



Speech By

Peter Russo

MEMBER FOR TOOHEY

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JUSTICE, INTEGRITY AND COMMUNITY SAFETY COMMITTEE

Report, Motion to Take Note

 **Mr RUSSO** (Toohey—ALP) (3.51 pm): I rise to speak on the Justice, Integrity and Community Safety Committee's report No. 16 on the oversight of the Queensland Family and Child Commission for the 2023-24 financial year. This report highlights the role the Queensland Family and Child Commission plays in protecting children, supporting families and holding our systems accountable. Established under the Family and Child Commission Act 2014, the Queensland Family and Child Commission's purpose is clear: to promote the safety, wellbeing and best interests of children and young people. It does this by monitoring Queensland's child protection and youth justice systems, undertaking research, advocating for reform and engaging with children, families and communities.

One of the commission's responsibilities is maintenance of the Child Death Register and the operation of the Child Death Review Board. In 2023-24, sadly 422 child deaths were recorded, a slight reduction on the previous year. The board reduced its backlog of cases, reviewing 70 in total, with suicide again confirmed as the leading cause of death among young people aged 10 to 17. The board's recommendations have consistently pointed to systemic shortcomings: the impacts of parental substance abuse, gaps in youth detention and the need for stronger mental health services for children. These are not statistics; they are tragedies that must guide reform.

A central theme in the hearing was the blue card system. Commissioner Natalie Lewis made it clear: while the blue card is important, there has been an historic over-reliance on it. The reality is that it functions as a record of conviction, not a guarantee of safety. In kinship care, this over-reliance has created unacceptable barriers. Safe and suitable family members have been prevented from caring for children due to administrative decisions rather than genuine risk. Commissioner Lewis advised that legislative changes passed last year could see up to 200 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children move from residential care to family placements, but this will only occur once a commencement date has been set. Until then, families remain needlessly separated.

When asked by the member for Maiwar about the decline in mental health of juveniles in detention, Principal Commissioner Luke Twyford stated his concern about youth detention and the use of watch houses. Too many children remain detained for extended periods, often in conditions that worsen their mental health. Isolation, lack of sunlight and separation from families compound trauma rather than address it. Commissioner Lewis and Principal Commissioner Twyford were explicit when they said—

... we are still seeing far too many children routinely held in watch houses. Irrespective of everything that goes on around it, the reality is that the science is incredibly clear in terms of the impact on an adolescent brain. They are spending extensive periods in isolation—no stimulation, no sunlight, no contact with families.

Detention must become a place of rehabilitation, not punishment. The current over-reliance on punitive responses—embodied in the so-called Making Queensland Safer Laws—does not reduce offending. Prevention and early intervention must be prioritised. Restorative justice conferencing was identified as a proven approach that delivers accountability for young people and justice for victims. Removing or weakening these options is a step backwards. Commissioner Lewis advised that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children make up nearly half of those in out-of-home care and more than half of those in detention.