li> </ul>
<b>Community programs and events</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>community-led programs and events that connect communities and build social cohesion, and</li> <li>large-scale events that attract visitors to Cairns.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>library programs including story time, writing Wednesday, book clubs, multicultural playgroup and tech help</li> <li>Cairns Festival</li> <li>Cairns Multicultural Month, and</li> <li>local markets.</li> </ul>
<b>Social and health services</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>government funded or charitable social and health service and inter-agencies (such as housing, safety, mental or physical health services).</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Uniting Care</li> <li>Mission Australia, and</li> <li>Access Community Housing.</li> </ul>
<b>Institutions</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>government agencies</li> <li>universities, and</li> <li>other large organisations.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Cairns Regional Council, and</li> <li>James Cook University.</li> </ul>
<b>Information and communication sources</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>newspapers</li> <li>newsletters, and</li> <li>noticeboards.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Cairns Regional Council website, and</li> <li>local community radio.</li> </ul>

## 6.2 Social asset by category

This section provides a high-level overview of the social assets in Cairns in each category.

### Community spaces and places

Cairns has a diverse network of community spaces and places including parks and open spaces, recreation facilities, libraries, community centres and halls and creative facilities. According to *Towards 2050<sup>10</sup> Community Infrastructure Plan* Cairns has:

- 13 Council-owned primary community activity spaces
- 8 libraries
- 28 cultural facilities and venues
- 21 aquatic facilities
- 4 recreation (leisure) centres
- 1,311 ha of recreation parks
- 158 ha of linear open spaces
- 582 ha of sports parks
- 16 recreation trails, and
- 7 cemeteries.

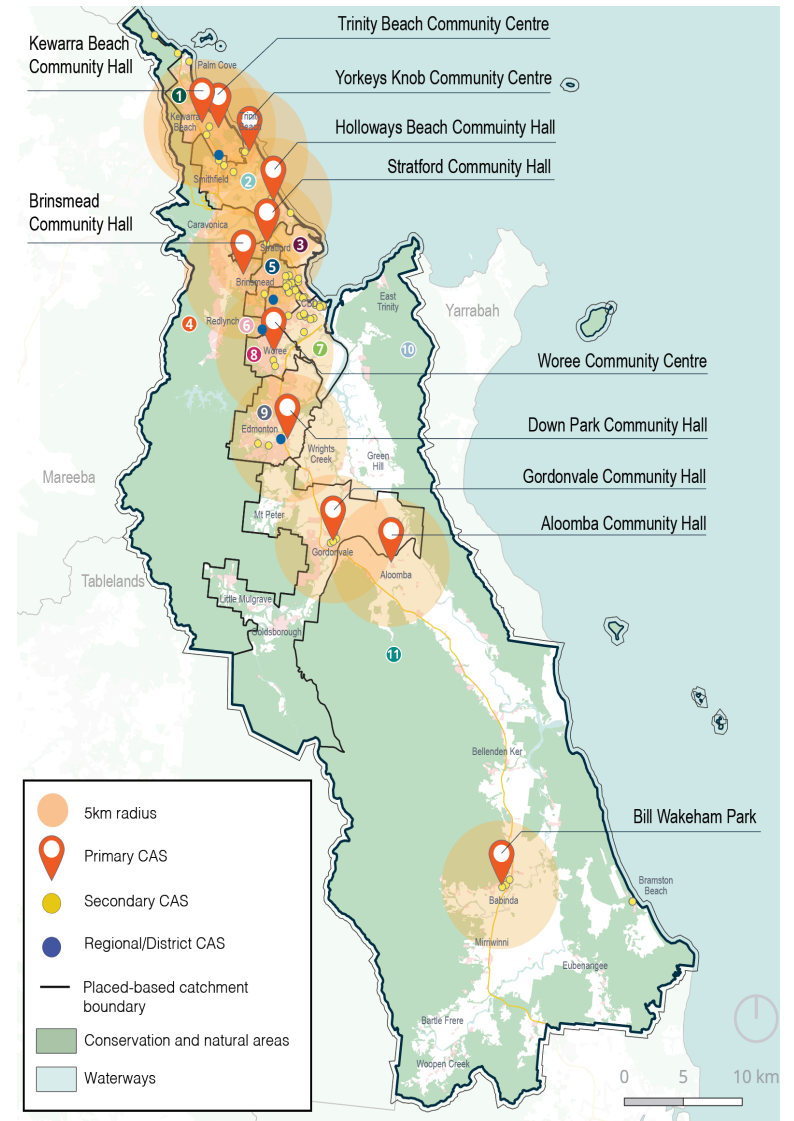
Figure 9 shows the primary and secondary Community Activity Spaces across the place-based catchments.

Consultation for Cairns 2050 found that community spaces and places are much loved and highly valued. This includes the world class assets like the Cairns International Tennis Centre and Munro Martin Parklands and local facilities like Stratford Library. Research also found that community facilities in Cairns are well located, often co-located with other infrastructure and in close proximity of other services, creating a highly accessible network of community infrastructure that connects the community to essential services and each other.

Looking to future needs, there is a good supply of land available for future community spaces and places and sport and recreation open space. This is important as evidence suggests people are moving away from organised community sport and recreational groups to more informal get-togethers and activities. This has implications for the types of spaces provided, as well as their location and design.

However, the *Towards 2050 Community Infrastructure Plan* notes that some of the community spaces and places in Cairns are aging, not fit-for-purpose and not accessible to people with disability. On top of this many of the community facilities do not meet adopted floorspace standards and most of the libraries do not meet the State Library of Queensland floorspace benchmarks. This limits the ability for those facilities to respond to growth and the changing needs of the community. For more in-depth analysis of community facility opportunities see the Cairns *Towards 2050 Community Infrastructure Plan*.

Figure 9 - Primary and secondary community activity spaces with 5km radius along place-based catchments (source: Cairns Regional Council, *Community Infrastructure Plan*)



<sup>10</sup> Cairns Regional Council, *Community Infrastructure Plan*, 2024.

## **Community groups and networks**

Cairns has a number of community groups and networks including local sporting groups and clubs, cultural groups and arts groups. The majority of community groups are focused on sports including hockey, soccer, golf, bowls, boxing, rugby league, basketball, baseball, oztag, swimming, AFL and netball.

Cairns is also home to nine State Emergency Services (SES) across the region, a volunteer-based emergency service that helps prepare for and respond to emergencies.

Cairns also has a number of community-run networks such as the Cairns Multicultural Leaders Network. The Cairns Multicultural Leaders Network supports multicultural communities by identifying priorities in the community and facilitating a platform for community associations to meet and discuss strengths, challenges and opportunities. The Network is facilitated by Centacare FNQ.

During consultation for the Cairns 2050 framework, community groups and social networks was often raised when community was asked what they love about their suburb and Cairns. We heard from stakeholders in interviews for this Report that there are opportunities to better promote sporting and recreation community groups for the whole community, in particular young people.

## Community programs and events

Cairns has a diverse, responsive and popular program of activities and events that provide a range of ways for people to learn new skills and connect. This includes small-scale programs at the libraries, including storytime, book clubs, multicultural playgroup and tech help sessions through to moving picture nights or local markets and cultural celebrations such as Chinese New Year or Cairns Italian Festival. There is also the Cairns Indigenous Art Fair.

There are also a number of large-scale events designed to celebrate Cairns and bring people from outside the region to the area including Cairns Festival, Cairns Ecofiesta, Great Barrier Reef Masters Games and the Cairns Marathon. These events can help boost tourism but can also help create a shared identity and sense of belonging within the community.

## Social and health services

Cairns is the principal city and gateway to Far North Queensland, performing an important role as a regional service centre. As a result, Cairns is home to an extensive array of social, health and emergency services addressing a range of needs including housing, emergency relief, disability and health.

According to Council reports, there has been increasing demand for social and health services. This is due to population growth and rising social and economic inequity across the region. Mission Australia's Hambeldon House has reported an estimated 70% increase

in demand for emergency food relief, 50% increase in older residents attending the centre to access support and information and a 30% increase in demand for counselling services onsite<sup>11</sup>. Of concern, this service currently has a three-month wait time for counselling support and 60% of those clients on the waitlist are children or young people<sup>11</sup>. Despite the growing need for localised, place-based support, the Queensland Families and Communities Association highlights that neighbourhood centres are the lowest funded form of social service<sup>12</sup>. Supporting local neighbourhood centres can help connect people to each other and services, which is essential to recovering from shocks and stresses.

As part of its social resilience platform and local disaster management arrangements, Cairns Regional Council facilitates the Human and Social Sub-Committee to centralise information and coordinate responses to shocks. The sub-committee comprises of around 45 organisations from across government agencies and the community and social services sector in Cairns.

## Institutions

Cairns Regional Council is the main institution in the Cairns LGA responsible for delivering essential services, managing community facilities and connecting community members. There are also Queensland government offices located in Cairns CBD, along with police stations and fire stations in various suburbs.

Cairns is home to three key higher education institutions – James Cook University, Central Queensland University and the Tropical North Queensland Institute of TAFE. These not only provide higher education opportunities but contribute to the social and economic vitality of the region.

## Information and communication sources

Effective communication and access to timely and accurate information is a cornerstone of social resilience. This includes access to information during emergencies, along with access to information on community events and activities and essential services.

Across the whole LGA there are a number of communication sources including the Cairns Regional Council website and enewsletter, Cairns Post, Cairns Local News and the Cairns Community Noticeboard Facebook group. These provide a variety of ways for the community to access localised information.

Along with this there are a series of place-based community Facebook pages, and in some areas local community radio stations. These provide even more localised and relevant information to people living in certain suburbs.

<sup>11</sup> Cairns Regional Council, *Submission into Inquiry into Social Isolation and Loneliness in Queensland*, 2021.

<sup>12</sup> *ibid*

## 6.3 Social assets by catchment

As shown in Table 2, access to social assets is not equitable across the place-based resilience catchments. The table also includes the percentage of the residential area in the catchment that is within 800m of public open spaces and community facilities. As institutions and information and communication sources typically service the whole LGA these categories are not included in the table.

It should be noted that the number of social assets have not been benchmarked against the population of each catchment.

Key insights suggest that:

- Catchment 7 has a larger number of all types of social assets, and most people living there are within 800m of public open space and community facilities. This makes sense as catchment 7 is the catchment that includes Cairns City. However many of the social and health service providers located in this catchment do outreach work across Cairns.
- Catchments 3, 10 and 11 all have a lower number of social assets across all categories, with catchments 10 and 11 also having many residents living further than 800m from public open spaces and community facilities. These are typically the more rural, and larger geographic catchments.
- Catchments 1, 2 and 4 have a lower number of social and health services.
- According to internal Council data (as shown in Table 2) there are a small number of community programs and events happening in each catchment. However there are a number of LGA-wide events with activities and programs spread across the LGA not reflected in this table. It should also be noted that in the areas with libraries (Catchments 2, 3, 6, 7, 8, 10 and 11) library programs have been counted as one program and event, but they include a range of programs that connect communities from storytime through to playgroups and tech help sessions.

Table 2 - Social asset in Cairns LGA by catchment (source: Internal Council research and GIS proximity mapping)

Catchment	Population (%)	Community spaces and places (#)	Community groups and networks (#)	Social and health services (#)	Community programs and events (#)	Residential area within 800m of a public open space (%)	Residential area with 800m to community facilities (%)
1	13%	125	25	1	1	98%	41%
2	8%	84	28	2	2	100%	46%
3	2%	31	12	1	1	100%	46%
4	12%	102	17	0	1	97%	35%
5	10%	70	30	10	2	99%	54%
6	11%	86	55	17	1	100%	77%
7	8%	77	72	47	3	100%	92%
8	8%	60	18	4	2	100%	55%
9	20%	155	39	3	1	100%	74%
10	5%	48	20	0	2	51%	26%
11	3%	53	15	0	2	21%	18%

## 6.4 What does this mean for social resilience planning in Cairns?

The social assets audit across Cairns reveals the following needs for social resilience planning in Cairns:



**Identify and strengthen the use of Cairns' 1,400 social assets** to better connect the community to services and each other. For example, Cairns' diverse, extensive and highly valued network of well-located places and spaces can be used as spaces for recreation, socialising and enjoyment, but also as resilience hubs during emergencies or as spaces for emergency relief programs.



**Consider opportunities to upgrade community facilities as community hubs** to meet the changing needs of the Cairns community, including ensuring they are accessible, modern and fit-for-purpose.



**Consider place-based neighbourhood level projects** and research on social resilience through partnerships with local community groups and networks.



**Increase awareness of Cairns' existing social assets**, particularly to key cohorts such as young people and new arrivals, to ensure everyone has equitable opportunities to participate.



**Keep building on the diverse range of programming** from local to large-scale events, particularly events that build community connections and celebrate cultural diversity.



**Support social and health services** to better deliver improved outcomes to the Cairns community, including outreach, neighbourhood centres and emergency relief.



**Continue to collaborate with service providers** through the Human and Social Sub-Committee and other opportunities for enhanced collaboration and information sharing.



# 7. Stakeholder interview insights

*This section provides a high-level summary of key findings from both the external and internal stakeholder interviews.*

*For more detailed findings please see the Stakeholder Engagement Report.*

## 7.1 Key findings

- Cairns has many social assets that connect the community to each other, services and information. This includes service providers, neighbourhood and community centres, events and festivals, open spaces, Facebook groups, sporting organisations and clubs, multicultural community associations, Council programs, schools and libraries.
- The Cairns community is facing a number of social stresses and issues, including:
  - affordable housing and homelessness
  - access to healthcare, particularly mental health
  - social disharmony and racism
  - community safety
  - insufficient public transport, and
  - poor access to information.
- There are also key cohorts who may be disproportionately affected by the above social stresses, including First Peoples and young people.
- Council and service providers are facing a number of challenges in trying to address these social issues and build social resilience in Cairns, including:
  - funding
  - poor communication between service providers and government, and
  - the geographical spread of Cairns.
- Council should engage with and listen to the community about their social resilience needs and priorities, taking a bottom-up approach to social resilience planning.

## 7.2 What does this mean for social resilience planning in Cairns?

Stakeholder engagement suggests the following needs for social resilience planning in Cairns.



**Plan to address key social stresses** and issues in the Cairns community including **housing affordability, homelessness, healthcare, community safety and transport** which can disproportionately impact some of our community including First People and young people.



**Review access to information** on disasters, along with information on community groups, events and activities available.



**Collaborate to respond to key challenges** to service providers and Council in achieving social resilience including funding, collaboration and timing.



Consider a **place-based approach** to social resilience through the creation of **community-led place-based plans**.



**Engage with the community about their sense of social connection and resilience** to learn about people's needs, priorities and experiences living in Cairns.



**Collaborate** with **state and federal government** on key social resilience issues, particularly housing.

# 8. Social and economic equity and personal health and wellbeing

*This section provides analysis relating to:*

- *Cairns LGA growth and change*
- *key social issues facing the Cairns community, and*
- *social and economic equity and health and wellbeing indicators.*

*All data in this section is sourced from the 2021 ABS census (via the id.community) unless otherwise stated.*

## 8.1 Cairns LGA

Cairns and Far North Queensland region is the gateway to two of the world's greatest natural treasures in the World Heritage Great Barrier Reef and Wet Tropics Rainforest. The region is subject to significant weather events, including cyclones, storm surges and flooding. In addition to personal safety, these events can adversely impact access to services when roads are cut or other transport infrastructure is restricted.

Cairns is the regional service centre of Far North Queensland, meaning it experiences high levels of visitors from neighbouring regions for health, justice or family and community matters. This can result in people becoming stranded in Cairns or staying longer than planned. This exacerbates overcrowding, escalates social tensions and put additional strain on local services and agencies.

According to research, the Cairns and Tropical North Queensland region attracts more than 2.9 million visitors each year, of which 863,000 are international visitors<sup>13</sup>.

While tourism has always been a significant part of the local economy, Cairns has one of the most diverse economies in Australia. According to economy.id, healthcare and social assistance accounts for 19% of employment, followed by education and training (10%), retail trade (10%) and accommodation and food services (10%).

Across local businesses, 97% are small businesses meaning they employ less than 19 people. Small businesses are essential to social resilience as they foster strong local connections, provide essential services, adapt to community needs and help sustain the local economy. The top industries for small businesses are construction, accommodation and food services, rental, hiring and real estate services and professional, scientific and technical services.

<sup>13</sup> Tourism Tropical North Queensland *Tropical North Queensland Destination Tourism Plan, 2021*

## 8.2 The Cairns community

Future planning for social resilience is driven by unique demographic and place characteristics of the Cairns LGA. The Cairns community is characterised by:

### A growing region

Cairns has the second largest regional population outside of South-East Queensland. At the time of the 2021 Census, the estimated resident population (ERP) of Cairns LGA was 169,250. This was an increase of 7,677 (+5%) people since 2016. As shown in Figure 10, this growth is expected to continue with the population projected to reach 241,000 (+42%, or +71,681 people) by 2051. Population growth will be spread across the LGA but most significant in place-based catchments 1, 6, 7, 8, 9 and 10 (See **Appendix 5**).

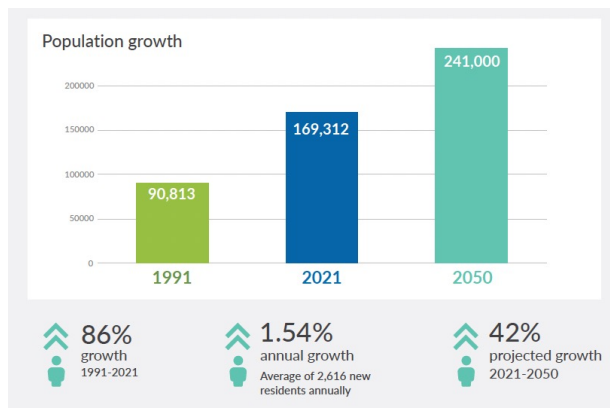


Figure 10 - Cairns population growth to 2051 (source: Queensland State Government via Towards Growth Strategy Framework)

### A comparatively younger, but aging population

The Cairns LGA median age is 39 years, similar to Far North Queensland (40). While Cairns has a similar proportion of children and young people aged 0-17 years compared to Far North Queensland (23%), it has a slightly higher proportion of working-aged people aged 25-49 years (34% in Cairns compared to 32% in Far North Queensland). There is also a comparatively lower proportion of people aged 65 years and over (16% in Cairns compared to 18% in Far North Queensland), however the proportion of people aged over 65 has increased since 2016.

### A large First Peoples community

The First Peoples population in Cairns is significant at 10% of the population (or 16,153 people). This is lower than Far North Queensland (15%) but much higher compared to Queensland (4%).

### A highly culturally diverse community

In Cairns, 14% of people speak a language other than English at home, which is similar to Far North Queensland (15%) and Queensland (13%). Since 2011 there has been a growth in people speaking Nepali, Punjabi, Mandarin and Malayalam.

22% of the Cairns community were born overseas. This is higher than Far North Queensland (18%). Since 2011 there has been a growth in people born in India, the Philippines, United Kingdom and China.

### An increasing need for assistance

In 2021, 5% of the Cairns population reported needing help in their day-to-day lives due to disability. This was a 1% increase from 2016, but is still slightly lower than the Far North Queensland average (6%).

### Better health outcomes

Across the Cairns LGA, the most common long-term health condition was mental health condition (8%), which sits below the Queensland average (10%). Around 29% of the population reported one or more health conditions, a lower rate than in Queensland (33%).

### Similar household types

In Cairns 25% of households are couples with children, just below Far North Queensland (22%). 25% of households are couples without children, the same as Far North Queensland (25%). Similarly, 25% of households are lone person households compared to 24% in Far North Queensland.

12% of households in the Cairns LGA single parents with children, compared to 11% in Far North Queensland.

### 8.3 Key social issues

This section provides an overview of priority social issues facing the Cairns community, based on a literature review of relevant existing research.

#### Affordable and social housing

There is increasing demand for social housing across Queensland. Queensland Council of Social Services estimates that there are 150,000 households in the state with unmet housing needs<sup>14</sup>. As shown in Figure 11, there were 3,512 people on the wait list to access social housing in Cairns in 2023<sup>15</sup>. Figure 12 also shows that the average wait time to access social housing has increased over time, from 11 months in 2017 to 27 months in 2023<sup>16</sup>. Most applicants are seeking one bedroom accommodation, followed by similar proportions seeking two- and three- bedroom houses. Waitlist data also shows there is higher need from some community cohorts, including older single women, single parents with children, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, and people with chronic health conditions.

For the Cairns LGA, social housing makes up 4.5% of rental housing, representing approximately 5,200 properties (October 2022). In this context, the level of current under supply is gauged at approximately 5,300 homes with some 2,100 people waiting on the local register of need for social housing. Of this group, some 87% are high or very high needs<sup>17</sup>.

Oxford Economics Australia’s recent report finds property prices in Cairns are set to outpace Brisbane over the next 3 year<sup>18</sup>. In March 2024, the median rental price for Cairns was \$500 per week (Residential Tenancies Authority, 2024). This varied from \$450 for a 2-bedroom flat to \$570 for a 3-bedroom house.

<sup>14, 15, 16, 17</sup> Queensland Council of Social Services,  
<sup>18</sup>Cairns Regional Council, *Cairns Social and Affordable Housing and Homelessness Plan 2023-2026, 2023.*

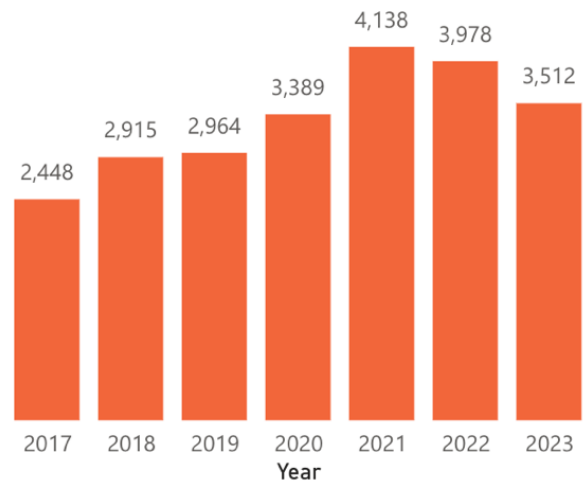


Figure 11 - Number of people on social housing register in Cairns LGA 2017-2023 (source: Queensland Council of Social Services 2024)

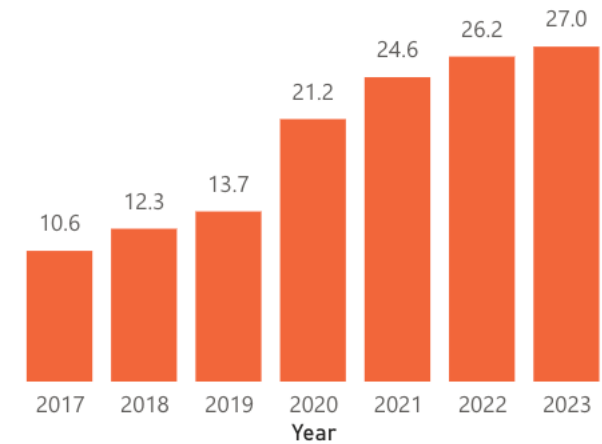


Figure 12 - Average number of months on social housing waitlist in Cairns LGA 2017-2023 (source: Queensland Council of Social Services 2024)

## Homelessness

Cairns is identified as a homelessness hotspot, with the Cairns Housing and Homeless Network Chair Mark Jentz indicating there has been a “significant increase” in the number of people rough sleeping in recent years<sup>19</sup>. In 2023, local services estimated that around 130 people were sleeping rough each night, rising to 240 people depending on circumstances<sup>20</sup>.

Many people also experience hidden homelessness, living in unsafe, unstable and overcrowded arrangements, such as couch surfing, hotel accommodation or living in caravans. People experiencing hidden homelessness are generally not accounted for in Census data and other sources.

## Domestic violence

Between 2023 and 2024, Cairns had the highest incidence of domestic and family violence in Queensland (2,000 charges between May 2023 to May 2024) (see Figure 13). Although it is possible charges processed by the Cairns Magistrates Court may include charges from outside the region. At the same time, neighbouring LGAs are experiencing an increase in domestic violence and do not have the services available to provide support. For

example, anecdotal evidence indicates that due to the lack of crisis accommodation in Mareeba Shire, women and children escaping violence are being housed with other family members or friends, in motels, or relocate to Cairns to find safe and affordable housing. This places additional pressure on the services and housing available in Cairns.

Studies show that living with domestic violence causes physical and emotional harm to children<sup>21</sup>. Young people exposed to domestic and family violence are more likely to:

- suffer from depression
- be homeless
- abuse drugs and alcohol
- engage in risk-taking behaviours, and
- experience or use violence and be controlling and manipulative in relationships.

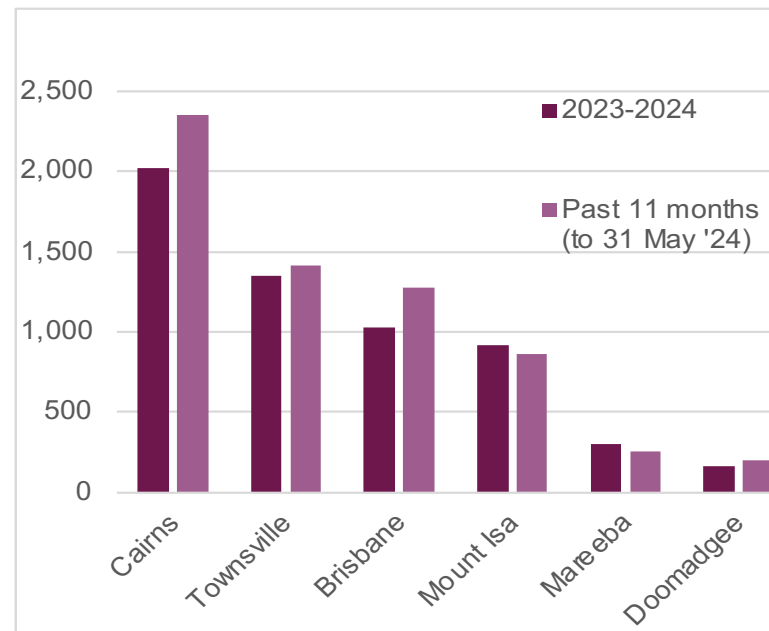


Figure 13 - Number of charges DFV charges lodged in each Magistrates Court, 2023-2024 (Source: Queensland Courts, 2024)

<sup>19</sup> Cairns Post, *Property prices in Cairns to outpace Brisbane over three years, 2024.*

<sup>20</sup> Cairns Regional Council (2023)

<sup>21</sup> Sety, M, *The impact of domestic violence on children: a literature review, 2011*

## Social isolation

Social isolation is an increasing issue across Australia that is estimated to cost the Australian economy \$2.7billion annually<sup>22</sup>. Social isolation is a contributor to mental health issues. Mental health issues are also rising and cost the economy around \$60billion annually.

During COVID-19 the social isolation impacts were diverse across different cohorts of people in the Cairns region. Specifically affected were people living alone, older adults, people with disabilities, carers and single parents. Impacts of social isolation included loneliness, feeling trapped, stress, anxiety and depression. Many people found different ways to connect including visiting where possible within social distancing measures, delivering meals for family members, checking in via phone and using digital technologies when available. Easing of restrictions enabled outings such as picnics and going to the beach. Examples were given of how special occasions such as birthdays were celebrated using digital means, dress up days and other ways to connect digitally.

## Digital inclusion/barriers to accessing information

The digital inclusion score for Cairns is low at 54.3, compared to national level score of 61.9 and Queensland score of 60.9<sup>23</sup>. The Cairns region score is also below that of rural Queensland. Data indicates that one in five people do not have access to the internet in Cairns and there is a digital divide across different population cohorts<sup>24</sup>.

Research undertaken during COVID-19 revealed that the way information was received, accessed and utilised was critical to good mental health outcomes<sup>25</sup>. This included households' ability to engage in employment, education, social interaction and access essential online health and social service supports. Situations that perpetuated social disconnection and isolation compounded mental health impacts.

Digital exclusion is related to affordability, access and ability. Adverse impacts are higher for certain groups, including seniors, First Peoples and migrant communities and is further exacerbated by levels of disadvantage. Impacts during COVID-19 included limited or no network connectivity, low levels of digital literacy, no or limited access to technology or data, or control of access<sup>26</sup>. This resulted in some people being unable to access support via online substitutes or remaining in unsafe situations. This can also be an issue during disasters, where people may struggle to access information on emergency preparedness, evacuations and information on services to help with repairs and recovery.

Digital capability is critical to responding to pandemics, and COVID-19 has highlighted the risks of the digital divide to sustain the health and wellbeing of the population during these events. A bi-lateral approach is required to improve infrastructure connectivity for Internet speeds and coverage, improvement of levels of digital literacy, and access to technology particularly for the most vulnerable.

<sup>22</sup> KPMG and Groundswell Foundation, *Connections Matter: A report on the impacts of loneliness*, 2022

<sup>23, 24, 25, 26</sup> Babacan, H, McHugh, J and Dale, *Cairns Local COVID-19 Social Needs Assessment*, 2020



## 8.4 Cohort indicators of social and economic equity and personal health and wellbeing

Who you are and where you live directly impacts your ability to be socially resilient. Those with more social vulnerabilities (e.g. lower income, unstable housing, socially isolated or with disability) and/or living in environmentally vulnerable areas (e.g. more impacted by storms, floods or heat) face more challenges to social and community resilience, both individually and within their neighbourhoods or communities.

This means diverse cohorts of people across Cairns have unique experiences of the places they live and work. This includes unique needs in accessing and connecting to places, services and opportunities that result in improved livability, a sense of belonging and connection. Recognising and understanding diverse experiences and needs will help to address enduring and emerging barriers within city and region plans.

This section provides an overview of key cohorts across Cairns LGA and the place-based resilience catchments to better understand the key social vulnerabilities and issues facing the region.

See **Appendix 2** for the data sources.

*Experience can be intersectional, in that we know that some people can be a member of a number of diverse social cohorts at the same time and may experience intersecting and compounded barriers based on their age, background, ability or gender.*

*For example, a person with a disability may also be gender diverse, therefore experiences unique needs and barriers in accessing services and places and their sense of belonging in relation to both of these identities may differ.*



## Age

### Children aged under 11

In Cairns 15% (or 24,652 people) of the population is aged under 11 years, this is similar to both Far North Queensland (15%) and Queensland (15%). As shown in Figure 14, this is higher in catchment 8 (19%), catchment 4 (17%) and catchment 10 (17%). Catchment 7 has a lower proportion of children aged under 11 (9%).

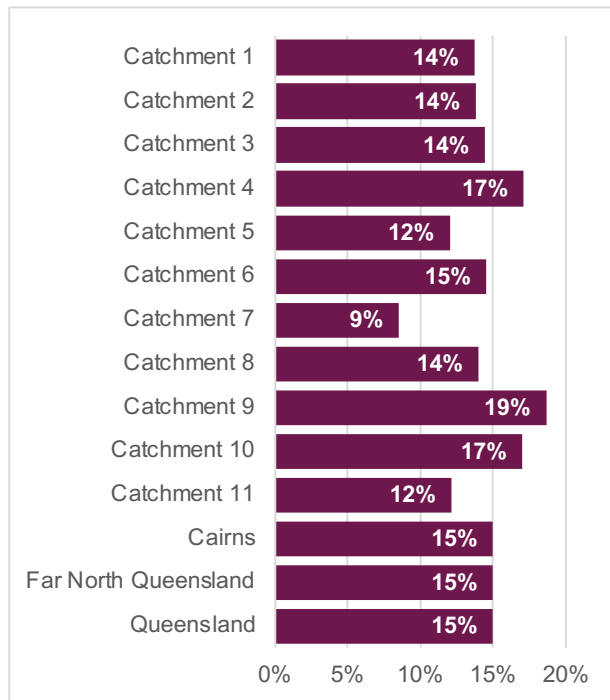


Figure 14 - Percentage of the population aged under 11 for each resilience catchment in Cairns (source: ABS 2021 census via profile.id)

Children aged under 11 bring vibrancy and energy to their communities. Their presence encourages the development of family-friendly amenities, such as parks and playgrounds, that benefit the wider community. Families with young children also tend to actively participate in local events and programs, which helps create a sense of belonging, connection and identity.

Research shows that children aged under 11 are also more dependent in terms of their day-to-day activities and they have fewer resources and opportunities to shape their own circumstances<sup>27</sup>. This can make them more vulnerable during shocks and when their family and communities are experiencing stresses. This highlights the importance of ensuring families with young children are connected to support networks, services and their community. Being connected increases the likelihood that they will seek help during challenges, leading to better outcomes for children.

Affordable and accessible early education and primary schools is essential for families with young children. Ideally, these facilities should be located within walking distance of residential areas and supported by safe active transport routes that facilitate independent travel. Research emphasises the importance of creating playful cities with play elements integrated throughout streets, promoting the health, happiness and physical activity of young children. Moreover, green spaces in residential areas have been shown to reduce depression, stress and improve overall health outcomes for children<sup>28</sup>.

### Young people ages 12 to 24

In Cairns 16% (or 26, 677 people) of the population is aged between 12 and 24, this is similar to both Far North Queensland (15%) and Queensland (16%). As shown in Figure 15, this is higher in catchment 4 (18%) and catchment 9 (18%). Catchment 1 has a lower proportion of young people (13%).

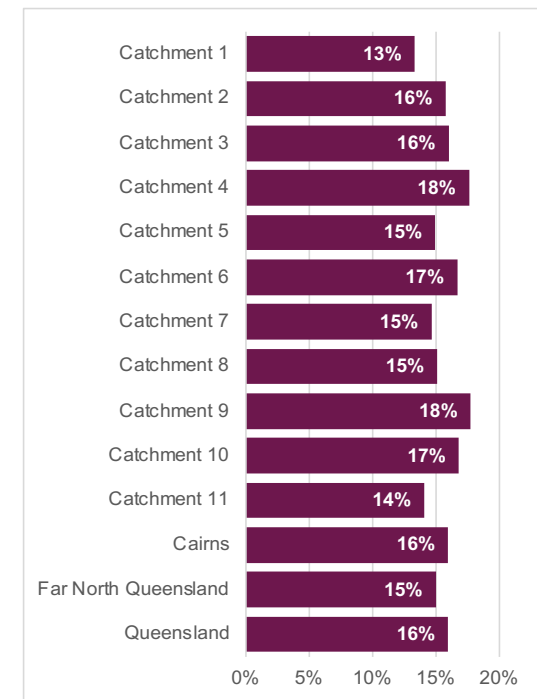


Figure 15 - Percentage of the population aged between 12 and 24 by catchment (source: ABS 2021 census via profile.id)

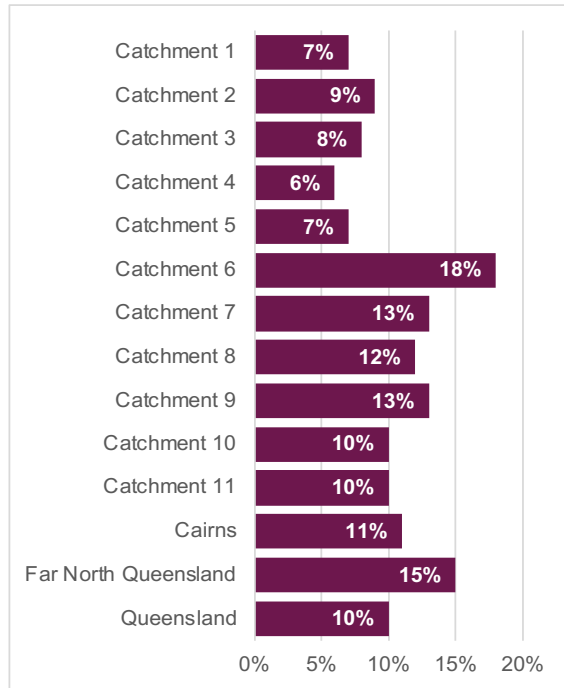


Figure 16 - Percentage of people aged 15 to 24 who are disengaged from work and by catchment (source: ABS 2021 via profile.id)

As shown in Figure 16, 11% of young people aged between 15 and 24 in Cairns are disengaged from both work and study. This is lower compared to Far North Queensland (15%) and slightly higher than Queensland (10%). However, this is much higher in catchment 6 (18%).

Research indicates that young people are highly connected to their communities, often finding their early independence travelling to high school, getting their first job and moving out of

home for the first time<sup>29</sup>. They can bring fresh perspectives and energy to communities and contribute to social cohesion.

However, they also face a number of challenges. Financial and housing insecurity, discrimination in public places, lack of transport from home to work or school and a shortage of safe, diverse, and youth-friendly activities at night can exacerbate their vulnerability. Specific challenges identified for young people in Cairns include homelessness and unemployment. As a result, people under the age of 17 years account for a significant proportion of incidences of antisocial behaviour in the Cairns CBD and fringes, including offences of a more serious nature such as assault<sup>30</sup>. On top of this, the negative perceptions of young people and youth crime are prevalent within the Cairns community. This can often lead to young people being stigmatised and discriminated against, and impacts the way young people see themselves and their place in the world.

The top priority item for the Young Mayors program is improving public transport in Cairns. This includes advocating for free public transport for young people studying, creating safe public transport environments with lighting and cleanliness and improving the number of services. This will ensure young people are able to access support services, employment, education and spaces for socialising.

To support young people, it is also essential to provide safe and accessible spaces where they can gather and socialise. This includes youth centres, sports facilities and cultural venues. It is also important to provide programs that promote youth employment and skills building. The participants through the Young Mayors program identified there is a need to better promote skills development opportunities available to young people in Cairns.

<sup>29</sup> ibid

<sup>30</sup> Cairns Regional Council 2023, Submission to the Queensland Youth Justice Reform Select Committee.

**People aged 65 and over**

In Cairns 16% (or 25, 822 people) of the population is aged 65 and over, this is similar to both Far North Queensland (18%) and Queensland (17%). As shown in Figure 17, this is higher in catchment 11 (23%) and lower in catchments 4 and 9 (12%).

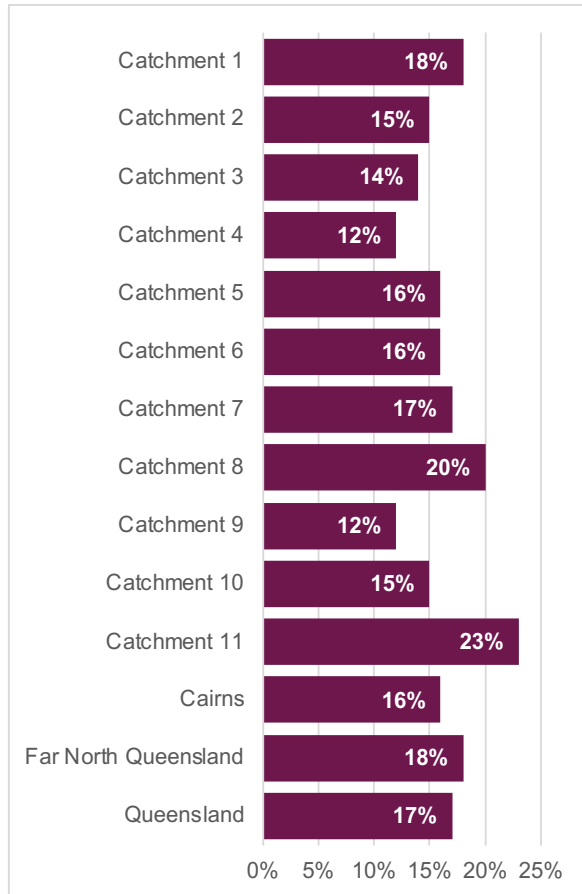


Figure 17 - Percentage of people aged 65 and over in each resilience catchment in Cairns (source: ABS 2021 census via profile.id)

People aged over 65 bring experience, knowledge and a strong sense of community to their neighbourhoods. Their participation in volunteering, local events and community groups strengthens social cohesion and fosters intergenerational connections. Many older adults also have deep roots in their neighborhoods having lived there for many years.

Aging in the neighbourhood where people feel connected is important to maintain healthy living, quality of life and established social connections. Ensuring that older adults can age in place requires enhancing the quality of public spaces and amenities. This includes safe, accessible and well-maintained parks, pedestrian pathways and accessible community facilities. Providing affordable housing options, reliable public transport and easy access to healthcare and social services supports older adults' independence and wellbeing. Promoting social activities and volunteer opportunities helps maintain their social connections and help improve their mental health.

Older people can be more vulnerable during shocks due to mobility issues or health conditions. They are also more susceptible to social isolation, financial insecurity and may find it hard to access to appropriate health and support services.

Through the *Cairns Disability Access and Inclusion Plan 2024-2026*, Council is working to ensure their events and spaces are accessible for people with disability, which will also help ensure people in Cairns can age in place.

## Health and wellbeing

### People who need assistance due to disability

In Cairns 5% (or 8,963 people) of the population need assistance due to a disability, this is similar to both Far North Queensland (6%) and Queensland (6%). As shown in Figure 18, this is slightly higher in catchment 6 (7%).

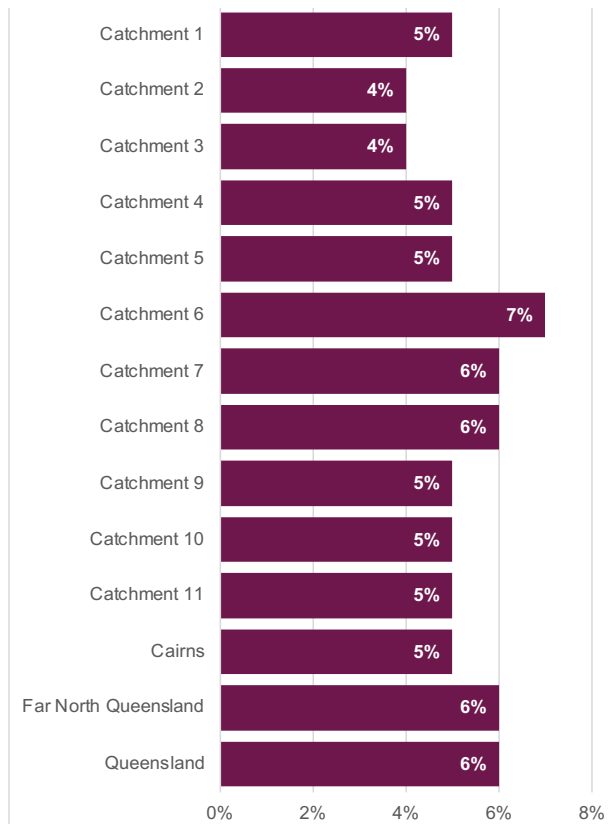


Figure 18 - Percentage of the population needing assistance due to disability for each resilience catchment in Cairns (source: ABS 2021 census via profile.id)

People with disability are active participants in society and their lived experience can help make communities more inclusive and cohesive. However, research indicates that people with disability overwhelmingly do not experience belonging in their community<sup>31</sup>. This can be because the physical infrastructure of cities often fails to adequately accommodate their needs. It can also be due to discrimination or stigma they face in navigating everyday life. When communities, services and places are not accessible or inclusive, people with physical, mental, intellectual or sensory disabilities may be prevented from participating fully in our cities and places. This also means they may not be able to respond to or recover from disasters and challenges as quickly as others in the community.

The *Cairns Disability Access and Inclusion Plan 2024-2026* aims to foster a commitment to increasing participation opportunities for people with disability and recognising their valuable contribution to the community. The Plan includes actions around ensuring public information is accessible, public spaces and places are accessible, meaningful pathways for employment and address public perceptions.

<sup>31</sup> Cred Consulting and Department of Premier and Cabinet (2023).

**People with long-term health conditions**

In Cairns 29% (or 47, 849 people) of the population have a long-term health condition, this is similar to both Far North Queensland (29%) and slightly lower than Queensland (33%). As shown in Figure 19, this is slightly higher in catchment 8 (31%).

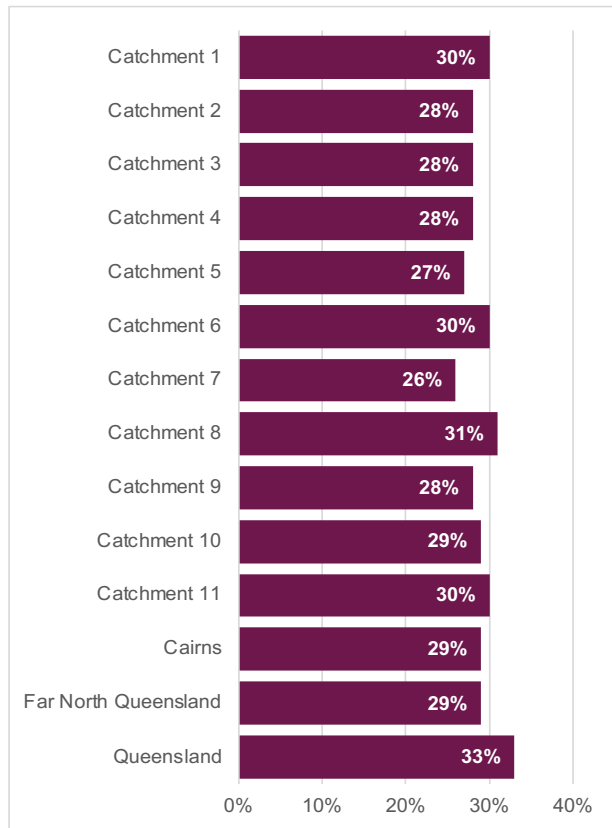


Figure 19 - Percentage of the population with a long-term health condition for each resilience catchment in Cairns (source: ABS 2021 census via profile.id)

The most common long-term health condition in Cairns is a mental health condition. As shown in Figure 20, 8% (or 13,165 people) in Cairns have a mental health condition, this is similar to Far North Queensland (7%) and lower than Queensland (10%). The proportion of residents with a mental health condition is slightly higher in catchment 6 (9%).

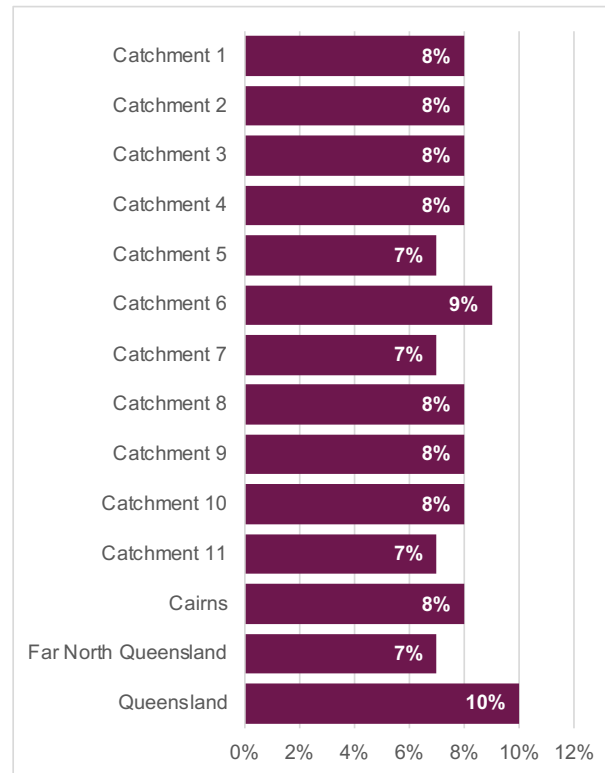


Figure 20 - Percentage of the population with a mental health condition for each resilience catchment in Cairns (source: ABS 2021 census via profile.id)

Individuals with long-term health conditions can face increased vulnerability during shocks. This is because they may require ongoing medical care and access to specialised resources and services, which can be disrupted during these events. On a day-to-day basis they may also face financial stress, poor access to healthcare services and physical infrastructure that does not cater to their specific needs, complicating their access to essential services and support. A key issue facing Cairns is inadequate and inequitable access to mental health services and bulk-billing doctors.

## Equity and access

### People living alone

In Cairns 25% (or 16, 311 people) of the population lives alone, this is similar to both Far North Queensland (24%) and Queensland (23%). As shown in Figure 21, this is higher in catchment 7 (38%) and catchment 6 (30%). Catchment 4 has a much lower proportion of people living alone (15%).

People living alone are independent, self-reliant and often have a strong sense of personal resilience. However, living alone can also mean they are at higher risk of experiencing social isolation and feeling disconnected from their neighbourhood and community. This can make them more vulnerable to shocks and challenges, as they may not have a local support network to call on for help.

Local community events and programs are an affordable and easy way to help people living alone connect to their neighbours, local services and council.

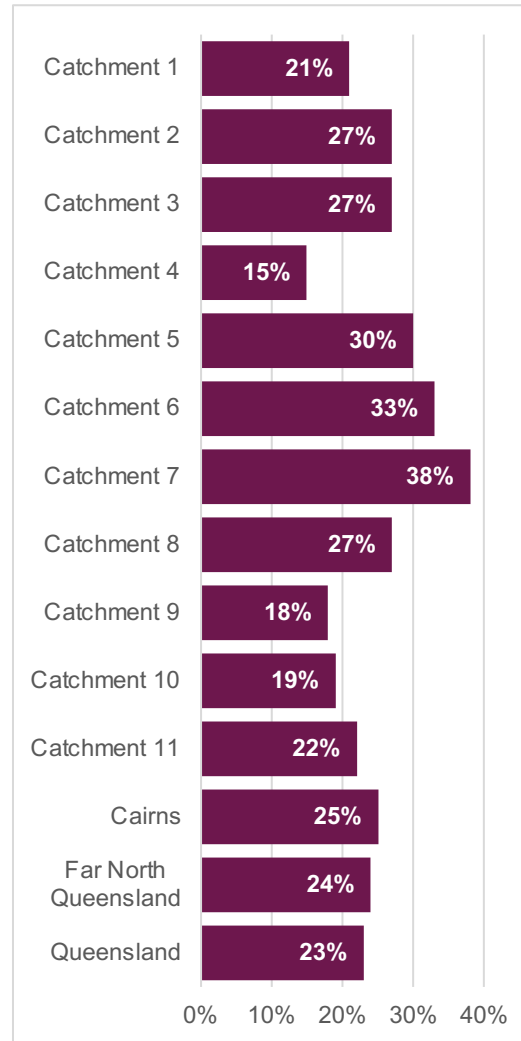


Figure 21 - Percentage of the population living alone for each resilience catchment in Cairns (source: ABS 2021 census via profile.id)

**Low income households**

In Cairns 21% (or 13,284 households) of households are considered low-income households, meaning they receive less than \$800 per week before tax. This is similar to Queensland (21%) but lower than Far North Queensland (25%). As shown in Figure 22, this is high in catchments 6, 7 and 11 (27%). Catchment 4 has a much lower proportion of low-income households (13%).

Communities with low socioeconomic status are often left out of decision-making processes. They are more likely to experience compounded social disadvantage and often struggle to access services and places. They are also more vulnerable to the adverse impacts of shocks (such as climate change and other natural disasters) and stresses (such as increasing cost of living).

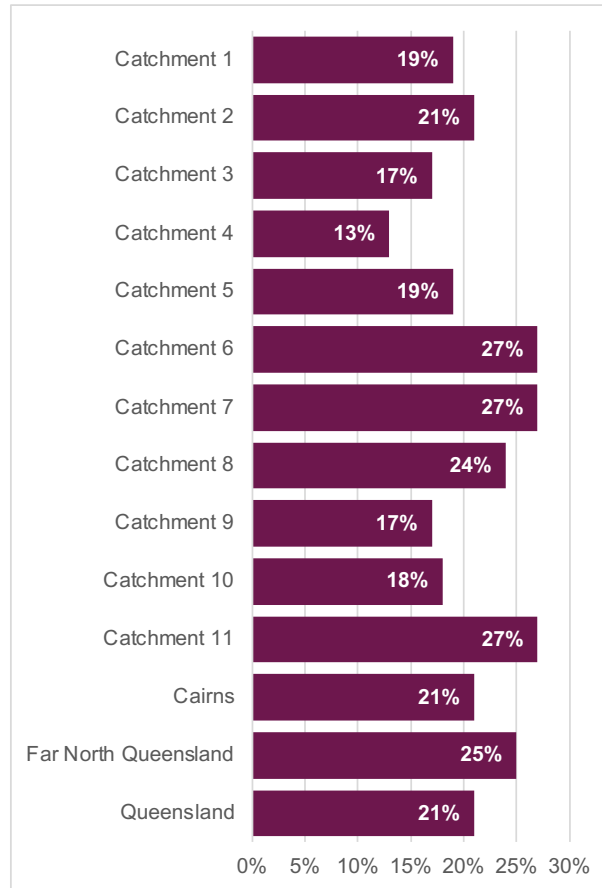


Figure 22 - Percentage of the low-income households for each resilience catchment in Cairns (source: ABS 2021 census via profile.id)

**Households without access to a car**

In Cairns 6% (or 4,021 households) of households do not own a car, similar to both Far North Queensland (7%) and Queensland (6%). As shown in Figure 23, this is much higher in catchment 6 (25%).

Households without a car are particularly vulnerable during emergencies as it means they may struggle to evacuate, obtain essential supplies or access medical care. Their reliance on public transport on a day-to-day basis can also negatively impact their lives. A lack of adequate public transportation options, increased travel times and higher costs for alternative transport methods can exacerbate their challenges. These households may also face difficulties in accessing employment opportunities, education and healthcare services, further contributing to their overall vulnerability.

There are a number of public transport projects underway in Cairns including the Cairns Metro Concept and the development of a Transport Strategy which will make it easier for households without cars to access services and other community connectors.

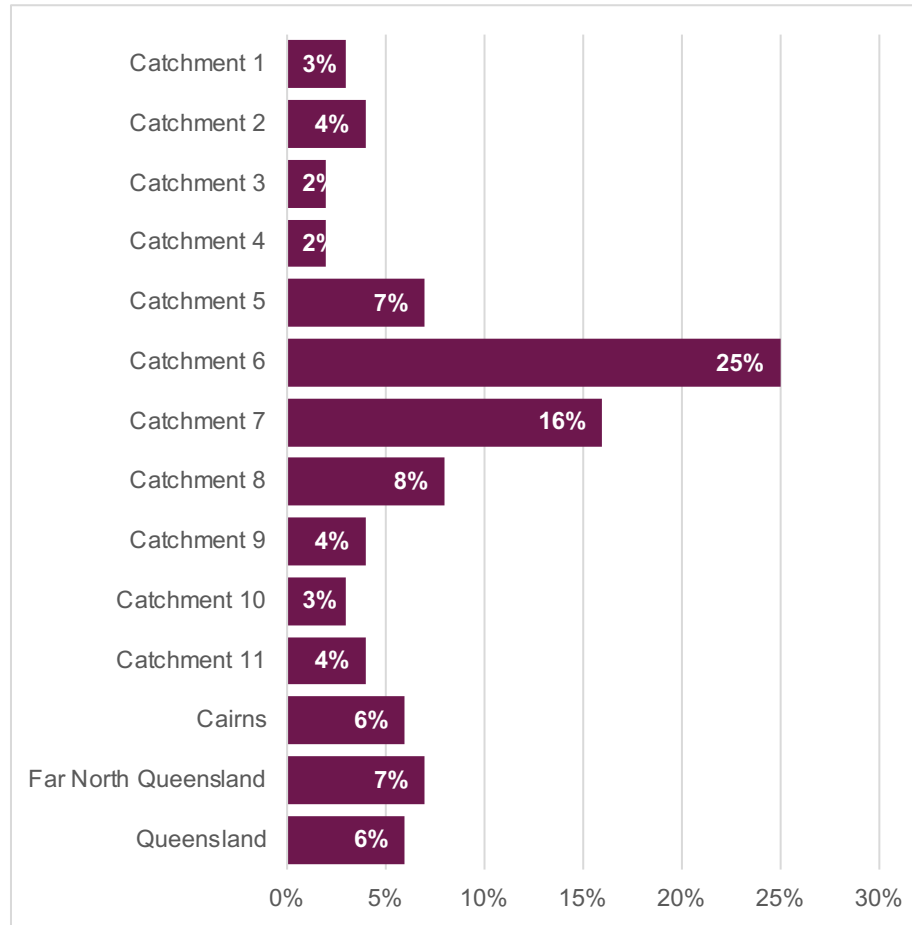


Figure 23 - Percentage of households without a car for each resilience catchment in Cairns (source: ABS 2021 census via profile.id)

**Households experiencing rental stress**

In Cairns 33% (or 6,975 households) of households who are renting experience rental stress, meaning they spend more than 30% of their income on rent. This is slightly higher than both Far North Queensland (30%) and Queensland (32%). As shown in Figure 24, this is higher in catchment 2 (39%), catchment 8 (38%) and catchment 1 (37%). Catchment 10 has a lower proportion of households experiencing rental stress (24%).

The *Cairns Social and Affordable Housing and Homelessness Plan 2023-2026* aims to address issues of unaffordable housing and therefore reduce the number of families experiencing rental stress.

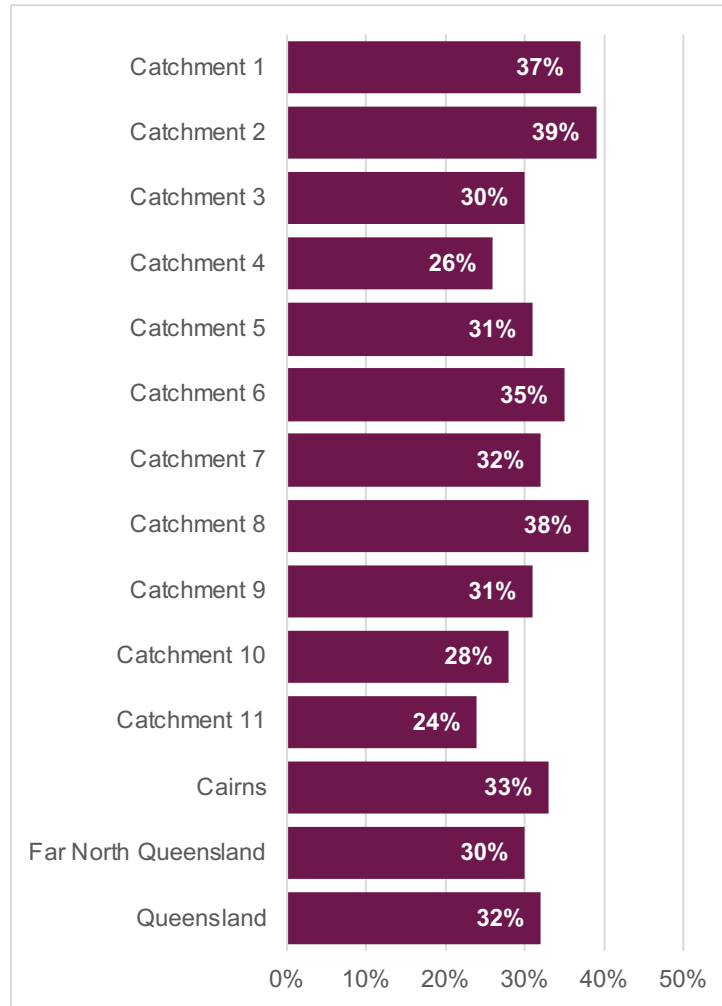
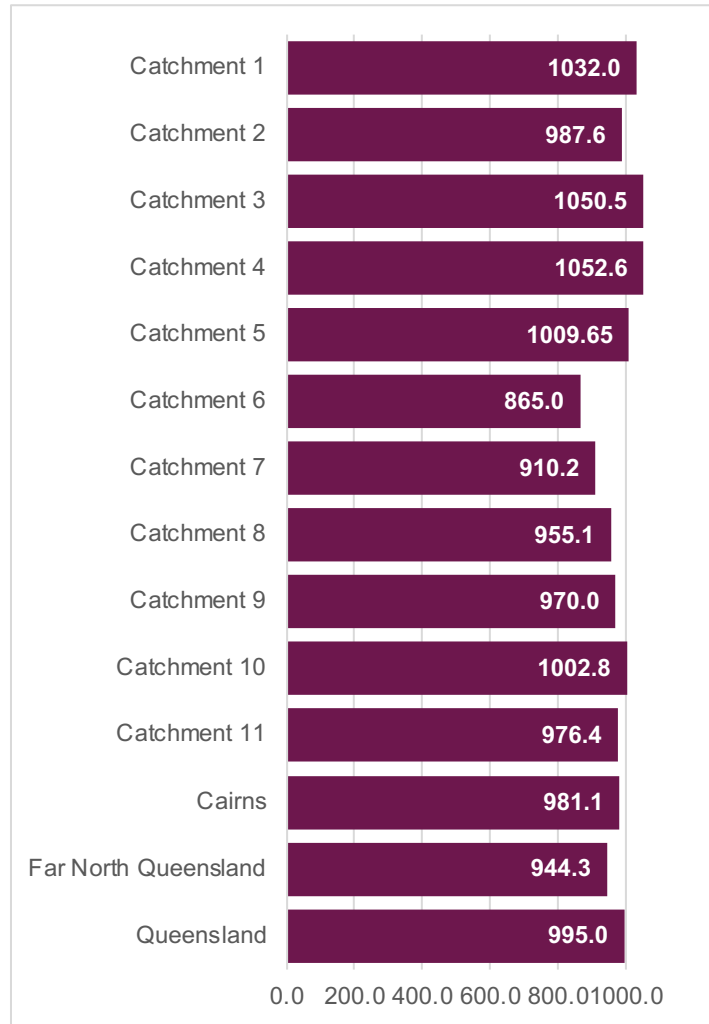


Figure 24 - Percentage of households that rent experiencing rental stress for each resilience catchment in Cairns (source: ABS 2021 census via profile.id)

***Socially and economically disadvantaged***

The SEIFA score in Cairns is 981.1, compared to 944.3 in Far North Queensland and 995 in Queensland. SEIFA measures the relative level of socio-economic disadvantage of an area with a lower score meaning more socio-economic disadvantage. This means Cairns experiences more socio-economic disadvantage compared to Queensland, but less compared to Far North Queensland. As shown in Figure 25, the SEIFA score is lower in catchment 6 (865) and catchment 7 (910.2), meaning they experience more socio-economic disadvantage.



*Figure 25 - SEIFA scores for each resilience catchment in Cairns (Source: Profile.id)*

## Diversity and inclusion

### First Peoples

In Cairns 10% (or 16,155 people) of the population identify as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander. This is lower compared to Far North Queensland (15%), but higher compared to Queensland (5%). As shown in Figure 26, this is higher in catchment 6 (18%). Catchment 1 has a significantly lower proportion of people who identify as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander (3%).

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have cared for communities and places within Cairns for more than 65,000 years. Their deep understanding of the landscape and traditional practices contribute to a rich cultural heritage and environmental sustainability. However, planning processes have historically excluded the knowledge and leadership of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, contributing to inequality and systemic barriers to accessing services, places and opportunities.

Cairns Regional Council is moving to a First Peoples Advisory Consultants model where First Peoples participants will be paid for their time spent providing advice and feedback to Council.

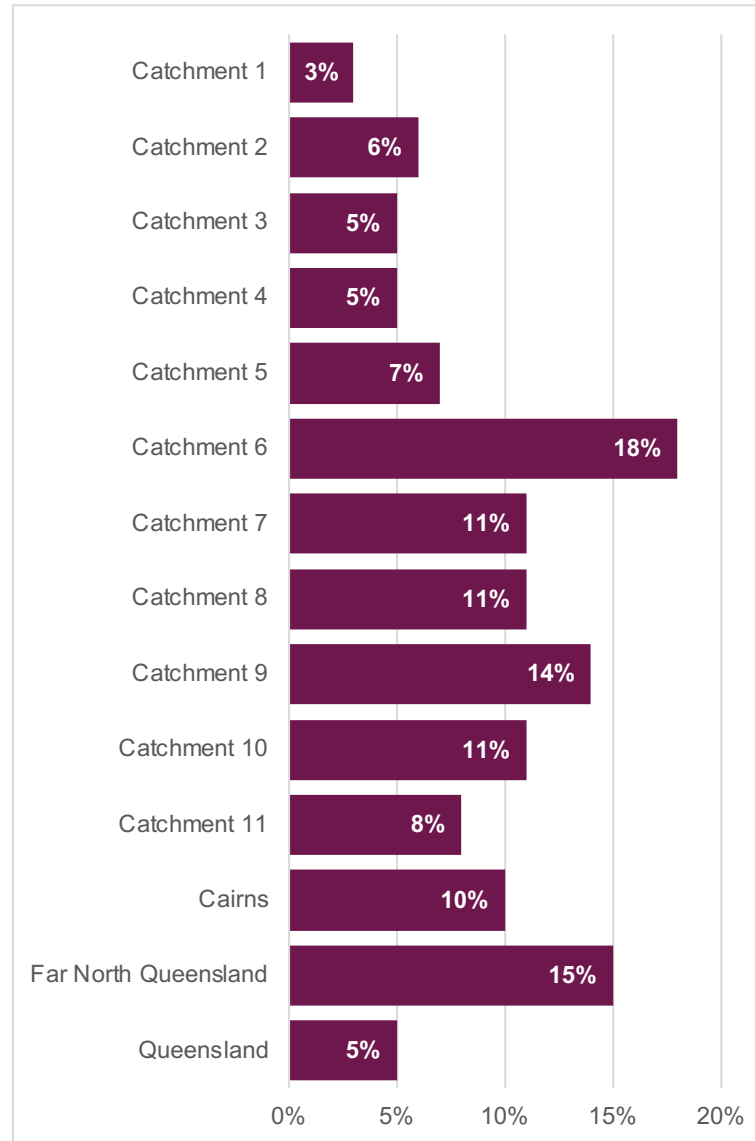


Figure 26 - Percentage of population who identify as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander for each resilience catchment in Cairns (Source: ABS 2021 census via profile.id)

**People who speak a language other than English at home**

In Cairns 14% (or 23, 472 people) of the population speak a language other than English at home. This is similar to both Far North Queensland (15%) and Queensland (13%). As shown in Figure 27, this is higher in catchment 7 (22%), catchment 6 (21%) and catchment 5 (18%). Catchment 11 has a significantly lower proportion of people who speak a language other than English at home (5%).

Culturally and linguistically diverse people bring culture, innovation and creativity to Cairns. However, they are in no way homogeneous. People who newly arrived have different social, cultural and recreation needs, interests and talents, and face specific barriers to accessing services and places, including discrimination, language barriers and proximity. People from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds are also at higher risk of experiencing social isolation.

Cairns Regional Council works in partnership with Centacare and TAFE to deliver adult migrant English programs, education sessions on visiting the library, disaster preparedness and waste and recycling. They also work with the Ethnic Communities' Council Queensland to deliver capacity building workshops.

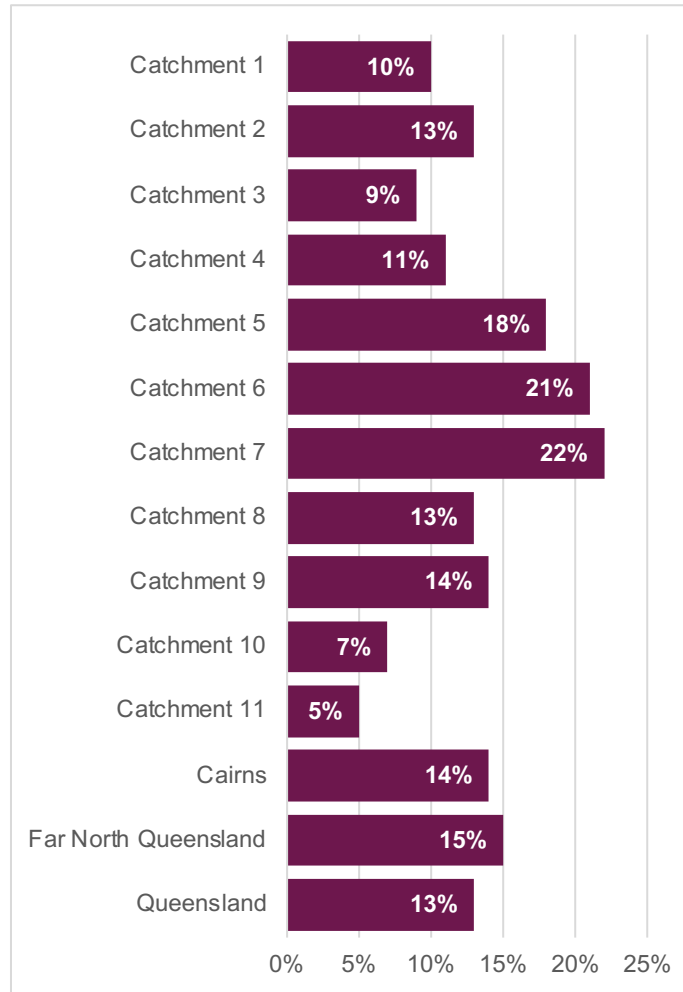


Figure 27 - Percentage of population that speak a language other than English at home for each resilience catchment in Cairns (Source: ABS 2021 census via profile.id)

**People who have arrived in Cairns from overseas between 2016 and 2021**

In Cairns 15% (or 5,514 people) of the population born overseas arrived in the five years between 2016 and 2021. This is similar to both Far North Queensland (15%) and Queensland (17%). However as shown in Figure 28, this is significantly higher in catchment 7 (31%).

On top of new arrivals from overseas, Cairns also has a heavy reliance on people moving from overseas on holiday visas<sup>32</sup>. Research in 2016 found that the wider Cairns community felt transient, made up of locals, people from other areas in Australia and those on temporary visas. The community felt this created a positive sense of cultural diversity in the community, with a regular flow of backpackers being viewed positively as it added to the holiday atmosphere and laid back lifestyle of Cairns<sup>33</sup>. However, according to the *Cairns Local COVID-19 Rapid Social Needs Assessment*, holiday workers, along with other non-permanent residents, are more at risk of financial distress, mental health impacts, social isolation and discrimination<sup>34</sup>.

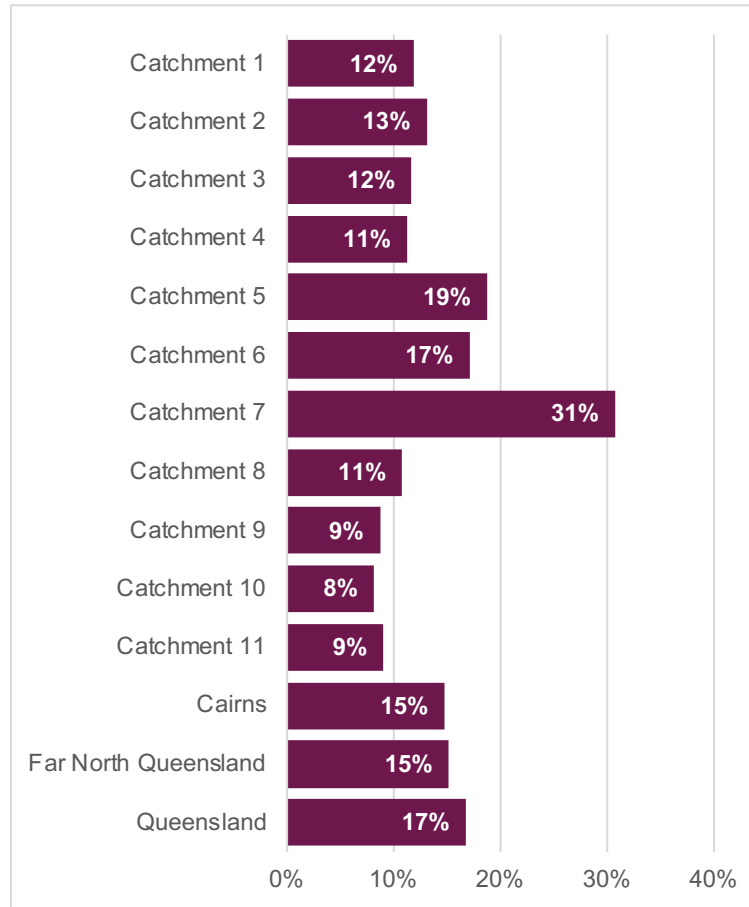


Figure 28 - Percentage of population born overseas that arrived in Cairns between 2016 and 2021 for each resilience catchment in Cairns (Source: ABS 2021 census via profile.id)

<sup>32</sup>Hordacre, A.L, Moretti, C., Gamble, H., & Crossman, S., *The Australia experience. Perceptions of Australia's Working Holiday Maker (WHM) program, 2019-2020*. 2021

<sup>33</sup>Hall & Partners, *Experiences of Temporary Residents*, 2016.

<sup>34</sup>Babacan, H, McHugh, J and Dale, A (2020)

## 8.5 What does this mean for social resilience planning in Cairns?

Socio-economic analysis suggests the following needs for social resilience planning in Cairns.



Address **key chronic stresses and issues** facing the Cairns community including **housing affordability, homelessness, domestic violence, social isolation and digital exclusion.**



Build on the **unique strengths and experiences** key cohorts bring to the Cairns community including First Peoples and people from culturally diverse backgrounds.



Address **social equity** by acknowledging the intersectional experiences of who people are and where they live, and how this impacts their ability to be socially resilient.



**Support families** including through providing resources, parenting support and family-friendly events and activities.



**Plan for spaces, events and programs that connect young people** with each other, their community, employment and education.



**Plan for family-friendly and accessible public spaces** and amenities including parks and playgrounds, footpaths and community facilities.



Improve access to **mental health services** and affordable healthcare.



**Plan for events and programs that foster social connections** to help those who may be at risk of social isolation.



**Advocate for better public transport** connections across Cairns such as the Cairns Metro Concept to improve connectivity for young people, low-income households and households without a car.



**Address rental and housing stress and homelessness** in line with the Cairns Social and Affordable Housing and Homelessness Plan 2023-2026.



**Engage and collaborate with First Peoples communities** to integrate their knowledge and leadership into planning and decision-making processes.



**Collaboratively plan for community-building initiatives** that foster inclusion and engagement within the Cairns community.



Image source: Cairns Regional Council

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# 10. Appendices

## Appendix 1: Case studies

This section provides case studies relevant to social resilience and the key issues facing the Cairns community as identified. They are examples of initiatives Council can deliver themselves alongside initiatives they can advocate for, or partner with stakeholders to deliver.

### Babinda Taskforce

Babinda Taskforce is a not-for-profit community organisation owned by the local community. The mission of the Taskforce is to lead future change and development in Babinda. They offer a number of services including Centrelink help, emergency relief, no interest loans, business support, administrative services such as printing and photocopying and meeting rooms and office space for rent. The Taskforce is an example of locally-led projects that can deliver social resilience outcomes.



Taskforce Facebook page (image source: Babinda)

### Youth foyers

Youth Foyers in Australia provide homeless young people aged 16-24 with stable housing linked to education and employment opportunities. By offering a supportive environment where residents engage in education or work, these programs help youth develop essential life skills, secure qualifications and transition to independence. While challenges like funding and demand exist, Youth Foyers have proven effective in breaking the cycle of homelessness and improving outcomes for young people.



(image source: Foyer Foundation)

## Beat the Heat, Blacktown City Council

In response to frequent extreme heat events in Western Sydney, Blacktown City Council has established cool centres in air-conditioned spaces like libraries, community hubs, and aquatic facilities. These centres offer refuge for vulnerable residents, particularly the elderly, young children, and those with chronic illnesses, during severe heatwaves. Activated during Bureau of Meteorology warnings, the centres provide not only a cool environment but also information on heat-related illnesses and tips for staying cool, playing a crucial role in protecting community health and promoting resilience.



(image source: Foyer Foundation)

## Emerald Neighbourhood Centre

Emerald Neighbourhood Centre has been a vital community hub in the regional area of Emerald for 45 years, serving a community that faces droughts, floods, and occasional bushfires. The centre plays a key role in disaster management and community support, offering a wide range of programs and referrals to allied services. During the 2021 floods, the Centre provided housing, clothing, food, and connections to partner organisations, becoming a central gathering point for the community. Their support extends beyond immediate relief, offering ongoing assistance and ensuring comprehensive, heartfelt care even after the disaster subsides.



(image source: Emerald Neighbourhood Centre)

## Geelong Youth Engagement

Geelong Youth Engagement (GYE) is a community organisation established in 2020 that aims to transform the lives of at-risk youth in Geelong, Bellarine and Surf Coast, Victoria. Through programs like the Geelong Kokoda Youth Program, which has been running since 2013, GYE engages young people aged 12-18 facing challenges such as mental health issues, homelessness and family difficulties. Other initiatives include Spring Back Geelong for Year 10 students and STRIVE for Year 7 and 8 students. By fostering resilience, confidence and self-belief, GYE empowers youth to overcome obstacles and transition successfully into adulthood, promoting positive community interactions and reducing anti-social behaviour.



(image source: Geelong Youth Engagement)

## **Appendix 2: Social vulnerabilities in Cairns**

Please see Excel attachment “Appendix 2 - Social vulnerability indicators” for the analysis of 25 social vulnerability indicators across Cairns LGA and the 11 place-based resilience catchments.

## **Appendix 3: Strategic and policy context**

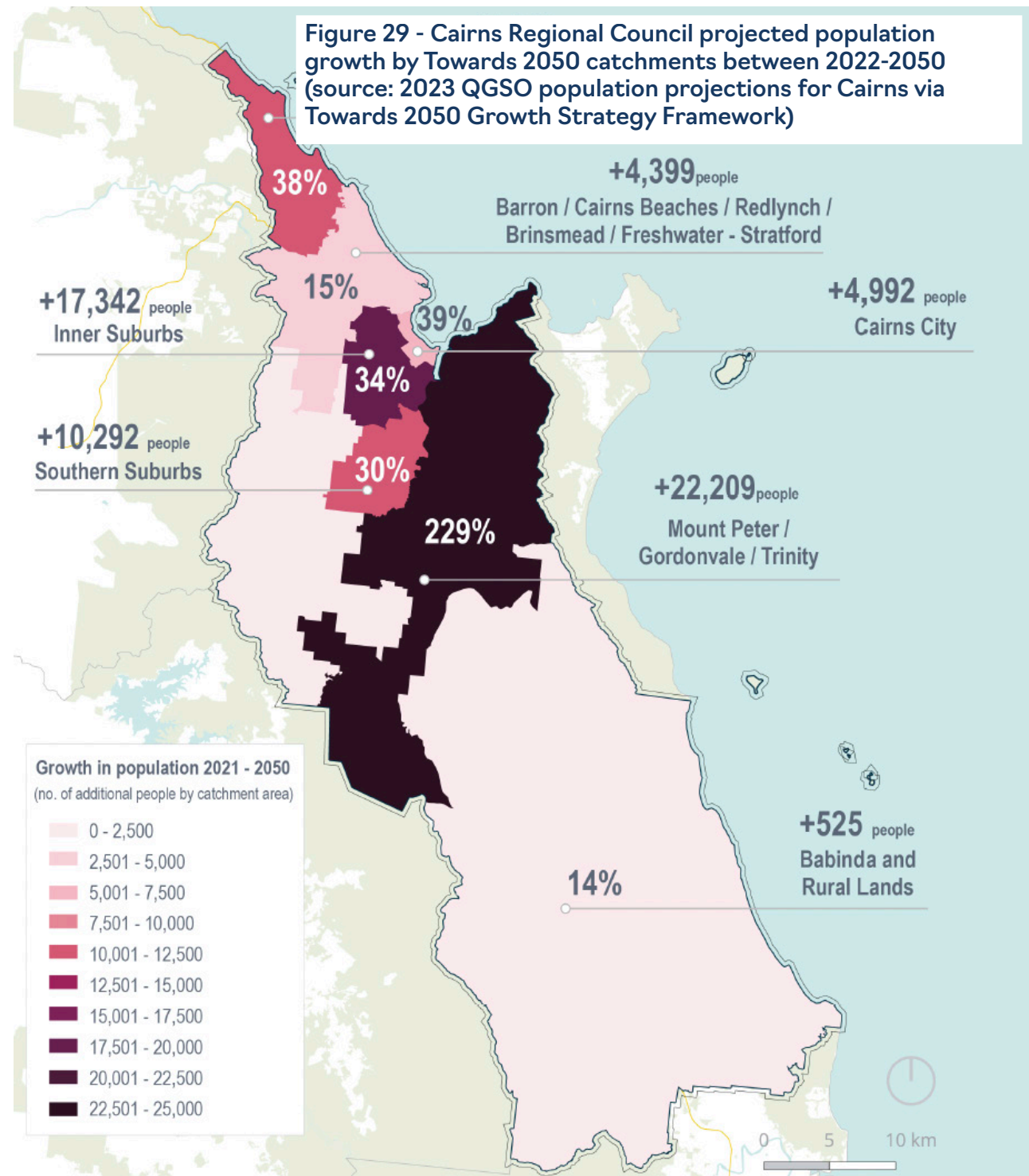
Please see Excel attachment “Appendix 3 – Strategic and policy context” for the analysis of regional and local documents relevant to social resilience.

## **Appendix 4: Social assets audit**

Please see Excel attachment “Appendix 4 – Social assets audit” for the social assets audit.

## Appendix 5: Cairns Regional Council projected population growth

As shown in Figure 29, taken from the Towards 2050 Growth Strategy Framework, growth will be higher in some catchments.



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