

MEDIA RELEASE

REPORT NO 142 – 2021 INSPECTION OF GREENOUGH REGIONAL PRISON

EMBARGOED UNTIL 2:00PM ON TUESDAY 14 JUNE 2022

The most recent inspection of Greenough Regional Prison found while it had been through a difficult few years, there were some positive signs it was emerging from those challenges to greater stability.

Acting Inspector Darian Ferguson said the shadow of the 2018 riot and recovery from Cyclone Seroja in April 2021 was still very evident at the prison during the inspection. However, a cohesive, experienced and capable leadership team along with significant infrastructure and security upgrades formed the backbone of an emergence from these challenges.

Mr Ferguson said given the events during the riot of 2018, much of the September 2021 inspection focussed on the ongoing recovery of staff and prisoners since that time. “We understandably heard of residual unease and unresolved trauma. For many staff this manifested as unhappiness with local and head office management. The level of that unhappiness communicated, by some, was high.”

This was exacerbated by some level of staff absences, expressed as ‘shortages’ by staff struggling to maintain services to prisoners as redeployments frequently occurred. The resulting shut down of services, such as recreation, was a precursor to the 2018 riot and staff were fearful of a repetition.

Mr Ferguson said despite the perception, an analysis showed that there were few vacancies in custodial staffing, relatively low workers compensation cases and overtime was available to cover absences at Greenough.

“All in all, from our time spent with staff it was evident that Greenough still had a traumatised workforce. And this impacted findings from across our inspection”, Mr Ferguson said.

“However, we felt there were genuine opportunities to improve relationships and support, and ways to capitalise on the progress that has been made. This is a shared responsibility requiring cooperation and engagement between both Department leadership and the staff.”

Given the extent and obviousness of the staff issues, Mr Ferguson said he was surprised and disappointed that the Department response to our recommendation to provide more proactive staff support was deemed as already occurring and ‘closed’.

“The experience of staff would indicate that the trauma and anxiety many still experience is not ‘closed’ at all”, he said.

Significantly, some prisoners who were present (but did not participate) in the 2018 incident also voiced ongoing fears and trauma. They also deserve more proactive support to recovery.

At the time of our inspection refurbishment of the heavily damaged women's precinct was near completion with improvements to ensure a more cohesive and contained environment for women in the region. Since then, small numbers of women have started to occupy the precinct. Mr Ferguson said it is important the unit becomes fully operational to provide the best placement options for local women and support them to rehabilitation and reintegration back to the community.

For prisoners, Mr Ferguson said many of the living conditions in place prior to the riot had still not been fully restored, and the impact of COVID limitations was exacerbating dissatisfaction. While positive steps have been taken, it is over three years on, and some areas still have a way to go.

Prisoners particularly complained about things like: access to recreation, availability of telephones, the quality of food, and access to treatment programs.

Mr Ferguson said an overarching key issue for Greenough moving forward is that the Department must finalise the prison's long-term strategic direction and its vision for it within the wider prison system.

"The Department of Justice prison network planning process has been ongoing for some years, with no tangible outcome. For regional prisons particularly, the local drive and investment moving forward is restricted by the uncertainty of its role in future years."

Darian Ferguson
A/Inspector

For further media information:

The Acting Inspector, Mr Darian Ferguson, will be available for comment from 2:00pm on Tuesday 14 June 2022 and can be contacted on 0417 939 661.