

Inspector's Overview

Wooroloo continues to impress, but the challenge is to do better.

Wooroloo Prison Farm (Wooroloo) has set itself a vision to be Australia's leading re-entry prison providing innovative and sustainable rehabilitation, improved community safety, and setting aspirational standards for all. Similarly, one of the Department's fundamental goals is the rehabilitation and reintegration of prisoners to prevent re-offending and thereby improve community safety. Given the right settings, both are lofty but ultimately achievable goals.

Minimum security re-entry prisons like Wooroloo play a key role in the rehabilitation of prisoners by developing their skills and capacity for post-prison life in ways that maximises the potential for them to break the cycle of recidivism. For this reason, there should be keen interest and investment in their success.

Wooroloo is a unique prison. It consists of many heritage listed buildings spread over quite expansive grounds that are all very well maintained. The accommodation units are not secured and apart from the external perimeter fence there are no internal barrier fences. Prisoners are given many privileges that are not permitted in most prisons, including greater freedom of movement for most parts of the day. For custodial officers this can be a daunting prospect at first, but many we spoke to said that although it was not without risk it was conducive to the overall goals of rehabilitation and reintegration.

We saw many positives during this inspection with strong and stable leadership and many areas performing very well. Health services at Wooroloo deserve mention. We are often critical of the health services we see in prisons, with issues around staffing, access to services and supports, or other inefficiencies impacting services for prisoners. But these were not critical issues at Wooroloo and, despite not having a substantive Clinical Nurse Manager, we saw a functional and positive health team. The health service generally provided a complete suite of services covering mental health and allied health services, including a regular dental service. This is proof of what is possible in a prison setting.

But it is fair to say that it was not all positives. We heard examples from some female staff of inappropriate behaviour by some of their male colleagues that would not be acceptable in any modern workplace. Both the prison Superintendent and the Department responded positively to these concerns and set out the steps that they would take to address these concerns. As we noted in our de-brief to all staff at the end of the inspection, the responsibility of response is not just a systemic one and it is incumbent on all staff to ensure that respectful relationships exist, and inappropriate behaviour is called out and those impacted by it are supported.

We heard concerns from many prisoners about the impact of COVID-19 restrictions placed on in-person social visit sessions, particularly from men with younger children who come to visit them. This was probably the biggest concern that men raised with us during the inspection. Pleasingly, these

restrictions started to ease shortly after our inspection and the Department's response to our draft report indicated that visit sessions had almost returned to pre-COVID processes.

We also heard that delays in the approval processes for external activities at Wooroloo were causing an impact. The farm and many workshops at Wooroloo are outside of the secure perimeter and prisoners require approval to work there. Also, other activities, such as reintegration leave and prisoner employment programs, require similar approvals. Shortly after our inspection we were told that many of the outstanding approvals had been received and the Department's response to our recommendations noted that these processes were under review.

We have also identified in our report opportunities for improvement in the therapeutic and voluntary programs that are made available to prisoners at Wooroloo. Addressing the rehabilitation needs of prisoners requires a combination of education, training and employment opportunities, that are supported by a range of programs aimed at reducing the drivers of offending behaviour. If Wooroloo and the Department are to meet the goals they have set for themselves then they must offer a comprehensive range of all these activities.

Finally, the Dowerin Work Camp continues to be an impressive facility that is very much appreciated by the men who are sent there and the local communities who benefit from the excellent work the men undertake in those communities.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We have two experienced Independent Prison Visitors who are community volunteers appointed by the Minister for Corrective Services. They attend Wooroloo on a regular basis providing an opportunity for the men to raise issues and feedback that information to our office. I acknowledge the importance of their work and thank them for the contribution they have made to our ongoing monitoring of Wooroloo.

It is important to also acknowledge the support and cooperation we received throughout the inspection from the Superintendent and staff at Wooroloo and from key personnel in the Department. The men who took the time to speak with us and share their perspective also deserve our acknowledgment 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 Aaron Hardwick for his hard work in planning this inspection and as principal drafter of this report.

Eamon Ryan
Inspector of Custodial Services

27 October 2021