

Cairns and Murgon watch-houses inspection report: Focus on detention of children

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.

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.

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. For example:
 - the Cairns watch-house was overcrowded at the time of the inspection and has no natural light in its cells or common areas
 - the Murgon watch-house has no access to fresh air
 - in both watch-houses there is a lack of privacy regarding access to toilets.
- The admission process at both watch-houses is inadequate. Of particular concern is that health clinicians are not generally involved in the assessment process and the process is not specifically designed for children, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children.

- The approach for managing at-risk children in watch-houses is inadequate compared with the options available in youth detention centres.
- Some children are being held in isolation from others, due to either being the only child in the watch-house or because they need to be removed from other children. This can cause significant harm to them.
- 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.
- There are no organised activities for children.
- In the case of the Murgon watch-house, important service providers (such as youth justice, health and mental health professionals) do not have regular, consistent and coordinated access to detained children. This means the children are not being regularly visited by services that can check on their welfare, and if necessary, escalate concerns.

Based on the information in the 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 address the concerns we identified during the inspection.



Catchment

This watch-house is in the catchment for Cleveland Youth Detention Centre (345 km away; approx. 4-hour drive)



Location

On Gimuy country in Cairns City in Far North Queensland

Cairns watch-house

On 5 January 2024:

11 children were being held
- 9 boys, 2 girls

10

were Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander children



Catchment

This watch-house is in the catchment for Brisbane Youth Detention Centre and West Moreton Youth Detention Centre (242 km away; approx. 3-hour drive)



Location

On Wakka Wakka country in Murgon, in the South Burnett region

Murgon watch-house

On 20 November 2023:

3 children were being held
- 2 boys, 1 girl

All

were Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander children

