

6 October 2023

The Honourable Jeremy Rockliff MP
Premier of Tasmania

Sent to: jeremy.rockliff@parliament.tas.gov.au

CC: guy.barnett@parliament.tas.gov.au; roger.jaensch@parliament.tas.gov.au;
madeleine.ogilvie@parliament.tas.gov.au

RE: Urgent action required to address the emergency at Ashley Youth Detention Centre

Dear Premier Rockliff,

We welcome the findings of the *Commission of Inquiry into the Tasmanian Government's responses to Child Sexual Abuse in Institutional Settings* and thank the Government for its commitment to accepting and implementing all recommendations.

We remain extremely concerned for the safety of the children currently held at Ashley Youth Detention Centre, particularly considering the Final Report confirms there are 'current and live risks' for detainees and recommended its urgent closure.

Since our previous correspondence to Minister Jaensch (13 September 2023) calling for the immediate closure of Ashley and transition to community-based care, we have met with Tasmanian community organisations to discuss how we can respond to the current emergency at Ashley and better support Tasmanian children and families. Many organisations and individuals hold serious and ongoing concerns about the safety and wellbeing of the young people detained at Ashley, and for all children involved in the Tasmanian criminal justice system. We also share many concerns about the lack of concrete timeframes and steps for the implementation of the therapeutic model of youth justice proposed by the draft Youth Justice Blueprint released in late 2022.

It has now been two years since former Premier Peter Gutwein announced the closure of Ashley, yet it seems we are still no closer to a date. Waiting any longer for change is unacceptable.

We also note the Government's announcement of a proposed southern youth detention facility at Pontville. This is not an adequate or appropriate response to the findings of the Commission of Inquiry, and we have no confidence that the development of a new southern youth detention centre will address any of the underlying issues contributing to our child safety and youth justice systems.

A new detention centre is not a therapeutic response. It will not provide greater opportunities for early intervention and support, and it will not address the needs of Tasmanian children in care, who so often end up within our youth justice system rather than receiving care and support.

Our community organisations — who already know and work with Tasmanian families and children — stand ready to work alongside the Tasmanian Government to offer additional support. With appropriate assessments to identify treatment and social needs, a detailed plan for community-based supports, and sufficient resourcing to develop an effective long-term therapeutic relationship, we know we can achieve positive outcomes for these children, their families and communities.

We, the undersigned, seek the following:

- **The urgent appointment of specialist forensic experts to assess all detained children and identify their treatment needs to plan for their care in community**

Practitioners and organisations working in the area of youth justice have identified a lack of comprehensive specialist assessment services for young people, which is needed to accurately assess their needs and determine effective options for treatment. We believe an appropriate first step to address the immediate needs of the children held at Ashley would be to appoint specialist practitioners (for example, forensic psychiatrists with experience working with young people) to conduct assessment and develop community-based treatment plans for those children currently detained.

- **The development of a multidisciplinary working group**

Although we are concerned with the immediate safety of the children held at Ashley, we are also conscious of the long-term changes needed to truly transform our youth justice system into a model which is safe and effective. We stand ready to work with Government to implement all recommendations from the Commission of Inquiry and provide advice based on our experience, and evidence from other jurisdictions. We recommend the Government convene a working group — with members from civil society organisations, community practitioners and experts in the fields of child safety and youth justice — to progress the reform we know is so urgently needed.

This is an emergency. The Government must act now to uphold the rights of all Tasmanian children and ensure they are safe. The closure of Ashley is just the first step — we need an effective, evidence-based therapeutic model to support our young people, families and communities.

We look forward to hearing from you and would welcome the opportunity to meet in person to present our views in more detail.

Yours faithfully,

- **54 Reasons**
- **Adrienne Picone, CEO of TasCOSS**
- **Australian Lawyers' Alliance**
- **Catherine Robinson, University of Tasmania**
- **Dianne Underwood, CEO of Colony 47**
- **Ebba Herrlander Birgeron, University of Tasmania**
- **Jackie Hallam, Acting CEO of Alcohol, Tobacco and other Drugs Council (ATDC) Tasmania**
- **Jane Hutchison, President of Community Legal Centres Tasmania**
- **JusTas**
- **Justice Reform Initiative**
- **Nicole Asquith, Director of the Tasmanian Institute of Law Enforcement Studies (TILES)**
- **Onesimus Foundation**
- **Prisoners' Legal Service Tasmania**
- **Uniting Church in Australia, Synod of Victoria and Tasmania**
- **Val Kitchener and Rob White, Tasmanian OPCAT Network**