

The Inspector's Overview

BORONIA PRE-RELEASE CENTRE FOR WOMEN: STILL PERFORMING WELL BUT IS IT REDUCING RECIDIVISM AND CAN IT BE MORE INNOVATIVE?

Boronia Pre-release Centre for Women ('Boronia') fulfils a very specific purpose. It is a pre-release facility for selected low risk women, and it aims to provide a positive living environment that replicates the 'real world' as far as possible. It seeks to empower the women to cope with the challenges they will face on release, including as mothers, and to ensure that appropriate support services are in place upon release. From the public's point of view, Boronia's ultimate goals are to enhance community safety and to reduce the social and financial costs of imprisonment by reducing recidivism.

This is the report of an inspection of Boronia conducted in March 2015. Boronia has been operating since May 2004 and this is the fourth occasion on which this Office has reported to Parliament and the public on its performance.

Viewed in terms of safety, security and decency of treatment, Boronia continues to perform well overall, as it has for over 10 years. I recognise that consistently good performance and a strong reputation are not things that are easily won: they require commitment, dedication, and a sense of purpose. However, it is also perfectly reasonable to expect that Boronia will be performing to the highest standards because it has so many advantages. It is a small facility; it has excellent, modern, purpose-built infrastructure; it houses a carefully selected group of low risk prisoners (called 'residents'); and compared with most prisons it is relatively well-resourced.

The key message in this report – and one that was conveyed at the time of the inspection – is that although Boronia is performing well, there is scope for improvement. It must be open to challenge and change and must not be defensive and content with the status quo. In an increasingly competitive environment, it needs to build on what has been achieved and to position itself for the next decade.

DOES BORONIA REDUCE RECIDIVISM?

Reducing recidivism is one of the key priorities of the Department of Corrective Services (the 'Department'), and it was the *raison d'être* of Boronia. It is a measurable outcome, and, as we have been arguing since 2006, it is something that should have been measured from the outset. However, there is still no clear evidence as to whether Boronia is actually achieving this goal. The continuing dearth of information is unacceptable, especially at a time when the government is calling for improved effectiveness and efficiency in the prison system.ⁱ

In 2014, we published our own report on the recidivism rates of prisoners who had been released up to 2009/2010 from the different prisons. We found that Boronia has a low recidivism rate compared with the state average.ⁱⁱ Internal Departmental data show the same result. However, this is not a sufficient measure: Boronia has such a selective low risk prisoner profile that lower recidivism rates are to be expected. When we factored in the residents' risk factors, we found that while Boronia was performing 'as expected', it was not performing any 'better than expected'.

i The Economic Regulation Authority (ERA) is currently conducting an *Inquiry into the Efficiency and Performance of Western Australia Prisons*.

ii OICS, *Recidivism rates and the impact of treatment programs* (September 2014).

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In 2012, the Department had supported in principle our recommendation that there should be a robust independent evaluation of Boronia's outcomes. Prior to this inspection, we therefore asked for any evidence it had in relation to this. It provided none, and its response was obtuse and non-committal:

The Department is in the process of reviewing its performance measurement framework in line with its reform program. This will be achieved by rationalising the Divisional performance indicators to a single source of truth, which will reduce duplication between levels, simplify and improve the efficacy (sic).

In response to Recommendation 1 of this report, the Department has now said there is no need for an independent evaluation because its newly-formed Women's Estate Reference Group is 'working with the Department to improve outcomes for all female offenders, which will involve an evaluation of post-release outcomes at all facilities.' I look forward to seeing these evaluations when they materialise, but note that the Department has not set any timeframe.

In summary, the Department cannot take informed investment decisions or target scarce resources to optimal effect if it lacks the evidence base. This is something to which the Economic Regulation Authority has also drawn attention. The decision to build Boronia was premised on the argument that it would reduce recidivism, and the public and Parliament are entitled to know whether it does this. Too much of the so-called 'evidence' about Boronia remains anecdotal, and selected 'good news stories' do not constitute evidence.

The situation at Boronia stands in stark contrast with the state's expectations of the privately-operated Wandoo Reintegration Facility for young men. Wandoo only opened in 2012 but if it does not achieve results, its future as a reintegration facility is at stake. It is also clear that the current contractor, Serco, will not be re-engaged unless they prove they have achieved results. Wandoo must meet a number of contractual performance requirements, many of which are based on reducing recidivism, and the Department is actively monitoring results. This information is already surfacing in political and public debate, and will, quite rightly, inform future decisions about Wandoo.

KEY FINDINGS

Boronia has a unique ambience, a clear philosophy and a strong track record with regard to safety and security. It is without any doubt the high point of women's imprisonment in Western Australia. For good reasons, it is also regarded as a national and international benchmark in terms of its design and philosophy. However, there are opportunities for improvement and innovation.

The site is in excellent shape. The gardens are beautiful, and the buildings are in a good state of repair. The calm, therapeutic qualities of the site stand in marked contrast to the state's main female prison, Bandyup. Prisoners and staff feel safe, and the Centre's approach to security has been balanced and effective.

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In the three years since the last inspection report, Boronia has become more crowded. Its design capacity is 70 but it is now required to house up to 95 prisoners. This means that if it is full, more than half its rooms will be shared by two women. Although it is possible to place two beds in the rooms, the additional numbers have impacted on privacy and on the Centre's values and regime. Education, health and employment have not been expanded in line with increased numbers, and the ability of mothers to bond with their children, and the general family focus of the prison, has been reduced.

Although services generally remain good, they are less comprehensive, less proactive, and under growing pressure. Some of the decline is due to resource pressures, but there is definitely scope for some areas to be more proactive and innovative without requiring additional staff resources. These include support to mothers and re-entry services (Recommendations 4 and 6).

The staff who work at Boronia are carefully selected and specially trained. They are committed, professional and experienced, and have developed positive and respectful relations with the residents. The management team has many years of experience, and has worked hard to ensure not only that Boronia runs efficiently but also that it has community support and standing. At the time of the inspection, a number of HR issues were causing frustration to staff but they were relatively minor and capable of resolution by a responsive management.

In previous inspection reports, we have been very critical of the low number of Aboriginal women residing at Boronia. This was a missed opportunity to reduce recidivism and to improve those women's lives. It was also contrary to the principles of substantive equality which the Department espouses. The situation had improved in 2015, with around a quarter of the residents being Aboriginal. This is well below the levels of Aboriginal representation at Bandyup (closer to 50%), but the increase is welcome. Having a critical mass of Aboriginal women at Boronia now gives the Department and Boronia the opportunity to develop a specific re-entry strategy for Aboriginal women, and they have committed to do this (Recommendation 1).

Two of the recommendations in this report (Recommendations 2 and 5) relate to the ability of residents to undertake work or activities, or to access services, outside the Centre itself. Boronia is a pre-release centre, housing highly selected low-risk women who are heading to release. We believe that, subject to appropriate risk assessments being undertaken, and to suitable protections being in place for the women, they should be able to access a wider range of community based activities. This would be entirely in line with the Centre's objectives, and would mean that the women are better connected to support services upon release. Related to this, we also argue (Recommendation 3) for a more appropriate uniform for residents. The baggy, ill-fitting maroon tracksuits they are required to wear do nothing for their self-esteem and dignity, core values of the Centre. They also compare poorly with the clothing worn by male residents at Wandoo.

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LOOKING AHEAD

Boronia has achieved a great deal in its 11 years of operation. Staff, management and the Department, should be proud of what has been achieved. However, there are opportunities for improvement and reinvigoration in a number of areas and it is important to guard against complacency. Since I started in this role in 2009, I have heard senior Departmental officials say, on numerous occasions, ‘Boronia doesn’t keep me awake at night’. In a business that carries as many risks as corrections, that is understandable. But it is not enough.

Boronia in 2015 is different from Boronia in 2005. Boronia in 2020 and 2025 will be different again. The system is changing in its expectations and is examining service delivery models. In this environment, Boronia itself must be agile, responsive and innovative. Centrally, the Department should set defined outcome-based measures for Boronia, and should evaluate and report publicly on these, as it does for the privately-operated Wandoo.

Neil Morgan

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