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New report reveals chronic under-funding is failing the most vulnerable children and young people in South Australia

Put simply, South Australia – over time – has not invested adequately in early intervention and family support services and we now bear the consequences with children, young people and families missing out on vital services, and increasing pressure on the child protection system to step in at critical points.

A new report from the Guardian for Children and Young People about South Australia's expenditure on the child protection system in 2021-22 shows that the state government spent \$704.5 million on child protection services, with 80.1% of that on care services for children and young people who had been removed from their families and taken into state care.

The report – which analyses data from the Productivity Commission's *Report on Government Services* and other sources – shows that South Australia fares poorly in reunifying families, with the highest rate of children and young people in the country on long-term finalised guardianship orders.

“Essentially, we are taking children into care and not exploring exit pathways at the same rate as other states. Once they are in the system, most often they stay in the system,” Guardian for Children and Young People, Shona Reid said.

“The figures set out in this report are an indictment on our society, that we have not adequately provided services or protected the most vulnerable through family and community support levers. Our child protection system seems to be a one-way street.”

“Rather than investing in support services to keep the children home in the first place, or to help parents make changes so their children can safely return home, we are permanently removing children at an alarming rate. The current model is unsustainable, not just financially, but for the wellbeing of our communities; and it is the children who pay the highest price.”

At 30 June 2022, 4,417 children and young people lived in out-of-home care, an increase of 1.2% since the same time the previous year, and the second-highest rate throughout the country. First Nations children in South Australia remain more likely than others to be removed from their families.

“It astounds me that as at 30 June last year, one in 11 Aboriginal children and young people in South Australia were in care, compared to one in 130 non-Aboriginal children. Couple that with this state's tendency and legislative bias towards long-term guardianship orders, we need to critically examine if these actions are creating another line of Aboriginal children not connected with families and country,” Ms Reid said.

Alarming, the report also shows that the state's reliance on residential care facilities is rising at eight times the rate of the overall care population, with one in six children in care living in residential care at the end of 2021-22. Further, the number of Aboriginal children growing up in residential care grew by 17.9% – five times the rate for non-Aboriginal children, at 3.7%.

“It is important to recognise, that properly resourced residential care can be a good therapeutic option for individual children and young people, and we need to make sure that these placements are available for those who need them,” Ms Reid said.

“But it can also be a really tough place to grow up, especially for young children, and my office has serious concerns about the safety and suitability of many residential care houses. Growing up in a family environment is something we know works best for most children and young people.”

The report also highlights the high cost of residential care, with nearly half of South Australia's entire child protection services budget in 2021-22 spent on residential care services, for 710 children and young people (\$345.9 million, from a total of \$704.5 million).

“It is both foreseeable and likely that residential care will continue to drive and worsen the imbalance in child protection expenditure over time – unless government commits to a major intervention to divert the current trajectory,” Ms Reid said

“The success of reform measures proposed in recent inquiries and reviews will depend largely upon whether the government is willing to take a different approach to child protection expenditure, and substantially increase investment in the places where it is needed to meet and advance the human rights of children and young people. We need to adopt new ways of thinking about child protection and working with children and young people for change.”

The 2023-24 State Budget, which was handed down yesterday, allocated a \$216.6 million ‘boost’ to the child protection budget, split between care services and funding for early intervention and family supports.

“These additional resources are a welcome announcement, and I look forward to discussions with the Minister for Child Protection, and Ms Bray as the new CEO of the Department for Child Protection, about how to make sure this money is best spent to promote the rights and best interests of children and young people,” Ms Reid said.

The report is available on the Office of the Guardian for Children and Young People's website, at www.gcyp.sa.gov.au.