

The Inspector's Overview

WORK CAMPS: WASTED ASSETS BLOT AN OTHERWISE A-POSITIVE SCORECARD

AIMS OF WORK CAMPS

Western Australia has five work camps, all of which cater for male prisoners in regional areas. Work camps are small, low-security facilities which hold only highly selected low-risk prisoners. The objectives of such camps are reflected in a number of 'R words': reparation, rehabilitation, responsibility, reintegration and reducing recidivism. Work camps are open to all suitably qualified prisoners but are seen as having particular benefit to Aboriginal men in the regions.

Work camps achieve reparation through prisoners undertaking work in the local community. They contribute to rehabilitation by enhancing prisoners' skills and self-esteem. They enhance responsibility and discipline because prisoners must respond to the trust that has been placed in them and live together collectively and collaboratively, with limited staff supervision. Reintegration is enhanced in that work camps are, in effect, a half-way point to freedom. The intended outcome, of course, is to reduce the social and financial costs of recidivism.

LOCATION AND INFRASTRUCTURE

Key facts about the five camps are set out below. With the exception of the Roebourne camp, which is at the front of the main prison, they are located some distance away from their host prisons:

- Walpole (current buildings added in 2010; capacity 12; host prison Pardelup);
- Wyndham (opened June 2011; capacity 40, host prison West Kimberley Prison in Derby);
- Warburton (opened August 2011; capacity 24 minimum-security prisoners and six secure cells; host prison Eastern Goldfields);
- Dowerin (opened February 2012; capacity 20 prisoners; host prison Wooroloo); and
- Roebourne (opened June 2014; capacity 30 prisoners; host prison Roebourne).

All the camps consist of high quality buildings, with most of the infrastructure having been approved for construction and completed within the last six years.

Work camps, however, are not a new phenomenon. Dating back to the late 1990's, more than ten other camps previously operated. Some lasted only a few months, others lasted over a decade. These now-defunct camps always had a temporary feel to them, most being based in old buildings that had previously served very different purposes. For example, the original Walpole camp was a disused Main Roads camp, the Bungurun camp near Derby was an old Leprosarium, and the Kellerberrin camp was a disused school. Those camps that were built from scratch were also low-budget and temporary in form; for example, the old Wyndham camp consisted of vans and dongas.

Inevitably, the infrastructure at the defunct camps was basic, and sometimes it was poor. However, inspections by this Office and a 2008 evaluation by the Department of Corrective Services ('the Department') concluded that work camps were making positive contributions to the correctional system.ⁱ On the back of this success, the Department developed successful business cases for new purpose-built infrastructure. Its objectives were to provide a better range of services to a larger number of prisoners in locations closer to their home country, to contribute positively to local communities, and to reduce recidivism.

THE GOOD NEWS AND FUTURE OPPORTUNITIES

We have previously inspected individual work camps when inspecting their host prisons, but this is the first independent review of work camps as a whole. Broadly speaking, it is a good news story: the evidence is clear that proactive, well-run camps have delivered a bonus to local communities and positive opportunities for prisoners.

Work camps have made tangible and valuable contributions through their community work. For example, prisoners at Bungurun restored some of the old leprosarium buildings as well as the adjoining cemetery. This helped to ensure the preservation of a moving, important, and largely unknown part of Kimberley history. Prisoners from the Walpole camps made a huge contribution to the construction of the Bibbulmun and Minda Biddi long distance trails. The Millstream Work Camp played a significant role in the upkeep of the Chichester National Park, including the control of toxic weeds and construction of tourist amenities.

There is no doubt that the work conducted by work camps has carried a positive reputational value for the Department as well as a dollar value. Far from being negative towards the prospect of work camps in their 'back yards', regional communities now vie for the chance to host a camp. The camps have also provided a good testing ground for prisoners who are coming up for release. Inevitably, some prisoners have abused the trust but escapes have been infrequent and short-lived, and none have involved serious threat to community safety.ⁱⁱ

The findings of this report suggest that there is a great deal on which to build for the future. In particular, there is a strong case for developing new work camp models to meet the needs of women and juveniles. To date, apart from two very short-lived experiments in the mid-1990's and the early 2000's, work camps have been limited to adult men. There is also scope for work camps to increase the amount of accredited job-training that occurs at the camps, and to link more prisoners directly to employment on release. The opening of the Roebourne camp in mid-2014 has already led to some valuable initiatives in this regard.

i Department of Corrective Services (DCS), *10th Anniversary of Work Camps in Western Australia, commemorative booklet* (2008); DCS, *Work Camps Future Directions* (2008).

ii Office of the Inspector of Custodial Services (OICS), *Escapes and Attempted Escapes from Corrections in Western Australia* (2015).

THE BLOT: EXPENSIVE, UNDER-UTILISED ASSETS

The decision to establish larger, purpose-built facilities instead of re-purposing old buildings was understandable. However, the up-front construction costs were high and the use of camps has generally been only 50 to 70 per cent. In fact, despite a total of \$40 million being spent on the new camps, they have generally housed fewer prisoners than the defunct camps they replaced.

The problem is especially acute at Warburton (over \$13 million) and Wyndham (around \$8 million): Wyndham is only around 50 per cent full and Warburton is even emptier. This has been the situation for almost the entire period that the two camps have been open. Both camps are at risk of becoming white elephants. Valuable assets of this sort must be fully-utilised if the Department is to maximise its opportunities for reducing recidivism. Crowding pressures in the mainstream prisons add to the urgency of the Department fully using all its assets.

The main reason that is given for the under-use of the camps is that there are too few suitably qualified prisoners. However, this begs a series of questions about the Department's planning and priorities, especially from 2008 to 2010. If there were not sufficient prisoners to access the camps, why were they built? If there were sufficient prisoners to justify building the camps in 2009, what had changed by 2011 when they opened? And why were work camps for male prisoners prioritised for funding over major pressure points such as women's imprisonment.ⁱⁱⁱ

Quite apart from the initial construction costs, camps that are half-empty or worse will cost more per head to run and will never meet their full potential.^{iv} There is also a cost to reputation and credibility, especially at Warburton. Funding for Warburton was approved when the community was reeling from Mr Ward's death in the back of a prisoner transport vehicle, described by the Coroner as a 'terrible death that was wholly unnecessary and avoidable'.^v The community had long been arguing for a facility in the Ngaanyatjarra Lands and, despite the distressing context of its announcement, they warmly embraced it. Their patience is admirable and they remain extraordinarily optimistic, but they feel badly let-down. It is to be hoped that the Premier's 2014 commitment to reducing Aboriginal incarceration, and the 2015 opening of the new Eastern Goldfields prison will provide fresh momentum and ensure that the camp is fully used for culturally relevant justice-related services.

This will also require whole of Department support and drive. This has not always been there. Successive Ministers and Commissioners have been supportive of work camps but some of their senior officials have been ambivalent at best and unsupportive at worst. Some have argued, in effect, that work camps are an expensive and unnecessary distraction, and that prisoners should either be in mainstream prisons or under community supervision.

iii Investment was clearly needed in women's prisons by 2008/2009 and the situation has now reached crisis point: see OICS, *Female Prisons in Western Australia and the Greenough Women's Precinct*, Report No. 91 (July 2014); OICS, *Report of an Announced Inspection of Bandyup Women's Prison*, Report No. 93 (October 2014).

iv See below on costs.

v Hope AN, *Record of an Investigation into Death, Ref 9/09*, Inquest into the death of Mr Ward, Coroner's Court of WA (12 June 2009) 5.

This flies in the face of their own Department’s policies and broader government positions. It is also naïve and wrong. First, work camps do not pose major risks if the correct risk assessments are carried out. Secondly, work camp prisoners are not under community supervision orders; if they were not at work camps, they would be in mainstream prisons where the costs are likely to be higher, not lower.

The following table shows the operating costs of the camps. With the exception of Walpole, the cost per prisoner per day at work camps is certainly more than the state-wide average cost per prisoner per day. However, this is to be expected: prison sites in regional areas will always be smaller and more expensive per head than the large metropolitan prisons, and the only comparison is the cost at a work camp versus the cost at the host prison. In fact, it generally costs less per prisoner per day at work camps than it costs at host prisons. The cost would also reduce if the camps were used to capacity, as promised five years ago.

Costs per prisoner per day: 2011-2012 figures (excluding some costs)^{vi}

Work camp	Total prison system cost per prisoner per day (\$)	Work camp cost per prisoner per day (\$)	Host prison cost per prisoner per day (\$)
Millstream	171	248	336
Walpole	171	122	177
Wyndham	171	282	327
Warburton	171	461	216
Dowerin	171	245	139

In examining the question of costs, it should also be noted that the table does not fully factor in three other important considerations: the dollar value of the community work undertaken by work camp prisoners; the reputational value of work camps; and the fact that if work camps are reducing recidivism as intended, they will reduce long term costs.

WHY ARE THE CAMPS UNDER-UTILISED?

I cannot intelligently or adequately explain the camps’ under-utilisation. Unfortunately, there appear to be only two possible explanations. Either the Department’s original planning was flawed (and its commitments at the time undeliverable), or it has failed to follow through on deliverables.

From the Department’s point of view, the explanation for under-utilisation is simple: too few prisoners are considered suitable for work camp placement. To be placed at a work camp, a prisoner must be assessed as minimum-security and also as suitable for camp placement. However, this needs further scrutiny. The Department’s modified assessment and classification tool, introduced in 2009, increased the number of non-Aboriginal people at minimum-security but impacted adversely on the number of Aboriginal people reaching minimum-security and work camp suitability.^{vii}

vi See also Chapters 4 and 5 of this report.

vii OICS, *Report on the Flow of Prisoners to Minimum Security, Section 95 and Work Camps* (January 2013).

This was bound to impact on the viability of the work camps in which it had invested so heavily, but when we undertook a review in 2012, there was no evidence that the Department had been monitoring the impact of the revised assessment tool or examining potential changes.^{viii} In addition, over the past 18 months, the number of people that the Department rates as minimum-security has declined, thereby reducing the potential pool.

It may be true that there are too few people who currently qualify for work camp placement but technical ‘explanations’ of this sort are fundamentally unconvincing. Certainly, over time, changes will occur in the prison population but circumstances cannot have changed so much that facilities considered viable in 2009 could have become unviable by 2011. In fact, the sad reality is that the overall makeup of the prison population is depressingly constant, especially when looking at the circumstances of regional Aboriginal men.

CONCLUSION

Work camps have been a very positive feature of the Western Australian correctional system for many years. The Department has good reason to be proud of what has been achieved and can now build positively for the future. This report recommends developing new work camp models for female prisoners and juveniles. The Department has supported these recommendations in part and has committed to a feasibility study.

Unfortunately, however, there are significant human, financial and reputational costs in the Department not using costly assets for which it developed business cases only a few years ago. Half-filled camps also impact on its ability to improve public safety by reducing recidivism. If the camps are to be maximised, all key parties must support and drive them. Mechanisms must also be found to increase the flow of prisoners to the camps. The Department has supported in part our recommendations in this regard and is due to complete a review of its assessment and classification system in June 2015.

I look forward to tracking progress, and hope to be able to report in the future on vibrant, successful justice programs operating out of all the existing work camps, and the expansion of the concept to new areas.

Neil Morgan

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viii Ibid.