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Locked-in care is a 'hard place to be happy'

Children's Commissioner Andrew Becroft has today released a new report where children and young people say, in their own words, what it's like to live in secure residential care.

Commissioner Becroft says the report, *A Hard Place to be Happy*, contains important challenges from children and young people, aged 9 to 17, about their experiences in care and protection residences.

"I found this report extremely difficult to read, and I think most New Zealanders would too.

"Children and young people have the right to have their views heard, considered and taken seriously. The voices of the children and young people contained in this report are insistent. They are distressing. We must take them seriously.

"History tells us large-scale residential care homes do not serve children well. The voices gathered here confirm our present institutional model of care must become a relic of the past," he says.

"As one child told us, 'I think they are setting ourselves up to fail. We will have to do things on our own. We can't cook, we can't keep our fitness up. We can't do anything ... I think it will affect my life when I'm older.'

"It's important to note these are not youth justice facilities. None of these children and young people are there because they have done anything wrong. They are there because of their complex needs which require highly specialised care along with increased support for their families," says Commissioner Becroft.

Fifty-two children and young people were interviewed between August 2017 and September 2018 about their experiences of living in one of five secure residential care facilities, four of which are run by Oranga Tamariki and one by Barnardos. At the time of these interviews, facilities varied in size from small eight-bed complexes to larger 20-bed institutions.

"As part of our ongoing monitoring of secure residences, we always interview children and young people. We decided, in consultation with Oranga Tamariki and Barnardos, to collate their voices in one report," says Commissioner Becroft.

"These children and young people would be better placed in small, child-centred homes where they have continuous access to a wide range of supports, like mental health services.

"Oranga Tamariki has already committed to phasing out these out-dated locked facilities and replacing them with small community-based group homes. For children and young people like those whose voices this report shares, this change cannot happen quickly enough.

"As one young person told us, 'I wish these places never existed'.

"*A Hard Place to be Happy* contains important insights from children and young people living in care and protection residences. I am committed to sharing these voices, so they can influence changes and improvements to our current system. The good news is, these children and young people are being heard," says Commissioner Becroft.

The full report is available at occ.org.nz.

ENDS

Notes to editors:

Children and young people were interviewed as part of our role as the independent monitor of residential care services provided by Oranga Tamariki and Barnardos under the Oranga Tamariki Act 1989, and as part of our [Optional Protocol to the Convention against Torture and other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment](#) (OPCAT) mandate.

Barnardos is contracted to run one of these residences by Oranga Tamariki. Oranga Tamariki runs the other four.

Secure care and protection residences are locked facilities run by Oranga Tamariki and Barnardos. All children and young people placed there have been assessed as being at serious risk of harm – physically, mentally or emotionally. This group includes those who are at risk from other people in their lives as well as those whose own behaviour has the potential to be harmful to themselves or others. The average length of placement in most care and protection residences is around two months but some children and young people are placed there for much longer periods.

Although this is a voices report without recommendations, it is being released as part of the Office of the Children's Commissioner's *State of Care* series.

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