



# FOLLOW-UP: CONTACT WITH FAMILY AND OTHERS WHILE IN CUSTODY

OCTOBER 2025

*Independent oversight  
that contributes to a more  
accountable public sector*



OFFICE OF THE INSPECTOR  
OF CUSTODIAL SERVICES

*The Inspector of Custodial Services and staff acknowledge Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people as the Traditional Custodians of this country, and their continuing connection to land, waters, and community throughout Australia. We pay our respects to them and their cultures, and to Elders, be they past or present.*

## Artwork Acknowledgement

*Marcia McGuire – Kolbang ‘Going Forward’ (2025)*

Format: Digital illustration (cover uses elements)

The artwork *Kolbang* – meaning ‘going forward’ – depicts the positive impacts the Office of the Inspector of Custodial Services has on the custodial estate in Western Australia.

The artwork embodies traditional knowledge passed on from Marcia McGuire’s families of the Whadjuk, Ballardong, Yued Noongar and Badimia Yamatji Aboriginal People.



## Follow-up: Contact with family and others while in custody

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## Inspector's Overview

*Being able to maintain contact with family and friends while in custody is an essential health and wellbeing protective factor.*

In 2018 we undertook a review into prisoners' ability to maintain contact with family and friends while in custody. We returned to this subject again in 2025, largely because it remains a constant source of complaint and grievance raised with us by people in custody and their families.

The findings from our 2025 Review broadly align with those of 2018. While the Department has made progress in areas like phone affordability and digital infrastructure planning, the reality on the ground remains challenging for people in custody trying to maintain family contact. People in custody continue to have difficulty getting access to phones - the most common means of contacting family, and the availability and quality of in-person social visits remains a major cause of concern.

The importance and benefits of people in custody being able to maintain some connection with the outside world via contact with family and friends ought not be underestimated. Social visits are not just a nice to have privilege, they are an entitlement - albeit with some limitations - that is set out in the *Prisons Act 1981* and the *Prisons Regulations 1982*.

People in custody being able to maintain contact with family and friends is also an essential health and wellbeing protective factor, as well as having a major impact on the behaviour of individuals and thereby the safety and security of the facility. This is supported by our experience visiting prisons and detention centres, and research which shows the positive impact this can have on the wellbeing and rehabilitation prospects of people in custody (Taylor, et al., 2023).

There have been significant changes in the custodial environment between 2018 and 2025. Most recently we are seeing significant increases in prison populations leading to overcrowding and enormous strain on infrastructure. Almost every facility is at maximum operational capacity. On top of this, is the impact of staff shortages and dated infrastructure that has not kept pace with the demands of an expanding population. Consequently, prisoner support services are stretched to their limits.

This has made it increasingly difficult for custodial facilities to provide adequate access to phones and social visits. We regularly hear from prisoners that there are not enough phones in their unit, that their available time out of cell is insufficient for everyone to have access to phones, that social visits are often difficult to book, and when they are they are often cancelled at short notice. We have also heard that the quality of social visits at some facilities have been reduced by contact restrictions and physical barriers that are still in place from COVID-era precautions.

We are aware of the Department's current work to address staffing issues, with the immediate focus on increased recruitment of custodial staff. Our recently released report on non-custodial staffing shortages identified some early initiatives to address the issue, but these will take considerable time to have an impact. Also, a significant degree of uncertainty remains about plans to address system-wide infrastructure issues.

Relevantly, the Department's Long Term Custodial Technology Strategy and the Offender Digital Services Platform offer promise. However, past delays in implementation and lack of agreed funding for later stages indicates meaningful change is likely to be years away. The digital telephone upgrade currently planned, while necessary, will not increase handset availability or enable in-cell calls, which is a missed opportunity for improvement.

It is pleasing the Department supported our recommendation to improve support for both prisoners and their families to encourage better use of e-visit technology. But to be clear, we see e-visits as a valuable supplement, not a substitute for in-person contact. The Department must invest in both infrastructure and staffing to ensure people in custody can maintain vital connections with their families. Without this, the Department risks undermining rehabilitation efforts and the wellbeing of those in its care.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

We are grateful for the support and cooperation received throughout the review from key personnel at the Department of Justice and Serco the operator of Acacia Prison.

I acknowledge the contribution and hard work of the team in our office who were involved in undertaking this review. I would particularly acknowledge and thank Sarah Palmer for her work as principal analyst for this review, and Scott Young as the final drafter of this report.

Eamon Ryan

**Inspector of Custodial Services**

24 October 2025

# Executive Summary

## Background

Contact with and connection to family and friends are key factors to maintaining the wellbeing of people in custody and for their rehabilitation prospects (Taylor, et al., 2023). Given its importance to prisoner wellbeing and successful reintegration, in 2018 this Office examined whether the Department of Justice (the Department) was meeting its responsibility to ensure family and broader relationships were being maintained while people were in custody (OICS, 2018a). For the same reasons, and as some significant challenges to maintaining contact in the years since have occurred, it was considered timely to conduct a follow-up review.

Our 2018 review noted people in custody generally maintained contact through social visits, telephone, and mail communication. Along with individual circumstances, organisational factors such as phone operating times, visit session times, and prison policies and procedures influenced the number of visits and phone calls made. The review found it was becoming increasingly difficult for the Department to meet family and social visits entitlements for people in custody as set out in legislation and departmental policies. This was largely due to population pressures within the prison system. The 2018 report's key findings included:

- telephone use was high, but access was not equal
- competition for a limited number of phones caused tension and negative behaviour
- overcrowding and inefficient processes, including an outdated visit booking system, increased the difficulty for people in custody to receive visits
- population pressures increased the difficulty of placing people in custody near their families and communities which made social visits harder to access
- the Department had made positive efforts to address some of the barriers, but more could be done.

The report made five recommendations:

1. Consider the use of wireless technology where adding land lines is cost prohibitive.
2. Increase the remand allowance to reflect the increased costs associated with calling mobile phones.
3. Review and update the remote allowance to reflect actual STD and international call costs.
4. Provide daily visits at Roebourne Regional Prison to meet legislative requirements for remand prisoners.
5. Implement an online booking system for social visits in all prisons.

While there have been some changes since 2018, there has been limited movement in other areas. The 2018 findings remain pertinent, but some of the recommendations are no longer applicable. For example, the introduction of a flat-rate charge made mobile and STD calls the same price as local calls. This rendered an increase to allowances unnecessary (Recommendations 2 and 3). Similarly, Recommendation 4 became immaterial in 2022 when legislative changes reduced the remand visit entitlement to twice weekly. Recommendation 1 currently forms part of a bigger digital transformation within the custodial estate. It is expected this will include digital (wireless) technology adopted in place of the analogue system across the prison phone network. The Department has

closed Recommendation 5 after implementing an online booking system. However, we have found considerable work is still required as only four facilities in Western Australia are using the system.

## Key Findings

### Important positive and negative changes have occurred since 2018

Since our 2018 review, there have been significant shifts in how people in custody maintain contact with their families. A notable improvement is the introduction of a flat call rate that includes mobile calls, making phone communication more affordable, even as the prison telephone system approaches end-of-life. Phone calls remain the most accessible and reliable method for maintaining family connections. However, access to phones continues to be poor despite an increase in the number of phones and a reduced average ratio of phones to people in custody. Restrictions on phone access hours, often due to lockdowns, remain a significant barrier.

Social visits have declined, with the average number of visits per person falling from 26 in 2018 to 17 in 2024. Compounding this, the proportion of people held on remand has risen from 28% to approximately 40% in 2025, while their visit entitlements have been reduced following amendments to the *Prison Regulations 1982*. Visit sessions have also been shortened and cancelled more frequently. And despite our 2018 recommendation to implement an online booking system for social visits across all prisons, most facilities still do not use the system that was introduced.

### COVID-19 and staff shortages have impacted the quality and quantity of visits

The COVID-19 pandemic significantly disrupted the social visit experience for people in custody. Visit suspensions and restrictions meant people were unable to hug or touch their visitors, share food, or rely on consistent visit schedules, with many visits cancelled or limited due to COVID-19 restrictions and staff taking pandemic-related leave. In response, e-visit technology was rapidly installed across facilities in 2020, offering a promising alternative. However, despite good initial uptake, it is now underutilised. While COVID-19 was initially cited as the reason for ongoing visit limitations, we observed some restrictions extended well into 2022 beyond what seemed reasonable. By 2024, complaints about visit restrictions were more commonly attributed to staff shortages, which continue to limit the availability and quality of visits.

### Implementing a digital services platform may improve family contact but rollout will take time

The Department is implementing an Offender Digital Services Platform as part of its Long Term Custodial Technology Strategy (LTCTS) which aims to modernise a range of offender services. These are positive steps which have the potential to improve the lives of people in custody, the benefits are likely to take years to materialise. Continued delays have hindered the implementation of digital technology, with upgrades to the phone system and e-visit services unlikely to occur in the short term. Additionally, access to Wi-Fi in prisons remains unclear, and while improvements to the online booking system should enhance current functionality, its upgrade is still pending.

## Conclusion

While there have been some positive developments in facilitating family contact for people in custody since our review, the Department must address some significant remaining barriers. Social visits have declined, access to phones is still limited, and remandees face reduced entitlements. The COVID-19 pandemic and ongoing staff shortages have further disrupted visit availability and quality. The Department's Long Term Custodial Technology Strategy and the rollout of the Offender Digital Services Platform should break down some of the barriers. But delays and uncertainty around implementation mean that meaningful change is likely to take time. Continued focus and investment will be essential to ensure that people in custody can maintain vital connections with their families.



# List of Recommendations

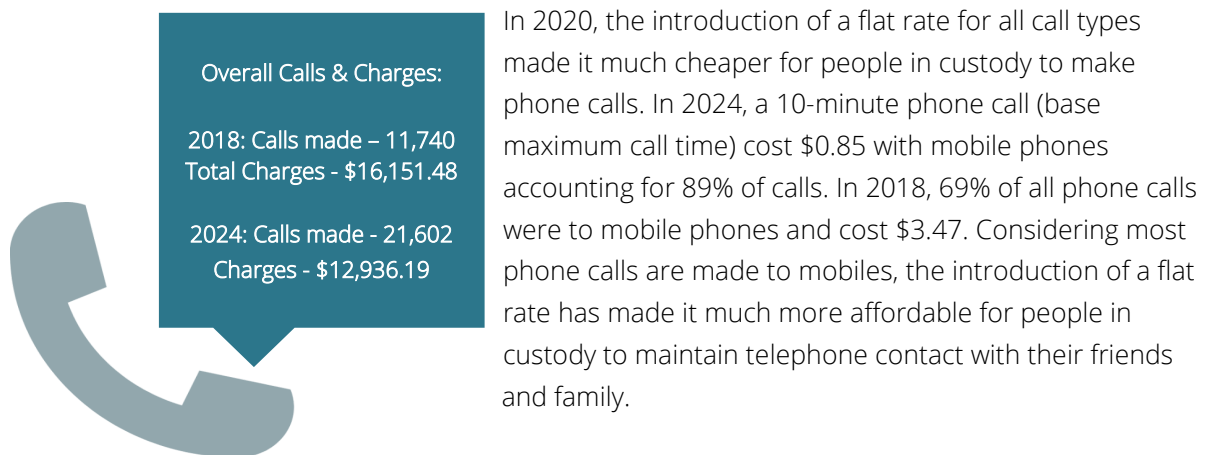
Recommendation	Page	DOJ Response
<b>Recommendation 1</b> Provide support to people in custody and their family members to increase the use of e-visit technology, including with an information package and support when technical issues arise.	11	Supported

# 1 Important positive and negative changes have occurred since 2018

Since the 2018 review, there has been a mix of positive and negative changes affecting people in custody's contact with family and others. Contact via the Prisoner Telephone System (PTS) remains one of the most common ways people in custody remain in contact. Phone calls have become cheaper with the introduction of a flat rate and the number of phones per person has increased. While these steps are welcomed, access to phones remains a concern.

There has also been pressure on social visits. Since 2018 both remand and general prison populations have increased and combined with staffing shortages (OICS, 2025b; OICS, 2025a), has had a negative effect on social visits.

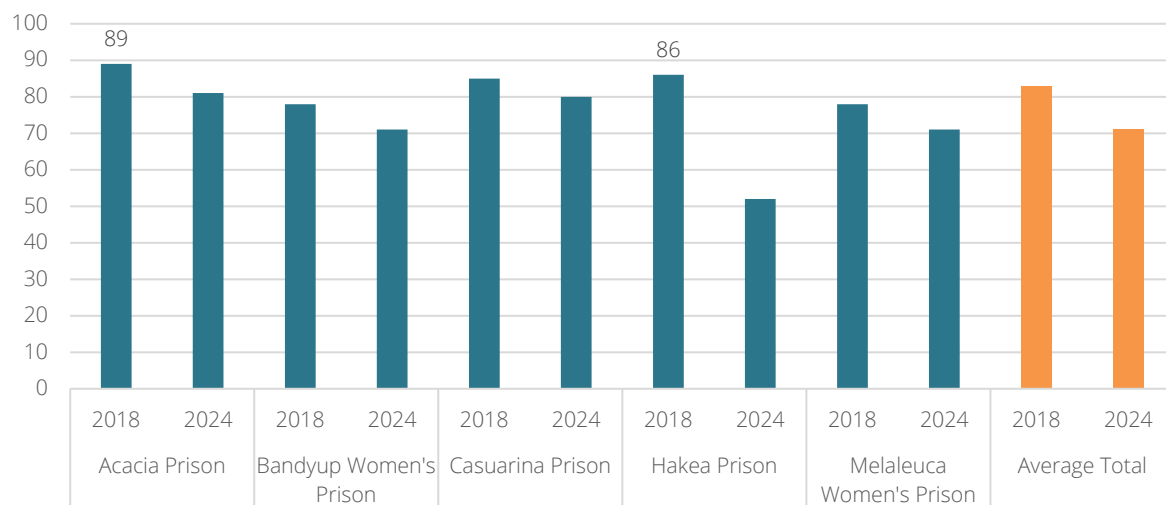
## 1.1 Phone calls have become cheaper and despite being an outdated system, remains the easiest form of contact



Two-thirds of the 650 phones across the custodial estate continue to use analogue technology. This is despite the Department being advised the technology would reach the end of its life in March 2025. At that time, the Department's contract with NEC Pty Ltd to provide PTS hardware, software, and maintenance was due to expire. According to the Department's Long-Term Custodial Technology Strategy, published in May 2021, a new digital telephony system was to have been implemented in 2023, well before the PTS reached the end of its life. However, a contractor to digitise the phone system has only recently been appointed. This has necessitated an extension of the maintenance contract – but maintaining the system past its use-by date has attracted a premium, increasing maintenance costs by 22%.

The digital system, which will require networking cable upgrades, will be more cost effective than installing and maintaining additional copper landlines, representing a saving for the Department. This is important because, despite the outdated system, our pre-inspection survey data indicates people in custody continue to regard phone calls as the easiest way to contact family. In surveys completed between 2021 and 2024, 71% of survey respondents from metropolitan prisons agreed it was easy to maintain family contact and connection via phone. However, this result was lower than

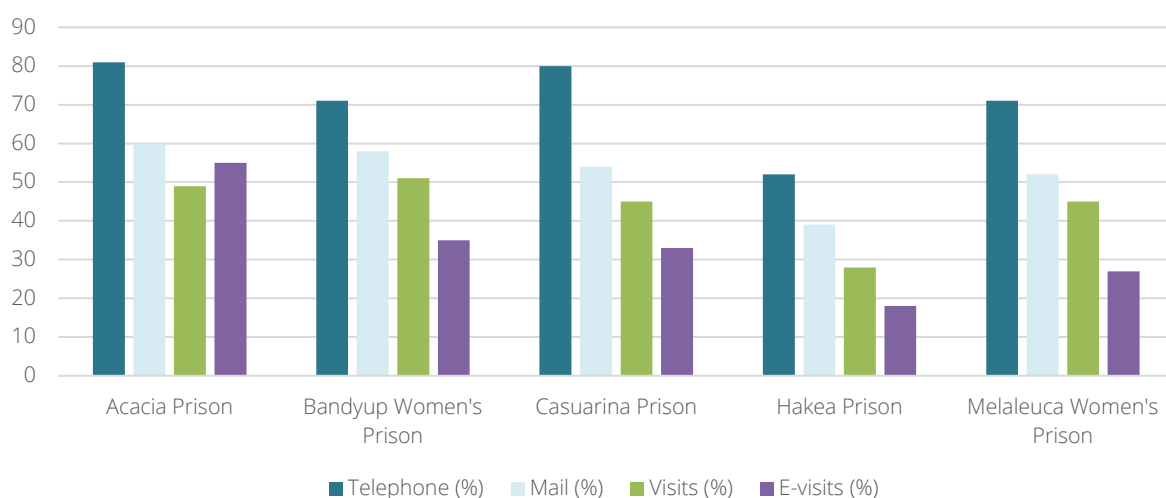
in 2018 when 83% of respondents found it easy. Hakea Prison recorded the lowest level of ease, going from 86% (2018) to 52% (2024).



**Figure 1 Fewer survey respondents agreed it was easy to contact family via telephone in recent surveys compared to our 2018 review.**

Across all methods of contact (telephone, mail, visits, and e-visits), Acacia Prison survey respondents reported the most ease when contacting family while Hakea recorded the least (both surveys were delivered in 2024). In its previous prisoner survey, Hakea was comparable with Acacia. The significant drop is likely explained due to the severity of lockdowns experienced at Hakea at the time of the survey. These lockdowns caused such concern a Show Cause Notice was issued under Section 33A of the *Inspector of Custodial Services Act 2003*, on grounds that prisoners were being treated in a manner that was cruel, inhuman, or degrading (OICS, 2025c). Access to telephones and visits were severely hampered during this time.

At almost all locations, e-visits were considered the hardest way to contact family, except at Acacia. E-visits are those conducted online using a platform such as Webex allowing for both audio and visual communication.



**Figure 2 Across most methods of contact, Acacia Prison recorded the greatest level of ease for contacting family.**

## Ease of access to phones is still poor, despite increased availability

In 2018 there was, on average, one phone for every 16 people in custody (OICS, 2018a). This has improved slightly to 1:13. Despite this improvement, we have regularly found competition for phones remains fierce, with long queues and fights occurring as people wait in line (OICS, 2025a, p. 22). Our ongoing monitoring at Greenough Regional Prison has found fights over the single phone shared between 29 women were common, and at Albany Regional Prison there could be up to 30 men trying to share a phone. Data provided by the Department showed an allocation of one phone per wing (for example a unit with four wings would have four phones) rather than per person. This means, overcrowding compounds access issues, and any associated frustrations, because there is no provision for extra phones if the population increases.

People's access to phones is also hampered by the number of hours out of cell when calls can be made. For example, at Hakea Prison the phone-to-prisoner ratio of 1:24 in 2018 improved significantly to 1:11. However, people in custody complained there was not enough time to make calls because of lockdowns. During November 2024, Hakea recorded the lowest average hours out of cell per day of any facility in Western Australia (6). On some days this was recorded as less than two hours out of cell. Lockdowns are not unique to maximum-security prisons. Departmental data also showed phone use was restricted due to lockdowns on three occasions in November 2024 at Boronia Pre-release Centre for Women. On two of those days, residents at Boronia could only access the phones for four hours instead of the usual 16 hours a day.

People at maximum-security prisons have roughly two hours less phone access per day than they did in 2018 (9 hours in 2024 compared to 11 hours in 2018). Across all facilities, people in custody have, on average, an hour less per day available for making phone calls than they did in 2018.

## 1.2 People in custody received fewer social visits on average

The average number of in-person social visits per person per year has almost halved from 26 in 2018 to 14 in 2024. Including e-visits, the number is estimated to increase slightly to 17 social visits per person. However, due to inconsistencies and a lack of clarity in the way e-visits are recorded, it has not been possible to determine a precise figure for social e-visits for this review. This is because e-visits are not currently categorised as being for social or official purposes. However, the Department advised us it estimated most e-visits occur for social connection.

In contrast, the e-visit software used by Acacia Prison can differentiate between social and official visits and showed weekday social usage equated to approximately 70%. Weekend e-visits at Acacia, as at other facilities, were almost exclusively social. Using this as a guide, the data provided here is our best estimate based on an assumption that approximately 75 per cent of the e-visit figures provided by the Department were for social e-visits and 25 per cent for official e-visits. Although e-visits increased rapidly in 2020 when COVID-19 restrictions were first imposed, they did not make up for the reduction in in-person visits. The fewest visits overall were in 2022.

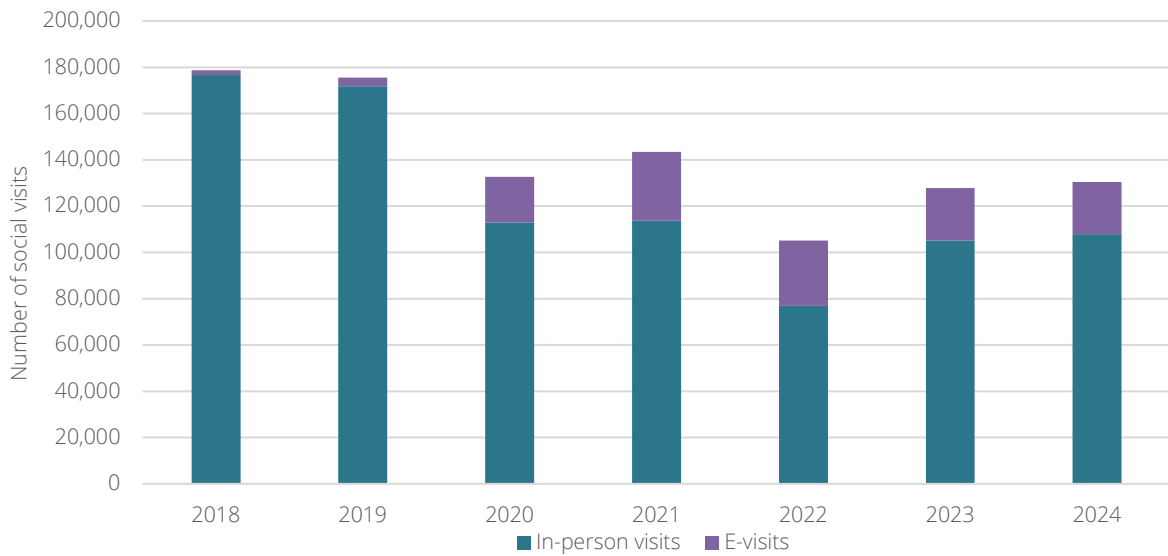


Figure 3 Social visits, including e-visits, have declined since 2018 with the lowest number recorded in 2022.

While visits decreased, the prison population remained roughly the same or reduced between 2018 and 2023 until there was a marked increase in the population in 2024. Hence, the average number of visits per person fell from 26 (one per fortnight on average) in 2018 to 16 in 2024. In-person visits per person more than halved from 26 to only 12 in 2022; one visit per month on average.

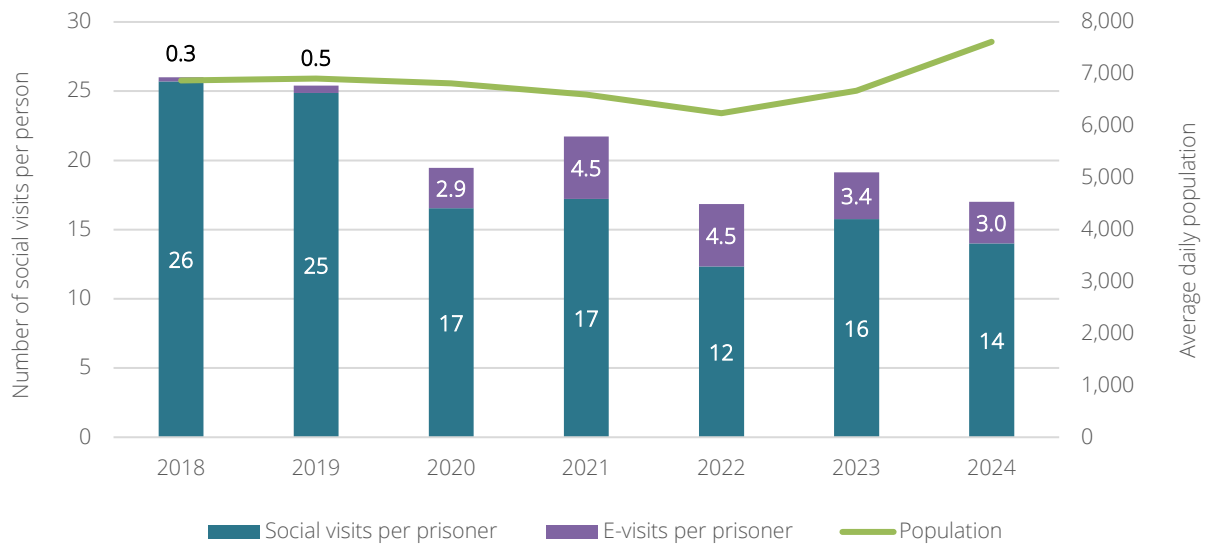


Figure 4 Between 2018 and 2024 the average number of visits per person fell from 26 to 17.

### 1.3 The remand population has increased but their visit entitlements have reduced

The proportion of people in custody on remand has increased since 2018 when it equated to just 28% of the total prison population. In April 2025, the proportion equated to roughly 40%. The population and proportion of those on remand at Hakea Prison (the state's main male remand facility) has remained relatively unchanged since 2018. However, at Casuarina Prison the daily average remand population has increased from 37% of the population to approximately 57%. Regional prisons have also not been immune to the rising remand numbers. At Eastern Goldfields and Greenough regional prisons, remand numbers have more than doubled, with the biggest increase occurring in 2024. This continues a trend noted in 2018 to place male remandees in regional prisons due to overcrowding at Hakea and Casuarina. As Figure 5 shows, the number of people on remand has increased in all regional prisons where unsentenced people can be placed.

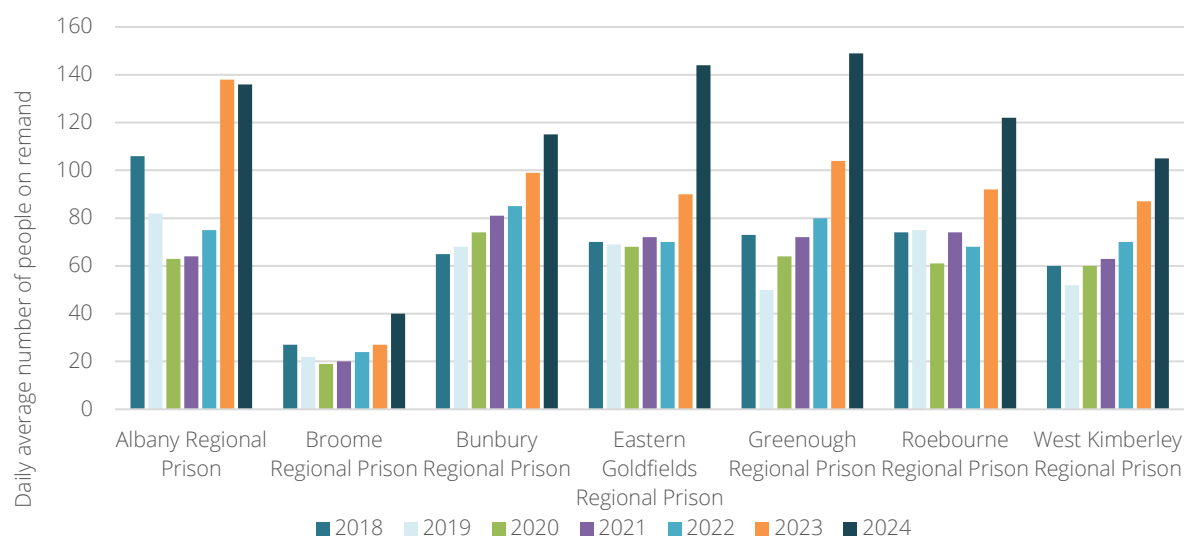


Figure 5 The average number of people on remand has increased to 40% since 2018.

In 2022 the *Prison Regulations 1982* were amended, reducing the visit entitlement of those held on remand from daily to twice a week. This was reflected in departmental policy from October 2023. The Department informed us that the reduction was attributed to facilities not being sufficiently resourced to accommodate daily visits.

#### Visit sessions were reduced and visits were cancelled more frequently

Since 2018, visitor-related cancellations have been the most common type of cancellation. By 2024 the number of these cancellations had reduced, but they still equated to more than three times the number of facility-related cancellations and four times the number of offender-related cancellations.

In 2024, approximately one in five visits were cancelled by the facility. The most common reason for this was not having sufficient staffing to adequately and appropriately supervise visits or other services throughout the prison. Facility-cancelled visits were highest in 2021 and 2022 which was likely due to COVID-19 restrictions [see Section 2.1].

However, in 2023 and 2024, our inspection and ongoing monitoring work found social visits were still being cancelled regularly and visit sessions had been reduced (OICS, 2024a; OICS, 2025b). In February 2025, the number of weekend visits sessions at Casuarina Prison was halved. Allegedly, people in custody climbed on to the roof to protest the reduction. Inspections at Albany Regional Prison (OICS, 2025a) and Bandyup Women’s Prison (OICS, 2025b) revealed visiting hours were restricted and the capacity of visit centres had also been reduced. Similarly, the 2023 inspection of Bunbury Regional Prison found weekend visits sessions had been cancelled due to short staffing (OICS, 2024a).

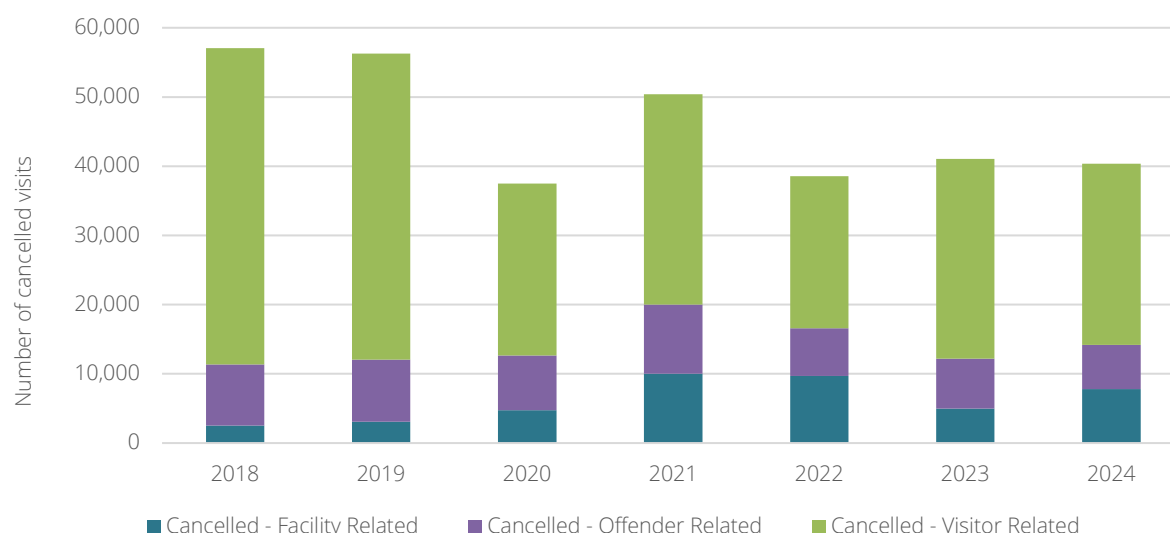


Figure 6 Facility-related cancellations were higher in 2021 and 2022 than in other years.

## 1.4 Most prisons still do not operate an online booking system

Our 2018 review recommended the Department implement an online booking system for social visits for all prisons (OICS, 2018a). We expected this would address the difficulties visitors experienced trying to make visit bookings by phone. While all facilities now have online booking capability, only four facilities (Bunbury, Boronia, Casuarina, and Hakea) offer this option. The Department explained the system was not very sophisticated and it was inflexible. Consequently, some facilities found the online booking system resource intensive, requiring the same level of manual processing as a phone booking. As such, use of the online booking system remains voluntary.

The ability to make bookings by phone will always be necessary, particularly to accommodate people unable to access the internet. However, an online booking request should be an option for visitors to all prisons as it enables the request to be made quickly at a time that is convenient to them, rather than during specific phone booking hours. The Department expects to provide information on the benefits of the online booking system to all its facilities to encourage uptake. However, this advice had not been provided at the time of writing.

## 2 COVID-19 and staff shortages have impacted the quality and quantity of visits

In early 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic led to the unexpected suspension of social visits. While social visits eventually resumed in June 2020, pandemic restrictions severely limited the quality of those visits. These restrictions persisted well after pandemic conditions in the community eased. To mitigate the reduction of in-person social visits, the Department installed e-visit kiosks which helped to alleviate some of this burden. At some facilities, however, this replaced existing social booths, reducing the number of in-person visits that could be conducted at one time. Since then and despite the easing of COVID-19 restrictions, social visits have continued to be impacted by a lack of staff to facilitate social visits.

### 2.1 The pandemic prompted visit suspensions and restrictions

Social visits to all Western Australian custodial facilities were suspended on 23 March 2020. At that time, the Department stated it would offer increased access to telephone calls and would explore options to allow for 'audio-visual visits' (DOJ, 2020a). Free telephone calls were introduced, and the number of free letters sentenced people in custody were allowed to send was increased from 12 to 16 per month. Those on remand could continue to send unlimited mail (DOJ, 2020c).

Social visits officially resumed on 27 June 2020. However, the easing and strengthening of social visit restrictions differed between facilities according to directives issued by the Department's COVID-19 Taskforce, local outbreak events, and government-imposed lockdown periods. Facilities offered a combination of e-visits and in-person visits. The latter was conditional upon compliance with social distancing, rapid antigen testing, and hygiene measures. From 1 December 2021, anyone requiring entry to a prison needed to show they were at least partially vaccinated, and from 1 January 2022, full COVID-19 vaccination was required for entry (or proof of exemption) (DOJ, 2021a).

Visit restrictions were officially lifted on 4 November 2022 when the State of Emergency ended, but hygiene measures and rapid antigen testing continued. It was more than a year later (12 March 2024) before the Department issued a broadcast to prison superintendents on the ongoing management of COVID-19 in prisons (DOJ, 2024a). At this point, given World Health Organisation advice that COVID-19 would persist in the community, the Department outlined standards for ensuring ongoing management of the disease. These included maintaining a sufficient supply of masks, rapid antigen tests, hand sanitiser and cleaning products, and continuing to display hand washing signs. People received into a prison were to be tested, as well as anyone else presenting as symptomatic and anyone who shared a cell with people who tested positive.

Those testing positive were to be offered e-visits. Symptomatic prisoners were to be offered an e-visit or an in-person visit if practicable, with masks to be worn by the prisoner and the visitor. Social distancing was also put in place as far as possible 'within the constraints of the visit room' (DOJ, 2024a). An in-person social visit could also be offered to positive or symptomatic prisoners in extenuating or compassionate circumstances (at supervisor discretion).



## Pandemic and post-pandemic restrictions impacted the social visits' experience

While measures introduced to mitigate the spread of COVID-19 were necessary, they diminished the visit experience for people in custody and their family and friends. Surveys of people in custody at Acacia, Bandyup, Casuarina, Hakea, and Melaleuca (the 5 main metropolitan prisons) revealed some common themes in relation to the impact of COVID-19 on visits, including:

- being unable to touch/hug visitors
- not being allowed to share food with visitors
- cancelled visits/not enough visits due to COVID-19 restrictions and staff on COVID-19 leave.

In some prisons, hygiene measures introduced during the pandemic – such as acrylic screen barriers on visit tables, and food and drink bans – were still in place as late as 2024 and early 2025 (OICS, 2025a, p. 20). The screens forced people in custody and their visitors to raise their voices, leading to privacy concerns (OICS, 2025a). At Bandyup Women's Prison, restrictions on visiting hours and amenities such as child day-stay visits facilities (where women can spend the day playing and cooking with their children) continued well beyond the pandemic (OICS, 2025b). Similarly, the café at Melaleuca Women's Prison closed in 2020 and has not been consistently open since (OICS, 2024c) while the creche in the visits area at Acacia Prison has not been staffed since it was closed during COVID-19 (OICS, Pending).

The restrictions and hygiene measures managed to withstand any COVID-19 outbreaks in prisons until February 2022, when Acacia became the first facility in the state to record cases among the population. To mitigate the spread of COVID-19, Acacia suspended social and e-visits. Riots broke out three days later and the cancellation of social and e-visits were found to be a contributing factor, among other reasons (DOJ, 2022).

As discussed earlier, visit cancellations by the facility rather than the visitor, were higher in 2021 and 2022 than in other years [see Section 1.3]. Consistent with this, complaints related to social visit conditions, visit bans, and visit restrictions were highest in 2021 according to the Department's complaints and compliments system, ACCESS. A sample of complaints from 2022 when COVID-19 cases were peaking in Western Australia, shows visit booking and cancellation complaints were often specifically attributed to COVID-19:

*Wife has been moved to Bandyup and placed in COVID quarantine and can only have one visit per week even though she is a remand prisoner.*

*Last four visits [at Acacia] cancelled for COVID reasons.*

*Visits timetable based on unit (due to COVID) so only able to see son [at Acacia] once every three weeks.*

*[Acacia] not answering visits line; was told there are staffing issues due to COVID.*

Complaints received through the Department's ACCESS system.

As part of this review, we also sought to determine if facilities had reduced the number of visit sessions or cancelled visit sessions during COVID-19 outbreaks. This was separate from facilities reducing the number of visit tables to comply with State-imposed social distancing mandates which would have accounted for some of the fall in social visits. However, most facilities did not or could not answer this query reporting it was impossible to determine due to frequent fluctuations in restrictions.

## 2.2 Introduction of e-visit technology has shown promise, but it is underutilised

The pandemic saw the rapid installation of e-visit kiosks in facilities across the state in 2020 when 100 e-visit kiosks were installed. Consequently, about 20,000 e-visits were conducted in 2020, approximately five times more than in 2019.

There are currently 131 kiosks across all adult custodial facilities. Most prison video-link facilities also have e-visit capability which can be used for social visits when they are not being used for official purposes (49). Together this equates to 180 booths for e-visits across Western Australian prisons. On 10 January 2025, Hakea Prison had the greatest e-visit capacity (37) and the best ratio per person (1:32) of the three large metropolitan male prisons. Roebourne Regional Prison had the fewest kiosks, with just two which were only installed in late 2024 (1:70). Boronia Pre Release Centre had the best ratio (1:14) while Acacia Prison had the fewest number of kiosks per person (1:98). Among the regional prisons, Bunbury had the lowest ratio with only six kiosks to share among more than 500 people (approximately 1:87).

Table 1 Bunbury has the lowest ratio of e-visit kiosks with only six to share among 500 people.

Facility	Kiosks (inc. video-link)	Population (10 Jan 25)	Persons per kiosk
Acacia Prison	15	1,463	98
Albany Regional Prison	17	463	27
Bandyup Women's Prison	10	332	33
Boronia Pre-Release Centre for Women	5	71	14
Broome Regional Prison	3	61	20
Bunbury Regional Prison	6	520	87
Casuarina Prison	18	1,542	86
Eastern Goldfields Regional Prison	10	332	33
Greenough Prison	12	345	29
Hakea Prison	37	1,200	32
Karnet Prison Farm	7	377	54
Melaleuca Women's Prison	8	234	29
Pardelup Prison Farm	3	87	29
Roebourne Regional Prison	2	139	70
Wandoo Rehabilitation Prison	4	63	16
West Kimberley Regional Prison	11	225	20
Wooroloo Prison Farm	9	445	49
<b>Total</b>	<b>180</b>	<b>7,899</b>	

However, while e-visit kiosks may be available to people in custody, many are not being used. Since their peak in 2021, uptake of e-visits across the state has decreased with a notable decline observed at metropolitan prisons. In contrast, regional prisons have recorded a modest upward trend.

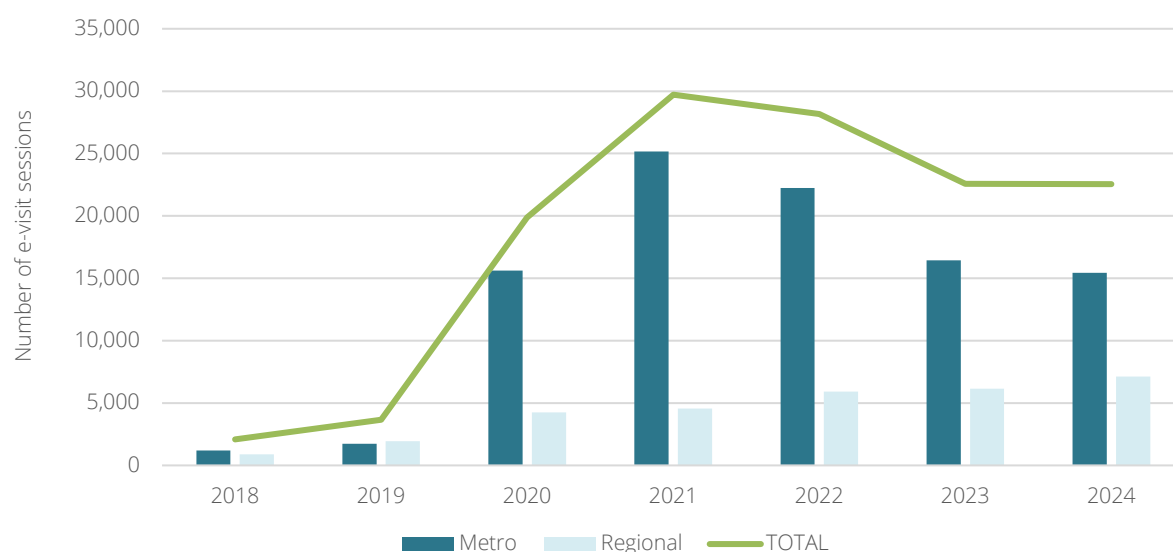


Figure 7 The number of e-visit sessions was trending higher in regional prisons in 2024.

In 2021 there were five times more e-visits at metropolitan prisons than regional prisons, despite the metropolitan population being only 2.8 times the size of the regional population. However, this had reduced by the end of 2024 to roughly twice the number of visits. This meant the number of e-visits per person was higher in regional prisons than metropolitan prisons in 2024 (see Table 2).

**Table 2 The average number of e-visits per person is now higher in regional prisons compared to metro prisons.**

Custodial facility location	2021	2024
Metropolitan area	6.0	3.0
Regional area	3.4	4.4

E-visits were welcomed by people in custody at times when in-person visits were unavailable. However, the space required for the e-visit booths has reduced the capacity for in-person visits. It is likely the replacement of in-person visit booths with e-visit kiosks has contributed to a decline in overall visit numbers. To ensure e-visit kiosks are not underutilised, the Department should investigate ways to increase uptake. This might mean better promotion of e-visits as an option and providing information and/or support to family members regarding the use of e-visit technology. This may be particularly useful in regional areas at locations where family members without video call hardware and/or software can make a call. It may also require better technical support within prisons, as we have previously found this was contributing to some unsuccessful e-visits (OICS, 2025a).

**Recommendation 1**

Provide support to people in custody and their family members to increase the use of e-visit technology, including with an information package and support when technical issues arise.

### 2.3 Staff shortages are limiting visits, but COVID-19 may be shouldering the blame

Staff shortages have continued to affect the number of visits being offered at some facilities. Concerns about staff shortages were raised in the most recent inspection reports for all five main metropolitan prisons (OICS, 2025c; OICS, 2023; OICS, Pending; OICS, 2025b; OICS, 2024c). We have found these shortages were due to unfilled vacancies, staff on workers’ compensation leave, staff on personal leave/COVID-19 leave, and unplanned absences. This had led to people in custody being locked in cells for extended periods (limiting their time for social contact), cancelled or reduced visits, reduced daily visits for people on remand (when they were still entitled to them), and lengthy delays in approvals for new telephone contacts and visit bookings.

Our ongoing monitoring of custodial facilities at the end of 2024 and start of 2025, found social visits were still being cancelled regularly at Hakea Prison (especially on Saturdays) and Casuarina Prison. In February 2025, the number of weekend sessions had been halved at Casuarina and we were told that this resulted in an incident where prisoners had allegedly climbed onto the roof in protest. At Bandyup Women’s Prison, women complained about regular lockdowns and only being allowed out of the cell for one hour on some days. Prison management explained ensuring sufficient staff was

consistently challenging, with many staff on workers' compensation leave. Given the frequency this is raised with us, our office is currently undertaking a review into the pervasive impact of workers compensation on people in custody. The repeated lockdowns and the reduced access to phone calls and visits has also been reported in the media (Wilde, 2025).

Our ongoing monitoring work has found instances of ongoing restrictions attributed to COVID-19 beyond what seemed a reasonable timeframe. At Albany Regional Prison, pandemic contact restrictions had reduced the capacity of the visits centre from 20 tables to 12, and it was rare for more than 10 to be in use each session (OICS, 2025a). Furthermore, staffing shortages have increasingly resulted in cancelled visit sessions and those that did proceed were often shorter. Staffing shortages also impacted e-visit sessions (OICS, 2025a). While the loss of tables can perhaps be attributed to COVID-19, the continued restrictions on visits cannot. COVID-19 contact restrictions have largely disappeared from the community. However, it appears prisons may have allowed some of them to continue because they assist in dealing with current resourcing challenges and preferred security restrictions.

In 2022, some complainants were already suspicious COVID-19 was being used as an excuse to limit visits, particularly at Hakea Prison:

*COVID restrictions not lifted but have been lifted in the community.*

*Visits cancelled tomorrow. Sick of hearing the COVID bull\*\*\*\* excuses.*

2022 complaints received through the Department's ACCESS system.

However, by 2024, as the relevance of the pandemic faded in the wider community, prisoner survey respondents no longer referenced COVID-19. They were more likely to mention staff shortages, particularly in relation to cancelled visits:

*Restriction of visits [at Albany] based on officers - spoke to Super & did nothing.*

*Animals get treated better than us 23-hour lockdowns and they take visits off us due to lack of staff [at Hakea].*

*[At Hakea] we are locked down mostly every day because of no staff and visits get cancelled due to no staff.*

2024 comments in our pre-inspection surveys of people in custody.

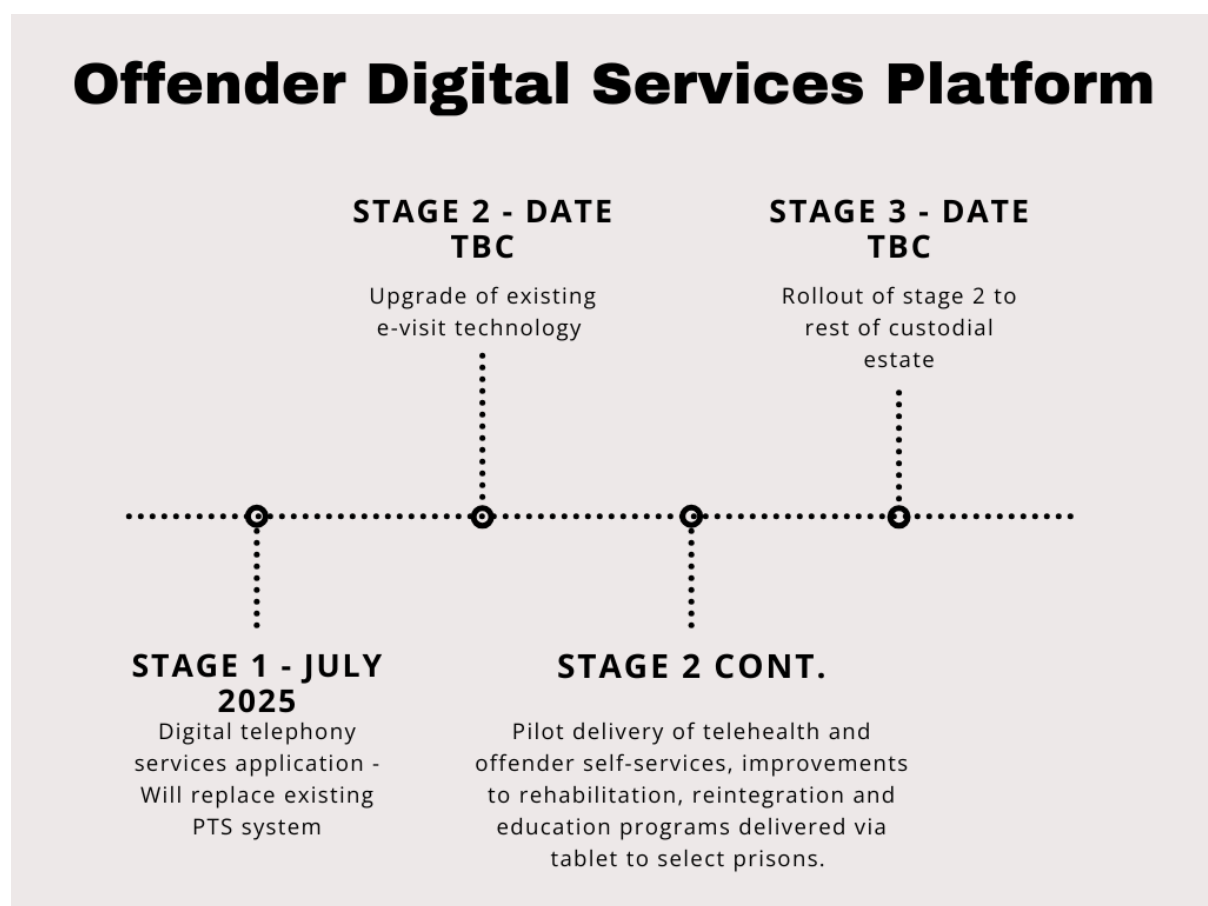
### 3 Implementing a digital services platform may improve family contact but rollout will take time

Work on the first stage of the new Offender Digital Services Platform (ODSP) is expected to begin in July 2025 following the appointment of a contractor. The ODSP is part of the Department's Long Term Custodial Technology Strategy (LTCTS) which aims to upgrade a host of offender services (see graphic below). However, the potential benefits will likely take years. Stage One – the first of three stages – is the digital telephony services application. This stage will replace the current out-of-date PTS and is also essential for facilitating implementation of new technology.

#### 3.1 Technical rollout has potential to improve the lives of people in custody

The Department expects the ODSP will 'provide incarcerated individuals with access to various digital services that can enhance their rehabilitation and reintegration process' (see below for timeline of ODSP) (DOJ, n.d.). The component most relevant to this review is visitor services. The requirement is to provide e-visit technology to keep people in custody connected with authorised social and formal networks. The Department has stipulated the e-visit system must have the capability to:

- deliver a more reliable audio-visual service
- connect with existing departmental systems
- access prisoners' calendars to schedule in-person or virtual social visits.



The Department has also indicated there is the potential to conduct an e-visit using in-cell tablet technology. However, multiple factors including operational, security, and infrastructure considerations will impact on this becoming a reality.

The other parts of the Extended Business Services (EBS) (services such as telehealth, offender self-services, and rehabilitation and education programs) are designed to be accessible from an in-cell tablet. Stage Two is a pilot of these services (including e-visit services) in nominated prisons for six months (with an option to extend for a further 6 months). Stage Three would roll out the program to other prisons.

These long term plans are very optimistic, but it goes without saying that they are just that, unless and until they are approved and appropriately resourced.

### E-visits can be beneficial, but should not be a replacement for in-person contact

While an upgraded e-visit system would assist with addressing the 'large numbers of manual and cumbersome processes taking prison staff's focus away from core duties' as identified in the LTCTS, it is also expected to deliver some practical benefits to people in custody (DOJ, 2021b, p. 5). However, this should not be a replacement for in-person contact.

There is limited research on the benefits of technology use in prisons in Australia. However, there have been some studies evaluating e-visits since their widespread implementation during COVID-19 and some assessments of handheld tablets following their introduction in New South Wales prisons (Barkworth, et al., 2022; Thaler, et al., 2022; Taylor, et al., 2023; Taylor, et al., 2023; Antojado & Ryan, 2024; Duursma, et al., 2024). One of the main benefits of e-visits is the ability to maintain contact with family who do not live locally. Studies have shown the further a visitor must travel, the less likely a visit will occur. This is because visits may incur food and accommodation costs, in addition to the cost of transport and time away from work (Taylor, et al., 2023; Flynn, et al., 2022; Antojado & Ryan, 2024). This is a particular burden on rural and remote families and disproportionately affects First Nations families (Flynn, et al., 2022).

E-visits can also be less stressful for children compared to in-person visits, sparing them a tiring journey and exposure to a hostile environment where they may not feel safe. E-visits could be more meaningful for young children who might struggle with the cognitive requirements of telephone conversations, with visual cues and facial expressions often proving helpful (Taylor, et al., 2023). Video calls also enabled people in custody to be more engaged in the daily lives of their children, perhaps by reading bedtime stories or helping with schoolwork and being able to see items such as toys and pets (Duursma, et al., 2024; VACRO, 2023). A study of caregiver views of father-child contact during COVID-19 also found e-visits 'go some way to supporting both family relationships and the wellbeing of the person in prison, during periods when contact is not possible' (Taylor, et al., 2023, p. 433). As such, the study notes e-visits may be preferable to face-to-face visits in some circumstances. However, they are not seen as a wholesale replacement for face-to-face visits which provide the opportunity for physical contact with family and friends.

The Department recognised the value of e-visits becoming a permanent fixture in 2020 when e-visit capacity was boosted in response to COVID-19 visit restrictions. It stated that it planned to continue

offering e-visits after social visits resumed 'as an alternative for prison visitors'. At the time, the then Commissioner said:

For many, this will remain a convenient way to spend time with prisoners, particularly for those who live remotely or have difficulties in being able to travel to the prison at visiting times. It may also afford prisoners the chance to see family members who are in hospital and even witness funerals they're unable to attend (DOJ, 2020b).

There are no Australian studies of e-visits conducted in cell via tablet technology as no jurisdiction has implemented this service. While in-cell tablets in New South Wales prisons can be used to make phone calls, e-visits are still conducted under supervision using designated tablets or fixed video conferencing facilities (NSW Parliament, 2023). People in custody in New South Wales can access several free services from their tablets, including selected games and pre-approved websites for news and entertainment, education and health and wellbeing. But the phone feature (despite attracting a charge) was found to be the most used and most valued service (Barkworth, et al., 2022). Users felt the tablets had improved their relationships in and out of prison, and their improved ability to connect with family and friends was positively associated with general wellbeing and a sense of autonomy (Barkworth, et al., 2022; Thaler, et al., 2022).

### 3.2 Continual delays hamper the implementation of digital technology

In 2021, within its LTCTS, the Department acknowledged Western Australia was already 'well behind other Australian jurisdictions in the adoption of digital technologies within a custodial context' (DOJ, 2021b, p. 3). The LTCTS roadmap indicated a request for tenders would be issued in 2022 with Stage One to be implemented in 2023. However, the tender was not issued until 2024 and at the time of this review, a vendor was only recently appointed. Departmental representatives informed us delays were attributed to the frequent change in leadership within the Department and inadequate consultation with the information technology (IT) team in building a successful business case.

In a 2018 review examining access to digital technology for people in custody, our Office noted investment in digital technology was lacking, along with a coordinated, strategic approach to improving digital services for people in custody (OICS, 2018b). The LTCTS acknowledged this, adding the lack of a technology strategy had resulted in an inefficient approach to information management, with a range of digital and paper-based processes being used across prisons (DOJ, 2021b). Limited and fragmented IT infrastructure made it difficult for the Department to provide better and equitable services to people in custody, particularly in regional areas. It also noted the poor offender access to digital technology (DOJ, 2021b).

These problems are only now beginning to be addressed with the awarding of the tender for the ODSP. The Stage One digital telephony services application is funded and due for completion by April 2027. Stage Two and Three are not yet funded and the tender documents note 'it will be at the Department's absolute discretion as to if and when it elects to proceed with either, during the term of the contract' (DOJ, 2024b, p. 4). However, it is encouraging to find a business case is underway. The Department was hopeful Stage Two, the pilot component, could begin in July 2026 and last between six and 12 months. Stage Three is conditional on the success of the pilot. It could be two years, however, before EBS starts being rolled out to prisons around the state.



## Benefits of phone system upgrade likely years away

The ODSP will convert the analogue phone system to a digital network, which will provide the resilience, support, and scalability required to support future additional functions and technologies (DOJ, 2024b). The phone system will also be integrated with the Department's offender management system which will assist people in custody to manage their funds to purchase phone calls. However, there will be no other discernible differences for people in custody. Instructions to the vendor are to provide 'like for like', so there will be no increase in the number of handsets, except for at work camps which were previously not part of the PTS (DOJ, 2024b, p. 3).

As outlined earlier, there is no provision within the ODSP for phone calls to be made from tablets in cells. In New South Wales prisons, where this feature is available, people in custody noted a reduction in fights and bullying caused by friction over the use of limited prison unit phones (Thaler, et al., 2022). In-cell phone calls provided greater flexibility and hence autonomy regarding when calls could be made, and most people in custody felt they offered more privacy (this was partly dependent on whether headsets were working). There are obvious benefits to being able to maintain regular contact and emotional connection with family. However, the opportunity to ease the pressure on prison phones and reduce one of the many tensions within prisons should be a further reason to consider in-cell phone calls via tablet. While security concerns may be cited, other Australian prisons have proven these concerns can be overcome.

## E-visit technology unlikely to change in the short term

The upgrades to e-visits have the potential to improve the overall experience for people in custody and families but may not materialise for several years. Furthermore, there is no guarantee technology upgrades will take the same form in all facilities. The Department has explained that funding will not be requested for upgrades to everything, at every site, all at once. It expects a tailored approach to occur which would see different services rolled out in different facilities according to risk and need.

## Unclear extent of access to Wi-Fi in prisons

In the event that in-cell tablets are configured to access approved websites and make phone calls, it is likely that a secure Wi-Fi connection will be needed. It is unclear, however, whether Wi-Fi access will be made available at all prisons. Departmental representatives informed us Wi-Fi installation may not be needed. Furthermore, there are potentially restrictions on placement of connection points in some buildings making Wi-Fi installation difficult. The LTCTS notes the security risks of using Wi-Fi and connecting devices to a shared network need to be considered (DOJ, 2021b, p. 52).

In New South Wales prisons, tablets have been configured for wireless access to the internet via a secure Wi-Fi connection specific to each centre, thanks to developments in Wi-Fi connectivity and secure internet portal infrastructure and protocols (Barkworth, et al., 2022; Thaler, et al., 2022). However, people in custody still complained about inconsistent Wi-Fi connectivity demonstrating the inherent challenges in establishing and maintaining a connection.

## Upgrade of online booking system potential to improve functionality

The ODSP will provide an opportunity to make the currently under-utilised online visit booking system more automated and standardised. The intention is to create a system which provides instant confirmation of a visit time (similar to online medical appointments), having automatically scanned prisoner records for any conflicts or alerts. An upgrade to the online booking system should be a priority for the Department. In April 2025, our Office identified a backlog of 800 emails regarding visit bookings for people placed at Hakea Prison which had not been actioned. By mid-May this had increased to more than 1,100. Almost 95% of these bookings were past the date of the proposed visit with the backlog attributed to short staffing. An automated online system would not be reliant on staff availability for processing, and it could prevent frustrations arising from visitors who are unable to book time with loved ones.

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## Appendix B Acronyms

Term	Expansion of Abbreviation
COVID-19	Coronavirus disease
DOJ	Department of Justice
EBS	Extended Business Services
E-visit	Electronic visit
LTCTS	Long Term Custodial Technology Strategy
ODSP	Offender Digital Services Platform
OICS	Office of the Inspector of Custodial Services
PTS	Prisoner Telephone System



# Response to Review:

## Follow-Up: Contact with Family and Others While in Custody

**September 2025**

## Response Overview

On 25 November 2024, the Office of the Inspector of Custodial Services (OICS) announced the commencement of a new review titled *Follow-up: Contact with Family and Others While in Custody* (the Review). The Review is a follow-up to a similarly titled review conducted by OICS in 2018<sup>1</sup>.

To assist with the Review, the Department of Justice (the Department) provided a range of documentation as well as access to systems, custodial facilities, staff, and prisoners.

On 4 August 2025, the Department received the draft report which contained one recommendation for review and comment. This recommendation is supported in principle.

A detailed response to the recommendation can be found below.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.oics.wa.gov.au/reports/contact-with-family-and-friends-while-in-custody/>

## Response to Recommendation

### **1 Provide support to people in custody and their family members to increase the use of e-visit technology, including with an information package and support when technical issues arise.**

**Level of Acceptance:** Supported  
**Responsible Division:** Corrective Services  
**Responsible Directorate:** Adult Male Prisons

#### **Response:**

The Adult Male Prisons (AMP) Directorate will commence the development of e-visit information packages surrounding the use and availability of e-visits to encourage and better support prisoners and their families and other external supports in the community on the use of this technology.

Each information package will be tailored for each facility to contain site-specific information such as e-visit locations, operating times, booking processes etc, using simplified and plain language as well as visual guides such as illustrations and pictures so that they are easy to read and understand.

It is intended that two versions will be made available:

- A prison specific package, containing details on e-visits from a custody perspective that will include key information for prisoners such as e-visit locations, operating times, booking processes, staff contacts for support and further information, and details on what to expect during an e-visit, including what to do in the event there are technical difficulties while an e-visit is taking place. This package will be provided to prisoners on reception into a facility and will also be available via unit manager and visits centre.
- A community specific package, containing details on e-visits for families and other external supports that will include information such as booking processes, equipment/device requirements, frequently asked questions and who to contact within the Department for further information and support on e-visits. This package will be available via the visits centre and offered to community members during in-person visits.

Alongside these information packages, the orientation process and handbooks at each facility will be updated to ensure consistent e-visits information is being communicated to prisoners, particular for first-time prisoners who may be unfamiliar with the options available to them to maintain contact with their families and other external supports.

These actions are aligned with various priorities of the *Corrective Services Strategic Plan 2025 – 2030*, including improving processes within custodial environments, fostering a culture of respect to better support those in the Department's care, and utilising contemporary technologies and systems to improve how Corrective Services operates.



## Appendix D Methodology

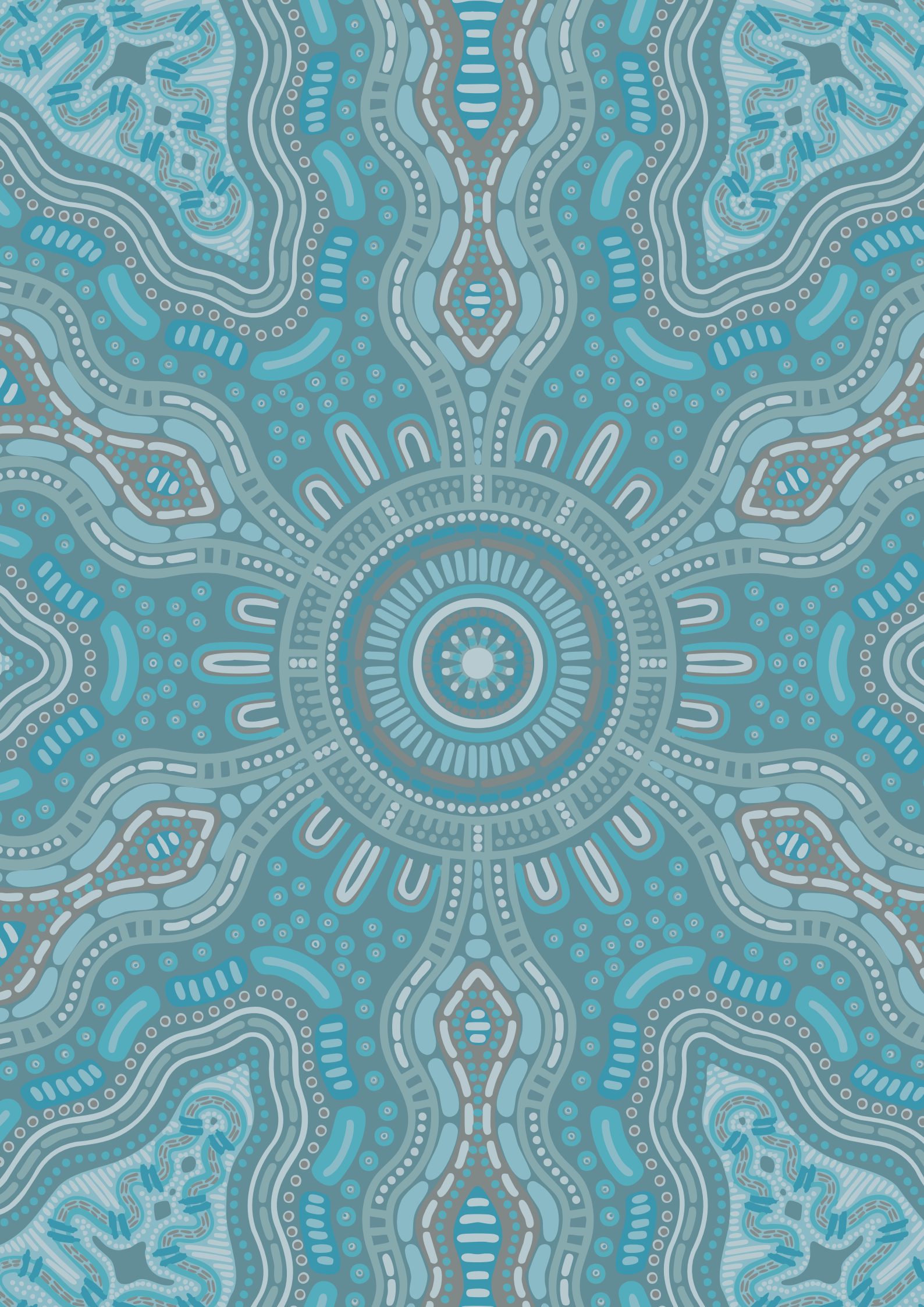
Data sets for this review were obtained from the Department of Justice's (the Department's) offender database through front-end reports and a series of extractions using SQL Server Management Studio. We also used a series of pre-constructed reports from the Department's Reporting Framework and from the offender database.

We also examined departmental documentation including policy and procedures and held various meetings with departmental representatives about key areas of inquiry.

A draft version of this report was sent to the Department in August 2025 for comment and to respond to the recommendation. A formal response was received from the Department on 25 September 2025, as shown in Appendix C.

This report was a review of a custodial service in accordance with Section 22 of the *Inspector of Custodial Services Act 2003*.

Key dates	
Review announced	25 November 2024
Field work	November 2024 – July 2025
Draft report sent to Department of Justice	4 August 2025
Response received from Department of Justice	25 September 2025
Declaration of prepared report	24 October 2025



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