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JUSTICE, INTEGRITY AND COMMUNITY SAFETY COMMITTEE

Members present:

Mr MA Hunt MP—Chair
Mr MC Berkman MP
Mr RD Field MP
Ms ND Marr MP
Ms MF McMahon MP
Mr PS Russo MP

Staff present:

Ms F Denny—Committee Secretary
Ms H Radunz—Assistant Committee Secretary

PUBLIC HEARING—OVERSIGHT OF THE QUEENSLAND OMBUDSMAN

TRANSCRIPT OF PROCEEDINGS

Wednesday, 25 March 2026

Brisbane

WEDNESDAY, 25 MARCH 2026

The committee met at 10.30 am.

GABRIEL, Ms Helen, Acting Executive Director, Detention Services Inspection Unit, Office of the Queensland Ombudsman

PEARSON, Ms Amy, Executive Director, Corporate Strategy, Office of the Queensland Ombudsman

PYKE, Ms Angela, Deputy Ombudsman, Office of the Queensland Ombudsman

REILLY, Mr Anthony, Queensland Ombudsman and Inspector of Detention Services, Office of the Queensland Ombudsman

CHAIR: I invite you to make an opening statement to the committee before we go to questions.

Mr Reilly: Thank you for the opportunity to make an opening statement. Our office provides services to the Queensland public sector and the broader community under three acts: the Ombudsman Act, the Inspector of Detention Services Act and the Public Interest Disclosure Act. I will now provide information about our performance of our functions under each of those acts.

Under the Ombudsman Act we have two purposes: first, to give people a timely, effective, independent and just way of having administrative actions of agencies investigated; second, to improve the quality of administrative decision-making and agency practices and procedures. During 2024-25 the office responded to 12,399 contacts from Queenslanders, about an eight per cent increase on the 11,479 contacts in 2023-24. There was also an 11 per cent increase in the number of finalised complaints about the administrative actions of agencies, from 6,287 in 2023-24 to 6,992 in 2024-25.

Demand for our services has continued to grow in the month since we tabled our annual report. As at 31 January 2026 contacts have increased seven per cent when compared to 31 January 2025. On the current trajectory, the office is forecast to receive around 13,100 contacts by 30 June 2026, which is a further six per cent increase on 2024-25 and a 14 per cent increase compared to 2023-24. We welcome Queenslanders contacting us for assistance with their concerns. Our job is to assist them to address those concerns. We note that the ongoing growth in demand, which continues and has been going now for over a year, is affecting our ability to address these concerns as quickly as we would like.

Our 971 finalised investigations over the course of the year led to 185 recommendations to improve the administrative actions of agencies. Examples of these outcomes for Queenslanders were reported in our *Casebook 2025: Helping agencies to improve decision-making*, which is our fifth annual casebook of investigation summaries. In addition to agencies reversing their original decision as a result of the investigations, the case studies also highlight some of the broader, systemic improvements achieved through our work. These include: improved policies and procedures, improved community consultation processes, better training for officers and improved coordination between agencies.

During 2024-25 we also published two major investigation reports under the Ombudsman Act, namely the *Forensic disability service—second report* in August 2024 and the *Preventing harm to children with disability in Queensland—Report 1: Department of Education*. That was in April 2025. The latter report arose from a recommendation of the Royal Commission into Violence, Abuse, Neglect and Exploitation of People with Disability. A second report relating to the royal commission recommendation in relation to the department of housing was published in November 2025. A third report about Queensland Health will be published in 2026. Each of these reports identified a range of systemic improvements that have been implemented by agencies.

I turn now to our second function under the Ombudsman Act of improving the quality of administrative processes. As I have already noted, a range of improvements are achieved every day every week in our office through our investigation work. Other strategies that we use to improve administrative processes include advice, web-based resources, newsletters, peer network and training.

In August 2025 we launched our new, online self-paced training module about good decision-making and in March 2026 launched our public interest disclosures module. The modules improve the accessibility of our training services as officers are able to do the training anywhere any time at a low cost.

Initial uptake of the modules has been strong and feedback has been very positive. Between August 2025 and the end of February 2026, 879 people had completed the online good decision-making module with 88.9 per cent of participants stating they agree or strongly agree the training will improve their decision-making. We will continue to monitor feedback and uptake of both modules to inform our approach to training and capability uplift for the sector.

I move on to the Inspector of Detention Services Act. Under the Inspector of Detention Services Act we pursue the purpose of promoting and upholding the humane treatment of detainees and preventing detainees from being subject to harm, including torture and inhuman or degrading treatment. In 2024-25, which was only the second full year of our operations under this relatively new act, we inspected the Cleveland, Brisbane and West Moreton youth detention centres and the Brisbane, Capricornia and Numinbah prisons. We also produced four reports about five inspections, namely Cleveland Youth Detention Centre, Cairns and Murgon watch houses, and the Southern Queensland and Palen Creek prisons.

In 2025-26 we have continued to inspect, report and recommend. Since July 2025 we have inspected youth detention centres including the Wacol Youth Remand Centre and Lotus Glen Correctional Centre. We are inspecting Woodford this week. I am looking forward to heading out to the prison tomorrow to look at some of their industries and some of the other aspects of the prison's operations.

In November 2025 we published our first combined inspection report for youth detention centres which included Cleveland, Brisbane and West Moreton youth detention centres. We focused on some really key humane containment issues for this first large statewide report and they were: the use of separation, the use of force, conduct of searches and provision of health services. Consultation drafts of reports about the Brisbane and Capricornia correction centres have also been provided to stakeholders. We are working them through and they will be finalised in the near future.

In addition, in October 2025 we also published the first evaluation of our recommendations in our *Inspector of detention services: Annual operational report 2024-25*, and there is the report. I was really pleased that of the 71 recommendations 98 per cent were either fully implemented, partially implemented or accepted but not yet implemented. I would like to take this opportunity to express my genuine appreciation to the leadership and officers of our youth justice, corrective services, police and health departments for their engagement with the evaluation process and our broader inspection program.

I will turn now to public interest disclosures, or PIDs, as they are known. As the oversight agency for the PID Act we monitor PIDs and support agencies in managing PIDs. Our annual public interest disclosure report for 2024-25, which is attached to our Ombudsman office annual report, provides detailed information about the number of PIDs reported broken down into various categories. It is important to note that our PID team inquiries and contacts in 2024-25 grew by 35 per cent compared to 2023-24 and our very small PID team have done an extraordinary job keeping up with this increase. I would like to take this opportunity to thank them for it.

Demand for those services remains strong. In May 2025 we rolled out the PID self-assessment audit to support agencies to check in on their PID management processes. The office received 186 submissions from agencies to the audit. I was also pleased to receive letters from heads of agencies welcoming the audit on the basis that it gave them a chance to look through their public interest disclosure management processes and check they have things in place. As I have already noted, in March 2026 we launched our new online self-paced training module about PIDs. It will complement our existing fantastic PID training program.

Before I conclude I would like to provide the committee with some brief information about our workforce systems and funding. In relation to our workforce, the results of our 2025 Working for Queensland Survey were very positive and very strong compared to public sector benchmarks. In relation to our systems, in late 2025 we undertook a review of our legacy information technology systems to ensure that they are fit for purpose and able to support our work into the future. We will liaise with Queensland Treasury about the outcomes of the review in the year ahead. In relation to finances I am pleased to report that our expenditure remained within budget in 2024-25.

Before concluding, I note that the strategic review of the office is currently underway. We appreciated the opportunity to work with the reviewer, Professor John McMillan, in late 2025. He spent two weeks in our office, which was great, and spoke to our staff. It was really enjoyable. We look forward to progressing the outcomes of the review.

Finally, I would like to take this opportunity to thank the office's staff for their hard work over the past year, particularly in areas like our PID team and intake team as they face increasing demands for their work and the contribution they make every day to improving public administration in Queensland.

CHAIR: I join you in thanking you and your staff for the wonderful work you do. Thank you for appearing before the committee today. Thank you for that fulsome introduction which was full of a lot of figures. I am going to add to that because my first question is full of figures as well, I am afraid. I note that the office responded to 12,399 contacts, which is an eight per cent increase on 11,479 from the previous year. Despite the increased demand, the office reduced the average time to complete preliminary assessments, from 7.8 days in 2023-24 to 7.4 days in 2024-25. Can you outline what efficiencies were implemented to have seen that improvement?

Mr Reilly: That great outcome was achieved through Deputy Ombudsman Angela Pyke's work, so I will ask Angela to take you through it.

Ms Pyke: Heading towards the end of the financial year we could see that the workload was a little bit too much for the intake team at that time, so we deployed a lot of resources into the intake team to assist in clearing those cases. That was a redeployment of resources to the team in an effort to reduce the backlog, the number of files, which then brought the timeframe down.

Mr Reilly: If I could add two things to that, first of all, at an organisational level there is a risk of having to deploy, if you like, investigator resources across to help with intake demand. Then you are potentially causing more pressure on your investigations and that can then cause delays for them because they are off doing the other work. The other thing is that in the past few years we have been having a look at improving our business processes and have done a fair bit of work on that, including getting external advice and so on. We have always taken a continuous improvement or business improvement focus.

Mr RUSSO: My question is in relation to your work as Inspector of Detention Services. As you gathered information from the different centres did you note any discrepancies in the information you were provided with from some of the centres?

Mr Reilly: Was that focusing on the youth justice detention centres or the adult prison—

Mr RUSSO: The youth justice detention centres.

Mr Reilly: My understanding is that the information provided has been sound and has been in response to our request, but I could ask Helen Gabriel, who leads our detention services inspection unit, to comment further, if that is of assistance.

Ms Gabriel: I would not necessarily say we found discrepancies. The departments, both of them—Queensland Corrective Services and the Department of Youth Justice and Victim Support—have policies and procedures in place for the management of young people and prisoners in their centres. For the most part, practices in those centres align with the policies and procedures, but sometimes there are individual differences or staff do not necessarily understand the policies. We found no discrepancies in the information provided to us. Our report did note that there are limitations to the youth justice system DCOIS, the database that we access for daily records, and the department has sought to provide us more accurate information. If there are any discrepancies we have noted it in our report in relation to what we can access through DCOIS and what the department can provide us more formally.

Ms MARR: Mr Reilly, in your August 2024 report you reflected on the Queensland Audit Office report No. 15, *Reducing serious youth crime*. It found that Cleveland Youth Detention Centre had the highest number of staff shortages across the three youth detention centres in Queensland. In September last year the Minister for Youth Justice provided an update that for the first time ever the Cleveland Youth Detention Centre was overstrength and that separation due to staff shortages did not happen anymore. Can you explain what benefits you expect to see from this improvement in staff shortages?

Mr Reilly: There are some assertions about certain facts in that question. My response is that I think those issues are ones for the minister to respond to because they relate to broader issues about the management of her department and how it is going generally. I do not have specific information

that I have obtained through inspections and which I have checked with the department, if you like, through a natural justice process that I feel able to provide to the committee, in fairness to the department.

Ms MARR: Could I make it a bit more broad? If we have overstrength of staff numbers in a youth detention centre, what are the benefits of that to the youth in that centre? What improvements could we see occur by making sure we have the staff there?

Mr Reilly: It would depend on the uses to which the staff's time was put and those are decisions that are taken by the department and their managers. There is a range of ways in which you can utilise the services of officers. Once again, I think that question might be best put to the department because they will know what the priorities are for them in terms of how to use their officers, if that is of assistance.

Ms McMAHON: Again referring to your role as an Inspector of Detention Services, you outlined the centres that were inspected during the period of the report. Can you outline what are the facilities that are in the process of either being inspected or reported on during the current financial year and how you prioritise which centres you are inspecting?

Mr Reilly: In terms of the youth detention centres, the legislation requires us to inspect each youth detention centre annually—once a year. We have been meeting that timeframe. At the moment there are four youth detention centres: Cleveland up in Townsville, Brisbane, West Moreton and, of course, the new Wacol Youth Remand Centre. We are endeavouring to inspect all four youth detention centres. We now have four to inspect on an annual basis.

Ms McMAHON: What about watch houses? I know watch houses fit within there and Cairns and Murgon were reported on during the last one. What about in the most recent financial year? We have a lot; how do you prioritise which ones you focus on during any given time period?

Mr Reilly: Yes, early on in the role we decided to do an inspection of the detention of children in watch houses because it was a significant humane containment issue in Queensland. I might have explained this previously to the committee: we chose to look at two watch houses which demonstrated the differing operational pressures the police were working under in different parts of the state. Of course, the further you get away from the big regional centres and the capital city, Brisbane, the harder it is often to deliver services, so that is why we picked Murgon and, to compare it, Cairns. When we published that report, the Queensland Police Service response was outstanding. They went and did a review of the watch houses more generally because, as we all know, they have concerns too about the pressures those watch houses are under. They involved us in that review, provided us with drafts and so on, and they published their review report. There are a lot of good recommendations in there.

In terms of how I assess which ones to go to—because there are so many watch houses—my view is that at a point in time we surfaced the issue of children in watch houses and provided some good transparency to the community, which I hope is what the function of the IDS is—to bring those things to light—and then there was a good response, so those issues are now surfaced and are being worked through.

One of the responses, of course, has been the opening of the Wacol Youth Remand Centre, so there has been a reduction in the number of children being held in watch houses because they are able to be located in the Wacol Youth Remand Centre rather than in a watch house. I think that is a good thing because the Wacol Youth Remand Centre has youth justice staff, teachers, good health services and so on. The problem with the Wacol Youth Remand Centre is that it is a watch house—it was effectively built as a watch house—but it is a much better place for children to stay while they wait to go to a youth detention centre than a small regional watch house or even a large watch house where there are not the services available to ensure the children are safe and well while they are in the watch house.

Those are the sorts of issues that we surfaced through our report. We have not had another look at children in watch houses because I think the issue has been looked through. Our inspection report on Wacol Youth Remand Centre, which we are currently putting together, will talk about some of these things and the way forward.

In terms of the many other watch houses and the detention of adults in watch houses, we do not have a mandated program for watch houses apart from two watch houses—Brisbane and Southport—and we are currently planning to try to get to an inspection of those later this year. The first thing we have to do is to get our watch house standards developed. We have sent a consultation draft to the police to get their technical operational feedback, just to make sure that the way we are looking at this makes sense in terms of their operations, and then we will release that for further community consultation. We would very much welcome the opportunity to liaise with the committee about it and to get feedback.

Mr FIELD: You have explained the issues in the past. What are the biggest challenges or risks for the office for the next 12 months?

Mr Reilly: The challenges and risks generally for the office of the Ombudsman? I think the increase in demand for our services is a challenge. We take very seriously our statutory charter, which is to provide speedy review. As the demand increases, within our limited resources it becomes more challenging to achieve that goal. That can sometimes make the people who are requesting that we provide them with our services become concerned as well and make complaints and so on. There is that risk: you get an increase in requests for review of our decisions and so on.

For me, the big challenge at the moment is the increase in demand for our services. There are a couple of other challenges. One is that we are a small office with wonderful staff who do a great job. We are technically, in a financial sense, a department and so we have to do all of these things that all of these giant departments do. We have only a small corporate services section and they are stretched very much across all of these different accountabilities we have to meet and standards we have to comply with. A particular example is in the information technology space. There is a real challenge for us in trying to keep up with all of those requirements within our very small budget. One of the things we are looking at doing, along with, as I mentioned before, the review of our ICT systems, is putting together a business case to look at ensuring our corporate services are properly set up so that the office can do its job properly. We will talk to Treasury about it, but we will return to the committee to talk about it too, possibly next year.

In terms of other demands, our Inspector of Detention Services unit does a brilliant job. They are a very hardworking team. They are out in the field all the time, but it is a big schedule and producing these big complex reports is difficult. We are doing our best to keep up with that schedule. We are on track, but staying on track will be a challenge in the years ahead, particularly as more centres come on line. For example, we have the new Lockyer Valley Correctional Centre, which we did a tour of last Friday. It is a very good centre. It is very impressive. That is another centre for us to inspect. The Woodford Youth Detention Centre, which is currently being built, is another youth detention centre that we will need to inspect. As those numbers increase, that makes the challenge of getting to all of the work within the statutory timeframes difficult.

Finally, our public interest disclosure team is very small. It is usually only two people. Sometimes that increases to 2½ or three, depending on how you count these things. They do an extraordinary job providing a very important service across government. With a team that small, it is a real challenge for them to keep up. It is a real risk for us. If those staff were to move on to other opportunities it would really be difficult to keep the service going. Thank you for the opportunity to throw out there all of the challenges facing us.

Mr BERKMAN: I would like to stick with your role as Inspector of Detention Services. The November 2025 report, as I understand it, reports on the 2024 inspections, so there is something of a lag in the way those reports become available. The first point in that report, in respect of separations, just the snapshot, says

- Extended separations due to staff shortages have continued at Cleveland ... but their frequency has reduced in 2025 compared to 2024.
- Brisbane YDC implements staff shortage separations on weekends.

I cannot read all of the points I am interested in, but can you comment broadly on the impacts that staff shortages are still having on separations in any or all of the youth detention centres?

Mr Reilly: The most recent information that we have gathered through an inspection, and which we provided to the department and the department has commented on and then we have published, is the information in last year's statewide report. My preference is to rely on that information because I always get concerned about me expressing generalised views about issues that are quite complex.

Our current statewide inspection is focusing on daily routines. That is basically that daily routine of how children wake up and have their breakfast and they go and clean up their rooms and so on and then they go to school and then do other programs and activities and then head off back to their accommodation rooms and so on. As part of that, we will be looking at the impact of staff shortage separations on the ability of the centres to fulfil the daily routine as much as they would like. At each centre I have been to I am always very impressed by how committed the staff are to trying to keep those processes going. At this point in time, with respect—and I am happy to take direction from the chair—I would prefer to rely on what was in that report last year as our source of information.

Mr BERKMAN: I appreciate your position here. Perhaps I could ask it this way: is it the case that there are still instances of staff shortage separations occurring in some or any of the youth detention centres?

CHAIR: I think the Ombudsman did say that he could only rely on the previous data. I think that has been answered. I will allow him to answer.

Mr BERKMAN: I have tried to narrow the question.

CHAIR: I think it was the same question, but go ahead, Mr Reilly.

Mr Reilly: The report we are currently preparing will look at that issue, perhaps not in as much detail as in prior reports but it will still look at it. I would prefer to rely on that when it is published. When we do these reports we go through quite a lengthy consultation process with the agencies to test what we think. We reach our views and we test that with the agency and then we do often adjust what we say to make sure that what we are doing is based on accurate information, because we present these reports to the public and to parliament and I am very mindful we have to get it right because our credibility is everything. Once again, subject to the direction of the chair, we hope that some updated information will be available in that next report.

CHAIR: Thank you, Mr Reilly. That concludes the hearing for today. I thank you for your attendance and thank you and your team for the wonderful work you do.

The committee adjourned at 11.01 am.