

# Elder Abuse Statistics in Queensland:

Executive Summary 2020–21



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Report prepared by:  
Anna Gillbard and Chez Leggatt-Cook  
UnitingCare

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192 Ann St  
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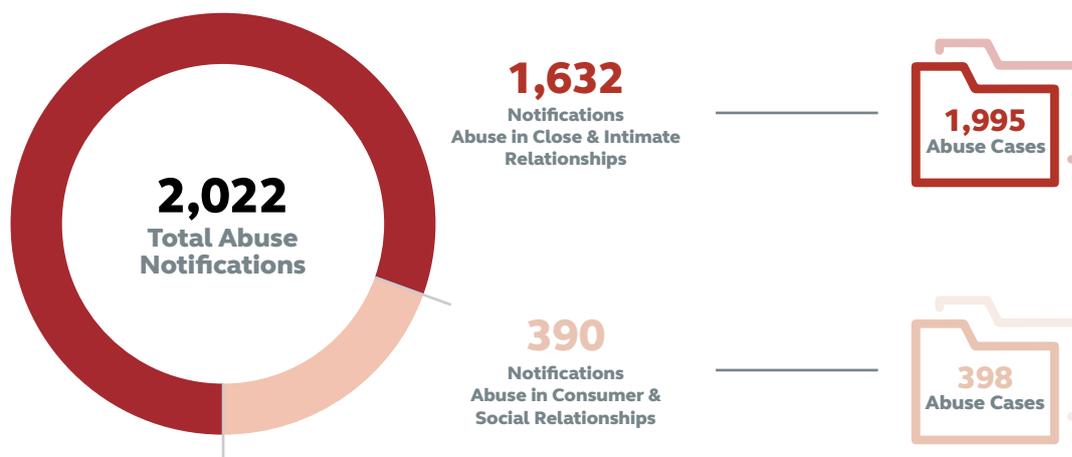
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# Executive Summary

The Elder Abuse Prevention Unit (EAPU) Helpline is funded by the Queensland Department of Seniors, Disability Services and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Partnerships to provide information, support, and referrals to older people and those who witness or suspect that an older person is experiencing abuse or neglect. Helpline staff enter this non-identifiable information into PEARL (Prevention of Elder Abuse Record List), the EAPU's custom-built research database. Data are extracted, analysed, and reported annually. The 2021 report contains a range of descriptive statistics and analyses of Helpline data collected during the 2020-21 financial year.

## Call Data

The Helpline received a total of 3,430 calls during the 2020-21 financial year. This included 2,022 abuse notifications and 1,408 enquiry calls (Figure E1). Ninety-eight notifications (4.8%) involved allegations of abuse against aged care services or workers.

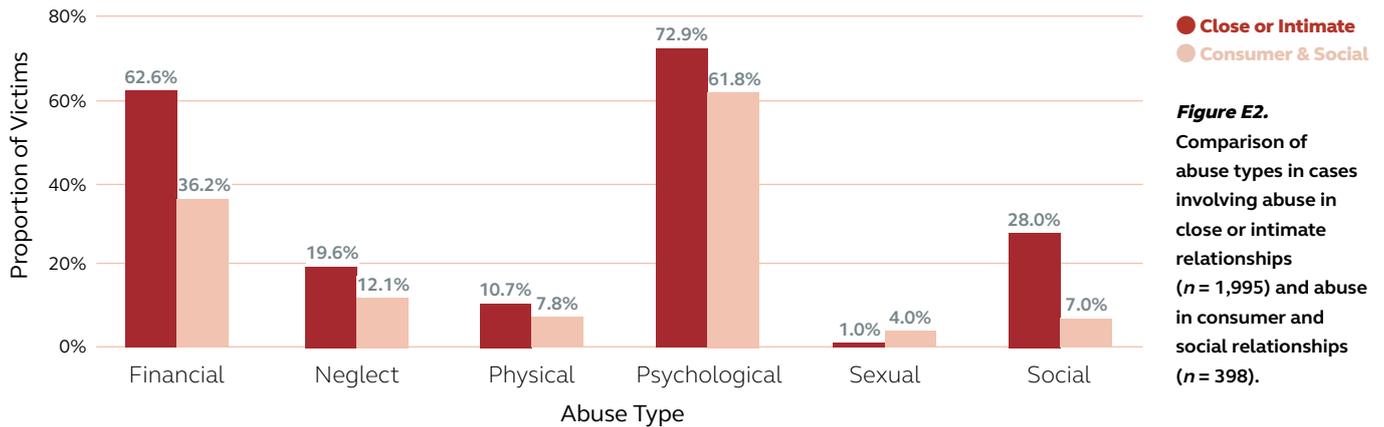


**Figure E1.**  
Notifications received in the 2020-21 financial year.

Compared with the previous year, an additional 488 (31.8%) abuse notifications were received in 2020-21. As reported in the 2019-20 Year in Review report, the number of calls to the Helpline increased sharply in March 2020 and higher than average call volumes were sustained. The largest monthly total on record ( $n = 347$ ) was observed in June 2021. The increase in calls from March 2020 likely relates to the social and economic impacts associated with the COVID-19 pandemic.

Queensland Government campaigns raising awareness of elder abuse were the most frequently recorded referral source in 2020-21. The most common types of services that EAPU staff referred callers to were legal ( $n = 676$ ), guardianship and administration ( $n = 438$ ), and health ( $n = 377$ ).

Most abuse notifications (80.7%) in 2020-21 related to abuse in close or intimate relationships. The other 19.3 per cent of notifications related to abuse in consumer and social relationships. The patterns of abuse differ between cases occurring in close or intimate relationships and those involving abuse in consumer or social relationships (Figure E2). This is probably due to differences in the relationships between victims and perpetrators, along with the drivers of the abuse. Due to these differences, the data are analysed separately to increase the usefulness of the analyses.



**Figure E2.** Comparison of abuse types in cases involving abuse in close or intimate relationships (n = 1,995) and abuse in consumer and social relationships (n = 398).

## Abuse in Close or Intimate Relationships

Data relating to abuse occurring within close or intimate relationships are presented according to a bifocal ecological framework. This framework views elder abuse as occurring through interactions between factors at the individual (victim and perpetrator), relationship, community, and societal levels.

### Individual Factors: Victims

Within a bifocal ecological model, the individual level considers factors that may increase an individual's vulnerability and, thereby, their risk of becoming a victim of elder abuse. Key findings:

- The largest group of victims was aged 80–84 years (21.9%).
- Females were over-represented as victims (68.8%).
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples were over-represented as victims (4.4%). This is more than double the proportion of people aged 50 years and over living in Queensland who identify as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander (1.9%).
- A large proportion of victims was widowed (40.6%), which is almost four times the proportion of people aged 50 and over living in Queensland who are widowed (11.2%).
- Almost one-third of victims (32.6%) had impaired capacity.
- Half (50.3%) of victims were reported to have care needs, with just under one-third (31.5%) of these victims receiving formal support.
- Formal decision-making arrangements were recorded in 29.3 per cent of cases. In more than three-quarters (80.2%) of these cases (where known), one or more decision makers were alleged to be perpetrating elder abuse against victims. Decision makers were recorded as having acted to protect victims in only 18.5 per cent of these cases.

### Individual Factors: Alleged Perpetrators

Individual vulnerabilities for perpetrators may not have direct or causal associations with elder abuse but they are important to consider when formulating responses. However, data relating to characteristics of individual perpetrators must be interpreted cautiously because notifiers frequently lack this information. Key findings:

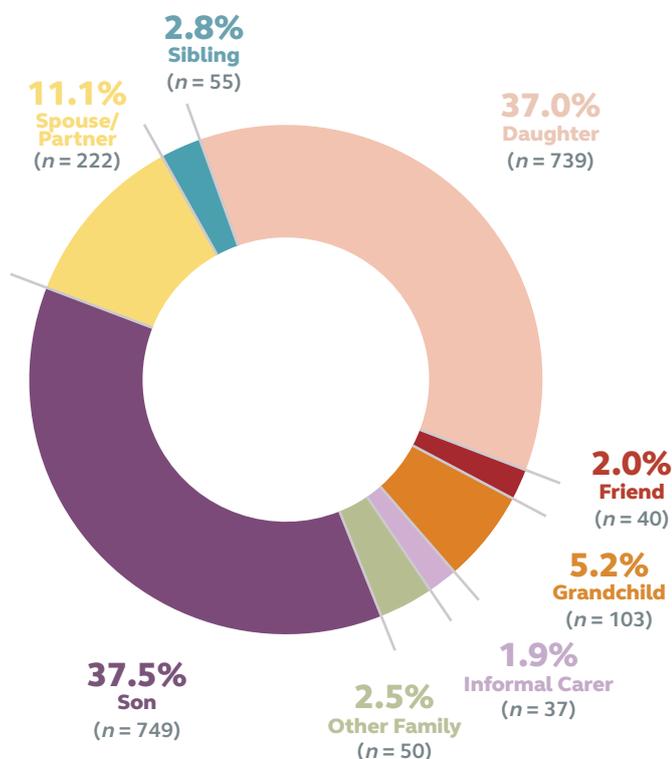
- The largest group of perpetrators was aged 50–54 years (15.5%).
- Males (50.1%) and females (49.9%) were equally represented as perpetrators.
- Regarding health, 9.6 per cent of perpetrators were reported to have mental illness and 11.3 per cent to have substance misuse issues. Co-occurring mental illness and substance misuse was reported in 5.8 per cent of cases.
- Problematic behaviour appeared long-standing for some perpetrators, who had a history of controlling behaviour (24.4%), conflictual relationships (16.1%), and aggression (14.3%).
- Perpetrators were reported to have a history of criminal behaviour in 180 cases (9.0%), with 40 (2.0%) recorded as having been jailed for offences. In 71 cases (3.5%), perpetrators were listed as respondents on domestic violence orders.



## Relationships Between Victims and Perpetrators

The victim and perpetrator of elder abuse may share vulnerabilities. Factors such as cohabitation, dependency, and difficult family history may contribute to the risk of elder abuse. Key findings:

- Almost all cases of abuse in close or intimate relationships occurred within family relationships (96.1%) (Figure E3). Sons and daughters (including in-laws) were equally reported as perpetrators, together accounting for three-quarters of cases (74.6%). Spouses or partners were recorded as perpetrators in 11.1 per cent of cases. Poor family relationships were identified in 11.8 per cent of cases and sibling rivalry was identified in 5.6 per cent of cases.



**Figure E3.**  
Perpetrators' relationships to victims.

- In close to two-thirds of cases (61.1%), victims and perpetrators were living together. Victim and perpetrator cohabitation has increased sharply over the past three financial years. In the 2019–20 report, a significant increase occurred in the third quarter of the 2019–20 financial year. The economic fallout from the COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in more adult children moving in with their parents. A further increase was recorded in 2020–21. Interstate migration since the start of the pandemic has resulted in a serious housing shortage in Queensland, which probably contributed to the further increase in cohabitation in 2020–21.

- Perpetrators were providing care to victims in 363 cases (18.2%). At least one issue relating to the provision of care was identified in 297 of these cases. The most common issues involved the provision of care being financially motivated (45.1%) and perpetrators struggling to meet the support needs of victims (43.8%).
- Dependence was a further concern, with close to one-third of victims dependent on perpetrators (31.6%). This was higher than the 26.9 per cent recorded in 2019–20. Victims were most likely to depend on perpetrators for decision making and emotional support. In some cases, perpetrators depended on victims (14.5%). The proportion of perpetrators dependent on victims was lower than the 24.5 per cent recorded in 2019–20. Perpetrators most often depended on victims for accommodation (8.7%) and financial support (8.1%).
- The most common factors that may have influenced the development of abuse were victim ill-health (11.5%) and perpetrators and victims beginning cohabitation (10.8%).

## Community

Community factors relate to the intersection of victim and perpetrator relationships with other family, friends, community members, potential support networks, or features of the community such as geographical location. The community in which a person lives can affect their vulnerability to abuse in both positive and negative ways. Key findings:

- Daughters (27.2%), victims themselves (22.9%), and workers (13.1%) were the most common notifiers of abuse in close or intimate relationships. Workers most frequently came from the health, community services, and aged care fields.
- The largest proportion of victims lived in the Brisbane region (23.2%). This finding was expected due to the large number of Brisbane residents aged 50 years and older.
- Geographic locations where the proportion of victims was higher than expected given population data were Wide Bay, Queensland – Outback, and Moreton Bay North.

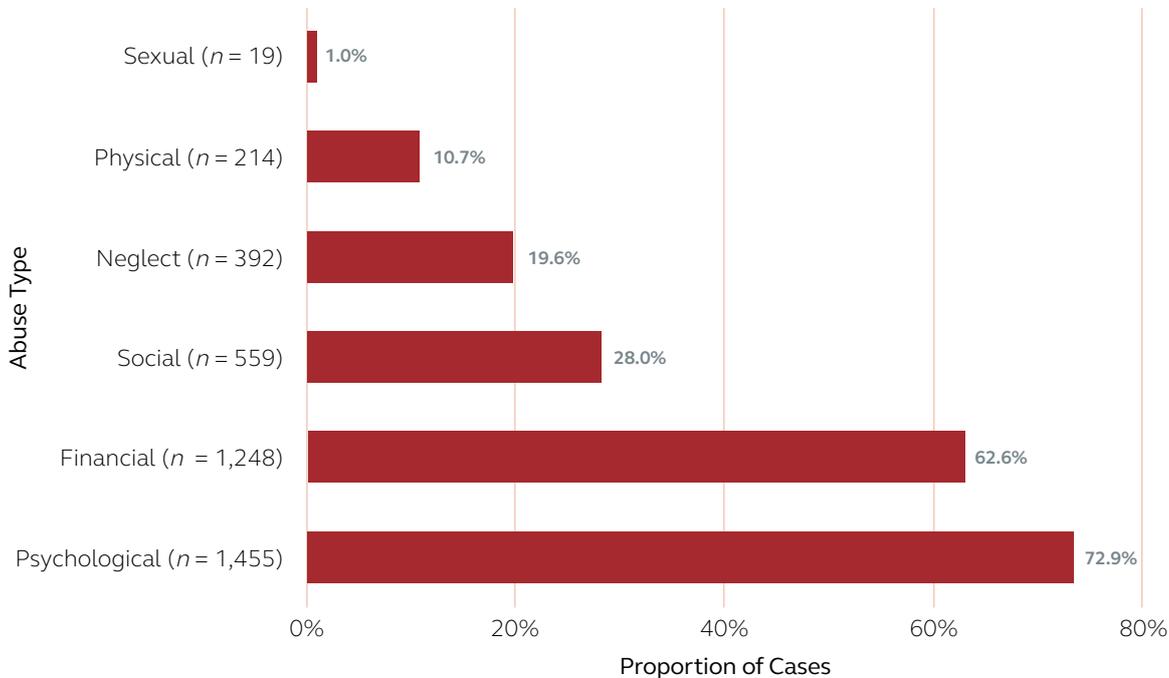
## Society

The societal level of analysis concerns the cultural context in which victims and perpetrators live. Sociocultural factors influence beliefs and attitudes and can contribute to a climate in which elder abuse is more likely. Key findings:

- Ageism was identified in almost half of cases (47.5%).
- Gender stereotypes were reported to have influenced the decisions of victims (primarily female) in 17.6 per cent of cases.
- Sexism and gender roles were reported to have influenced the behaviour of perpetrators (primarily males) in 14.4 per cent of cases.
- A sense of entitlement to an older relative's assets was identified in close to half of cases (42.5%).

## Abuse Data

The most common types of abuse reported were psychological (72.9%), financial (62.6%), and social abuse (28.0%) (Figure E4). In 64.5 per cent of cases, victims were experiencing more than one type of abuse. Physical, sexual, and social abuse were most likely to have other types of abuse co-occurring. Abuse was most often reported as occurring daily (60.3%). Victims who were experiencing neglect were most likely to experience the abuse daily.



**Figure E4.**  
Proportion of victims  
by abuse type.

Data are also captured around the presentation of each type of abuse. Key findings include:

- The most common methods of perpetrating financial abuse were undue influence (32.9%), misuse of an Enduring Power of Attorney (18.6%), and misuse of debit and credit cards (12.8%).
- The most frequently reported forms of financial abuse involved victims being coerced into gifting (22.3%), non-contribution (18.1%; for example, living with the victim and not contributing towards expenses such as electricity or groceries), and paying perpetrators' bills (16.5%).
- Failing to ensure victims' nutritional needs were met, refusal to allow others to provide care, and failing to take care of victims' medical needs were the most frequently reported forms of neglect.
- The most frequently reported forms of physical abuse were striking (32.2%), pushing (28.0%), and rough handling (20.6%).
- The most common forms of psychological abuse were degrading victims (70.9%), emotional blackmail (40.9%), and gaslighting (31.7%).
- The most common forms of sexual abuse were being coerced to perform sexual acts (36.8%), and rape (21.1%).
- In 12.2% of cases of social abuse, Enduring Power of Attorney misuse was recorded as the method of perpetrating abuse.
- Restricting visitation by others (53.1%), restricting access to a phone (34.3%), and deliberately behaving in a way which limited visitation from others (27.4%) were the most common forms of social abuse reported.

## Impact of Abuse

Psychological (60.1%), financial (52.2%), and health impacts (48.3%) were most frequently reported impacts of abuse. The proportion of cases in which homelessness was reported as resulting from the abuse noticeably increased between 2019–20 (6.7%) and 2020–21 (10.6%).

## Barriers to Change

The most common barriers to change for victims related to their individual vulnerabilities (56.7%), fear of further harm (38.2%), and concerns about protecting the perpetrator and their relationship (37.5%).

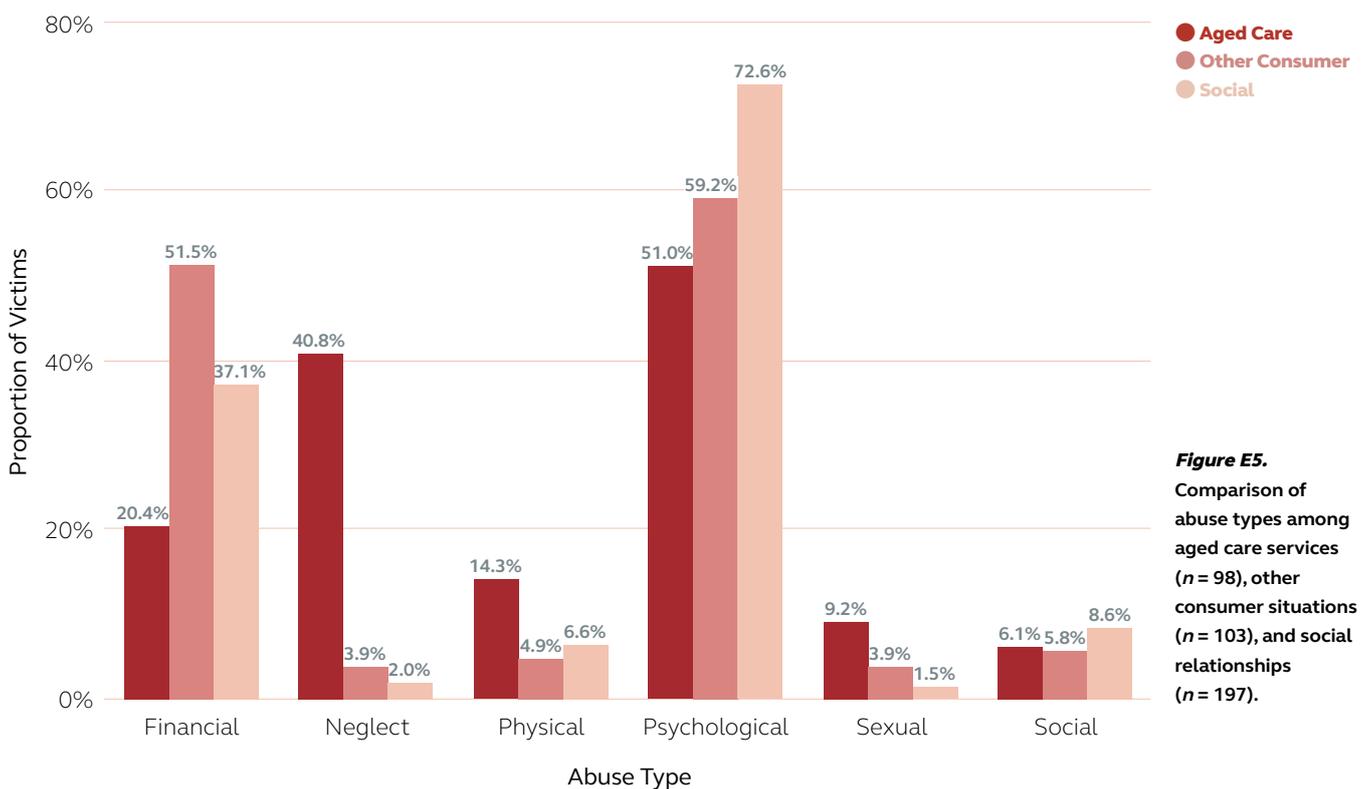
## Abuse in Consumer and Social Relationships

The proportion of calls relating to abuse in consumer and social relationships (19.3%) was similar to that in 2019-20. Of the 398 cases of abuse in consumer and social relationships, 98 related to abuse involving aged care services, 103 concerned abuse in other consumer relationships, and 197 involved abuse in social relationships. Key findings:

- In cases of abuse involving aged care services, notifications mostly concerned residential aged care (81.6%). Most complaints were about aged care facilities as entities, with only 27 cases identifying individual workers as perpetrators. Within residential aged care facilities, 73.2 per cent of reported issues related to the quality of the care provided. Safety, attention to personal needs, and food were the most common issues reported that related to the quality of the care.
- The most frequent complaints of abuse in other consumer relationships related to providers of accommodation services. Almost half (42.9%) were about retirement villages and 20.0 per cent involved public housing. Forty cases were categorised as “Other”, involving complaints about tradespeople, various government departments, banks, and other service providers.
- Neighbourhood bullying accounted for nearly two-thirds of cases involving abuse in social relationships (59.4%).

Abuse types varied across different forms of abuse in consumer and social relationships (Figure E5).

- Abuse in aged care services most frequently involved psychological abuse, neglect, and financial abuse.
- Psychological and financial abuse were the most common types reported for other consumer relationships.
- Abuse in social relationships commonly involved psychological and financial abuse.



**Figure E5.** Comparison of abuse types among aged care services (n = 98), other consumer situations (n = 103), and social relationships (n = 197).

## Future Directions

The findings in this report highlight the multidimensional nature of elder abuse. More than three-quarters of abuse notifications related to the abuse of older people at the hands of family or close friends who were “acting as family”. This finding highlights the importance of understanding and dealing with elder abuse in the family context. The EAPU believes that some areas that warrant further consideration and research may include:

- The influence of COVID-19 on rates of elder abuse, including precipitating factors and victim impacts. Intra- and interstate comparisons across different policy and health contexts would be particularly valuable.
- Increasing numbers of victims were fearful of becoming homeless or had already experienced homelessness because of the abuse. Support to access safe, accessible, and affordable housing for victims of elder abuse is likely to become increasingly important in Queensland as the current housing shortage escalates. EAPU considers that examining the suitability and availability of existing crisis accommodation, along with the effectiveness of providing housing support to victims of elder abuse, should be prioritised.
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are over-represented as victims of elder abuse in the Helpline data, but whether this population experiences higher rates of abuse than other populations remains unknown. Examining Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives on elder abuse and help-seeking behaviours would support the development of culturally appropriate services.
- There is a dearth of Australian research into perpetrator factors associated with elder abuse, and little intervention work with perpetrators. EAPU considers that there are benefits in developing and monitoring the effectiveness of an evidence-based perpetrator program.
- Little research exists about the abuse of older people who identify as LGBTIQ+. The PEARL database captures this information; however, as callers are not explicitly asked if victims identify as LGBTIQ+, meaningful analysis is not possible.
- Limited information is available about abuse experienced by older people with cognitive impairment, and whether their experiences differ from those of other people. Research in this area could inform targeted prevention and intervention efforts for people with cognitive impairment.

Elder abuse is a complex social issue, but filling these evidence gaps may help increase the effectiveness of prevention and intervention efforts.



**Telephone**

1300 651 192

**Postal address**

EAPU  
PO Box 2376  
Chermside Central QLD 4032

**Email**

[eapu@ucommunity.org.au](mailto:eapu@ucommunity.org.au)

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