

The Inspector's Overview

WOOROLOO PRISON FARM: DIFFICULT TRANSITION BUT GENUINE OPPORTUNITY

CONTEXT: PREVIOUS INSPECTIONS

This is the report of an announced inspection of Wooroloo Prison Farm ('Wooroloo'), conducted in late March 2012. It is the fourth occasion on which this Office has reported to Parliament and the public on the prison's performance. The first two inspections, conducted in 2002 and 2006, found Wooroloo to be one of the state's best performing prisons.ⁱ However, the 2009 inspection concluded that while there were areas of good practice, its overall performance and sense of direction had significantly declined.ⁱⁱ It was against this backdrop that the 2012 inspection was conducted.

In 2009, the reasons for Wooroloo's decline were far from straightforward but included several related ingredients. Some involved developments over which the prison itself had little direct control but which required a clear sense of direction from the Department of Corrective Services' head office coupled with strong and careful local management. The prison was having to transition, in less than eight years, from a small unfenced facility housing around 160 prisoners to a 360-bed prison behind a substantial perimeter fence. These changes were leading to considerable uncertainty as to the prison's exact role and future direction, a situation which was compounded by fragility in senior management positions, divisions amongst some staff and declining staff/prisoner relationships.

2012: TIME TO RE-FOCUS AFTER A PERIOD OF UNCERTAINTY

In 2009 we believed there was reason to be cautiously optimistic about Wooroloo's future. There were signs that the management situation would be stabilised, staff were certainly keen to see progress, and there was a positive official response to the inspection. In the period from 2009 to 2012, the prison has seen some significant infrastructure improvements and has continued to do well in a number of specific areas of activity.ⁱⁱⁱ Unfortunately, however, despite some noticeable progress during 2011 and early 2012, the underlying cultural, relationship and directional issues have not yet been adequately addressed. The limited progress has caused understandable frustration to staff and the issues must be addressed if Wooroloo is to maximise its undoubted opportunities.

Fortunately, the time is right for improvement. In late 2011, a very experienced substantive Superintendent was appointed and an experienced senior management team is now largely in place. In addition, the prison has now been operating at or close to full capacity for over two years, so that some of the 'fear of the unknown' that was evident in 2009 should have passed. The inspection therefore provided an opportunity for reflection and a potential catalyst for action. At the exit debrief which I presented to the prison on 30 March 2012, there was a high measure of agreement with our core findings and proposals. The Department of Corrective Services' responses to the formal

i See: Office of the Inspector of Custodial Services (OICS), *Report of an Announced Inspection of Wooroloo Prison Farm*, Report No. 17 (October 2002) and OICS, *Report of an Announced Inspection of Wooroloo Prison Farm*, Report No. 39 (January 2007).
ii OICS, *Report of an Announced Inspection of Wooroloo Prison Farm*, Report No. 61 (September 2009).
iii See below.

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recommendations in this report also reflect an acceptance of the challenges and a commitment to change.^{iv}

One of the more important recommendations is Recommendation Five which states: ‘With staff consultation and input, develop a strategic plan for Wooroloo Prison Farm outlining the prison’s vision, role, priorities, culture and values.’ The Department has supported this recommendation and there are several reasons why it is important, not only at Wooroloo but also at other prisons. At Wooroloo itself, a frank, consultative discussion of issues such as vision, culture and values should contribute to addressing some of the internal issues relating to morale and communication.

Implementation of the recommendation also requires the Department’s Head Office to assist in articulating Wooroloo’s position in the system as a whole. The Department’s overriding philosophy is ‘Making a Positive Difference’ and to some extent this is about how staff go about their work on a daily basis within a prison environment. However, it should also involve the development at every prison of: (i) a guiding philosophy that articulates what ‘making a positive difference’ means in terms of vision, practice and goals at that facility; and (ii) what can reasonably be expected in terms of improved correctional outcomes, and how are these outcomes to be evaluated? At present, out of all the state’s prisons, only Boronia Pre-release Centre for Women has a detailed and publicly articulated guiding philosophy of this sort.^v

INFRASTRUCTURE

Prior to becoming a prison farm in 1972, Wooroloo was a sanatorium. Many of its buildings are heritage listed and this imposes some restrictions on development at the site and some requirements with respect to the nature of any restoration and refurbishment activity. However, on balance, these limitations have been a positive thing. Some impressive renovation and restoration work has been undertaken, and Wooroloo is testimony to the fact that prisons do not necessarily require purpose-built cells: the most recently renovated units provide some of the best prisoner accommodation and staff work spaces in the state. A new health centre, reception centre and education and program rooms also provide excellent facilities and working conditions. Ideally, however, renovation work needs to be undertaken on a number of other heritage-listed buildings. They are deteriorating and will become increasingly expensive to fix as time goes by.

iv The first five recommendations in the report are all supported. They include ensuring a fully substantive senior management team; improved anti-bullying strategies, processes and training; improving clarity and consistency of communication; and the provision of better training opportunities for senior officers. Specific commitments are also made with respect to anti-bullying training and training for senior officers in October 2012.

v See www.correctiveservices.wa.gov.au/_files/.../boronia-philosophy.pdf. Although Boronia does have a clear guiding philosophy, there has been no rigorous evaluation of its success in achieving its goal of ‘the reduced rate of reoffending’: see OICS, *Report of an Announced Inspection of Boronia Pre-release Centre for Women*, Report No. 79 (July 2012).

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Another positive development has been the opening in February 2012 of a new work camp at Dowerin, which is managed from Wooroloo. This is a purpose-built facility with accommodation and facilities which are far superior to those at its predecessor camps at Kellerberrin and Wyalkatchem.^{vi}

REACHING THE NEEDS OF ABORIGINAL MEN

Two of the most obvious features of the cohort of prisoners held at Wooroloo are the relatively low number of Aboriginal prisoners and the relatively high number of foreign national and non-English speaking prisoners.^{vii}

The most recent Australian Bureau of Statistics snapshot of the nation's prisons confirms that Western Australia has by far the highest per capita incarceration rate of Aboriginal people in the country.^{viii} Department of Corrective Services' statistics also show the total number of Aboriginal prisoners to be at unprecedented levels. On 9 August 2012, there were 1942 Aboriginal prisoners out of a total of 4936.^{ix} It is also universally acknowledged that Aboriginal people, as a cohort, have very high re-entry needs. In the recent report of an announced inspection of Boronia Pre-release Centre for Women, I drew attention to the small and declining number of Aboriginal women accessing its excellent facilities and well-resourced re-entry services, and to the lack of central acknowledgment and planning around this issue.^x

Unfortunately, the same picture emerged at Wooroloo. In 2009, Wooroloo held around 260 prisoners, 60 of whom (23 %) were Aboriginal. During 2011 and 2012 Wooroloo's population was around 360 but generally only 40 to 50 Aboriginal prisoners (11 to 14 %) have been there. If the state is to maximise the opportunities for prisoner rehabilitation and for reduced recidivism amongst core target groups, there needs to be better understanding of the trends and a sharper strategic focus on the needs of this group.

PRISONER SERVICES AND OPPORTUNITIES

Like all prisons, Wooroloo faces budgetary constraints and these are unlikely to ease in the coming years. In essence, this report shows that it does a good job within those constraints. Health services are good. Education and training opportunities are also good, but there are waiting lists for some courses. Unfortunately, however, far too many prisoners are either unemployed or under-employed. This does not accord with Wooroloo's intended role and philosophy, and must be a key focus of both the prison and the Department over the coming years.^{xi}

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- vi The role and work of the new Dowerin work camp will be further examined, alongside other work camps, in a future report by this Office.
- vii The number of foreign national prisoners is increasing and Recommendation 9 of this report urges the Department to finalise and implement policies to guide the management of such prisoners. The Department has supported this and says it is an existing initiative. However, the development of a policy has now been in train for well over two years.
- viii In Western Australia, around one in 32 Aboriginal adults is currently in prison. The next highest rate is found in South Australia (one in 45): see Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Prisoners in Australia 2011*, Table 3.3: [http://www.ausstats.abs.gov.au/ausstats/subscriber.nsf/0/7B05CD44A0E2FC8ACA25795F000DBD0F/\\$File/45170_2011.pdf](http://www.ausstats.abs.gov.au/ausstats/subscriber.nsf/0/7B05CD44A0E2FC8ACA25795F000DBD0F/$File/45170_2011.pdf)
- ix http://www.correctiveservices.wa.gov.au/_files/about-us/statistics-publications/statistics/2012/cnt120809.pdf
- x OICS, *Report of an Announced Inspection of Boronia Pre-release Centre for Women*, Report No. 79 (July 2012).
- xi See Recommendations 15 and 16.

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Wooroloo plays a major role as a 're-entry' facility and generally does a good job in terms of practical skill development and community outreach. A good example of this is driver training. It may sound a small thing to many people in the general community, but there was no mistaking the pride with which prisoners told us that they had acquired licences and this achievement had boosted both their self-esteem and their post-release prospects. The arrangements for visits and for recreation, including organised external games, are also real highlights at Wooroloo.

Neil Morgan

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