

Inspector's Overview

Recent improvements are welcomed, but Roebourne Regional Prison is facing many ongoing challenges

Roebourne Regional Prison (Roebourne) operates in a challenging regional environment, where workforce constraints, infrastructure limitations, and service delivery pressures intersect. This inspection found that while these structural challenges remain significant, there are emerging signs of stability and improved organisational cohesion.

Staffing pressures continue to have a material impact on the prison's day-to-day operations. Shortages across both custodial and non-custodial roles are affecting the delivery of services and the daily regime of the prison. Regular daily shortfalls are driven by a combination of factors, including high levels of workers' compensation leave, difficulties in recruiting staff in a competitive labour market, and ongoing housing constraints in the local area. Roebourne is not unique in this; we see similar challenges during inspections of every regional prison.

There were significant issues around access to services, particularly health and mental health services. Despite having a permanent mental health nurse, the lack of access to a psychiatrist, even via tele-health, was having a major impact. Men and women in need of mental health diagnosis or treatment review, often presented with behavioural issues raising risks to the safety of both staff and prisoners. While the peer support network was working very well and provided valuable support, it cannot be a substitute for specialist care.

Limited access to suitable programs, meaningful employment and structured recreation were also identified as consequences of daily staff shortfalls.

Despite these pressures, the inspection found more positive sentiment among staff about how the prison is currently operating, particularly when compared to previous inspections. Many staff expressed cautious optimism about the direction of the prison and its ability to improve.

However, these gains remain fragile. Sustained improvement will depend on addressing the underlying workforce challenges that continue to limit the prison's capacity to operate an effective daily routine. Without progress in this area, there is a risk that pressures on staff and services will persist, undermining conditions for both people in custody and staff.

There were several highlights identified during the inspection demonstrating what can be achieved in regional facilities through local initiatives and partnerships. The prison has a longstanding and impressive partnership with the Kanyirninpa Jukurrpa Martu organisation from the East Pilbara who deliver a cultural education and transition program for Martu men and women in Roebourne. Another initiative is a staff cultural appreciation program led by an Aboriginal staff member who works closely with prisoners holding cultural knowledge, language and connections to local family groups.

During the inspection, we were also able to attend the first graduation of men having completed a Certificate II in Rail Infrastructure through the *Bulujari Guma* (meaning forward together) program. This was an impressive partnership with local businesses and organisations providing valuable

employment skills. The prison also runs a barista program, and training in operating a radio program in conjunction with the local radio station. We hope these programs can continue and become embedded in the operations of the prison.

The most pleasing observation was the completion of the project to install air conditioning in the main accommodation units within the prison. Both staff and prisoners spoke highly of the positive impact this has had on prisoner welfare and general behaviour within the prison.

Women remain a marginalised group in Roebourne. The women's unit is small with a capacity for around 14, although this is often exceeded resulting in women sleeping on a mattress on the floor. Most women were held on remand which leads to high turnover and fluctuating numbers. These factors and staffing shortfalls often meant that limited supports or activities were available for the women. Women were only employed in their unit as cleaners and did not have access to meaningful opportunities for education, programs, or rehabilitation support.

We heard that because of the fluctuating numbers and the remand status it was not possible to provide additional support. Although this may be the case now, this argument is premised on having only one approach to supporting women in a small regional prison. A better way to look at this problem might be to understand the characteristics of the female population in Roebourne (i.e., predominantly local Aboriginal women held for relatively short periods on remand) and then design a general program that meets some of their needs, rather than saying the cohort do not fit within the existing programs. This is an issue we will explore further as part of our current review into remand prisoners.

The report highlights the need for coordinated, system-level responses to meet many challenges facing regional prisons, particularly in relation to recruitment, retention, and workforce wellbeing. Ensuring that facilities such as Roebourne are adequately resourced is essential to maintaining safe, secure, and humane custodial environments.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We had, until recently, two Independent Prison Visitors for Roebourne who are community volunteers appointed by the Minister for Corrective Services. They attended the prison on a regular basis observing operations and providing an opportunity for the prisoners to raise issues and complaints. The reports they provided after each visit informed the work of our office, and throughout the period of their appointment they advocated strongly for improvements in conditions for the men and women held there. I acknowledge the importance of the work undertaken and thank them for their contribution to our ongoing monitoring of Roebourne.

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

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

We had two independent experts join us for this inspection. I am very grateful for the expertise provided by Ms Helen Gabriel, from the Office of the Inspector of Detention Services, Queensland

Ombudsman, and Ms Shayna Burton, an environmental health expert with the WA Department of Health.

I acknowledge the contribution and hard work of the team in our office who were involved in undertaking this inspection. I would particularly acknowledge and thank Kieran Artelaris for his work in planning this inspection and as principal drafter of this report.

Eamon Ryan
Inspector of Custodial Services

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