

MEDIA RELEASE – EMBARGOED UNTIL 12 NOON ON TUESDAY 12TH AUGUST 2014

Report No. 90 – Acacia Prison

On 28 July 2014, the privately operated Acacia Prison experienced its first escape since opening in 2000. In releasing his report of an inspection of Acacia conducted in November 2013, Inspector of Custodial Services Neil Morgan said:

‘Serco will pay a price for this escape, probably financially and certainly reputationally. Rigorous scrutiny is needed of any physical security weaknesses as well as the possibility of human error. The lessons learned at Acacia will also need to be rolled out across the whole system. Obviously, one escape is one too many. But the reality is that prisons are risky environments and security breaches will occur from time to time. Acacia houses many people who are risk takers, would prefer to be somewhere else, and will test boundaries. And it is not alone: earlier this year, two young men took some high risks to escape from the maximum security section of Roebourne Prison during a cyclone.’

Mr Morgan pointed out that Acacia has also faced the challenge of a massive building project which will increase its capacity from 1000 to 1400, and make it Australia’s largest prison:

‘Large scale construction projects inside the perimeter of custodial facilities always bring risks, something Banksia Hill Detention Centre found to its cost in 2012 and 2013. I drew sharp attention to the risks at Acacia at the time of the inspection, and all key parties responded promptly, but it is possible that the project contributed in part to the escape.’

Noting the level of public and political interest in privatization and the costs of prison services, the Inspector also called for greater accountability from the Department of Corrective Services:

‘The amount paid to the contractor is quantifiable, known and publicly reported. What is not being properly quantified or reported is the amount it costs the Department to monitor the contract and provide central services.

A decade ago, the Department told us its costs were 30 per cent of the fee paid to the contractor. It has never chosen to revisit this figure in the past but on this occasion I specifically requested an estimate. Initially, the Department was unable to provide a figure but finally settled on 13 per cent. I am not able to explain why it has not been routinely tracking its costs or how they could apparently have dropped by seven to eight million dollars a year.’

Mr Morgan concluded that:

On the evidence, there is nothing to indicate that Acacia is not offering value for money but the Department needs to apply consistent and transparent accounting methodologies, and to report

more fully on its costs. Although it has accepted this in relation to Acacia, I am disappointed that it has rejected a recommendation to report on the relative costs of all the state's prisons.'

In terms of Acacia's operations, the inspection found that it was generally performing to a good standard in most areas but that there had been some slippage from the very high level found in 2010. The main slippage points were staff/prisoner interaction and dynamic security, health services and community re-entry assistance for prisoners. Acacia was also struggling to find sufficient meaningful activities for its prisoners. This problem was exacerbated by regular staff shortages due to prison staff having to undertake 'hospital sits' to cover shortfalls in the prisoner transport contract (a problem at many prisons). Mr Morgan expressed his concern at these issues but emphasized that Acacia is not a 'failing prison':

'All prisons go through periods when performance will be better than it is at other times and Acacia is still performing to a good standard in most areas. Even after the escape, it is not the prison that most concerns me and there are more pressing problems elsewhere, especially women's imprisonment. But there is undoubtedly a good deal of work ahead to lift performance back to 2010 levels and to safely manage the transition to 1400 prisoners.

With the current contract for prison services expiring in May 2016, Serco has a strong incentive to position itself for the future. I have been impressed with their responsiveness to date and will inspect Acacia again in late 2015. This will allow us to assess the impact of the prison moving to 1400 and to provide independent advice to government as it makes its decision about a new contract.'

The report also emphasizes that it is imperative for the Department to provide clarity in setting Acacia's future direction within the prison system as a whole. Mr Morgan noted that Acacia is just one of part of a total system of 16 prisons for which the Department has responsibility:

'Effective and efficient prison systems are those which improve community safety by reducing recidivism. This means not just 'finding a bed' for prisoners but targeting resources at their needs. The Department is refreshing its focus on reducing recidivism and setting new targets. The Acacia expansion presents some real opportunities but maximizing these opportunities will require good Departmental planning as well as innovation and strong performance from Serco.'

Neil Morgan
Inspector

11th August 2014

For more detail, see the Inspector's Overview to the Report (copy attached)

Key Findings

Positive findings from the 2013 inspection included:

- The prison continued to meet most of its contractual requirements.
- The most tangible innovation was the Custodial Management System, an ATM-like kiosk that allows prisoners to self-manage their daily life, freeing up officers to complete other duties.
- The majority of staff demonstrated enthusiasm towards their job and a commitment to organisational values.
- Prisoners' care and wellbeing needs were generally being met to good standards.
- Acacia offered a full-time dentistry service with an emphasis on restorative work instead of tooth extractions.
- The Indigenous Enrolled Nurse encouraged Aboriginal prisoners to establish greater engagement with health services.
- Re-entry services were innovative and making good use of their resources.

Areas for improvement included:

- Staff at all levels appeared preoccupied with expansion and this was leading to a reduced focus on the 'here and now'.
- Custodial staff were regularly deployed off-site to conduct 'hospital sits' which were not covered by the limits of the Court Security and Custodial Services contract. This ultimately affected the operations of the prison. Recreation was frequently cancelled and staffing in the Detention Unit was often too low.
- Dynamic security had dropped back and custodial staff were spending too much time in offices and not interacting out in the units. Without a strong physical presence in the units, the risk of bullying, standover tactics and fighting increases.
- For such a large prison, the number of computers available for prisoner use was far too low.
- A new external store and training kitchen were built as part of the expansion and completed before schedule. However, the buildings remained empty.
- Operational staff felt that communication from management had slipped
- Resources were stretched in a number of areas, including health and re-entry services
- The Department were yet to replicate Acacia's innovative products and services at other prisons in the state.

For Further Media Information

Neil Morgan will be available for comment from 12 noon on Tuesday 12th August and can be contacted on 0427 426 471.

The full report will be available on the Inspector's website (www.oics.wa.gov.au).