

The Inspector's Overview

BORONIA PRE-RELEASE CENTRE FOR WOMEN: CERTAINLY UNIQUE, BUT DOES IT REACH KEY TARGET GROUPS AND IMPROVE CORRECTIONAL OUTCOMES?

This is the report of an announced inspection of Boronia Pre-release Centre for Women ('Boronia') which was conducted in late January 2012. Boronia has been operating since May 2004 and this is the third occasion on which this Office has reported to Parliament and the public on its performance.ⁱ

There is no doubt that Boronia is different from every other prison in the state, remaining something of a showpiece for an alternative approach to correctional services and attracting national and international interest. It has achieved a good deal and has been well resourced to do so. The political point scoring which once appeared to have the potential to derail the facilityⁱⁱ has all but disappeared.

Overall, Boronia provides a safe, secure, calm and positive environment for the women who are held there. There have been no major incidents since it opened and it has a positive community profile. This profile has been achieved through activities such as its catering training and services, the choir, the gala day and the Community Engagement and Advisory Group. None of these things happen by accident and they are a credit to the foresight and actions of management and staff.

In these senses, Boronia is undoubtedly 'working' and the general 'feeling' at the prison itself and on the part of head office management is certainly positive. But satisfaction must not be allowed to breed complacency. The bar was set deliberately high for Boronia and, throughout its existence, it has been in a privileged position relative to other prisons. Consequently, expectations should be high. However, despite a number of previous recommendations Boronia still does not reach a representative cross-section of female prisoners and the opportunities for community outreach activities have not yet been maximised.

Two other important points must also be made. Firstly, after eight years, Parliament and the public are entitled to know whether Boronia's approach has actually 'worked' in terms of reducing reoffending and other social indicators. Secondly, with the exception of Boronia and the new West Kimberley Prison in Derby (due to open in October 2012), Departmental planning and action for women prisoners has been reactive, belated and ad hoc. Now, with some developments on the horizon, the time is right for a reflective stocktake of where Boronia has come and development opportunities.

i OICS, *Report of an Announced Inspection of Boronia Pre-release Centre for Women*, Report No. 42, April 2007; OICS, *Report of an Announced Inspection of Boronia Pre-release Centre for Women*, Report No. 62, November 2009.
ii See <http://www.abc.net.au/7.30/content/2005/s1285330.htm>

BORONIA PRE-RELEASE CENTRE FOR WOMEN: CERTAINLY UNIQUE, BUT DOES IT REACH KEY TARGET GROUPS AND IMPROVE CORRECTIONAL OUTCOMES?

A UNIQUE PLACE

Boronia is unique in many ways. Indeed, it was described by the Department in 2009 as ‘one of a kind’ and as a ‘complete departure from standard prison design and services.’ⁱⁱⁱ Several features combine to provide this uniqueness:

- **Location:** Boronia is in a very convenient metropolitan location close to services for prisoners, to transport for visitors and to other housing.
- **Design and facilities:** Boronia is the state’s most modern operational prison. The ambience is pleasant and the accommodation consists of shared houses, not cells. High quality modern infrastructure adequately supports its functions.
- **Size:** Boronia is a small facility, with a design capacity of just 70. It was deliberately planned small to permit a more personal and individualised focus on the women’s needs. It currently houses around 80 women (18 per cent of all female prisoners), making it the state’s smallest prison.
- **Pivotal and unique role:** Boronia is the only dedicated minimum-security and re-entry facility for women in the state.
- **Philosophy:** Boronia has a philosophy^{iv} which emphasises four values: ‘personal responsibility and empowerment’, ‘family responsibilities’, ‘community responsibility’ and ‘respect and integrity’. In line with this, women held at Boronia are called ‘residents’ not prisoners, a title afforded to no other group in the system.
- **Projected outcomes** of the philosophy include ‘the reduced rate of reoffending and the improved education, training, work and health of the women’.
- **Staff selection and training:** staff who wish to work at Boronia are subject to particularly rigorous training and selection processes.
- **Prisoner selection:** prisoners are only placed at Boronia after a rigorous screening selection process which includes assessments regarding any risk to children, mental health status and general suitability. Prisoners must also formally sign up to the centre’s values.
- **Children:** Boronia allows up to six children under the age of four to reside with their mothers. Normally, there is an age limit of twelve months at other prisons.

iii OICS, *Report of an Announced Inspection of Boronia Pre-release Centre for Women*, Report No. 62, November 2009 (iii).

iv Department of Corrective Services, *Boronia’s Guiding Philosophy* (http://www.correctiveservices.wa.gov.au/_files/prisons/prison-locations/boronia-philosophy.pdf)

BORONIA PRE-RELEASE CENTRE FOR WOMEN: CERTAINLY UNIQUE, BUT DOES IT REACH KEY TARGET GROUPS AND IMPROVE CORRECTIONAL OUTCOMES?

RELATIVE IMMUNITY FROM OVERCROWDING

Boronia has also been unique in terms of its prisoner numbers. It enjoyed a very gradual fill, only reaching 72 prisoners after almost five years of operation.^v Subsequently, it has been relatively immune from the pressures of overcrowding that beset so much of the prison system. As numbers have risen, extra beds have been installed so that it now generally houses around 80 women and can hold 82. Put another way, using nationally accepted benchmarks,^{vi} it is at 117 per cent of design capacity when full.

To have up to 24 women sharing bedrooms certainly goes against the centre's original intent and presents challenges to implementing its philosophy. However, the centre has managed the extra numbers well, and it must be said that it has not been affected by increased numbers to anything like the same extent as other relevant facilities. Its closest male counterpart, the Bunbury Prison Pre-release Unit ('PRU') has a similar design to Boronia and the same design capacity. It opened in October 2008 and was soon holding 100 prisoners. The PRU is also attached to an existing facility and has not been afforded the dedicated management and staff resources that Boronia has enjoyed.

In terms of comparisons with the rest of the women's estate, Boronia stands in depressingly sharp contrast to Bandyup Women's Prison ('Bandyup'). Bandyup is currently operating at 155 per cent of design capacity, and even after an extensive program to install double bunks in small, single cells, more than twenty women have been sleeping on mattresses on the floor. And Bandyup's ageing infrastructure is wholly inadequate for its design capacity of 183, let alone for 280 women.^{vii} The state's remaining 70 female prisoners are housed in claustrophobic compounds in the predominantly male prisons at Kalgoorlie, Greenough, Roebourne and Broome. The regional prisons generally do what they can to assist their female prisoners and are often quite innovative, but the numbers of women are small and the opportunities for structured re-entry initiatives very limited.^{viii}

v OICS, *Report of an Announced Inspection of Boronia Pre-release Centre for Women*, Report No. 62, November 2009 Chapter One.

vi The Australian Government *Report on Government Services 2009-2010* (<http://www.pc.gov.au/gsp/reports/rogs/2011>) measures 'prison utilisation rates' in all jurisdictions. The formula is the average daily population of prisons as a percentage of prison design capacity. It is generally accepted that the best utilisation rate is between 85 and 95 per cent in order to allow for movements between prisons, for segregating different people for risk management, and to allow for sudden upward fluctuations in prisoner numbers. Nationally, the prison utilisation rate was 105 per cent in 2009-2010. In Western Australia as a whole it was over 130 per cent, the highest by far in the country.

vii OICS, *Report of an Announced Inspection of Bandyup Women's Prison*, Report No. 73, August 2011.

viii OICS, *Report of an Announced Inspection of Roebourne Regional Prison*, Report No. 70, February 2011, Chapter Five; OICS, *Report of an Announced Inspection of Eastern Goldfields Regional Prison*, Report No. 72, June 2011, Chapter Three.

BORONIA PRE-RELEASE CENTRE FOR WOMEN: CERTAINLY UNIQUE, BUT DOES IT REACH KEY TARGET GROUPS AND IMPROVE CORRECTIONAL OUTCOMES?

REACHING PRIMARY TARGET GROUPS: ABORIGINAL WOMEN AND WOMEN WITH MENTAL HEALTH ISSUES

General Trends

Over the past decade, in line with national and international trends, the number of female prisoners in Western Australia has been rising proportionately faster than the number of males. It is also universally recognised that women prisoners have different needs, and often higher needs, than male prisoners. For example, rates of mental illness and victimisation tend to be higher amongst women, and they tend to have more child-rearing and family responsibilities. These factors are especially pronounced amongst Aboriginal women, who constitute 48 per cent of all female prisoners in the state^{ix} and many of whom have a depressing pattern of returning to prison.

Boronia is based on the philosophy that providing prisoners with better re-entry programs, including the opportunity to ease back into the community through a more normalised regime than a mainstream prison, will reduce reoffending and improve other social indicators. It must be remembered, too, that Boronia is the only minimum-security pre-release facility for women and the only alternative to Bandyup for women in the south west. Thus, whilst it is important to cater for the re-entry needs of all female prisoners, it is obvious that there must be a strong proactive focus on Aboriginal women, especially from the south west.

Aboriginal Women

Our 2009 Boronia report pointed out that Aboriginal women were under-represented at Boronia and over-represented in the more disadvantaged parts of the prison system. At that time there were 22 Aboriginal women at Boronia, the vast majority of whom were from the metropolitan area. We made a recommendation for proactive initiatives across the system, including the setting of measurable outcomes, targets and timeframes. The Department not only supported this recommendation but claimed it was ‘already a key focus ... and therefore implementation is ongoing and part of our continuous improvement philosophy.’ Relevant Departmental documents also emphasise the importance of a strong focus on Aboriginal women at Boronia.^x

In fact, there has been a continuous decline in the number of Aboriginal women at Boronia. At the time of the inspection in January, and despite the fact that Boronia’s numbers had increased from 72 to 80, there were only nine Aboriginal women there. This was well under half the 2009 number. And throughout 2011 the average was less than 14 and at times there were only five.^{xi}

ix On 21 June 2012, there were 206 Aboriginal women and 225 non-Aboriginal women in prison: see http://www.correctiveservices.wa.gov.au/_files/about-us/statistics-publications/statistics/2012/cnt120621.pdf

x For example, the Job Description Form for the position of Boronia Superintendent (<http://dcs-internet.wagov.bigredsky.com/files/vacancies/260713/3062294.pdf>)

xi See Chapter Two.

BORONIA PRE-RELEASE CENTRE FOR WOMEN: CERTAINLY UNIQUE, BUT DOES IT REACH KEY TARGET GROUPS AND IMPROVE CORRECTIONAL OUTCOMES?

These were very marked and very obvious changes. Given that the position of Aboriginal women was ‘a key focus’ of continuous improvement, one would reasonably expect the Department to have actively tracked numbers, analysed reasons for the decline, and examined potential strategies to rebuild and enhance access. To the contrary, the numbers appeared to come as a surprise to senior Departmental representatives and there was no evidence of such work having been undertaken.

Our concerns were raised prior to the inspection week. In response, we were provided with figures which indicated that the proportion of female Aboriginal residents at Boronia is similar to the proportion of male Aboriginal prisoners at Wooroloo prison, and somewhat higher than the proportion at Karnet and Pardelup prisons. However, these figures cannot justify or explain the low numbers at Boronia:

- Aboriginal women constitute a significantly higher percentage of prisoners (48 per cent of female prisoners) than Aboriginal men (38 per cent of male prisoners).
- It beggars belief that the objective characteristics and ‘qualifications’ of Aboriginal women to be at Boronia could somehow plummet in eighteen months.
- Many Aboriginal men are able to acquire minimum-security status and to access work camps and other positive external activities out of the regional prisons.
- The fact that there are relatively low numbers of Aboriginal men at Wooroloo, Karnet and Pardelup is also an issue of concern and not a justification for Boronia’s low numbers.
- Subsequent to the inspection, the number of Aboriginal women at Boronia has dropped back again, with only between six and eight there during May and the first three weeks of June 2012.^{xii}

This report makes a number of findings and a number of suggestions as to how the situation may be improved and the Department has supported the main recommendation which followed.^{xiii} This is a matter we will continue to track: the public have a legitimate interest in knowing whether the facility is reaching all the groups it was intended to reach, including those who have the highest re-entry needs.

Women with Mental Health Issues

It is acknowledged that female prisoners have high mental health needs and we have previously criticised the fact that so many are being held in a counter-therapeutic environment at Bandyup. The design and calm ambience of Boronia is inherently more therapeutic but women are ‘refused transfer to Boronia on mental health grounds if they are clinically unstable or if their risk is considered too great.’^{xiv} This policy position is sound but in our view, there are opportunities for it to be applied more flexibly. Furthermore, in line with Boronia’s philosophy, there are real opportunities for residents to access community based mental health services whilst at Boronia, with the view to improving continuity of treatment on release.

xii Calculated from Department of Corrective Services, Weekly Offender Statistics for May-June 2012 (<http://www.correctiveservices.wa.gov.au/about-us/statistics-publications/statistics/2012.aspx>)

xiii See Recommendation 1.

xiv See The Department’s response to Recommendation 1.

BORONIA PRE-RELEASE CENTRE FOR WOMEN: CERTAINLY UNIQUE, BUT DOES IT REACH KEY TARGET GROUPS AND IMPROVE CORRECTIONAL OUTCOMES?

MAXIMISING OPPORTUNITIES FOR PERSONAL RESPONSIBILITY AND EMPOWERMENT

Boronia's philosophy emphasises personal responsibility and empowerment. There are many areas where this is evident in the centre's operations, but we have concluded that this focus can be further enhanced without risk to residents, staff or the public and that there are some situations where the centre has adopted practices which are intended to be protective but can actually be disempowering. The Department has accepted some of our recommendations and rejected others.^{xv}

DOES BORONIA IMPROVE CORRECTIONAL OUTCOMES?

After eight years of operation, Parliament and the public are entitled to know whether Boronia's 'new way of doing business' actually 'works'. Boronia was not meant to offer just a different operational model: the aim was to achieve measurably improved outcomes. Staff and management at Boronia and in head office are justifiably proud of Boronia and believe that it is making a positive difference. But an independent, methodologically robust evaluation is required. Currently, there is too much reliance on anecdote and good feeling.^{xvi}

An evaluation of this sort will need to examine reoffending rates and probably also other social indicators. It will necessarily require comparison with the outcomes achieved from other prisons, including Bandyup and some of the male minimum-security prisons. It will also need to take account of the fact that Boronia houses a highly selected group of lower risk women.

IMPACT OF DEVELOPMENTS AT DERBY AND GREENOUGH

On many occasions over the past three years I have criticised the lack of planning and action for female prisoners at a time when their numbers were rising rapidly. The expansion in beds which has occurred has been almost entirely focused on male prisoners and there has been far too little focus on women.

Later this year there will be two important developments for women prisoners. First, the new West Kimberley Regional Prison in Derby ('Derby') will open, probably in October, with a dedicated women's unit. Secondly, one of the male units at Greenough Regional Prison ('Greenough') will be converted to a female unit. The net sum gain in terms of beds will be in the region of 65 to 70.

We will be examining these developments carefully over the coming months, including during a formal inspection of Greenough in October 2012. Greenough currently houses around 22 women and has not been able to offer them a very positive regime. If it is to build up to 72 (Boronia's total design capacity), while ensuring the adoption of a number of basic principles that underpin Boronia, including the need for a women-centred approach, it will need to be properly supported in terms of infrastructure, staff training and human resources across all areas, not least health, education and support services.

Neil Morgan
24 June 2012

xv See Recommendations 2, 9, 10, 15 and 17.

xvi See Recommendation 18, which the Department has supported subject to funding.