

Making Justice Work response to the release of the Final Report for the Royal Commission into the Protection and Detention of Children in the Northern Territory

The recent release of the final report of the Royal Commission into the Protection and Detention of Children in the Northern Territory was a landmark day for Territorians.

The report revealed a system in crisis, with widespread abuse and neglect of vulnerable children and young people. The Royal Commission has stated “Governments cannot choose to ignore the law” in allowing this long-term damage to be done.

When it comes to reforming the Territory’s broken child protection and youth justice systems, we all want the same thing.

We want less crime, fewer victims and safer communities. We all want our community’s children to have every opportunity to flourish and contribute to society.

This requires child protection and youth justice systems focused on strengthening and supporting children and young people, not failing to protect and care for those most in need.

Youth crime is rarely far from the headlines in the Territory.

Now, more than ever, is a time to connect kids with education, family, culture and community.

The best way to combat crime is to prevent it from occurring in the first place.

We know that when our kids spend time in prison, they often come out worse off than when they entered. This means they’re more likely to re-offend.

In the Royal Commission’s final report, Mick Gooda and Margaret White identified an extensive list of deep seated and confronting issues that have plagued the Territory for years, at an enormous human and financial cost to us all.

They also put forward a range of important recommendations which Making Justice Works supports including closing the Don Dale Youth Detention Centre, raising the age of criminal responsibility from 10 to 12 years old and ending the detention of children under 14.

Crucially, many recommendations relate to stopping young people from becoming involved with criminal activity in the first place (such as increasing family support before children become institutionalised) and making sure prison is a last resort, by increasing diversionary and therapeutic responses to children in trouble with the law.

The recommendation to invest in a specialised youth police force and build police capacity to effectively respond to youth also means that more young people will be diverted out of the justice system before the damage is done.

While the findings of the Royal Commission are shocking and damning, they provide a platform for the Territory to lead the nation in reforms.

It is essential that the NT Government takes this chance to implement the recommendations, which will involve extensive legislative change, and that the Federal Government supports these changes and provides funding to make this a reality.

We commend the NT Government for having immediately responded to the release of the final report by committing substantial funds towards its implementation. However, we are concerned that the Commonwealth Government has not yet followed suit, and call on it to do so as a matter of urgency.

We also urge the Territory Government to increase engagement with Aboriginal community controlled organisations and hand back decision-making powers to Aboriginal communities to allow for culturally-specific and local, responses and solutions.

Northern Territory Police also have a significant role in leading responses to reduce reoffending in young people. To do so, policing policies and strategies must reflect what the evidence says works.

The Royal Commission findings are a great place to start in reforming our youth justice and child protection systems, but police also must also change the way they do business.

Police can take the lead in prevention not enforcement when it comes to children

Police have a role in diverting kids away from the justice system and back into the community and family, supported and in school.

Recent reports have suggested camouflaged police will be armed with assault weapons to patrol Alice Springs and Darwin at night, to allay community concerns over the Christmas period.

This would be a dangerous and retrograde move.

We know that some young people are on the streets at night because they live in unsafe homes.

Some of these at-risk young people will progress to having involvement with the justice system if we don't intervene now.

Equipping police officers with military-grade weapons would only serve to increase fear and tension among young people and the broader community.

We must ensure that all of our efforts and resources support an evidence and rights-based approach to youth justice and public safety. This means addressing the underlying causes of crime, reducing reoffending and ensuring the safety of victims.

Not only does this give us the opportunity to reduce crime, but it will lead to long-term savings.

Our community also stands to save \$335.5 million over 10 years by implementing the report's recommendations – highlighting that not only does locking up children not reduce crime but it is a costly failure.

No longer can reports of systemic failures fall on deaf ears.

Thank you to the many Territorians who shared their stories, insights and expertise in the hope of positive change.

The Territory is in a unique position to show leadership when the nation is watching. Through careful and evidence-based reforms, we can lead Australia by setting the highest standard for child protection and youth justice systems, which will benefit us all.

Making Justice Work

Making Justice Work is a coalition of over 40 organisations from across the NT with a common interest in effective responses to crime in our community. Our asks and proposed reforms are available on our website <http://makingjusticework.wixsite.com/website>