

Media release

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For immediate release

Inspector's report on Cairns and Murgon watch-houses released

The *Cairns and Murgon watch-houses inspection report: Focus on detention of children*, prepared by the Inspector of Detention Services, was tabled by the Honourable Curtis Pitt MP, Speaker of the Queensland Parliament on Wednesday 11 September 2024.

Under the [Inspector of Detention Services Act 2022](#) (IDS Act) the Queensland Ombudsman, Mr Anthony Reilly, is also the Inspector of Detention Services (Inspector).

The report makes 19 recommendations for improvement to address the concerns we identified during the inspections of Cairns and Murgon watch-houses. Concerns included admission processes, lack of privacy, assessment of risk and harm and issues relating to children being detained in watch-houses for a long time.

Watch-houses, which are operated by the Queensland Police Service, are intended to be used for the short-term detention of a person prior to them being granted bail or being transferred to a youth detention centre or prison. However, watch-houses in Queensland are now used to detain children for lengthy periods of time.

The Cairns and Murgon watch-houses are two facilities in which children have spent many weeks. Case studies in the report highlight practices used at these watch-houses.

The majority of children detained in watch-houses, including at Cairns and Murgon, are Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander peoples. Children who are placed in watch-houses are often already vulnerable, and many have significant health complexities and traumatic backgrounds.

Mr Reilly said, "In our inspections of these two watch-houses, we focused on the fundamental issues of keeping children safe and unharmed, and treating them humanely.

"We are concerned that the infrastructure of both watch-houses is not suitable for detaining children, especially for longer periods of time.

"The admission process at both watch-houses is inadequate. We are concerned that self-harm/suicide risks or significant health and medical issues may not be identified through the admission process. This would leave a child, who may subsequently spend many days or even weeks detained in the watch-house, with unaddressed risks or medical needs. The consequences could be catastrophic.

Mr Reilly said the approach for managing at-risk children in watch-houses is inadequate compared with the options available in youth detention centres.

“There is limited guidance for watch-house staff on behavioural management strategies for children, and staff are not provided with specialist training geared towards working with children, let alone those with complex needs.

“Based on the information in this report, the detention of children in watch-houses creates risk of harm and it should be avoided. If detained in a watch-house, children should be held for the minimum time possible and transferred to a more suitable facility as soon as possible.

“We have made recommendations to the Queensland Police Service to address concerns we identified during the inspection.”

About the Inspector

The Queensland Ombudsman and Inspector of Detention Services is an independent officer of the Parliament. Staff from the Office of the Queensland Ombudsman support the Inspector’s functions under the IDS Act.

The goal of the IDS Act is promoting the humane treatment of detainees and the prevention of harm through reviews, inspections and independent reporting.

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Key facts about the report

What is the role of the Inspector of Detention Services?

The focus of the Inspector is on the prevention of harm rather than responding to complaints when harm occurs. This preventative focus examines the systems and the lived experiences of people detained.

The purpose of the of [Inspector of Detention Services Act 2022](#) is to promote the improvement of detention services and places of detention:

- with a focus on promoting and upholding the humane treatment of detainees, including the conditions of their detention
- preventing detainees being subjected to harm, including torture and cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment.

The Inspector's functions include:

- Prepare and publish standards for carrying out inspections
- Inspect places of detention (youth detention centres, prisons, work camps, watch-houses)
- Review and monitor detention services (including places of detention, health care and education services provided to detainees, and transport of detainees)
- Report to parliament on each inspection and review (all reports will be publicly available)
- Report annually on operations (report tabled in Parliament).

More information about these services is available at <https://www.ombudsman.qld.gov.au/detention-inspection>

Why these two watch-houses?

Queensland has many watch-houses of various sizes across the state. We inspected the Cairns and Murgon watch-houses because both have been used to detain children for long periods (including over a month in some cases) and they represent different types of watch-houses. The two vary in several key aspects, including size, location and design.

By selecting different types of watch-houses, we hoped to gain a broader understanding of the issues and challenges in detaining children.

Despite the differences, we found many similarities between the two watch-houses, and we discuss these throughout this report.

What happens next with the recommendations?

We will monitor the actions taken in response to the recommendations as part of our ongoing program of inspections of watch-houses.

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