

MEDIA RELEASE

REPORT NO 132 – 2020 INSPECTION OF EASTERN GOLDFIELDS REGIONAL PRISON

EMBARGOED UNTIL 12 NOON ON 12 APRIL 2021

The Inspector of Custodial Services inspection of Eastern Goldfields Regional Prison (EGRP) took place in January 2020. While the onsite phase of our inspection went ahead unaffected, our processes and arrangements for managing the report writing, response and production were impacted by the COVID pandemic and led to a delay in publishing this report.

Inspector Eamon Ryan said despite the delay, the Office's ongoing monitoring of the prison over the past 12 months had noted improvements in many areas, but some issues identified during the inspection continue to need attention.

At the time of inspection, the population at EGRP was significantly below capacity. While the prison had never operated at its full 350 prisoner cap since opening in 2016, the population had fallen to 231 and has remained close to this number.

Mr Ryan said the most concerning aspect was that the two units that were closed at the prison with the reduced population were the privileged and enhanced units offering reward for good behaviour, better opportunities for rehabilitation and the teaching of self-responsibility and life skills.

"The external transition unit, Unit 5, has always been a wasted resource having never been used since the prison opened in 2016. And the closure of Unit 3 self-care raised further concerns about not providing the predominantly regional Aboriginal prisoner population with the incentivised living opportunities available at other prisons," Mr Ryan said.

"The importance of these accommodation options as a means of internal prison management, as well as the positive impact of developing independent living skills for the men involved cannot be underestimated."

Another challenge facing EGRP was the recruitment and retention of staff across many employment groups. The prison was staffed by a high proportion of new and recent graduate custodial staff undertaking their first posting, who, somewhat surprisingly, could almost immediately place their name on a list to transfer to another prison. In November 2019, 80 prison officers were seeking a transfer out of EGRP.

Mr Ryan said the Department needed to address the high turnover of staff at the prison, as it was impacting the capacity, consistency and quality of services delivered to prisoners and the community.

“Poor retention levels mean that new staff with less experience are constantly churning through the prison, this is disruptive and impacts on consistency of service. It also places high levels of reliance on the smaller group of experienced staff to constantly train, guide and support new staff,” Mr Ryan said.

The inspection also found a level dysfunction among some groups of staff at EGRP. This issue was, at the time of our inspection, having a significant impact on staff and even on the prisoners who saw it manifest as inconsistency in practice. We were told that this issue was one of the factors that influenced some staff to seek opportunities elsewhere. The Department’s response supported our recommendation and noted that the cause had been identified and was being addressed.

A positive finding from the inspection was the improvement of services for women prisoners. At the time of the inspection the appointment of a Women’s Support Officer and a dedicated Life Skills Officer had provided more rehabilitative activities and support. Women also had better access to employment, education and recreation.

“Having women from regional areas held as close to home as possible provides many benefits including more contact with family and better connection to country. The new staff and services in place meant there was greater substantive equality for the women than we had previously seen at EGRP,” Mr Ryan said.

Mr Ryan said it was pleasing that the Department supported both of our recommendations to ensure all staff were appropriately trained and followed the relevant plans and policies for working with women at EGRP. We will continue to monitor progress towards these recommendations.

Eamon Ryan
Inspector

For further media information:

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