

MEDIA RELEASE

REPORT NO 141 – 2021 INSPECTION OF BANKSIA HILL DETENTION CENTRE INTENSIVE
SUPPORT UNIT

EMBARGOED UNTIL 12:00PM ON TUESDAY 19 APRIL 2022

Following from months of increasing concerns about the treatment of young people at Banksia Hill Detention Centre, the Inspector of Custodial Services took the unusual step of conducting a short inspection of the Centre in December 2021.

Inspector Eamon Ryan said the previously unscheduled inspection found that young people were sometimes being managed in ways that did not meet international standards and arguably breached their human rights.

Mr Ryan said the months leading up to the inspection had seen a rise in the number of critical incidents, including detainee self-harm, suicide attempts, and staff assaults.

'The Centre was presenting as increasingly in crisis and unable to safely manage the needs of all of the young people in detention. This was especially so for a cohort of highly vulnerable youth acting out regularly and through their actions dominating the attention of the management of the facility,' Mr Ryan said.

Because of the nature of the concerns, the inspection focussed only on the conditions and treatment of detainees in the Intensive Support Unit (ISU), where 'poor' behaviour, and youth at risk, are managed.

After analysing youth records, observing operations and interviewing young people and staff, it was evident that Banksia Hill was under extreme pressure and consequently not managing young people according to its own rules, or those expected internationally.

'Our report is critical of the conditions at Banksia Hill and for many it will be difficult reading. What much of it comes down to is that it is not fit for purpose as a youth detention centre. It looks like, and in many respects runs like, an adult prison,' Mr Ryan said.

Staff shortages have compounded the problem, with adult prison officers being stationed at the facility to assist in maintaining order and security. Recent critical incidents have also regularly resulted in the deployment of response teams from the Department's Special Operations Group. There have even been occasions where chemical agent (also known as pepper spray) has been used to control the behaviour of young people during an incident.

While recognising the challenging nature of the behaviour – including serious self-harm and suicide attempts, staff assaults, fence and roof ascents, and infrastructure damage – Mr Ryan emphasised that you cannot lose sight that these are young people, many of whom have significant impairments, traumatic backgrounds of abuse and neglect, and diagnosed complex neurological disorders.

'This tells us that the management and care of these children must be trauma informed and evidence based with at the very least an equal focus on welfare needs alongside custodial needs,' Mr Ryan said.

It was also troubling that, due to regular lockdowns, other young people not involved in any of the incidents were significantly impacted. They were often unable to access services (such as education, training, programs or recreation) as all the attention was towards managing the ISU cohort.

It was, however, pleasing to see that after many years of recommending the need for a strong, consistent operational philosophy for Banksia Hill, the Department has commenced work on the development of a trauma informed model of care. If successfully developed and implemented, this is the initiative that is most likely to have lasting impact and change.

Mr Ryan said it was important to recognise the difficult challenge and trauma also faced by many staff in having to manage a centre that is not fit for purpose.

'The Department has committed to work towards change, which is positive. But the young people in Banksia Hill need change now – they need support, understanding and more appropriately trained staff with a focus on youth care. Their rights need to be respected.'

Eamon Ryan
Inspector

For further media information:

The Inspector, Mr Eamon Ryan, will be available for comment from 12:00pm on Tuesday 19 April 2022 and can be contacted on 0421 480 925.