

# The Inspector's Overview

WOOROLOO PRISON FARM: A SHARPER SENSE OF PURPOSE AND LESS DISCORD,  
BUT STILL A LONG WAY TO GO IF IT IS TO MEETS ITS ASPIRATIONS

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This report of an announced inspection of Wooroloo Prison Farm ('Wooroloo'), conducted in May 2015, is our fifth public report on the prison. Wooroloo has undergone some fundamental changes over the past decade, and it has not been a smooth journey. This inspection found the prison was taking steps to improve performance and culture, but it remains a 'work in progress'. The Department of Corrective Services (the 'Department') must ensure that the positive momentum is maintained and that its policies and procedures maximise the opportunities presented at the prison.

## WOOROLOO'S EVOLUTION

Wooroloo has a fascinating history. The buildings, most of which are heritage-listed, began life in the early Twentieth Century as a sanatorium. It then served as the local hospital before becoming a minimum-security prison farm in the 1970s. Despite never being planned as a prison, it is an excellent site: the buildings are generally very good and its calm environment is very suited for its official role as a minimum-security prison with a focus on preparing people for release.

Wooroloo has now been a prison for over 40 years. It must not live in the past, but it is not possible to understand the challenges it faces without also understanding how it has transformed over the last decade, and the poor management of that transformation from 2007 to 2013.

In 2002 and 2006, this Office concluded that Wooroloo was one of the state's best prisons. At the time it was a small open prison housing 160–200 prisoners. It had a clear sense of direction, and enjoyed a reputation for effective offender management, good preparation for release, and strong community connections. In 2006, my predecessor Professor Richard Harding called it the best prison in the state.

Between 2006 and 2009, Wooroloo changed both physically and culturally. A much more secure perimeter fence was constructed, and the prison expanded rapidly, so it now has a designated total capacity of 362.

Changes of such magnitude clearly required consistent and proactive local management, combined with appropriate head office support and oversight. Unfortunately, both were lacking for most of the period from 2007 to 2013. In 2009, we found that Wooroloo's sense of direction, performance and morale had declined. The prison was clearly 'on the cusp', and our recommendations aimed to address the issues and to maximise its potential.

The Department accepted all our 2009 recommendations. In fact, it claimed to be already well-aware of the issues. However, it did not take sustained remedial action. Not surprisingly, Wooroloo continued to drift, and in many respects it declined further.

In 2012, Wooroloo was still doing a decent job in some areas, but it still had no clear philosophy and was being dragged down by discord and disharmony. Staff as a whole were frustrated and disillusioned; the senior officer group, so critical to the good operation of any prison, was divided; and despite the efforts of some individuals in their time there, prison management turnover had stymied progress. The prison had not been taking a clear and consistent approach to managing either its staff or its prisoners, and staff/prisoner relationships had deteriorated.

In short, in 2012, Wooroloo was falling well short of its potential and known issues had been left to drift for too long. It needed revitalising.

## WOOROLOO 2015

### Turning the Corner

This inspection found that Wooroloo has lifted since 2012 in terms of its sense of direction, staff morale, and consistency and accountability in management. However, considerable work remains to be done in all those areas, and there are several other areas of weakness or missed opportunity.

Staff morale has improved, and there is far less division. Some staff were unhappy with aspects of the ‘firm’ management style being adopted at the prison but complaints about inconsistency, favouritism and unfair process had almost entirely gone, and few complaints of major substance emerged. The issue was primarily one of style and this can be addressed with will on all sides. Management were also working hard to ensure the prison stayed within budget.

Staff/prisoner relations had also improved, probably a direct result of improvements in staff morale. As a result, relational security, including intelligence-gathering, was working quite well. However, we found some issues with procedural security. For example, the control room was sometimes being left unsecured and empty, creating a number of risks. Control rooms, even in the relaxed environment of Wooroloo, must be secure and staffed at all times. The Department has assured us that this is now the case.

The prison itself was generally in excellent shape. The grounds were very well-maintained and the heritage-listed ‘recreation hall’ had been well-renovated. At a site such as this, however, there will always be a great deal of ongoing maintenance, such as painting and clearing of gutters. These present obvious opportunities for prisoner training and employment at the prison – opportunities that were simply not being maximised.

### Maximising Opportunities and Effectiveness

Wooroloo has therefore ‘turned a corner’ in terms of some of the fundamental building blocks for the future. However, a great deal remains to be done if it is to meet the Department’s corporate goal of reducing recidivism and its own aspiration to be ‘Australia’s leading re-entry prison’.

There are two key elements to continuing progress. First, the prison, with support from head office, must build up those areas where progress has already been made, and must develop and embed positive management/staff relations. Secondly, the Department must ensure that the prison is adequately funded and that centrally-mandated policies take account of Wooroloo’s role, and maximise its effectiveness as a re-entry prison.

This inspection found that budget constraints were impacting on a number of areas, notably education and training. However, the more pervasive problem was the impact of tighter centralised policies on Wooroloo’s capacity to do what it has a proven long term ability to do. The tighter policies had been implemented primarily as a result of a spate of escapes in 2013 and 2014.

It was understandable that there would be a tightening of policies after these escapes, but it is important to place some context around the issue.<sup>i</sup> First and foremost, the number of people who have escaped from any correctional location over the past six years is low. Secondly, the number of escapes from medium- or maximum-security locations is extremely low. Thirdly, Wooroloo is a minimum-security re-entry prison. Before prisoners can go there, they have been in Departmental custody for some time, have undergone risk assessments, and have needed to ‘earn’ their minimum-security status through good prison conduct. The vast majority of them ‘do the right thing’ when they get to minimum-security. They respond to the trust that is placed in them, and want to use the opportunity to improve their chances of being law-abiding citizens on release.

The system must not judge the vast majority of minimum-security prisoners by the irresponsible and unacceptable actions of a few. It must also not compromise its ability to achieve the goal of improving public safety by reducing recidivism. At Wooroloo, the tightened policies were having an unnecessarily negative impact in many areas, including the following:

- The prison workshops are located outside the perimeter fence. This short-sighted cost-saving measure dating back to the construction of the fence in 2008, has had detrimental long term costs. In 2014, tightened approval processes for prisoners to work in the workshops had further reduced the amount of work being done in the workshops, the capacity to attract external contracts, and the delivery of training that would assist prisoners to obtain employment on release.
- The assessment processes for prisoners to undertake out of prison activities under section 95 of the *Prisons Act* had become more convoluted and time-consuming, leading to undue delays.
- Even though prisoners going to Wooroloo are well-known to the system before they get there, they were only being assessed for section 95 after they got there.
- Prisoners who were allowed out of the prison to undertake employment, home leaves or other activities were required to be shackled and escorted by two officers if they needed medical treatment outside the prison. This is both unnecessary and expensive.
- Wooroloo’s official name is the Wooroloo Prison Farm, but 10 prisoners at most are allocated work places at the farm. During our inspection, there were days when only one prisoner was actually there.

Obviously, the Department must prioritise community safety. However, correctional services are, at their core, about people management and risk management. Departmental policies must therefore be balanced, taking account of the different roles of different facilities and the long-term goal of reducing crime.

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i Office of the Inspector of Custodial Services (OICS), *Escapes and attempted escapes from corrections in Western Australia* (February 2015).

#### MAINTAINING MOMENTUM AND THE RISKS OF COMPLACENCY

Wooroloo has certainly moved ahead in some respects from where it was in 2012, but there are some continuing issues of concern and numerous improvement opportunities.

I am pleased to report that the Department has supported all 13 of our recommendations for improvement, and I look forward to reviewing progress in the future. However, I am concerned at the equivocal and non-committal nature of the support. The Department has stated that ‘no further action is required’ in relation to 11 of the recommendations. Although some recommendations, such as the one relating to tightening up the control room procedures, involve a simple fix, the majority do require further action and continuing oversight.

Wooroloo’s own history – charted above – is testament to the problems that occur when recommendations are supported on paper but not backed by action, or when complacency creeps in. The same is true of other sites, including Bandyup Women’s Prison and Banksia Hill Juvenile Detention Centre. Wooroloo is a ‘work in progress’, and the recommendations were made because action is required.

The prison system is also edging towards an era of ‘contestability’, of stricter performance measures, and of different service delivery models. In this environment, Wooroloo and other minimum-security prisons must be agile, responsive and innovative, and the Department should not be satisfied with the status quo. It needs to more clearly identify its expectations of each prison, including Wooroloo, resource the prisons in line with those expectations, set outcome-based measures, provide facilities the flexibility to achieve outcomes, and evaluate and report publicly on those results. This is what is expected of private sector operators at prisons such as Wandoo and Acacia. The same should apply to the publicly operated prisons.

Neil Morgan

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