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Report No. 72 - Announced Inspection of Eastern Goldfields Regional Prison

Firm Future Foundations but Short Term Risks

Eastern Goldfields Regional Prison has managed to overcome many of the limitations caused by its ailing infrastructure to make steady progress in the provision of services to prisoners, said the Inspector of Custodial Services in releasing his most recent inspection report.

Inspector Neil Morgan said that despite the prison being poorly designed, poorly maintained and well beyond its use-by-date, it has refocused and markedly improved its performance over the past three years. The Inspector also welcomed the fact that approval has been given for a replacement prison, scheduled to commence operations in 2015, but raised some notes of caution for the intervening period.

'The biggest risk over the next four years is that the resources required for the new prison will come at the expense of the existing facility. Continued investment and support at the existing site is essential not only to meet the state's duty of care to prisoners but also to provide support and affirmation to staff,' Mr Morgan said.

Significant improvements included more positive relationships between all groups of staff, better opportunities for prisoners to undertake education and programs, and the number of prisoners (both male and female) undertaking out-of-prison activities.

'In the past, the lack of meaningful activity at Eastern Goldfields has been a major concern. The team at the prison is to be congratulated on their efforts – they are cohesive and have worked hard. There is now a much more positive atmosphere and outlook, not just for prisoners but also for staff,' Mr Morgan said.

A number of areas of major concern remained, however, particularly in relation to health services, the operation of the Aboriginal Visitor Scheme, the position of women prisoners, and the operation of the Mt Morgan's Work Camp.

'Health is such an important aspect of services, especially as the prisoners from the region tend to have high health needs. We found problems with respect to the lack of resources in the health centre and with the quality and consistency of services, including the screening of prisoners on admission, timely access to GP consultations, and continuity in the provision of medication,' he said.

'We also identified significant shortfalls in meeting the needs of Aboriginal prisoners from the region. The Aboriginal Visitor Scheme had not been functioning at Eastern Goldfields for some time and it is concerning to find that the Department does not support the introduction of a visiting Elders' Program.'

Unfortunately, the women prisoners, like their counterparts in other regional prisons, were faring poorly compared with male prisoners at Eastern Goldfields and with women in metropolitan facilities.

While the Inspection found the prison had an appropriate focus on a 'prison-to-work camp' philosophy, providing basic, practical skill development relevant to prisoners' home communities, access to such opportunities through the Mount Morgan's Work Camp was disappointing. Subsequent to the inspection, it has been decided that Mount Morgan's will close. Although a new work camp will open in Warburton, it is most unfortunate that Mount Morgan's never reached its full potential.

Neil Morgan

10 August 2011

Neil Morgan will be available for comment from 12 noon on Wednesday 10th August and can be contacted on 9212 6200 or 0427 426 471.

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