

MEDIA RELEASE

REPORT NO 133 – 2020 INSPECTION OF WEST KIMBERLEY REGIONAL PRISON

EMBARGOED UNTIL 12 NOON ON THURSDAY 15 APRIL 2021

This inspection of West Kimberley Regional Prison (WKRP) was like no other in the 20-year history of the Office of the Inspector of Custodial Services.

In response to Covid-19 pandemic restrictions at the end of March 2020, we had to pause our scheduled inspection of WKRP. After considering how best to proceed, we decided to carry on with our inspection of the prison using telephone and video conferencing with staff and small groups of prisoners. This was followed up in September 2020 with a site visit to confirm our findings.

It also confirmed to us the importance and value of the regular liaison and monitoring visits we undertake each year to facilities. Our assessment, knowledge and understanding of the prison developed through this work allowed us to confidently modify our work for this inspection.

We had been concerned over the past years that WKRP had been moving away from its original purpose and philosophy centred on promoting and facilitating Aboriginal wellness and a culturally sensitive environment for Aboriginal prisoners.

Our 2020 inspection found that while there had been an erosion of this direction, the prison leadership was taking steps to return to its original operating philosophy.

Inspector Eamon Ryan said he was encouraged by the local management's plans and desire to protect and restore the WKRP philosophy and had confidence work was being done towards this end.

"The team at the prison had clear priorities for the prison, including increasing local staff recruitment (especially Aboriginal staff) and relevant constructive activity for prisoners that would enhance their skills when returning to their local communities," Mr Ryan said.

An achievement noted at the time was a small increase in Aboriginal staff numbers from the time of the last inspection.

One of the main impediments to the success of the plans were limitations on budget and resourcing, that were especially difficult in the prison's remote location. An example of this was the need to double bunk cells designed for single occupation, which interfered with the philosophy of promoting self-management and responsibility. Also, despite the population increases at the prison, support staff in important roles such as life skills officers had not been increased. More work also needed to be done towards supporting and reinvigorating the Aboriginal Visitors Scheme and Aboriginal Services Committee.

Other positive developments at the prison included ensuring more 'local' prisoners were being brought back to country and the appointment of an Assistant Superintendent Offender Services position.

Women prisoners at WKRP were still not receiving substantively equal access to services, including treatment programs, access to education, work and recreation compared to male prisoners. There was also a reduction in the level of appropriately supervised mixing between female and male relatives.

Mr Ryan said that women prisoners in most of WA's regional prisons suffered from being the minority group in the prison, the women at WKRP were no different. It was essential that they have access to similar levels of services to men and be given the same rehabilitation opportunities.

Eamon Ryan
Inspector

For further media information:

The Inspector, Mr Eamon Ryan, will be available for comment from 12 noon on Thursday 15 April 2021 and can be contacted on 0421 480 925.