

Inspector's Overview

WANDOO REINTEGRATION FACILITY: A SUCCESS STORY WITH AN UNCERTAIN FUTURE

WANDOO HAS AN UNCERTAIN FUTURE

The Wandoo Reintegration Facility ('Wandoo') in Murdoch opened in late 2012. It is a small, 78-bed minimum-security prison which provides rehabilitation and reintegration services for young men aged 18 to 28. Serco currently operates the facility under a five year contract with the state government. The contract expires in November 2017.

This report shows that Wandoo has been a success in its own right. But, more than that, it offers some positive lessons for the state's other prisons and the Banksia Hill Detention Centre for juveniles. The decision to target specific services at young men was a good one, and Serco has met or exceeded reasonable expectations. In short, there is no performance reason why Wandoo should not continue to operate along current lines.

Despite this, Wandoo's future is uncertain. The Opposition opposes the outsourcing of prison services, and has announced that it will convert Wandoo to a drug rehabilitation centre for female prisoners if elected at the March 2017 election. The current government's position is very different. It established Wandoo to honour a 2008 election commitment and supports contracted services. It has not suggested that there will be any change of function but, if re-elected, will need, at the very least, to decide whether to extend or re-tender the contract.

IT IS IMPORTANT TO EXPAND SERVICES TO YOUNG WOMEN AS WELL AS YOUNG MEN

Young people return to prison at a depressingly high rate. This carries a high cost to community safety, to the young people and their families, and to the state. Although further research is needed, the evidence is that properly targeted initiatives can reduce recidivism. I therefore urge the post-election government to expand, and not to reduce, the focus on young people, whatever decision is taken about Wandoo itself.

Prior to Wandoo, WA had no specific facilities or programs for young prisoners. Recently, a young offenders unit was established at Acacia Prison, a large medium-security prison that is also operated by Serco. This is a promising initiative with real potential. However, a minimum-security option is also needed. This means that if Wandoo is re-purposed, an alternative should be developed.

I also strongly urge the government and the Department of Corrective Services to develop and implement programs for young women. They are a very high need group but to date they have been neglected in Departmental planning.

SOME LEARNINGS FOR ADULT AND YOUTH JUSTICE

Wandoo provides a positive, purposeful, and safe regime, and has performed well across all key measures. It offers new ways of 'doing business' that are relevant to the management of both adult prisoners and juveniles at the troubled Banksia Hill Detention Centre.

The ‘standout’ areas are:

- a coherent, purposeful philosophy that is supported by staff and which permeates all areas of the centre’s operations
- a strong multi-disciplinary approach to managing and supporting the residents
- a model that is based on personal responsibility, positive reinforcement and genuine opportunities for rehabilitation
- sustained and targeted partnerships with the not-for-profit sector
- ‘real’ work opportunities for residents leading to post-release employment
- the contractor’s willingness to respond, innovate and improve.

The Department has set itself the goal of delivering ‘Integrated Individualised Offender management’ (‘IOM’). Wandoo is already doing this, and is a model of best practice. Although it is a small, minimum-security reintegration facility, there are lessons to be learned for the system as a whole.

WANDOO IS PRIVATELY OPERATED, BUT THE DEPARTMENT SHOULD ALSO BE PROUD OF THE FACILITY.

Contracts for prison services will only work well if appropriate oversights and relationships are in place. Fortunately, WA has a robust accountability framework: the Department manages the contract and monitors the contractor, and we provide strong independent oversight of both the contractor and the Department. This means that WA is not at risk of the widespread and expensive accountability failings that the Australian National Audit Office (2017) has revealed in relation to Commonwealth government contracts for offshore immigration detention centres. However, we do believe there is room for the Department to improve contract monitoring and contractual performance measures if it is to maximise the opportunities for innovation and to improve outcomes.

Wandoo has experienced one particularly damaging event in its four years of operation. In August 2015, four residents managed to start a forklift truck, and used it to break out. The escape revealed some on-site weaknesses but also some system-wide issues.

The escape led to the evening regime at Wandoo being severely curtailed. This was an appropriate response immediately after the escape but we have recommended that it is time to relax the restrictions and to bring the Centre in line with other minimum-security facilities. Serco has said it supports this but the Department has ruled that the restrictions will remain in place. I still consider the restrictions should be relaxed as they go against the Centre’s objectives and philosophy, and the contractor should be trusted to manage the risk.

DCS NEEDS BETTER DATA ON COSTS AND OUTCOMES

I have been arguing for many years that we need better methods and better data to compare the relative costs and effectiveness of our prisons. Wandoo again illustrates the importance of this.

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Wandoo costs considerably more than the average ‘cost per prisoner per day’ across the state but this is not surprising because it is small (so it lacks economies of scale), and provides a different service. It is also difficult to directly compare costs: arrangements and cost models are not the same at all prisons, and Departmental overhead costs are not clear. The best comparator for Wandoo is probably the Boronia Pre-release Centre for Women, whose costs appear similar.

Ideally, we would also have a ‘cost-benefit’ model which includes outcomes, not just ‘up front’ costs. If facilities such as Boronia and Wandoo are reducing recidivism below what is being achieved with similar cohorts at other prisons, the State will reap massive downstream benefits.

The current evidence is not robust but in response to our recommendations, the Department says it is developing more sophisticated measures for effectiveness and cost.

LOOKING AHEAD

Debates will continue about the best use of the Wandoo site but we must not lose the momentum to improve services for young prisoners. If it remains a young men’s facility, there is scope to expand its capacity by 40-50 people. This would bring some efficiencies and opportunities. If it is converted to a different role, we need another minimum-security option for young men. And we must do more for young women in prison.

Neil Morgan
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