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Media Release

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Children and young people in detention in South Australia facing serious human rights breaches

Guardian for Children and Young People and Training Centre Visitor, Shona Reid, holds grave concerns that the basic human rights of children and young people detained in Adelaide's Youth Justice Centre are not being upheld.

Information obtained by the Training Centre Visitor indicates that children and young people are spending extended periods in isolation, with serious barriers to accessing basic services, rehabilitative programs, and health treatment.

These conditions impact upon some of the most vulnerable children and young people in South Australia, with a third of the detention population coming from the child protection system, more than half from First Nations backgrounds, and an indeterminate number with disabilities and/or a range of psychosocial needs. Many of these young people – upwards of 90% on any given day – will only be on remand, not sentenced for any crime.

"I fear that the Centre is not providing the care, correction and guidance necessary for the development of the young people into responsible members of the community who are helped to properly realise their potential," Ms Reid said.

"Chronic understaffing has created a totally unacceptable 'new normal' in which children and young people spend most of their time locked in their rooms without sufficient access to social, recreational, and meaningful activities, or even core services such as medical support."

"I am particularly concerned about self-harm and the difficulty the Centre appears to have with avoiding psychosocial health related incidents that have been exacerbated by current restrictive conditions due to ongoing staff shortages."

"We must protect the central *rehabilitative* purpose of youth detention, the task of which is not simply to punish. This is especially the case for young people who really are incarcerated because they have exceptional needs that are not met in the community. Often with traumatic backgrounds, developmental and social vulnerabilities, perhaps with impaired cognitive or emotional regulation skills – they need a properly resourced therapeutic environment."

Noting that similar serious concerns had been raised by her predecessor, Ms Reid said that –

"These are not new issues, and so, with no apparent prospect that this current crisis will be fixed in the foreseeable future, I feel compelled to honour my obligation to Parliament and the South Australian community by bringing this crisis into their line of sight."

Civil society organisations have similarly expressed serious concerns about the risk of the sort of tragic, foreseeable outcomes that have been seen interstate, including at Ashley Youth Detention Centre in Tasmania, Banksia Hill in Western Australia, and Don Dale in the Northern Territory.

Fundamentally, time spent in youth justice detention should be rehabilitative and not cause further harm.

“Young people make mistakes, but we must remember they are children.”

“We should expect accountability for the delivery of core services in an acceptable environment. Far from advocating for luxury, I am calling for minimal humane standards, and I’m calling for it as a matter of urgency: things like responsive medical management, access to personal and professional visitors, the opportunity to engage in meaningful activities.” Ms Reid said.

Ms Reid acknowledged the pressure on staff who must try to cope with the impact of the current crisis.

“Open-ended good intentions are not enough. A clear response to the current crisis is needed now.”