



Guardian
for Children and
Young People

 3/111 Gawler Place, Adelaide 5000
 gcyp@gcyp.sa.gov.au
 www.gcyp.sa.gov.au
 08 8226 8570

Media Release

Guardian for Children and Young People releases 2022-23 Annual Report

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In her 2022-23 Annual Report, Guardian for Children and Young People, Shona Reid, gets serious about the government's responsibility to look after children in their care and make meaningful changes to South Australia's out-of-home care system.

In her first full year as Guardian, Ms Reid reports that the subject of advocacy requests to her office remained the same as it has for many years – with the top issues being the safety and stability of where children and young people in care live, their contact with people who matter to them and their involvement in the decisions (big and small) that affect their lives.

"Children and young people in care tell us, with uncanny consistency, they want to be safe, loved and respected – not much different to any of us really. They want the opportunity to have a say in their own lives and have some control over what happens to them", Ms Reid said.

"Again the biggest issue raised by children and young people is not feeling safe in care. The reasons for this are broad and complex, sometimes it's about the people they live with and sometimes it's about past trauma making it hard to feel safe. But let's be real – safety concerns are the reason why they have been removed from their families and brought into care in the first place, it is reasonable to expect that they feel safe and feel loved during their time in care, and we need to find a way to ensure this".

In highlighting the long-standing systemic issues impacting upon safety and wellbeing in care, the Guardian's report demonstrates the importance of governments remaining open and committed to independent oversight and scrutiny. In particular, the report notes:

- a lack of responsiveness to recommendations made by the Guardian's office, and
- a need for greater transparency in reporting on progress against recommendations made by other independent bodies and reviewers, including the 2016 *Child Protection Systems Royal Commission*.

As explained by Ms Reid:

"Throughout the year, I drew attention to the fact that the South Australian government has marked very important recommendations from the 2016 Child Protection Systems Royal Commission as 'complete' when, in fact, little has changed. This includes children and young people under 10 being placed in residential care, rostering practices that make both carers and young people vulnerable, and children spending long time periods with carers who haven't been fully assessed.

These recommendations were made to keep children in care safe. They have not been fully implemented. Seven years later, we continue to see the same safety issues occurring. Which means – in layman's terms – kids are still getting hurt because these particular parts of the system have not been fixed to satisfy the intent of the original recommendations.

I understand and respect that people in government are working hard to make changes and implement reforms that they believe will improve the situation, and I see good work happening across the sector. But the unfortunate reality is that, despite work undertaken by successive

governments for many years now, the core experiences for children and young people in care remain the same – and that's not good enough”.

The Guardian's report notes that 'in-mandate' enquiries to her office have tripled in the last 10 years, with a 23% increase in the past year alone. Yet, in contrast to significant growth of in the number of children coming into care over this time and the accompanying increase in the Department for Child Protection's budget to cater to this, the only increase to the Guardian's budget during this time was funding for a single staff member in 2017. Any funding provided outside of this was for her Training Centre Visitor, Child and Young Person Visitor and Youth Treatment Order Visitor mandates.

“Let's be clear – I don't want to be talking about money, I want to spend my time and efforts doing the job and raising the experiences and voices of children in the care system. But at the same time, I must be responsive to the fact that there are more children and young people in care who need my advocacy, my independence and my oversight. I'm worried, I know I don't have the resources I reasonably need to deliver on my responsibilities.”

Other key themes identified in the Guardian's report include:

- Issues in cross-government coordination to facilitate access to services for children in care, including across health, mental health, education, and housing.
- Children and young people going missing from care, including due to feeling unsafe in their placements and searching for their family and community connections.
- The sexual exploitation and abuse of vulnerable children and young people in care, which is targeted and comes from across the wider community by those who specifically prey on the vulnerability of this group of children and young people.
- Resource-driven barriers to children and young people who have been exposed to sexual violence accessing therapeutic interventions and supports.
- Underreporting of children and young people in care with diagnosed disability, and ongoing service gaps in both diagnosing disability-related needs and implementing identified service responses.
- Continued success of DCP in supporting and engaging children and young people who have been identified with a disability to access NDIS.
- Indicators of poorer social and emotional wellbeing outcomes for Aboriginal children and young people in care compared to their non-Aboriginal peers – including across education, access to disability supports, youth justice involvement, family and community connections and placement stability. Positively, the report identifies indicators of improved wellbeing outcomes for Aboriginal children and young people in family-based care, particularly kinship care.
- An increasing number of young people in care who are admitted to youth detention, with a growing proportion of dual involved young people who are Aboriginal.
- The impacts of DCP's management of their 2023 boundary re-alignment, which caused distress for many young people and considerable disruption to case management during the transition.

While many of these matters are well-known across government, the sector and the community, Ms Reid hopes her report encourages practical and actualised responses from the sector to these long experienced challenges, and engaging with the voices of children and young people to guide them.

“The call-to-action in my annual report is clear. The South Australian government as a whole must accept responsibility for the lives of children and young people in their care and prioritise their healing and wellbeing over the needs of the systems they live within,” Ms Reid said.

“One of the biggest things we can do to make that happen is move past asking children and young people to speak up about the same things again and again, and actually do something about it when they do. We already know a lot about what needs to happen to make change, so let's stop wasting time fighting about whose job it is to cough up the money and fix it.”

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