

2023 INSPECTION OF WEST KIMBERLEY REGIONAL PRISON

WEST KIMBERLEY REGIONAL PRISON IS AT A CROSSROADS

West Kimberley Regional Prison (WGRP) has been a unique facility from its inception back in 2005 and opening in 2012. The prison was founded on an innovative philosophy that Kimberley prisoners should be held on, or close to, country and traditional culture should inform service delivery.

The prison was designed to facilitate community style living with the majority of prisoners having responsibility for cooking, cleaning, and laundry in their allocated houses. Conceptually this would develop their independent living skills and, hopefully, reduce their likelihood of returning to prison.

As we have reported previously, over time the prison strayed away from the original philosophy, largely due to population pressures elsewhere and the demand for beds. This trend has continued, and we saw it again during this inspection. But despite some positive local initiatives designed to return towards the foundations of the original philosophy, there needs to be a concerted effort for this to succeed. The plan for a new facility in Broome is the ideal opportunity for the Department to develop a long-term Kimberley custodial plan that emphasises the role of WGRP and how it can return to the original design philosophy (see Recommendation 1).

But in the short-term significant population pressure in the Kimberley, Pilbara and across the entire system is the immediate challenge placing WGRP at a crossroad. Most regional facilities, except for Eastern Goldfields, are currently operating at or close to maximum capacity. In fact, at the time of writing all three facilities in the Kimberley and Pilbara were operating at over 100% of their stated general purpose bed capacity. This puts enormous pressure on every facility to find bed availability.

The population pressure is compounded by staffing shortages and WGRP is directly impacted by both issues. Our report highlights many of the staffing challenges faced by WGRP, including finding suitable accommodation for staff and offering sufficient incentives to attract staff to work in the prison (see Recommendation 3).

As a result there are many prisoners, both men and women, at WGRP who are not fully engaged in regular meaningful activities, and this has a significant impact on their prospects for rehabilitation. These concerns are not just our opinions; they were expressed to us by staff and prisoners alike and evidenced by the results of our pre-inspection surveys as well as our interactions with them throughout the inspection.

Commendably, most staff, and not just custodial staff, demonstrated a willingness to just get on and do their best to make it work. Around the time of the inspection, we saw relatively low levels of workers compensation and personal leave being taken. The main driver of staffing shortages was vacant or unfilled positions.

We heard of staff being willing to undertake overtime or extra hours, including members of the leadership group undertaking weekend shifts, to ensure the prison operated as close to a normal routine as possible. This is something we often observe in our inspections, but it is unwise to rely on the goodwill of local staff to continue to make it work and more needs to be done at a system level to adequately staff prisons, so they are able to operate effectively.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We had until recently one long serving Independent Prison Visitor for WKRP who was a community volunteer appointed by the Minister for Corrective Services. She attended WKRP on a regular basis providing an opportunity for the men and women placed there to raise issues and feedback that information to our office. I acknowledge the importance of her work undertaken and thank her for her contribution over many years to our ongoing monitoring of WKRP. She will be missed by one and all.

This creates an opportunity for community minded individuals who may wish to undertake this rewarding volunteer opportunity to give something back to the community and make a difference in the lives of people incarcerated in WKRP.

I also acknowledge the support and cooperation we received throughout the inspection from the Superintendent and staff at WKRP and from key personnel in the Department.

The men and women living in WKPR who took the time to speak with us and share their perspectives also deserve our acknowledgement and thanks.

Finally, I would like to thank the members of the inspection team for their expertise and hard work throughout the inspection. I would particularly acknowledge and thank Charlie Staples for his hard work in planning this inspection and as principal drafter of this report.

Eamon Ryan

Inspector of Custodial Services

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