

MEDIA RELEASE – EMBARGOED UNTIL 12 NOON ON MONDAY 15th DECEMBER 2014

Report No.93 – Bandyup Women’s Prison

Strategic and systemic neglect of the needs of women prisoners over the past ten years, coupled with severe overcrowding, have made Bandyup Women’s Prison the most complex and challenging prison in the state according to the latest report from the Inspector of Custodial Services.

In Western Australia, women now comprise almost 10 per cent of the state’s prison population. Their numbers have been growing rapidly, and twice as fast as men. Female prisoners also have a different profile and very different needs from males. Many are victims and mothers as well as offenders and rates of Aboriginal over-representation are even higher for women than for men.

As the state’s primary women’s prison, Bandyup accommodates an extremely diverse and complex mix of prisoners. It holds prisoners of all security classifications, remand and sentenced, women from remote and regional areas, those with acute mental health needs, the majority of pregnant prisoners, and a number of mothers with infants.

In releasing the report of a March inspection of Bandyup, Inspector Neil Morgan said:

‘Many jurisdictions specifically acknowledge the needs of women prisoners by allocating them much more funding per capita. In WA, however, we seem to have done the opposite in recent years: despite a massive investment in male prisons, there has been very little investment in female prisons. Women have been neglected and Bandyup has borne the brunt.’

Mr Morgan acknowledged that the Minister and the Commissioner for Corrective Services have been actively examining options for new facilities for female prisoners, that the Department has accepted most of the recommendations, and that it has pursued some improvements at Bandyup after the March inspection. However, he said the issues should have been responded to more urgently:

‘In 2011 we released a report that clearly identified the problems and the need for urgent action. Unfortunately, the Department’s responses to that report lacked any real sense of urgency and some were factually wrong or out of touch.

The Public Administration Committee of the Legislative Council was so concerned by our findings that in 2012 it undertook its own investigations. The Committee criticised both the poor state of Bandyup and the inadequate planning for women.

The Department’s passive acceptance of the unacceptable over this time, particularly in relation to strategic focus, funding, and health/mental health services, directly contributed to the situation we found at Bandyup in March. There had been

virtually no progress against our 2011 recommendations. Indeed, the situation had generally deteriorated.'

Despite having an official 'operational capacity' of 259, and being very full at 230, Bandyup's population now steadily sits above 300 and has been as high as 319. Women who do not have beds must sleep on mattresses on the floor or on trundle beds, often with their heads next to a toilet. This is degrading and unhygienic and does not happen in male prisons. Since the inspection, the Department has started installing bunk beds in more cells but this does not yet meet demand, and bunk beds in very small cells are not a long term solution.

Mr Morgan said that much of the site is crowded, disorganised and run down compared with many male prisons. The inspection found that environmental health and hygiene standards had been compromised, and that access to services, including health and mental health, was seriously stretched. The prison's capacity to have a positive impact on recidivism is severely limited by insufficient employment, education and training, and recreational and personal development activities. Bandyup also has the highest rate of assaults by prisoners on staff in the state, usually the result of mental health problems.

Mr Morgan also emphasised the impact on staff:

'Not surprisingly, the neglect of Bandyup, especially in comparison with male prisons, saw staff become increasingly frustrated. During 2012 and 2013, as staff/management relations deteriorated badly, there was very little evidence of proactive head office support.

There are signs that relationships and morale are improving but the past failure to acknowledge the severity of neglect at Bandyup has taken a significant toll on the facility, its staff and the women who are held there. I do not suggest that women's needs have been intentionally sidelined, but the effect of policies and priorities has been to substantively disadvantage female prisoners.'

Looking to the future, Mr Morgan said that targeted and significant investment is required in women, not only at Bandyup but also at other facilities:

'A new women's prison is needed but this is many years away. The government must therefore re-allocate existing assets and an announcement is expected shortly. Options under active consideration have included new units at Hakea Remand Prison (a male facility), and the taking over of Wandoo Reintegration Facility and the minimum security facility at Bunbury.

Whatever decision is taken, it must treat women as women and meet their specific and highly complex needs. This cannot be done if they are treated as an adjunct to a male prison.'

Mr Morgan noted that in the mid-2000's, when the Department had a senior managerial position devoted to women's corrections, positive progress had been made and that strategic focus and services deteriorated when that position was abolished. He said:

'I am perplexed that the Department has rejected our recommendations to reinstate such a position or positions over the past four years. In my view the situation of women will not improve unless there is a dedicated high level 'champion': someone who is responsible for ensuring that the needs of women are properly evaluated and then embraced in policy and practice across the whole Department.'

Neil Morgan

Inspector

11th December 2014

For further Media Information:

Please see the Inspector's Overview to the Report and Key Findings (attached).

The Inspector, Professor Neil Morgan, will be available for comment from 12 noon on Monday 15th December and can be contacted on 6551 4201 or 0427 426 471.

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