

# **Asthma Australia 2025-26 Queensland Pre-Budget Submission**

**February 2025**

## Budget Proposals

Asthma Australia’s submission focuses on the following funding proposals for consideration in the 2025-26 Queensland Budget:

Proposal	Investment
1. Increasing access to local air quality information	Expand the air quality sensor network to ensure Queensland communities have access to air quality information. Costs to be determined in consultation with agencies responsible for air quality monitoring.
2. Supporting people with asthma on low incomes to install cleaner and more efficient forms of heating, cooling and cooking in their homes	Introduce a financial support program for low-income households to replace inefficient methods of household heating and cooking to address indoor and outdoor air quality.
3. Develop and implement a housing, health and environment strategy	The Queensland Government invest in developing and implementing a health, housing and environment strategy to provide direction for responsible departments to work together across portfolios. This to ensure government investment creates new homes that are climate resilient, healthy and affordable for people to live in.

## About Asthma Australia

Asthma is a respiratory condition that affects 2.8 million people in Australia, with children being the most impacted. Asthma is responsible for at least one Australian death every day, making it a serious health concern. Despite the prevalence of asthma, it is often misunderstood, causing fear and anxiety for those living with the condition. Asthma Australia has been the leading charity for people with asthma and their communities for over 60 years.

The challenges of climate change, unhealthy air, and health inequity make it more important than ever for people with asthma to have a voice. We search for new and progressive approaches to challenge the status quo. Our work is grounded in evidence and centred on the experiences of people affected by asthma. We believe by listening to those living with asthma, designing solutions with them, and influencing change, people with asthma can live freely, unrestricted by their asthma.

## Asthma in Queensland

Asthma is a chronic respiratory condition affecting 11.4% of the population in Queensland, or approximately 591,700 people.<sup>1</sup> In 2024, asthma was the 8th leading contributor to the overall burden of disease in Australia, having risen from 10<sup>th</sup> place in 2003.<sup>2</sup> Asthma is the leading cause of total burden of disease in children aged 1–9 years.<sup>3</sup>

Asthma places a significant burden on the hospital system. Nationally, in 2023-24, there were approximately 92,000 presentations to public hospital emergency departments (EDs) with asthma. About 44,000 (48%) were admitted, including admission in the ED or admission to a hospital ward, and 48% were triaged as

urgent.<sup>4</sup> On average, an ED presentation for asthma costs \$443,<sup>5</sup> and repeated asthma-related presentations to EDs increase the risk of hospitalisation.<sup>6</sup> In 2021-22, Queensland had 6,092 potentially preventable hospitalisations for asthma. This was the second highest, just behind New South Wales and ahead of Victoria which both have substantially larger populations than Queensland.<sup>7</sup>

A concern for Queensland is the number of people with asthma who have died, with a significant increase in the number of deaths in 2022.<sup>8</sup> Queensland had increased deaths even compared to before the COVID-19 pandemic. There were 89 deaths in Qld in 2022, representing a 21% increase compared to pre-pandemic (average 2016-2019), and an 82% increase compared to 2021. The death rate in Australia decreased during pandemic measures and was at 0.8 per 100,000 people in Queensland in 2021 (compared to 1.0 for Australia). It rebounded back to pre-pandemic levels in 2022, at 1.3 per 100,000 people for Queensland and Australia in general. For Queensland in 2022, the death rate increased by 63% compared to 2021.<sup>9</sup> This is a significant concern to Asthma Australia as asthma deaths and hospitalisations are largely, if not entirely, preventable.

## **Asthma Australia's work in Queensland**

Asthma Australia acknowledges the ongoing support from the Queensland Government for Asthma Australia's work. The funding Asthma Australia receives from the Queensland Government has enabled Asthma Australia to deliver a range of programs and activities to improve the health and wellbeing of people with asthma in Queensland. This includes telephone and digital education, and support services and online training for healthcare professionals.

Asthma Australia has invested in understanding the impact of our work to demonstrate the value of these services. From a sample size of 1698 consumers using our services:

- 84% reported they had and adhered to their preventer medication, compared to 48% of the general population of adults with asthma.
- 72% reported they had seen their healthcare professional for a planned asthma review in the last 12 months compared to 60% of the general population of adults with asthma.
- 65% reported they had a flare up requiring medical intervention in the last 12 months compared to 53% of the general population of adults with asthma

As a condition that can be well managed in most people, the continuing investment in education on self-management is vital to empower people to manage their asthma and reduce the demand on health services.

## **Queensland Budget Priority Areas**

It is clear from the significant increase in the number of asthma deaths in 2022 in Queensland, that ongoing investment is required and that there is more work that can be done. Improved asthma management reduces preventable hospital admissions, the cost burden to the health care system, absenteeism and lost productivity, and improves people's quality of life.

Asthma Australia has a proven track record of delivering services to the Queensland community. Asthma Australia looks forward to working with the Queensland Government to ensure people with asthma and communities across Queensland benefit from Asthma Australia's programs and support, and to being an ongoing part of health service delivery in Queensland.

With the 2025-26 Pre-Budget submission, Asthma Australia is highlighting the impact of air quality and healthy homes on improving the lives of people with asthma. In a cost-of-living crisis, ensuring people's homes are energy efficient has health benefits along with reducing the cost of cooling and heating.

The importance of respiratory health has been highlighted through various challenges across Australia including the COVID-19 pandemic, the 2022 floods and the 2019-20 bushfire crisis, in which 80% of the population was exposed to smoke pollution.<sup>10</sup> Floods in particular represent a significant challenge for Queensland. Climate change-driven conditions that impact people's health are increasing and investing in measures that improve the safety of people's homes and gives them access to reliable air quality information, will not only assist people but save lives.

Addressing air pollution is a strategic priority for Asthma Australia, as even low levels of air pollution are associated with asthma exacerbations and hospitalisations. Certain pollutants can also increase the risk of developing asthma. Ensuring we are addressing asthma risk factors and giving people the tools to make lasting changes to live healthy lives is vital. It is particularly important to ensure people with asthma on low incomes receive the support they need to live in healthy home environments.

As extreme weather events increasingly drive people to seek refuge in their homes, housing conditions and the absence or removal of internal health triggers become ever more important. Homes utilising efficient and healthy forms of energy can help improve both indoor and outdoor air quality, contribute to climate change mitigation, and address cost of living pressures. This includes new homes being built through investment by governments, and will ensure the aspects of health, the environment and housing are being linked to achieve the maximum benefits of this investment.

## Priority 1: Increasing access to local air quality information

A key finding from the Federal Government's 2021 State of the Environment report was that better information could reduce the impact of poor air quality.<sup>11</sup> The report recognised that communities need real-time, local air quality information during periods of poor air quality.

However, many communities around Queensland do not have access to local air quality information because there are not enough air quality monitoring stations. Regional and rural populations commonly lack local air quality monitoring facilities, which can be particularly problematic during bushfires if people in these communities are disproportionately affected by smoke from nearby fires. However, even in metropolitan areas, air quality monitoring stations span many suburbs, meaning localised peaks of air pollution are neither detected nor reported on.

Air quality monitoring stations provide highly accurate information however, they require suitable locations and can be expensive to establish and run. In contrast, low-cost air quality sensors provide air quality data at a good level of accuracy and have been included as a part of the air quality monitoring network in Queensland. Additionally, there is more flexibility in placement as the sensors can be affixed to premises such as schools or council buildings. Some sensors require a data connection while others have built in communications. The need for access to air quality information and guidance will only increase as climate change continues to increase the frequency and severity of events causing poor air quality.

Responsibility for air quality is shared by the federal and state and territory governments, with states and territories having prime responsibility for monitoring and managing air quality. All governments are required to help maintain and improve air quality and deliver on actions through the National Clean Air Agreement, which includes as one of four strategic approaches:<sup>12</sup>

**Better knowledge, education and awareness** are essential requirements to inform policy decisions and to help empower communities and individuals to better deal with air pollution. Knowledge, improved through information sharing and research, is critical to plug existing data gaps, identify future trends and help focus efforts in managing air quality, and explore innovative measures to address air pollution. The Agreement's initial work plan also includes a two-year plan for reforms to improve the National Pollutant Inventory.

The National Clean Air Agreement work plan for 2021-23 includes projects on nationally consistent public air quality information and health advice. This project has a framework agreed by jurisdictions and providing guidance on low-cost sensors measuring air pollution to the public.<sup>13</sup>

Air quality sensors can cost as little as \$200 per sensor, meaning that a small investment can have a significant investment not only in recording air quality information, but also in increasing the knowledge in the community and involving them in solutions to address air quality. This information is critical to ensure that people vulnerable to the health impact of air pollution exposure can protect themselves and their families.

Investing in increasing access to local air quality information would act on the recommendations of the State of the Environment Report, as well as progressing the National Clean Air Agreement work plan. This information is critical to ensure that people vulnerable to the health impact of air pollution exposure are able to protect themselves and their families.

**INVESTMENT REQUESTED: Expand the air quality sensor network to ensure Queensland communities have access to air quality information. Costs to be determined in consultation with agencies responsible for air quality monitoring.**

## **Priority 2: Supporting people with asthma on low incomes to install cleaner and more efficient forms of heating, cooling and cooking in their homes**

Replacing gas cooktops, gas heaters, and wood heaters, with efficient, electric alternatives in Queensland will reduce air pollution, improve health outcomes, and reduce greenhouse gas emissions. Gas cooktops and heaters produce a variety of air pollutants, including fine particulate matter, nitrogen dioxide, and carbon monoxide. Similarly, wood heaters produce a range of pollutants that can worsen indoor air quality and wood heater contribute significantly to outdoor air pollution. Exposure to pollution from these gas and wood appliances can trigger asthma flare-ups. Research indicates cooking with gas is responsible for up to 12% of childhood asthma in Australia.<sup>14</sup> People who rent or live in social housing have limited agency to replace their appliances with efficient, electric alternatives, while people on low incomes may face cost barriers.<sup>15</sup>

In 2022, Asthma Australia undertook a nationally representative survey to look at homes, health and asthma in Australia, which was completed by 5,041 people.<sup>16</sup> The survey asked participants about their current practices and preferences for heating their homes and cooking. The most common type of cooking was gas (48%) followed by electric (41%). Only 7% had an induction cooktop or a combination cooktop. While the preferred type of cooktop was gas, regardless of their cooktop preference, most people's preference is based on cooking preferences, ease of cleaning and affordability. Only 15% of respondents cited their cooktop preference was due to health reasons and 14% noted environmental reasons.

The preferred types of heating were reverse cycle air conditioning and central heating, which are the most efficient options and provide the additional benefit of cooling the air in the warmer months. However, 43% of respondents said they do not currently have their preferred form of heating at home. Around one in five respondents regularly used portable electric space heaters, 13% used wood heaters, 8% used flued gas heaters, and 7% used unflued gas heaters. For people who don't have their preferred source of heating, the most common barrier to switching is cost (43%), followed by not owning the home (32%).

Fully electric homes contribute to improved indoor and outdoor air quality, as well as climate change mitigation. Electrification increases energy efficiency and reduces consumer costs compared to gas or wood appliances.<sup>17</sup> Investing in measures that enable people to make their homes more energy efficient in the long term returns on investment to the budget through lessening the need for ongoing rebates and bill assistance, and makes people's homes healthier places to live.

Introducing financial support for low-income households to replace inefficient and polluting methods of household heating and cooking would address health impacts associated with poor indoor and outdoor air quality, assist low-income households to address cost of living pressures and reduce greenhouse gas emissions. This is particularly important for people who are unable to make these changes due to cost or not owning their home. The scheme should include owners of rental properties to encourage them to make these replacements. People on low incomes, living with chronic disease and in living situations where they are unable to make changes themselves, should be prioritised, as they will likely benefit the most from reduced power bills and improved living conditions in their homes.

Most State and Territory Governments have accessed joint funding with the Australian Government to fund programs for low-income households and social housing to improve energy efficiency. The Queensland Government also accessing this joint funding, would enable this investment. The ACT Government allocated \$5.2 million in funding to cover the up-front costs of energy efficiency upgrades and electrification for around 350 low-income households. A similar investment by the Queensland Government could have a significant impact on improving the energy efficiency and costs for low-income households in Queensland.

**INVESTMENT REQUESTED: The Queensland Government introduce a financial support program for low-income households to replace inefficient methods of household heating and cooking to address indoor and outdoor air quality.**

### Priority 3: Develop and implement a housing, health and the environment strategy

A central platform of governments in all jurisdictions in Australia is investing in measures to build new homes and increase social housing. The *Homes for Queenslanders* initiative had the stated aim of building 1 million new homes by 2046, including a substantial increase in social housing. Other aspects include fast tracking updates to local council plans, and housing design standards that simplify approvals and building times. The significant investment in new homes, particularly social housing, provides an opportunity to ensure new homes are climate resilient, healthy, and energy and cost-efficient for people to live in.

Work needs to be done to link initiatives in the health, housing and climate change and environment portfolios, and ensure potential co-benefits are recognised. Government departments and agencies should work collaboratively to maximise investment and impact across these areas.

Housing is an important determinant of health. More than 90% of people's time is spent indoors, mostly inside homes.<sup>18</sup> Homes should provide residents with safe and secure spaces that support their health and wellbeing by providing shelter, sufficient space, healthy indoor air quality, thermal comfort and affordable, efficient, and healthy energy sources. Additionally, homes should be affordable and provide a sense of belonging, security, and privacy.

The importance of housing is increasing as climate change causes hazards that require people to shelter in their homes. Climate adaptation policy should focus on improving housing conditions, particularly for people with asthma and others who are highly vulnerable to climate change impacts. Additionally, electrification of homes and connection to renewable energy sources can improve housing conditions, reduce energy costs, and contribute to climate change mitigation.

Asthma Australia's Housing and Asthma Policy Position Statement recommends all levels of government take action to increase access to healthy and affordable housing which in doing so will reduce asthma risks and contribute to broader health benefits.<sup>19</sup>

By developing a health, housing and environment strategy, the Queensland Government would be a leader in connecting these areas and providing a framework to integrate work across portfolios and departments. Stakeholders in these sectors should inform the development of the strategy and be involved in its implementation.

The significant investment in building new homes across jurisdictions and governments provides an opportunity to ensure these homes are climate resilient, healthy and affordable for people to live in. Queensland can be a leader by developing a housing, health and environment strategy.

**INVESTMENT REQUESTED: The Queensland Government invest in developing and implementing a health, housing and environment strategy to provide direction for responsible departments to work together across portfolios. This to ensure government investment creates new homes that are climate resilient, healthy and affordable for people to live in.**

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