

The Inspector's Overview

KARNET: A PRISON IN TRANSITION

2007 – 2011: A TIME OF TRANSITION

This is the report of an announced inspection of Karnet Prison Farm (Karnet), conducted in February 2010. Karnet has a long and interesting history. It originally opened in 1963 as a small facility catering for around 60 convicted alcoholics. Given that drug and alcohol use are such significant factors in offending in 2010, it is interesting to reflect on the fact that 50 years ago the justice system was exploring specialised and targeted approaches to the rehabilitation of offenders with entrenched substance abuse problems.

The prison farm gradually expanded and at the time of our 2007 inspection it held 174 prisoners. It had developed a reputation for good management of prisoners and a relaxed but productive rehabilitative culture. It has also always made a massive contribution to the prison system as a whole through its efficient farm operations, its abattoir and associated work. And of all the state's prisons, it has been one of the best, if not the best, in terms of its community acceptance, support and links.

Reports by this Office have consistently identified Karnet as both a good performer and a place with greater potential. This remains the case in 2010. In the October 2007 Report this translated to a recommendation that Karnet should be expanded to a capacity of 240 through the construction of a new unit and through additional investment in infrastructure and human resources. This recommendation was not supported by the Department of Corrective Services (the Department) which said that 'an expansion at Karnet Prison Farm is not part of the Department's capital investment plan'.ⁱ Two main reasons were given for this: 'expansion is problematic due to environmental considerations' and 'the need for additional minimum security capacity is not paramount.' In 2007, the Department's future asset planning also included a 'new minimum security prison (replace Karnet)'.ⁱⁱ At the same time, there was a great deal of discussion in the prison and the local community about the prospect of the site being taken over by a major mining company.

Not surprisingly, this combination of factors and plans led to very real uncertainty about Karnet's future. But two and a half years later, at the time of this inspection, the position had changed markedly. Prisoner numbers in the system as a whole had increased rapidly – some of this increase being predictable and some less so – and there was particular pressure for more minimum security beds.

In January 2010, Karnet held 256 prisoners, a 40 per cent increase from 2007. This increase had not been achieved through the installation of new purpose built accommodation but through the addition of extra beds to existing cells which were originally intended for single occupancy.

In addition, it had been announced that a new 60-cell unit would be added to the site to accommodate another 120 double-bunked prisoners. The Department said that it expected construction to be completed by April 2010 but at the time of writing this Overview the building project had suffered some delays and was not expected to be completed until October 2010.

i OICS, *Report into the Announced Inspection of Karnet Prison Farm*, Report No. 47 (October 2007), 48.

ii *Ibid*, ii.

With a potential addition of 120 prisoners to existing numbers, it is projected that the population of Karnet could as much as double between 2007 and 2011. Over that time, it will therefore have moved from being a relatively small prison – and one that formed no part of future capital investment planning and was not considered appropriate for expansion – to a much larger facility with a rather more certain future. This rapid transition presents both challenges and opportunities. Fortunately, given the prison’s high level of performance, it is relatively well-placed to meet these demands provided it is afforded the necessary support and resources.

CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

The challenges that Karnet faces include coping with the increasing number of prisoners and possible changes in the profile of offenders, providing sufficient activity for prisoners, and ensuring a positive staff / prisoner culture. The report makes a number of recommendations to those ends.

Infrastructure

There is a significant ongoing investment in new (mainly transportable) buildings. In addition to the new accommodation block, this includes a new ‘Shared Facilities Centre’ at the entrance to the prison, and more rooms for education and programs. However, a good deal of this is ‘catch-up’ investment, required to balance the limited investment in such facilities over preceding years. Furthermore, some parts of the site are run down and in urgent need of renovation and upgrading. In particular, Unit 1 should be replaced. As the prison expands, it is therefore critical to address existing deficits as well as focusing on the needs generated by the new unit.

Employment and Training

One of the most critical challenges for Karnet and for the system as a whole relates to employment and training. The Legislative Assembly Community Development and Justice Standing Committee recently concluded that: ‘The Department of Corrective Services ... operates with significant cost pressures which cause the under resourcing of employment, training and general education initiatives.’ⁱⁱⁱ The Committee found ‘a significant level of underemployment’ in the prison system as a whole (‘masked by an over assignment of prisoners to menial tasks so they can be provided with a gratuity’), and referred to ‘demonstrably inadequate’ infrastructure.^{iv}

Traditionally, Karnet has been something of an exception in terms of employment levels, with high levels of real employment both inside and outside the prison. However, the increase in numbers that has already occurred coupled with the pending expansion pose considerable challenges. There are limits to the amount of work available inside the prison

iii Community Development and Justice Standing Committee of the Legislative Assembly of the Parliament of Western Australia, *Interim Report: ‘Making Our Prisons Work’: An Inquiry into the Efficiency and Effectiveness of Prisoner Education, Training and Employment Strategies*, Report No 4 in the 38th Parliament, June 2010 <<http://parliament.wa.gov.au/web/newwebparl.nsf/iframewebpages/Committees+-+Current>> xv.

iv Ibid, xx.

and at the time of the inspection, Karnet had been unsuccessful in its business case for expanding the existing industries and for developing new industries.^v Karnet and the Department continue to negotiate on these issues but as yet there is no confirmed commitment to additional industries infrastructure or resources.

Karnet is a minimum security facility with a proven track record and a positive community standing. It should therefore be possible to expand external community work activities under section 95 of the *Prisons Act*. Indeed, this seems essential if the high levels of employment are to continue. In the course of this inspection, local councillors and others were certainly very positive about and supportive of such initiatives and Recommendation 4 is directed to this end. It recommends both that external community work be expanded and that a work camp attached to Karnet should be created. Although the Department states that it does not support either part of Recommendation 4, we will be examining any progress with respect to both of these matters in future inspections.

Recommendation 6 also relates to employment. The Prisoner Employment Program (PEP) is something of a flagship program, and has attracted significant investment. The aim is to allow prisoners to undertake employment in the last few months of their sentence or to become registered as a job seeker and engage with a community job network. To date, only a limited number of prisoners have actually accessed PEP. In the past 12 months we have published reports on all three of the metropolitan minimum security facilities, namely, Wooroloo Prison Farm, Boronia Pre-release Centre for Women and now Karnet Prison Farm. At Wooroloo, three people were involved in PEP; at Boronia there were two; at Karnet only one prisoner was approved for actual employment and two for job-seeking.

Prisoners are certainly very keen to engage in PEP and the Employment Coordinators at the three facilities are enthusiastic and hard working. The main reasons for the low uptake of PEP are the restrictive selection criteria, and slow approval processes which cause significant frustration to potential employers, prisoners and prison staff. Recommendation 6 is therefore that (i) the approval processes and (ii) the eligibility criteria for PEP be modified so the program is accessible for a greater number of prisoners. Quite independently, both the Community Development and Justice Standing Committee^{vi} and the Department's own review of prisoner employment^{vii} have made very similar findings and recommendations. After initially responding that it did not support any part of Recommendation 6, the Department resubmitted a response that it supports the recommendation in part and that it will 'look at ways to streamline the process for PEP approvals.' We believe that action is essential on this matter. It is far from clear that the high levels of investment in PEP and the current low levels of engagement offer value for money.

v See [2.20].

vi Community Development and Justice Standing Committee of the Legislative Assembly of the Parliament of Western Australia, *Interim Report: 'Making Our Prisons Work': An Inquiry into the Efficiency and Effectiveness of Prisoner Education, Training and Employment Strategies*, Report No 4 in the 38th Parliament, June 2010 <<http://parliament.wa.gov.au/web/newwebparl.nsf/iframewebpages/Committees+-+Current>> 86 (Finding 13 and two associated recommendations).

vii Department of Corrective Services, *Review of Offender Employment in Western Australia 2010* (undated), 47 – 50.

Aboriginal Prisoners

It is well recognised that recidivism rates amongst Aboriginal prisoners are high and that due to their socio-economic circumstances, many Aboriginal people have limited formal educational or trade qualifications. Imprisonment does at least provide an opportunity for positive intervention, assistance and self improvement and Karnet certainly offers some particularly positive opportunities.

In terms of keeping prisoners close to home, there are also numerous Aboriginal families in the Kwinana / Armadale / Pinjarra / Mandurah / Rockingham areas. However, Karnet continues to house a very small number of Aboriginal prisoners. We have therefore recommended that, subject to appropriate security assessments, proportionately more Aboriginal prisoners should be placed at Karnet, in order to benefit from the positive opportunities it offers. Clearly this is an issue we will continue to monitor.^{viii}

Conclusion

Karnet Prison Farm has always been a good performer. It appears to have a more certain future than was the case three years ago and the expansion in numbers offers both opportunities and challenges. Given its track record, I am optimistic that, provided there is adequate investment in infrastructure and a vigorous proactive engagement with the supportive local community, it can build further on its positive and unique place in the State's prison system.

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viii Initially the Department's response to this recommendation was simply 'not supported'. After further discussions with the Inspectorate, it now states that it supports the recommendation in part.