

2023 INSPECTION OF BUNBURY REGIONAL PRISON

BUNBURY REGIONAL PRISON SHOULD NOT BE DEFINED BY RECENT NEGATIVE PUBLICITY AROUND STAFF CONFLICTS

Bunbury Regional Prison (Bunbury) has traditionally been seen by the Office of the Inspector of Custodial Services as a positive and productive prison catering to the needs of an increasingly complex cohort of prisoners. During our 2023 inspection many of these attributes were still evident, but it is also fair to say that cracks were starting to appear.

Bunbury is the largest regional prison in Western Australia and the fourth largest across the prison estate. It has a general-purpose capacity for almost 570 medium- and minimum-security men, with the population sitting at around 530 at the time of writing.

It is expected to deliver an increasingly broad range of services to the men sent to live there, including prison employment, education, training, therapeutic programs, external community work, and general reintegration support services. Most recently this has been expanded to include the Djarraly AOD Reintegration Service, which provides support for men with drug and alcohol addictions in preparation for release back into the community. Management and staff at Bunbury have a record of just getting on with the job and making it work. But it is unclear if this is sustainable without greater system level support.

Our report highlights many concerns around staffing and infrastructure that have not kept up with the population and service delivery expansion at Bunbury. The Department has supported all but one of the seven recommendations we made to address these concerns. Most importantly, we recognise the Department's support for the first four recommendations covering the need for a statewide strategic plan for all prisons, a review of Bunbury's leadership structure and positions, an audit of Bunbury's infrastructure needs, and a statewide recruitment and retention strategy for health and mental health staff. These are not immediate short-term solutions and we will monitor progress and implementation with keen interest.

During the inspection we had many opportunities to interact with staff in both structured and informal settings. This included talking with uniformed staff, civilian staff, staff working in support services, and managers and leaders. We also undertook a pre-inspection survey of staff, which had a 30% participation rate. It is fair to say we heard many complaints and concerns about conflicts between some staff, including allegations of bullying behaviour. We also heard concerns about how matters were handled, and the level of communication and support people involved had received.

But it would be unfair to say such negative comments and sentiments define the perspectives of all staff at Bunbury. We also had many positive interactions with staff where they acknowledged the positive support and relationships they had with their peers and colleagues and how this was a positive factor in their enjoyment of working in the prison.

It is not for the Office to determine the merits or otherwise of such complaints, in fact we are specifically prohibited from dealing with individual complaints under our legislation. We can, and do, use the information to inform our work or make appropriate referrals to other agencies that do have jurisdiction to deal with the substance of such matters.

Our approach to these matters, consistent with our inspection standards, was to consider if there were appropriate mechanisms available for staff to raise grievances and have them resolved; if there were escalation processes; and if there were external mechanisms available to pursue complaints that were not resolved or were of a more serious nature. During the inspection we were satisfied that such processes were available. We made no assessment as to whether the complaints process adequately addressed the specifics of each matter raised, nor should we because to do so would take us outside of our remit.

Suffice to say, any outstanding issues require resolution as soon as possible to minimise the impact on the operation of the prison and to ensure the safety and wellbeing of all staff.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We have two Independent Prison Visitors for Bunbury who are community volunteers appointed by the Minister for Corrective Services. They attend Bunbury on a regular basis providing an opportunity for the men placed there to raise issues and feed back that information to our office. I acknowledge the importance of the work undertaken and thank them for their contribution over several years to our ongoing monitoring of the prison.

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

The men living in Bunbury 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 Liz George for her hard work in planning this inspection and as principal drafter of this report.

Eamon Ryan

Inspector of Custodial Services

18 April 2024