

Inspector's Overview

There were a lot of positives seen in EGRP in 2023, but fundamentally it is a prison that remains underutilised.

Our last inspection of Eastern Goldfields Regional Prison (EGRP) was undertaken in 2020 with the report published in April 2021. The first two recommendations arising from that inspection, neither of which were supported by the Department, related to the underutilised infrastructure and staffing shortages (see recommendations 1 and 2; OICS 2020). These issues are as relevant today as they were in 2020, and in the current environment probably even more so.

During this inspection we again found that Unit 3, an earned privileges unit for men, was significantly underutilised and Unit 5, a minimum-security transition unit located outside the secure perimeter fence, had never been used.

We also found similar staffing issues with difficulties in attracting and retaining staff at EGRP, particularly custodial staff, leading to regular understaffing and reports of staff burnout and reductions in services. We heard that the prison regularly operated with up to 20 custodial staff short each day and on many occasions were unable to fill the 10 available overtime shifts to reduce the shortfall. Many custodial staff told us they were already undertaking overtime on a regular basis and were too fatigued to accept more.

There are, however, two critical factors that have changed the dynamic of these two issues since 2020. The first is the widely reported change in the Australian labour market which has significantly impacted recruitment and retention of staff across many sectors, including the public sector. The second is the rising prison population and the high occupancy rates for maximum- and medium-security facilities in Perth and the regions. Recently, the adult male prisoner population exceeded the previous all-time high recorded in March 2020. This increases the imperative to address both issues.

Resolving the staffing issues could mean up to 100 beds would be available to be brought online to relieve population pressure on the adult male estate.

One of the key elements of the staffing issue is retention rather than recruitment. New recruits who are posted to EGRP can transfer out after only 12 months. Many told us they were encouraged to take a posting to EGRP with the incentive that it was only for 12 months as they could put their names on the transfer out list as soon as they commenced. Although we understand this may not be encouraged by the Department, it was certainly being actively practiced at the time of our inspection.

We also heard that there were significant disparities between the allowances available for local staff compared to non-local staff, with many local staff telling us this could mean a difference in pay of several thousand dollars each year. The Department's response advised that the regional incentive allowances are available to all staff under the relevant Award. Access to subsidised housing remains the major disparity.

There is merit in the Department pursuing options to resolve the staffing issues, looking at both recruitment and retention. Doing so would open options to make better use of the spare accommodation capacity at EGRP and relieve some of the population pressures.

There are other perhaps less obvious benefits to resolving these issues. Better use of the infrastructure would allow the State to maximise the benefits of the existing Public Private Partnership contract. Improved staffing could offer better rehabilitation services and support to the men and women sent to live there. It could also enhance safety and security of the prison. All of which would have an overall positive benefit to the community.

Our report contains 13 recommendations all of which the Department supported in full or with some caveat. The Department's response, which is an appendix to this report, included information about several initiatives that have been commenced or completed since our inspection. Most notable is the filling of vacant health and mental health positions, the installation of CCTV cameras in reception, and the return to pre-COVID orientation processes. These initiatives, and several others listed in the response, are a very positive indication the Department is proactively taking steps to address many of the challenges facing EGRP.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

For part of 2023, we had one Independent Prison Visitor who was a community volunteer appointed by the Minister for Corrective Services. Unfortunately, he was unable to continue due to other commitments and resigned last year. He had attended EGRP on a regular basis providing an opportunity for the men and women placed there to raise issues and feedback that information to our office. I acknowledge the importance of the work previously undertaken and thank him for the contribution made over several years to our ongoing monitoring of EGRP. We are once again actively seeking expressions of interest from community volunteers for this interesting and highly valued volunteer role.

I also acknowledge the support and cooperation we received throughout the inspection from the Superintendent and staff at EGRP and from key personnel in the Department.

The men and the few women living in EGRP who took the time to speak with us and share their perspectives also deserve our acknowledgement and thanks.

Finally, I would like to thank the members of the inspection team for their expertise and hard work throughout the inspection. I would particularly acknowledge and thank Ben Shaw for his hard work in planning this inspection and as principal drafter of this report.

Eamon Ryan
Inspector of Custodial Services

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