



HALT Collective - Unborn Children

A Promising Practice Case Study



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Preamble

The HALT Collective is a collaborative community-led response to the ongoing over-representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people living in the Brisbane District in the child protection system.

In 2022, the story of development and the significant outcomes achieved, guided by Elders and secured through strong collaborative partnerships, was captured through a promising practice case study ([HALT Collective: A Promising Practice Case Study - QATSICPP](#)). It was a story of cultural respect and how children and families can be kept safe when Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledge drives child protection processes.

This Case Study continues the HALT Collective story. It focusses on the journey undertaken to keeping children and families safe, specifically for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander pregnant women, residing in the Brisbane District, where there was reasonable suspicion that an unborn child might be in need of protection once born.

The success of the initial pilot project and establishment of a process that meets both legislative requirements and families' needs has been significant and extremely hard fought for. The outcomes provide a compelling story.

It is important to acknowledge all those from across the system and sector who - in partnership - never gave up or gave in when it seemed the challenges to change were insurmountable. It is important to acknowledge their willingness to tell this story.

Most importantly, this Case Study acknowledges the Elders, who almost a decade ago had the courage to say "enough". Their grace, patience and wisdom led to a better way.

1. Back to the beginning of the story

"HALT is crucial, and it is hard to imagine life without it because of the difference community-led makes"

The first official HALT Collective meeting was held on December 6th 2018 at Kurbingui Youth and Family Development. Defined as a collaborative Brisbane district community-led response to address the

over-representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families in the child protection system, the collaborative partnership soon demonstrated how families could secure better outcomes when cultural knowledge was embedded in the Intake process.

The name 'HALT' was chosen since the notion of slowing down the Intake process was core to the work of the HALT Collective. For the HALT Collective, the term also points to the broader aim of stopping Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people entering the tertiary child protection system.

As the HALT Collective has become more established, and the partnerships have become more trusting and stronger, it has successfully embedded the core elements of the *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Placement Principle* into its practice. Over the last five years the HALT Collective has grown in strength, membership and impact.

Since the early development and establishment of the HALT Collective, the aim has remained the same: to slow down the intake process and place trusting, collaborative relationships with partners at the core of the process, to improve information sharing and have an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural lens at the heart of actions and decision making.

As stated in the HALT Collective Terms of Reference, the Collective envisions a future where Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people grow up safe, nurtured, and connected to their family, community, and culture. Guided by the wisdom and accountability of Community Elders, they are committed to embedding a culturally informed, community-led approach at every stage of the intake process.

The HALT Collective's vision is to ensure that decisions are made through a cultural lens, informed by meaningful consultation and collaboration with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families, Elders, and community partners. By slowing down the intake process, fostering strong partnerships, and prioritising cultural advice, they aim to provide the right service at the right time, reducing the over-representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in the child protection system.

Aligned with the principles of self-determination, human rights, and the legislative frameworks of the *Child Protection Act 1999* and the *Human Rights Act 2019*, the HALT Collective strive to uphold the values of prevention, partnership, connection, participation, and placement. Together, Collective members are committed to continue to build trust, strengthen relationships, and ensure that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander voices remain central to decision-making, intervention, and support for families.

Keeping culture at the heart of every decision, the HALT Collective are committed to walking alongside our communities to create a safer, stronger future for our children and young people.

Importantly one of the shared values for the HALT Collective is to provide a culturally safe and supportive response to pregnant women where there is a reasonable suspicion that an unborn child will be in need of protection once born.

The Collective has the following core members who work in partnership together:

- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Community Health Service Brisbane (ATSICHS) – Family Wellbeing, Intensive Family Support Program and Family Participation Program.
- Kurbingui – Family Wellbeing
- Kummara – Family Wellbeing
- Indigenous Family & Child Connect /FaCC
- Institute of Urban Indigenous Health (IUIH) – Birthing in Our Community (BIOC)
- Kummara - Infinity
- Child Safety Brisbane District
- Brisbane and Moreton Bay (BMB) Quality Practice Team

- The Child Safety Brisbane and Moreton Bay (BMB) Quality Practice Team including all members of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Intake Team, the BMB RIS Senior Practitioner (for complex cases), and Child Safety Officers who may be presenting at HALT
- Child Safety After Hours Team.

From time-to-time the Collective invites other guests on a case-by-case basis. This has included Yulu-Burri-Ba Family Wellbeing, Kambu Family Well-Being, Kummara Family Wellbeing Southwest, Murri School Family Wellbeing (Acacia Ridge), CYMHS Inala – Indigenous Workers and Indigenous Liaison Officers from Education, Police and Housing as well as representatives from Youth Justice and Corrections.

Through the ongoing engagement of Elders, and with their wisdom embedded within the practice, the vision and success of the HALT Collective has been maintained.

2. The beginning of the Unborn Children Pilot Project

Almost from the very beginning the HALT Collective held concerns and conversations about what a more culturally safe and supportive response would be for the recording of an Intake and/or Assessment for pregnant women, particularly where there is reasonable suspicion that an unborn Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander child may be in need of protection once born.

The unborn children pilot emphasised the importance of an enabling and authorising environment to support and advocate for community-led [approach]

At the time there was significant discomfort with statutory involvement in the lives of pregnant women before birth and a shared belief by all partners that the system was failing Aboriginal and Torres Strait

Islander mothers.

Leaders reflected on the challenges faced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander populations in the region associated with disconnection from Country, community, and kin networks. They felt strongly that standardised statewide policy fails to recognise these challenges, demanding locally adaptable models that respect context and community composition.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families, leaders and organisations repeatedly emphasised the sacred time of birth and the trauma caused by the removal of children from their mothers at birth. As conversations deepened, honouring the sacredness of mother–baby bonding and ensuring that removals following birth happen only in *exceptional circumstances* became a primary focus. This began to shift the way success was defined. Partners recognised that for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women (indeed all women) childbirth carries spiritual, cultural, and emotional weight and as such,

must be approached with deep cultural respect and planning.

“The system was inadequate and did not recognise the precious moments of pregnancy. It was a system disrespectful of the parenting journey and when talking to Elders and leaders we started to think differently about what success looks like”

Critically the 2021 Operational Performance Review identified that the further an Aboriginal and / or Torres Strait Islander child went into the child protection process, the greater the over-

representation and the more likely the child will stay longer in the system. Confronting this data was a major catalyst for addressing the systemic failure directly by focusing on change from the *first point of contact*. For many within the Department the project “*became a moral imperative as much as a policy one, to act on the values of justice, respect, and truth-telling*”.

Conversations continually came back to the HALT Collective, being a place where there was already a successful model with trusted community controlled organisations delivering improved child protection outcomes for families in partnership with the Department.

At this time, the legislative framework did not permit the recoding of a ‘No Outcome’ for an assessment for pregnant women where there was reasonable suspicion that an unborn child may be in need of protection once

It provides an opportunity for families to be seen, heard, valued, supported, empowered to believe in their strengths and step into a healing journey together and continue together”

born. Those advocating within the Department now look back and describe persistent policy and legislative hurdles and internal concerns based most often on fear and misunderstanding. There was also frustration that policy and procedures were treated as law, preventing flexibility or innovation.

Within this environment, the team worked collaboratively, operating within legislation but taking a broad view of policy. It is credit to those who never gave up and advocated with evidence, passion and managed risk for better outcomes. Through continued advocacy over a prolonged period, approval for exceptions was finally signed off by the then Director-General through a Submission for Approval in January 2023. This approval revealed how rigid bureaucracy resists and does not easily enable community-led reform.

The then Director-General approval applied to Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander pregnant women in the Brisbane District and allowed for the recording of a ‘No Outcome’ following a six-week Cultural Safety and Support Response that has been recommended by the HALT Collective.

Critical to success of the program and in securing the approval from the Director-General was the recruitment of a Principal Program Officer (PPO). The PPO supported the HALT Pilot Program and since their appointment has continued to provide essential practice and service delivery support for the HALT Collective. This has ensured the successful integration of the pilot program into the HALT Collective’s broader remit.

3. From a successful pilot program to a permanent support pathway

Foundational to establishing the HALT Unborn Children Pilot Project was sustained trust within the HALT Collective and between community leaders and Departmental staff. Indeed, strong regional leadership created a safe space for innovation, allowing staff to hold risk, test ideas, and work relationally with community. The model sought to prioritise collaboration and early support.

Commencing in January 2023, the pilot project aimed to provide culturally safe and community-led support, ensuring early intervention and addressing concerns in a way that honours cultural identity and maintaining and strengthens family connections.

"It's been about humility and hearing stories and allows us to protect our mums, sisters, grandparents ... and it replaces Child Safety at the bedside with family and kin"

This approach led to significant positive outcomes, including improved access to culturally appropriate services for pregnant mothers, partnering with families to support stable and supportive family environments, and a reduction in risk factors.

The delivery of a Cultural Safety and Support Response is embedded within the legislative framework of the *Child Protection Act 1999* and *Human Rights Act 2019*.

The specific clauses in the *Child Protection Act 1999* refer to:

- Section 5C asserts the right for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders to self-determination
- Section 22(2b) allows the Chief Executive to take appropriate action, including offering help and support to pregnant women if there is reasonable suspicion that the child once born, will be in need of protection
- Section 22 enables the Chief Executive to arrange for an independent Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander entity for the child to facilitate the participation of the pregnant woman and child's families in these matters
- Section 14(1b) allows for the Chief Executive to take appropriate action should there be a reasonable suspicion that the child is in need of protection. This section is invoked if there are older siblings recorded alongside the unborn child in a Notification.

Within the *Human Rights Act 2019* the specific clauses are:

- Section 26 asserts protection of families and children and their cultural rights generally
- Section 27 emphasises that persons with a particular cultural, religious, racial or linguistic background must not be denied the right, in community with other persons of that background, to enjoy their culture, to declare and practise their religion and to use their language
- Section 28 details the Cultural rights of Aboriginal peoples and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

Between January 2023 - November 2023, the HALT Collective embedded the Unborn Children Pilot Project within its framework and processes, ensuring that cultural safety and support responses provided by agencies were guided by the principles of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Placement Principle. The HALT Collective formally requested that the HALT Unborn Children Pilot Project be established as a permanent support pathway for pregnant women and their unborn bubs, in November 2023 as a result of the emerging positive outcomes already being demonstrated.

The HALT Collective Unborn children practice model is outlined in Figure 1.

The HALT Collective Unborn Practice Model

All unborn referrals within the Brisbane District for women and their unborn children who identify as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander will be referred to the HALT Collective.



An exception applies prior to a referral being sent to HALT. Child Safety Officers from the Brisbane and Moreton Bay Regional Intake Team will conduct a pre-notification check with relevant agencies to confirm whether a mother is already receiving support from the community.



In cases where the mother is being supported by a community agency that partners with HALT, the agency's advice on whether the referral still needs to be presented at HALT will be considered as part of the assessment process. This approach supports a community-led response.



When supporting unborn matters screened as a Standard Support Response, the Collective will consider providing a Cultural Safety and Support Response to collaborate with a pregnant mother and their family, aiming to enhance the safety and wellbeing of their child upon birth, including any siblings. They will also assess whether the risk has decreased and if the child safety concerns have been resolved during this period. If the concerns are resolved, no further involvement from the department will be necessary.



If the risk remains high or the HALT Collective has been unable to engage with the pregnant mother and their family to provide a response they will follow standard reporting procedures and communicate their concerns to the Brisbane and Moreton Bay Regional Intake Team. This will enable further assessment of the safety and support needs to take place.



If a matter is further assessed by Brisbane and Moreton Bay Regional Intake Team and a Priority or Standard Response is screened for additional assessment to understand the safety and support needs of a child, it will be requested that the allocated Child Safety Service Centre conducts a consultation with a Cultural Practice Advisor and completes a referral to the Family Participation Program.



A Cultural Practice Advisor will provide cultural advice and assistance when the Collective determines that the risk is too high for community support to be provided. This will ensure that the allocated Child Safety Service Centre can respond promptly to support the best possible outcomes for pregnant women and her child/ren. The Cultural Practice Advisor's role includes advocating for a timely response, while maintaining partnerships with the involved agencies.

Figure 1: HALT Collective Unborn Children Practice Model

Further, in November 2024 the Department worked closely with the HALT Collective to understand how best to embed the upcoming Enhanced Intake and Assessment Approach (EIAA) within HALT processes, ensuring the continuation of an early response and cultural support for pregnant mothers and their unborn children. Numerous sessions were held with the HALT Collective to discuss and refine this approach, alongside high-level consultation with the Department's Chief Practitioner's Office and Statewide Operations Team.

Through the partnership and support of BMB RIS and the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Intake Team (appointed in June 2025), arrangements were made to ensure that the HALT Collective can continue partnering with pregnant mothers and their families while meeting the requirements of the EIAA. With the introduction

"If we don't listen and the family don't decide, they can't develop and own their story. We would be imposing our story on them and then they will tell us to fly that kite elsewhere"

of the EIAA during April 2025, the HALT Collective continues to strengthen its efforts in supporting pregnant mothers and their children by delivering a tailored Safety and Support Response, building on its commitment to early intervention and culturally safe practices and ensuring that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families receive the support they need in a timely and respectful manner.

4. Outcomes Achieved

Outcomes reporting for the HALT Collective has previously shown the benefits a culturally sensitive and community-led response can have for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families.

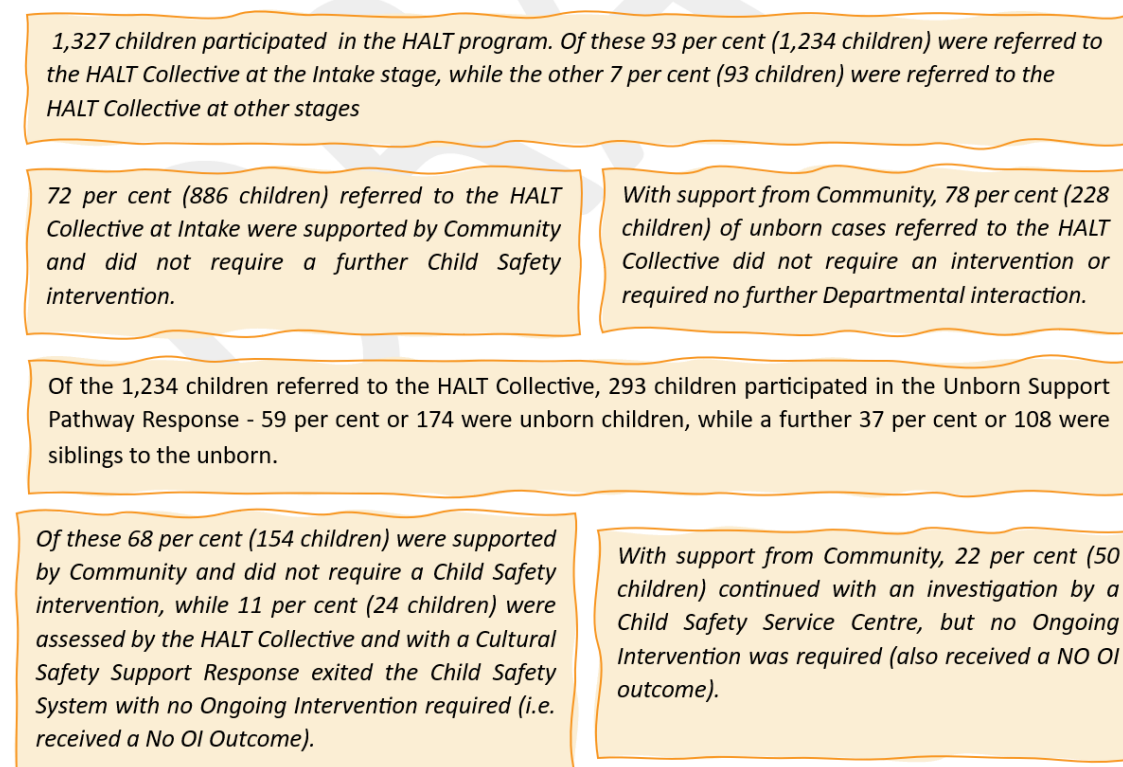


Figure 2: HALT Outcomes 2022-2025

While the data speaks for itself, the numbers do not tell the full story of the impact of what is being achieved. The Cultural Safety and Support Response has reduced hospital removals. However, it has critically increased culturally safe outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander mothers and babies. This has led women and families to have, in part or fully, the joy of childbirth and enabled them to experience the sacredness of the experience – culturally, emotionally, physically and spiritually. Such is the level of trust and confidence in the HALT Unborn children process, some Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women have moved to Brisbane to access HALT Collective support. This is a clear sign of its community credibility and reputation for respectful engagement.

A further outcome is the genuine demonstration and effects of community-led practice and self-determination. There are practical, policy and even legislative shifts in power where more control is given to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. The approach challenges historical power imbalances and promotes shared decision-making between government and community – as partners. Trust is increasing – in places where there was none prior to establishing the unborn children support program.

“The HALT Unborn children process slows things down at one level and allows time for consensus in decision-making and true engagement. It allows time for community partners to do their work, but community support services can commence straight away”

There is clear and intentional emphasis placed on self-determination, with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander practitioners and agencies guiding decision-making with and for their own families. It is a profound example of how government and community can work in *true partnership*, co-designing responses rather than imposing them. Practitioners report a shift in culture within the Department characterised by

greater humility, understanding, and modelling of cultural safety.

Practitioners stress that cultural connection is essential to effective practice and understanding the intergenerational trauma experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families through forced removals and mission histories is critical to how services respond – and therefore the outcomes being achieved. The services have embedded cultural healing and spiritual wellbeing in practice and each case brought to the HALT Collective is considered through this lens. The Cultural Safety and Support Response recognises that cultural safety must be ongoing rather than tokenistic, and it’s important to acknowledge the continued need for investment in culturally grounded healing programs.

An important outcome achieved through the development, piloting and establishment of the unborn children program is that it has provided a model for system reform, demonstrating how culturally informed, community-led practice can reduce overrepresentation in the child protection system. There are calls to expand HALT statewide, adapt it for other regions, and embed its principles within legislation and policy. Meaningful system reform can only occur with sustained investment. Alternatively, scaling the model would require dedicated funding to ensure communities are properly supported to lead this work.

“The way notifications are presented has evolved. With the CSOs there has been a change in thinking from problems to solutions and circumstances are now pulled through a trauma and healing lens.”

Enablers to these outcomes have included a focus on preventative as an alternative to statutory intervention. By engaging early with families, cultural practitioners, and health services, HALT helps avoid last-minute or crisis-driven removals at birth. Each of the *228 unborn children and their unborn siblings that did not require an intervention or required no further Departmental interaction is a baby that remained safely with mother and kin at one of the most vital times in a child's life, through early, culturally supported planning.*

'Slowing things down' remains the HALT Collective's defining principle and a key enabler to achieving positive outcomes. In contrast to the fast-paced, risk-driven nature of statutory child protection work, allowing practitioners to pause, gather fuller information, and involve community before decisions are made often prevents unnecessary notifications, reduces trauma, and leads to *better outcomes for families.*

Feedback from all stakeholders involved highlights how partnerships between departmental staff, community-controlled organisations, and Cultural Practice Advisors are key to success. Information sharing across agencies ensures decisions are informed by local knowledge and prevents duplication or inappropriate referrals.

"Community will tell us if they are worried and when we give information to community, they will let us know what to do"

Practitioners suggest that relationships of trust and mutual respect make this collaboration possible and in a cyclical manner then further reinforce and strengthen trust and respect.

Finally, the HALT Collective expresses a shared vision of keeping children connected to family, culture, and community. The work with unborn children is seen not just as a program, but a philosophy of practice grounded in respect, reflection, and relational accountability. It is the aspiration of the HALT Collective that the model will inspire broader systemic change and become embedded in everyday child protection practice across Queensland and beyond.

5. Upholding the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Placement Principle

The HALT Collective specifically aims to address over-representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people in the child protection system. It seeks to do this in a way that upholds and is aligned with the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Placement Principle (ATSICPP) by:

- Ensuring culture underpins and is integral to safety and wellbeing for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and is embedded in policy and practice.
- Recognising and protecting the rights of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, family members and communities in child welfare matters.
- Increasing the level of self-determination of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in child welfare matters.

Across the five elements of the ATSICPP, the HALT Collective offers evidence of how agencies can activate these elements for best impact. SNAICC (2019) further identifies research that demonstrates

that family support services are most impactful when programs incorporate cultural knowledge and are focused on the strengths of families.

This HALT Collective Unborn Children Promising Practice Case Study specifically meets the five elements of the Child Placement Principle.

Prevention: Early, culturally informed intervention

The HALT Collective's founding purpose to slow down the intake process and ensure culturally appropriate responses for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families embodies the *prevention* element of the ATSICPP. Rather than waiting until statutory thresholds are met, HALT intervenes early, at the first point of contact, to keep children safely with their families. The Unborn Children Pilot Project extends this prevention focus even further, providing structured support to pregnant Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women where there is suspicion an unborn child may be at risk.

"What is happening is that we have a process now that is respectful of the parenting journey and honours the experience of birthing and ensuring Mum and bub has a really good start"

By embedding early intervention within a *Cultural Safety and Support Response*, HALT prioritises healing and strengthening family capacity. Its practice model reframes pregnancy as a sacred time rather than a time of surveillance, recognising that intrusive involvement during pregnancy compounds trauma. Elders' leadership and the integration of

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledge have redirected departmental practice away from crisis-driven removals toward culturally grounded prevention strategies.

Evidence of effectiveness is clear in the outcomes reported earlier where each figure represents a prevention success where families strengthened before harm occurred.

HALT also prevents harm at the systemic level. By challenging rigid policy interpretations and promoting legislative flexibility (e.g., approvals for 'No Outcome' under Section 22 of the *Child Protection Act 1999*), the HALT Collective demonstrates how prevention can be embedded structurally. This approach aligns directly with the ATSICPP's expectation that governments invest in early, community-led services that stop unnecessary child removals.

Partnership: Shared decision-making and co-design

The *partnership* principle is the foundation stone of HALT Collective's governance and practice. It is a community-led collaboration between community-controlled organisations (ATSICHS, Kurbingui, Kummara, IUIH and others) and the Department of Families, Child Safety. From its inception in 2018, HALT has operated as a shared decision-making forum, guided by Elders and sustained through regional leadership that values Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledge as central to good practice.

The structure ensures that Departmental staff do not act in isolation: each referral is discussed collectively, cultural advice is embedded in decisions, and community partners co-design responses. The presence of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Cultural Practice Advisors and the active inclusion of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Intake Team exemplify genuine partnership rather than consultation after the fact.

"We have something where there was nothing and now Mums can keep their babies. All that was needed was early intervention with no judgement and they keep their little ones"

Importantly, the HALT Collective demonstrates *power-sharing*. The approval of the Unborn Pilot Project, achieved through joint advocacy, marks a shift in control from government to community. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leaders and practitioners framed the problem, developed the solution, and negotiated the policy change. Practitioners describe this as *"a profound example of how government and community can work in true partnership, co-designing responses rather than imposing them."*

Such relational partnership is cyclical: trust between agencies enables open information sharing, which leads to better decisions, which in turn deepens trust. HALT's success shows that when Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership directs design and delivery, and where cultural authority is handed over to community, outcomes improve for children, families, and the Department alike.

Placement: Keeping children safe within family, kin, and culture

Although HALT's work focuses primarily on prevention and early intervention, its impact on *placement* outcomes is significant. By slowing the intake process and providing culturally appropriate alternatives to statutory action, the HALT Collective ensures that fewer Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children enter care in the first place. For those who do, HALT's collaborative discussions ensure placement decisions are informed by kinship knowledge and cultural advice.

"Through the Unborns and the notification coming through the HALT we have a chance to make a change and even if there is something small, we can work with then let's start with that as it's an opportunity to dig deeper"

The data shows that among unborn children and sibling cases, more than two-thirds of children remained safely with family or kin following cultural safety planning. The HALT Collective commitment to *"valuing the role of both parents"* and holding both equally responsible for care further strengthens family preservation, recognising fathers' importance in maintaining cultural and familial continuity.

Where removal is unavoidable, HALT's structure linking departmental staff with community agencies creates a practical mechanism for ensuring placements comply with the ATSICPP hierarchy (family then kin then community then other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander carers and finally non-Indigenous carers). Its processes model the principle that placement decisions should not occur without Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander oversight or cultural mapping.

In effect, the HALT Collective transforms placement from a bureaucratic outcome into a culturally responsive continuum. By supporting mothers through pregnancy and strengthening kinship networks

before birth, it reduces the need for out-of-home care altogether, aligning with the ATSICPP's highest aspiration: to keep children safe within their own families and cultures.

Participation: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander voices leading decision-making

Participation, being the right of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to be involved in decisions affecting their children, is central to every aspect of the HALT Collective's operation. It is not an advisory committee but an *active decision-making forum* where Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander practitioners, and organisations determine culturally appropriate responses.

Families themselves participate through engagement with Family Participation Programs and culturally safe discussions facilitated by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander practitioners. This ensures that parents are not passive recipients of departmental decisions but collaborators in shaping plans for their children's safety and wellbeing.

The HALT Collective also models participation within the Department. Staff "*immerse [themselves] in cultural discussions,*" receive direct feedback from community, and co-learn alongside Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leaders. This ongoing participation builds departmental cultural capacity and transforms practice from compliance-driven to relational and reflective.

"We strongly work within the Child Placement Principles, and the Department don't need any more to be controlling the space"

The principle is reinforced legislatively through Section 22 of the Child Protection Act 1999, which enables the Chief Executive to arrange an independent Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander entity to facilitate family participation. The HALT Collective operationalises this section in practice: it is the entity through which participation occurs. It's success, illustrated by the Department's later integration of the Enhanced Intake and Assessment Approach (EIAA) in collaboration with the HALT Collective, shows how sustained Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander participation can reform statutory systems from within.

Connection: Sustaining cultural identity and belonging

HALT's guiding philosophy is to keep children connected to family, culture, and community. This mirrors the *connection* element of the ATSICPP. The HALT Collective recognises that safety for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children is inseparable from cultural continuity. By embedding cultural healing, spiritual wellbeing, and respect for the sacredness of birth, the HALT Collective safeguards the relational and spiritual ties that define identity.

Elders' involvement ensures that every decision reflects local cultural authority. The program's success has fostered community confidence so strong that some Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women have relocated to Brisbane specifically to access HALT's culturally safe support. This demonstrates that connection is not abstract but experienced through trusted relationships and the ability to raise children safely within culture.

"We have families and parents saying, "I have never known who I am" and I say, "Well I can't wait to see who you are" and HALT Unborns allows us to focus on potential. We often say, "just imagine what can be..." and then we build on the strengths"

The HALT Collective also addresses intergenerational trauma and the legacy of forced removals. Practitioners emphasise the need to understand these histories to respond effectively, and the HALT Collective's processes explicitly counteract historical disconnection. By replacing crisis removals with culturally supported birth planning, HALT restores what colonisation disrupted: the continuity of motherhood, kinship, and belonging.

Connection is further reinforced through partnerships with health and wellbeing services such as the Institute for Urban Indigenous Health's *Birthing in Our Community* program, ensuring that care extends beyond statutory boundaries into holistic cultural health networks. This integration of cultural, emotional, and physical safety exemplifies the ATSI CPP's intent to keep children grounded in identity and community.

In conclusion, across all five elements, the HALT Collective demonstrates excellent alignment with the ATSI CPP. It prevents unnecessary removals through early cultural intervention; embeds partnership and redefines power between government and community; ensures placements are culturally appropriate and family-centred; empowers Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander participation at critical decision-making moments; and sustains lifelong cultural connection for children and families.

Reduced hospital removals, increased family preservation, and improved departmental cultural capability demonstrate the potential of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander led reform. The HALT Collective's approach moves beyond compliance to embodiment and shows that when Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledge leads, systems transform. Its success suggests that statewide expansion might mean the principles of prevention, partnership, placement, participation, and connection could become the everyday reality for all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in Queensland.

6. Key Messages

The HALT Collective's development and evolution offer several lessons on how to embed Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership, knowledge, and values at the centre of child protection practice. Its success in reforming responses to unborn children and early child protection cases demonstrates not only what works, but how culturally grounded partnerships can shift systems that have historically failed Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families.

Community-led reform must drive systemic change

One of the most important learnings is that *systemic change begins with community leadership*. The HALT Collective emerged because Elders and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leaders refused to accept ongoing over-representation of their children in the child protection system. Their insistence on self-determination reframed departmental thinking from risk management to cultural healing and family preservation. The case study shows that enduring reform cannot be externally imposed or bureaucratically engineered. It must grow from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander worldviews, with government playing a supportive rather than directive role.

Trusting partnerships are the foundation of success

Trust takes time, courage, and consistency. The HALT Collective's progress depended on respectful, relational partnerships between community-controlled organisations and departmental staff. Early resistance, fear of policy breaches, and bureaucratic rigidity nearly stalled reform. It was only through sustained relationship-building, honesty, and shared moral commitment that the model took root.

The appointment of a dedicated Principal Program Officer, ongoing Elder guidance, and consistent community participation built confidence in the process and demonstrated that trust must be actively maintained, not assumed. These stores of trust were enablers to establishing the Unborn Children Pilot Project and embedding the practice into the HALT Collective

Cultural safety transforms outcomes

The Cultural Safety and Support Response reinforced that *cultural safety is not an adjunct to practice, it is the practice*. Culturally safe engagement enabled pregnant Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women to receive support rather than surveillance, and families to experience childbirth as a sacred, empowering moment rather than a site of trauma. This approach led to measurable improvements with a clear lesson: embedding cultural safety early prevents crisis later.

Policy flexibility and courageous leadership enable innovation

A critical learning concerns the importance of courage within bureaucracy. The HALT Collective operated whereby policy interpretation could strengthen opportunities for innovation. Persistent advocacy eventually led to the Director-General's approval of a 'No Outcome' for unborn children. This was an historic shift allowing culturally-led intervention before birth. The lesson is that meaningful reform requires leaders willing to challenge rigid systems, reinterpret policy, and hold risk in pursuit of justice and better outcomes.

Slowing processes improves decision-making

The HALT Collective embodies a vital lesson. Slowing down creates space for better, culturally informed decisions. By pausing at intake, gathering holistic information, and requiring community advice, practitioners were able to make informed choices that avoided unnecessary escalation. This intentional slowing countered the reactive, fear-based culture of statutory work and demonstrated that time invested in understanding families saves trauma and resources later.

"We give permission to our staff to slow things down for our families and communities. 'slowing it down' is now part of our language"

Embedding cultural connection sustains long-term impact

Finally, the HALT Collective model demonstrates that success must be measured not only by reduced interventions but by strengthened *connection* to family, culture, and identity. The HALT Collective's inclusion of Elders, use of local cultural authority, and collaboration with programs such as Birthing in Our Community show that enduring change requires merging cultural continuity into every stage of service delivery.

With that, challenges remain. Continued barriers to progress that include rigid legislation, high caseloads, limited resources, and lack of training for new staff. There are also concerns about inconsistent practice between regions and the need for more education and cultural humility across the workforce. Participants advocate for systemic accountability to ensure the HALT Collective principles are sustained rather than dependent on individual goodwill.

In sum, the HALT Collective teaches that cultural knowledge is not supplementary to child protection but that it is essential to it. Sustainable reform depends on it being Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander led, relational trust, and bureaucratic bravery. By embedding these lessons across Queensland's systems, the state can continue to move from reactive intervention toward genuine partnership and prevention, ensuring that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children remain safely and proudly connected to family, culture, and Country.

"What we do here is revolutionary yet deeply human. We are rebalancing of power between government and community, with healing, trust, and cultural continuity at its core."



**Queensland Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander
Child Protection Peak Limited**

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