



2026 INSPECTION OF
MELALEUCA WOMEN'S
PRISON

171

SEPTEMBER 2026

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



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.



2026 Inspection of Melaleuca Women's Prison

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Inspector's Overview

A prison under strain, caring for an increasingly vulnerable population

Melaleuca Women's Prison is Western Australia's primary remand facility for women, accommodating people with high levels of trauma, vulnerability, mental ill-health, substance use issues and instability. Many women spend only a short time there and arrive in crisis, separated from children, families and support networks. This demanding environment requires trauma-informed practice, strong support services and a stable custodial workforce.

The imprisonment of women has consequences that extend far beyond the individual. Behind many women in custody are children, families and communities affected by their absence. This makes it especially important women are treated with dignity, supported to maintain family connections and provided with genuine opportunities to heal, recover and rebuild their lives. The findings in this report should be considered in that context.

This inspection found a prison operating under significant and sustained pressure. Chronic staffing shortages, workforce inexperience and increasing population pressures affected almost every aspect of prison life. The consequences were visible throughout the inspection. Women experienced frequent lockdowns, reduced access to family contact, fewer meaningful activities, and difficulty accessing some services and supports. Staff were required to continually adapt routines and redeploy resources simply to maintain safe operations.

Importantly, many of the issues identified in this report are not unique to Melaleuca. The prison was included in a Show Cause Notice shortly before this inspection, reflecting broader concerns about conditions across parts of the custodial estate. The findings of this inspection reinforce the conclusion that sustained workforce shortages and increasing demand are placing significant strain on the system's ability to provide safe, humane and rehabilitative custody.

Despite these challenges, the inspection identified examples of commitment, professionalism and good practice. Reception processes were well managed despite their complexity and staffing pressures. Access to legal representatives and court appearances was prioritised, and an experienced Bail Coordinator worked proactively to assist women to secure release at the earliest opportunity. Education staff continued to provide practical and relevant learning opportunities, and a range of voluntary programs remained available, despite significant infrastructure and staffing constraints. Across the prison, staff were working hard to support women and maintain essential services in difficult circumstances.

However, the inspection also identified areas of serious concern. Women reported feeling less safe than at the previous inspection with lockdowns a defining feature of daily life, increasing isolation and limiting access to family, support services and meaningful activity. Conditions for women in crisis, and for pregnant women, were not consistent with the needs of these particularly vulnerable groups. The physical environment continues to present significant limitations, having never been designed as a women's remand prison.

One theme emerged repeatedly throughout this report. Staff and managers were often required to focus on maintaining essential operations rather than improving services or planning for the future. Considerable effort was directed towards managing immediate pressures and mitigating risk. While this commitment is commendable, it is not sustainable as a long-term strategy. Goodwill, adaptability and resilience cannot indefinitely compensate for shortcomings in staffing, infrastructure and resourcing.

This report also raises broader questions about how women are accommodated within Western Australia's custodial system. Melaleuca was adapted from infrastructure originally designed for a different purpose and population. While local staff have worked hard to make the environment as supportive as possible, there are inherent limitations that cannot be addressed through operational practice alone. The case for a purpose-built remand facility for women is compelling and increasingly difficult to ignore.

The findings and recommendations in this report are intended to support improvement both at Melaleuca and across the wider custodial system. There remains a committed workforce, dedicated support staff and examples of good practice on which to build. However, meaningful improvement will require more than local effort. It will require sustained attention to workforce capability, infrastructure, service delivery and, most importantly, the needs of women in custody. Without this, the pressures identified throughout this report are likely to continue to affect not only the women held at Melaleuca, but also the children, families and communities connected to them.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We have four Independent Prison Visitors for Melaleuca. They are community volunteers appointed by the Minister for Corrective Services, who attend Melaleuca on a regular basis and observe the operations of the prison. They also provide an opportunity for the women to raise issues and complaints which informs the work of our office. I acknowledge the importance of their work and thank them for their contribution to our ongoing monitoring of the prison.

I thank Superintendent Lisa Ryan and her team, and the Department of Justice, for their cooperation and openness throughout this inspection. I am especially grateful to the women who generously shared their experiences and insights, helping ensure their voices are reflected in this report.

We had two independent experts join us for this inspection. I am very grateful for the expertise provided by Ms Justine Eades, from the Western Australian Ombudsman, and Ms Shayna Burton, an environmental health expert with the WA Department of Health.

Finally, I acknowledge the professionalism and dedication of the inspection team, and particularly Lauren Netto and John Shenton for coordinating the inspection, and Lauren Netto for preparing this report.

Jane Higgins

Acting Inspector of Custodial Services

9 September 2026

Summary of Findings

A Show Cause Notice was issued prior to the inspection

Nearly two years after a Show Cause Notice was first issued for Hakea Prison, conditions across the custodial estate remained in crisis. The male prisons, Hakea and Casuarina, and Melaleuca Women's Prison faced particular challenges, and all three facilities were the subject of a Show Cause Notice prepared shortly before the on-site inspection of Melaleuca.

The inclusion of Melaleuca in a subsequent, system-wide Show Cause Notice reflected the seriousness of ongoing risks at the facility, particularly in the context of chronic staff shortages, unsafe staffing levels, frequent lockdowns, and limited access to a normal daily routine. Low morale among both prisoners and staff combined with concerns about safety exposed a custodial environment that is increasingly unstable and unsustainable, underscoring the need for urgent, system-wide reform.

Human resources were inadequate across the prison

Custodial staffing at the facility was consistently and significantly below required levels, with an average shortfall of 24% across 71 days, and peaks of up to 50%. These shortages were driven by a combination of unfilled positions, leave (planned and unplanned), and workers' compensation absences. As a result, there were insufficient officers to meet core custodial requirements, placing pressure on daily operations. The facility relied heavily on adaptive routines to maintain basic functions, redeploying staff from non-critical roles to essential posts. This approach enabled continuity of operations but led to reduced or cancelled programs and services, with the greatest impact experienced by women in custody.

The operational model was further strained by workforce capability issues, with 74% of custodial officers having less than two years' experience. Frequent redeployment of Vocational Support Officers, who play a key role in facilitating prisoner employment and structured activity, further undermined purposeful routines. At the leadership level, insufficient staffing within the Senior Leadership Team required extended working hours to meet operational demands, raising concerns about fatigue, burnout, and the sustainability of effective oversight.

Reception and court processes were effective, but women remained disconnected

Reception at Melaleuca is a high-risk operational area that depends on adequate staffing, experienced officers, and suitable infrastructure. Despite ongoing short staffing and infrastructure challenges, reception processes were well managed and efficient. Positively, video-link and legal visit arrangements were prioritised, and a proactive Bail Coordinator ensured the timely release of eligible remandees. Other than these, we found few targeted supports for remand prisoners.

Social visits had declined from four daily sessions to a single one-hour timeslot, limiting access for families. Cancellations due to staff shortages have further restricted access. While core reception and legal processes have been sustained, constrained staffing has reduced important supports and contact opportunities.

An unsuitable environment for a vulnerable population

Perceptions of safety at Melaleuca have deteriorated significantly since the 2023 inspection, with both staff and prisoners reporting they do not feel safe. In 2026, only 49% of women reported feeling safe, a substantial decline from 66% previously and below the state average. Despite most custodial staff reporting they had received adequate training in trauma-informed management, there was little evidence of structured training or consistent application in practice. Weak complaint and request processes, reliant on paper-based systems with limited transparency or follow-through, further reduced trust and confidence in staff among women.

Persistent hygiene and maintenance issues were evident across accommodation units, including mouldy and leaking showers, deteriorating grout and blocked drains. Laundry operations presented additional concerns, with untrained prisoners managing washing processes without appropriate Personal Protective Equipment (PPE). Equipment was not fit for purpose, with domestic washing machines unable to meet the volume or hygiene standards required.

Health and wellbeing services were stretched

Instability in the health workforce increased the risk to service continuity and clinical oversight at Melaleuca. While staffing levels were generally adequate and most shifts were filled, reliance on an acting Clinical Nurse Manager and casual nursing staff created workforce risks, particularly in covering some night shifts.

Although a broad range of primary and allied health services was available, women reported significant barriers to access. Survey results were poor, with only 14% rating general health services as good. Dental care was a particular concern. Access to dental services relied on limited weekly transfers to Wandoo and was further affected by staffing shortfalls, which reduced utilisation. In 2025, only 14 of 51 available dental visits were attended. The mental health team was committed but under-resourced and unable to meet the needs of a complex population.

Melaleuca was not fit for purpose, with no dedicated spaces for pregnant women, a number of whom reported feeling unsafe and vulnerable in shared, often chaotic accommodation. Conditions in the Crisis Care Unit (CCU) had further deteriorated since 2023, with crowding and unsuitable infrastructure undermining its intended therapeutic function. Overcrowding saw up to 11 women in a unit designed for four. Support services were present but under-resourced: the peer support team and Prison Support Officer allocation were insufficient for the size and vulnerability of the population. While the Aboriginal Visitor Scheme provided valuable cultural support, reliance on a single resource limited its capacity to meet the needs of First Nations women.

Limited opportunities to engage in a purposeful regime

Recreation, programs and education at Melaleuca were constrained despite committed staff and good intentions. While a structured recreation schedule existed and VSOs were proactive, chronic staff shortages and frequent redeployment led to regular cancellations, reflected in worsening prisoner perceptions of organised sport. Program delivery faced similar barriers, with limited infrastructure, including only one available program room, and insufficient custodial staffing preventing external

facilitators from accessing the prison. Lengthy security clearance processes further delayed the introduction of new providers. Notwithstanding these challenges, the programs that were delivered were relevant to the needs of the population and education was appropriately focused on practical skills and employability.

Employment opportunities were limited. Melaleuca lacked the infrastructure and resourcing to support an adequate employment program, with more than half the population not working and a further proportion confined to unit-based roles such as cleaning and laundry. Frequent redeployment of VSOs further reduced available work opportunities.

Overcrowding and understaffing impacted security operations

Frequent lockdowns were the most significant concern for women and were inconsistent with a trauma-informed model of care. Extended periods confined in units or cells limited women's ability to maintain relationships with family. Time out of cell declined substantially during the 12 months before the inspection, falling from an average of 8.45 hours per day in January 2025 to 6.54 hours in January 2026 and 5.36 hours in February 2026. As a result, women were spending close to 19 hours each day locked in their cells or behind wing grilles.

The decline in conditions coincided with chronic staff shortages, frequent redeployments, an inexperienced custodial workforce and reduced opportunities for positive staff-prisoner interaction. As operational priorities shifted towards maintaining basic safety and security, staff had less time to build relationships with prisoners and understand their individual needs and circumstances. This contributed to a growing disconnect between prisoners and officers. During this period, use of force incidents increased significantly, averaging 38 incidents per month and peaking at 80 in late 2025. Although incidents declined afterwards, they remained elevated into early 2026, and Melaleuca continued to record some of the highest use of force rates across the adult prison system.

Staff shortages also affected key security functions, with redeployments reducing capacity to complete security processes, maintain timely use of force reviews, and manage prisoner disciplinary matters. These challenges were compounded by the absence of a dedicated management unit, leaving Melaleuca as the only maximum-security remand prison without a purpose-built facility for managing prisoners on restricted regimes.

The inspection also identified concerns about searching practices. Although Melaleuca had a full-body x-ray scanner intended to reduce or eliminate the need for strip searching, strip searches remained common practice.

Recommendations

Recommendation	Page	DOJ Response
Recommendation 1 Build a fit-for-purpose remand facility for adult women.	1	Supported in Principle
Recommendation 2 Develop and implement an appropriate staffing model for all aspects of Melaleuca's operations.	5	Supported in Principle
Recommendation 3 Melaleuca's reception should be fully staffed at all times by officers specifically trained in reception processes.	8	Supported in Principle
Recommendation 4 Ensure contracted supports at Melaleuca are sufficiently resourced to provide adequate and comprehensive services for women on remand.	9	Supported
Recommendation 5 Increase resourcing for bail services at Melaleuca.	10	Supported
Recommendation 6 Increase opportunities for women to maintain contact with family.	12	Supported – Current Practice/Project
Recommendation 7 Introduce an electronic system for prisoners to manage requests and complaints.	18	Supported in Principle
Recommendation 8 Implement a structured daily cleaning regime and ensure consistent access to approved cleaning products.	19	Supported
Recommendation 9 Implement a centrally managed laundry system with adequate capacity and processes to ensure safe and hygienic cleaning of all clothing and bedding.	21	Supported in Principle
Recommendation 10 Invest resources to improve the conditions for the most vulnerable women at Melaleuca, specifically pregnant women and those most at-risk.	28	Supported in Principle

Recommendation 11 Increase the number of Prison Support Officer (PSO) and Aboriginal Visitor Scheme (AVS) positions at Melaleuca.	30	Supported – Current Practice/Project
Recommendation 12 Limit the redeployment of the Recreation VSOs.	33	Supported – Current Practice/Project
Recommendation 13 Address staffing and infrastructure shortfalls that impact education delivery at Melaleuca.	35	Supported in Principle
Recommendation 14 Increase employment opportunities for women at Melaleuca with additional industries infrastructure and additional VSO positions.	36	Supported – Current Practice/Project
Recommendation 15 Prioritise completion of local Use of Force (UoF) reviews.	41	Supported – Current Practice/Project
Recommendation 16 Explore options to build a multi-purpose management unit at Melaleuca.	42	Supported in Principle
Recommendation 17 Ensure sufficient staff are trained in the use of the x-ray scanner to reduce reliance on strip searching.	44	Supported – Current Practice/Project

Background

Melaleuca Women's Prison is Western Australia's primary receipt and remand facility for women, though it has a complex and evolving history. The site originated as two additional accommodation units (Units 11 and 12) of Hakea Prison. These were commissioned in 2011 to expand capacity for the male estate. However, these units were underutilised due to safety concerns and uncertainty about their role. In 2013, following a major disturbance at Banksia Hill Detention Centre, the units were repurposed to temporarily house over 130 young male detainees for nine months.

In 2014, the Department of Justice announced the conversion of these units into a 256-bed, maximum-security remand and reintegration facility for women. This marked a significant shift, with the site transitioning from male accommodation to a youth detention facility, and ultimately to a women's prison. The Melaleuca Remand and Reintegration Facility commenced operations in December 2016 under private management by Sodexo Australia Pty Ltd, following a competitive tender process.

The prison's early years were shaped by contractual and governance challenges. This culminated in the early termination of the Sodexo contract in 2019, with the facility transitioning to public management in April 2020.

This was Melaleuca's fourth inspection and the third as a publicly run facility.



MELALEUCA WOMEN'S PRISON

FACT PAGE

OFFICIAL CAPACITY
AT TIME OF INSPECTION

256

GENERAL BED CAPACITY
AT TIME OF INSPECTION

240

PRISONERS AT TIME OF
INSPECTION

228

PRISONERS SLEEPING
ON THE FLOOR

2



Melaleuca Women's Prison
is located on Wadjak
Noongar land, 19 kms south
of Perth.



INSPECTION DATE

20 - 27 March 2026

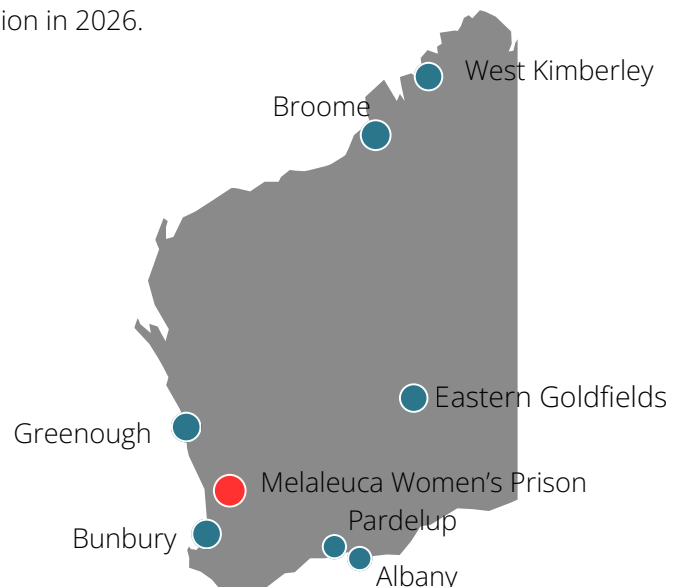
ROLE OF FACILITY

Melaleuca Women's Prison is Western Australia's primary receipt and remand facility for adult women. Located adjacent to Hakea Prison, it accommodates women on remand and those requiring maximum-security custody. The prison manages a complex population with high levels of trauma, mental ill-health, substance use issues and social disadvantage. As the State's primary women's remand facility, it plays a critical role in supporting women's access to courts, legal representatives, bail services and essential support programs.

HISTORY

The site originated as two accommodation units of Hakea Prison, commissioned in 2011 to expand capacity in the male prison estate. In 2014, the Department announced its conversion into a 256-bed maximum-security remand and reintegration facility for women.

Melaleuca commenced operations in December 2016 under private management by Sodexo Australia Pty Ltd before transitioning to public management in April 2020. The prison remains Western Australia's primary remand facility for women and underwent its fourth inspection in 2026.



The Inspection Process

This inspection was guided by the Office's *Inspection Standards for Adult Custodial Services* (the Standards) (OICS, 2025), which draws on expectations and rights established in relevant international treaties and guidelines. The Standards provide a framework for assessing the performance of custodial facilities.

The scope of this inspection was refined to focus on 22 of the 33 adult standards, across seven of the eight core themes. Scoping was based on the assessment of available evidence such as liaison visit reports, data on key indicators, a self-assessment completed by the Superintendent, and themes arising from Independent Visitor reports.

Before the on-site inspection, surveys were conducted with prisoners and staff, and interviews were held with departmental staff, key prison personnel, and service providers. Additional documents from the Department and a demographic data pack also informed the inspection's lines of inquiry.

The on-site inspection took place over five days in March 2026. It involved engagement with management, staff, and prisoners; observation of key processes; and review of relevant documentation. At the end of the inspection week, a debrief was held with senior management to present preliminary findings.

The findings and recommendations in this report are based on evidence gathered throughout the inspection process.



1 A Show Cause Notice was issued prior to the inspection

In May 2024, following a routine inspection of Hakea Prison (Hakea), the Inspector issued a Show Cause Notice to the Director General of the Department of Justice under section 33A of the *Inspector of Custodial Services Act 2003*. The notice reflected concerns that conditions at the prison may have amounted to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment. When the Office returned in 2025, some improvements had been made, but overall conditions remained unacceptable (OICS, 2025).

Nearly two years later, ongoing monitoring found that conditions at Hakea had not meaningfully improved. Similar concerns were evident at Casuarina Prison (Casuarina) and Melaleuca Women's Prison (Melaleuca). Across all three prisons, the Office observed chronic staff shortages, unsafe staff-to-prisoner ratios, frequent lockdowns and an inability to provide a normal daily routine with meaningful activities. Relationships between staff and prisoners had deteriorated, while use of force incidents, self-harm and psychological distress had increased. Staff and prisoners reported low morale, and staff described feeling unsafe and experiencing moral injury. Together, these indicators pointed to a custodial system under significant and sustained strain.

As a result, the Inspector issued a further Show Cause Notice covering Hakea, Casuarina and Melaleuca. The accompanying report made a single recommendation for the Government to commit to and fund system-wide reforms (OICS, 2026). The matter was referred to the Minister for Corrective Services on 8 April 2026, and, at the time of writing, no response had been received.

The decision to include Melaleuca in the Show Cause Notice came shortly before its scheduled routine inspection. This report outlines the challenges faced by staff and women at the prison, driven by ongoing staffing shortages, inadequate infrastructure and an increasingly complex population.

The Office has consistently found Melaleuca's infrastructure to be unsuitable. Converted from former units of Hakea Prison, the facility is not fit for purpose for women on remand. As the number of women on remand continues to grow, there is a clear need for a purpose-built remand centre that supports trauma-informed care, meaningful activities, and the health and wellbeing needs of women in custody.

As such, at the outset of this report, and in light of the concerns raised in the Show Cause Notice, the Office considers it important to recommend the construction of a fit-for-purpose remand centre for adult women.

Recommendation 1

Build a fit-for-purpose remand facility for adult women.

2 Human resources were inadequate across the prison

Custodial staffing shortfalls at Melaleuca were frequent and severe, with daily deficits of 25 to 30% routine and shortfalls of 40% not uncommon. To maintain basic operations and manage safety risks, the facility relied on constant adaptive routines. The Senior Leadership Team (SLT) adjusted officer deployments daily, redeploying staff from their substantive roles to cover critical operational areas and sustain essential services, often at the expense of routine activities and programs.

A high proportion (over 70%) of the custodial workforce was inexperienced with less than two years' custodial experience. On many shifts, large numbers of inexperienced staff were managing prisoners and complex operations. The burden to monitor and guide these new officers fell to experienced officers who were already overworked and nearing burnout.

The SLT staffing model was inadequate. Leaders were skilled, experienced, and knowledgeable and they managed the complex environment effectively. But this required most of them to work extended hours which was not sustainable.

This chapter assesses the performance of Melaleuca against the following standard:

Standard 2 – Human Resources

All staff possess the necessary skills and authority to manage people in custody safely and effectively.

2.1 Consistent staff shortages impacted prison operations

We found custodial shortfalls were regular and severe. Figures obtained from the facility shows an average custodial officer shortfall of 24% over 71 days (1 January 2026 to 12 March 2026). The range of staff shortages varied from 40% to 50% over six days during this period, 30% to 40% over 22 days and 20% to 30% over 28 days.

The motivators behind these shortages were a combination of vacancies in prison officer positions, planned and unplanned personal leave and officers on workers' compensation leave. Of 127.5 operational staff assigned to Melaleuca (as included in the Service Level Agreement) only 84 were available for work. The shortfall was primarily due to current workers' compensation claims which we were informed numbered as many as 30 unresolved claims as at March 2026. There were an additional nine officers who had been on workers' compensation and were on return-to-work plans.

Officers returning to work after a period of absence were subject to specific plans outlining the conditions under which they could resume their duties. A key stipulation of these return-to-work plans was to not have direct contact with prisoners. This presents significant challenges in a prison. Consequently, the range of suitable roles available to officers on return-to-work plans is restricted, impacting the daily operations of the prison.

Adaptive routines were used regularly

Staff shortages meant there were not enough officers to fill required custodial roles, affecting services and operations across the site. Adaptive routines were implemented to maintain basic operations without compromising safety. Staff were redeployed from their usual roles to cover critical areas and keep essential services running. The greatest impact was on the women, with limited staffing leading to reduced or cancelled services and programs.

The most commonly redeployed officers were the Vocational Support Officers (VSOs). These staff managed the prisoner work crews, and their role was essential in enabling a purposeful and structured routine for prisoners by keeping them meaningfully employed.

The Gardens VSO was commonly redeployed to video-link and official visits services which could not be cancelled as they involved court appearances, the judiciary and lawyers. Further, attending these provided the women potential opportunities to get bail and be released which eased the population pressure.

The Cleaning VSO was also consistently redeployed to support video-link court processes. The recreation VSOs were commonly and consistently redeployed to the gatehouse and reception. Other areas of redeployment included visits (when these occurred) and escorting external contractors across the site.

When these VSOs were redeployed to other positions, the women they usually employed in their work areas were left in the units with nothing to do. Gardeners could not garden without the VSO to supervise them. And the women missed out on recreation when the Recreation VSOs were redeployed.

Social visits were also impacted. While the SLT made concerted efforts to facilitate booked visits despite ongoing staffing constraints, access to social visits remained vulnerable to operational disruption. The ability for women to maintain family connections, particularly with children, is a critical protective factor that supports wellbeing, rehabilitation, and prospects for successful reintegration.

The biggest impact of the staff shortages for the women were lockdowns. Lockdowns were implemented as a risk-management measure when staffing levels fell below what was required to safely unlock and manage women within the units. While the SLT took active steps to minimise both the frequency and scope of lockdowns, there were occasions when staffing levels were so critically low that full lockdowns were unavoidable to maintain safety. Although necessary in these circumstances, lockdowns had a significant impact on women's access to out-of-cell time, activities, and services. They also increased anxiety among the women when they could not access the phones to call their children and families.

These findings were, unfortunately, consistent with and unchanged from those of the previous inspection in 2023. Following that inspection, we made two recommendations about custodial staffing at Melaleuca, both of which the Department of Justice (the Department) supported as current practice/projects (OICS, 2024, pp. 14-16).

Recommendation 5 - Develop and implement an appropriate staffing model for all aspects of operations at Melaleuca.

Recommendation 6 - Increase custodial officer resourcing at Melaleuca.

Although the Department marked both recommendations as complete, no progress had been achieved. The Department justified this with reference to a staffing review that was still underway and had not yet resulted in changes to staffing levels or resourcing, with further action dependent on a future funding submission. This raised concerns about both the criteria used to assess whether recommendations have been genuinely implemented and about the continued staffing crisis at Melaleuca.

2.2 There was a large cohort of new, inexperienced officers

Senior managers stated that 74% of the custodial officer group had less than two years' experience working in a custodial role. On any given shift there could be a significant number of inexperienced officers managing prisoners and prison operations. Copies of the prison's adaptive routine obtained for the three months leading up to the inspection confirmed this, with almost half the number of officers on some shifts having less than two years' custodial experience (46% on 5 January 2026).

Once graduating from the Academy with broad understanding and skills relating to custodial duties, they were rostered for shifts in the prison with no more formal training provided. Rather they were expected to learn the specifics of each role in the particular facility by shadowing other officers and learning on the job.

These officers reported they did not feel adequately supported when they first commenced at Melaleuca. Critical custodial officer shortages limited the capacity for new officers to properly observe and learn the full scope of their roles. This resulted in an over-reliance on a small cohort of experienced staff, while some new officers were being trained by colleagues who themselves had limited experience. The requirement for officers to manage their usual duties while also training new staff added further pressure, contributing to fatigue and reports of burnout.

The number of inexperienced officers was reported as one of the worst aspects of working at Melaleuca in the pre-inspection staff survey.

Due to always being so busy experienced staff are burning out and new staff cannot learn to do things properly

No experienced senior officers

Lack of experienced Officers meaning new Officers are not getting the training they deserve

Quotes from officers about inexperienced staff

The SLT commented that although recruitment is proactive, there are gaps in retention strategies. Reasons for staff leaving Melaleuca were largely around transferring to another facility and retirement.

2.3 Too few positions in the Senior Leadership Team

The SLT did not have sufficient positions to effectively support the complex operational requirements of Melaleuca. Leaders were skilled, experienced, and knowledgeable about the facility. However, their limited numbers necessitated extended working hours, raising concerns about staff burnout and their ability to maintain effective oversight of the prison's operations.

Melaleuca's SLT model included the following positions:

- Superintendent
- Assistant Superintendent Operations (ASO)
- Assistant Superintendent Women's Services (ASWS)
- Assistant Superintendent Security (ASSec)
- Business Manager
- Two Principal Officers

Other prisons that also manage complex remand populations have more leadership positions on their staffing profile. These include Deputy Superintendents who report to the Superintendent and have Assistant Superintendents reporting to them.

Melaleuca's SLT had recently added an extra temporary position – Manager Case Planning and Family Services. The position primarily provided support for some of the responsibilities attached to the ASWS role. However, the individual in this position was already in place at Melaleuca so was a new position in title only; it did not provide an additional person and was also only a temporary addition to the SLT.

Recommendation 2

Develop and implement an appropriate staffing model for all aspects of Melaleuca's operations.

3 Reception and court processes were effective, but women remained disconnected

The reception area at Melaleuca is a high-risk operational environment that relies on sufficient and experienced staff and suitable infrastructure. Persistent staffing shortages pose significant safety and operational risks, particularly given the vulnerability of newly arrived women and the complexity of reception processes. Reception procedures were generally well managed, with Senior Officers maintaining consistent processes and staff demonstrating respectful and sensitive engagement with women on arrival.

Women on remand comprised approximately 80% of the population. But there were limited supports to assist women to manage the stress and uncertainty of being on remand. While staffing shortages continued, the prison prioritised access to legal representatives, with official visit numbers remaining relatively stable overall.

Opportunities for social visits had reduced since 2023, with daily sessions decreasing from four to just one. The timing of this session in the late afternoon was problematic. Visits were at times cancelled due to staff shortages.

This chapter assesses the performance of Melaleuca against the following standards:

Standard 4 – Reception and support

People entering custody are treated respectfully, can immediately contact their families, and have their needs and risks identified and supported.

Standard 6 – Support for people on remand

Custodial facilities minimise the stress for people entering custody on remand, offer a regime that reflects their unconvicted status, and assists them to meet their bail conditions and be promptly released from custody.

Standard 7 – Access to legal supports

People in custody have confidential access to legal representatives and resources and are assisted to prepare for their court appearance.

Standard 13 – Contact with family and visits

People in custody can maintain contact with their friends and family and organise regular visits.

3.1 Well-managed reception processes at risk

The prison reception area is a high-risk operational environment that relies heavily on adequate staffing levels, staff experience, and appropriate infrastructure. Short staffing presents a significant operational and safety risk, particularly given the vulnerability of newly arrived women and the complexity of reception processes.



Photo 1: One of the holding cells in the reception centre.

Reception processes at Melaleuca were well-managed and performed, despite the challenges of short staffing, infrastructure and the constant flow of prisoners. Reception Senior Officers (SOs) had these processes well-embedded to ensure they flowed as smoothly as possible especially at busy times when many new arrivals were expected. Staff working in reception were respectful and sensitive towards the women arriving at Melaleuca, some of whom could be particularly anxious and vulnerable.

Inspection team members observed a late afternoon/evening reception process to witness first-hand the pace and complexity of this operational area. This confirmed the strength of the processes in place and the importance of having experienced staff familiar with these.

On the day of our visit there was only one officer (an experienced Senior Officer) rostered in reception. They had anticipated the arrivals in (from police, the contractor Ventia and transfers in from regional facilities) and had all the paperwork and property boxes ready and waiting. There were seven women listed to arrive at Melaleuca that evening, but officers were also prepared for unexpected arrivals.

The officer had also worked alone the previous day and had processed 28 movements through reception on their own. When we arrived at 4:00 pm to observe reception we were informed that night shift staffing was already 50% short, down to two officers at the gate, one in the Crisis Care Unit, and a Senior Officer. Two officers had been tasked with an unexpected 'hospital sit' and there had been some unscheduled 'book offs' by the other rostered officers. The Reception SO was due to leave by 6:00 pm but ended up staying to get through the work until after 8:00 pm. Two officers working in other operational areas and also due to end their shifts, offered to stay later to assist in reception until the officers returned from the hospital escort. Officers staying and/or helping other officers was a common theme at Melaleuca. We observed this in different operational areas throughout the on-site inspection.



Photo 2: The reception area was organised but lacked privacy.

Prisoner reception workers assisted reception staff, working across the day in morning and afternoon shifts. They worked behind the scenes organising essential packs (clothing, bedding etc.) for the new arrivals. They cleaned the area, laundered clothing and ensured women arriving were provided with a hot drink and food. Their work was valued by reception staff.

Reception infrastructure was not fit for purpose. This presented some risk. The lack of space for private interviews and the presence of only two holding cells made it difficult to safely separate new arrivals.

Recommendation 3

Melaleuca's reception should be fully staffed at all times by officers specifically trained in reception processes.

When officers unfamiliar with reception intake assessments were required to perform these tasks, the risk to newly arrived and vulnerable women increased. Intake questions related to self-harm and suicide are particularly sensitive and, if not asked appropriately, may result in missed indicators of risk.

3.2 Minimal supports offered to women on remand

Remand prisoners made up 80% of the population at Melaleuca, consistent with the prison's role as the primary remand facility for adult women in the metropolitan region. Despite this, there were few structured or targeted supports available to assist women to manage the acute stress, uncertainty, and disruption associated with being remanded in custody. Survey data indicated that 60% of women reported arriving at Melaleuca 'very upset', suggesting a need for appropriate and targeted support in their first few days in custody.

ReSet was contracted to provide women on remand with a one-off support session, which could include information and referrals relating to Centrelink, financial counselling, counselling, and drug and alcohol services, as well as discreet assistance such as liaising with employers or landlords to advise them of incarceration. However, ReSet advised the service for women on remand was severely underfunded relative to demand, noting the increasing remand population had significantly outpaced resourcing. ReSet further advised there were no contracted throughcare services for women on remand, which they considered a critical gap, particularly given the instability associated with remand. These concerns were confirmed by the Transitional Manager (TM), who also identified insufficient support for women on remand as an ongoing operational and wellbeing risk.

Beyond the contracted ReSet service, support for women on remand was largely procedural or provided on an ad hoc basis. This included the standardised reception intake process, comprising an intake interview and initial at-risk assessment, which was observed to be largely transactional in nature given the volume of receptions. While the TM provided case-by-case assistance to some women to manage external matters such as housing and bills, the movement of women in and out of the facility did not allow for systemic support and some women did miss out.

The lack of a structured, coordinated response for newly remanded women increased the risk that urgent needs were not identified and exacerbated distress for women in their early days at Melaleuca.

Recommendation 4

Ensure contracted supports at Melaleuca are sufficiently resourced to provide adequate and comprehensive services for women on remand.

Bail processes were efficient

Positively, Melaleuca had an experienced Bail Coordinator who played a critical role in supporting women to meet bail conditions at the earliest opportunity. Between January 2025 and January 2026,

the Bail Coordinator completed between 44 and 80 bail-related matters per month across Melaleuca and Bandyup.

The Bail Coordinator had established processes to commence contact with surety providers immediately following a woman's arrival from court. Staff advised that these processes often supported the timely release of women who have already been granted bail. When bail was approved, the Bail Coordinator notified relevant staff across the prison to facilitate timely release, including the cashier and reception staff.

However, consistent with pressures reported in other roles across the prison, the Bail Coordinator advised they regularly worked overtime hours to manage the workload. With the remand population steadily increasing statewide, there is a need for the Department to consider whether additional bail coordination capacity is required. An effective and well-resourced bail coordination function can significantly reduce stress and anxiety for women remanded in custody by supporting release at the earliest opportunity, while also assisting the prison and the Department to manage population pressures more effectively.

Recommendation 5

Increase resourcing for bail services at Melaleuca.

3.3 Official visits and video-link processes operated effectively despite limited infrastructure

Despite ongoing staffing shortages, Melaleuca attempted to prioritise women's access to legal representatives through official visits. The rate of successfully completed official visits has largely remained steady. Between January 2025 and January 2026, the number of official visits recorded as 'successful' ranged from a low of 163 (December 2025) to 305 (May 2025). January 2026 recorded 277 successful official visits. The number of official visits recorded as being cancelled by the facility varied, ranging from none in some months to 27 in another. This reflected the overall staffing situation at Melaleuca, with some days sufficiently staffed to facilitate all official visits while other days critically short-staffed.

Video-link processes operated effectively, despite some staffing and infrastructure challenges. Staff working in the area were experienced and the system was efficient. There were two prison officers and an official visits VSO that manage both video-link court rooms and official visits. Staff working in this area advised the operation would function better with additional VSO staff to further support official visits and video-link processes.

The lack of a dedicated control room and limited holding areas made conditions for the staff and prisoners difficult. Officers had no dedicated workspace and spent most of their time working in the corridor. There were only two holding cells to accommodate the women who often had long waits for

their turn. Both cells were poorly ventilated and sparsely furnished with a metal bench. There was a television in another room which could be seen but not heard by those waiting.

Staff managed alerts and risks between the women by placing them in separate holding cells. However, on some occasions there could be as many as 20 women waiting in each cell, exacerbating the risk level and creating a potentially unsafe and uncomfortable environment.

Long waits in these cells with limited facilities can leave women stressed and tired before court, which can affect their ability to concentrate, understand what is happening and engage effectively in these proceedings.

There were plans in place to convert one of the two video-link court rooms into three video-link cubicles. This would increase the video-link court rooms from two to three. The remaining video-link court room would be converted into office space for civilian staff.

3.4 Family contact was increasingly constrained

Staying in contact with family and children is essential for women in prison. Most are mothers and maintaining connections with children is crucial for emotional wellbeing and capacity to manage in the prison environment. It gives women hope. The alternative (constraining opportunities to sustain these connections) can lead to intense distress for women and the breakdown of family relationships. This impacts their mental health and potentially successful reintegration post release.

Since our last inspection in 2023, the number of daily social visits sessions had reduced from four per day to just one – a single session between 4:00 pm and 5:00 pm. This had significantly reduced the opportunity for women at Melaleuca to receive an in-person visit with friends and family. Reliance on a single timeslot for social visits was also problematic. Being so late in the day could impact those travelling long distances, young children's afternoon routine, as well as after-school activities.

Social visit sessions were also being cancelled due to staff shortages. In February 2026, 28% of visits went ahead successfully. This was up from only 10% in January 2026 which were recorded as 'successful'. This downward trend has been noticeable since 2025. In January 2025, for example, there were 345 successful visit sessions but only 63 in January 2026. The reduction in the number of daily visit sessions to just one would, of course, have also influenced these figures.

The women felt this decline in opportunities to maintain social connections. Pre-inspection survey responses evidenced this. Of the women who responded to the survey, only 26% answered that it was easy to contact family through social visits. This was down from 46% in 2023. Further, only 16% said 'yes' to the question about whether they were given information about what opportunities there are to maintain relationships with their children. And only 21% felt that they had been able to maintain a relationship with their children while in custody.

The reduction in social visits sessions, whether due to the limit of only one per day or to unexpected cancellations, was difficult for visitors too. They could only book a visit through a telephone booking system. And there was only one Visits Booking Officer in position to manage the social visit booking requirements for well over 200 women and their families and friends.

Prisoners and their visitors were frustrated by long wait times on the phone to get through to the Visits Booking Officer, sometimes without success. An online visit booking system would provide a more immediate response and is in place in other prisons. But this could not replace the personal approach the booking officer at Melaleuca took in engaging with visitors when they called. They were experienced and their approach aligned with a trauma informed style of engagement with visitors.



Photo 3: The visits centre was a good facility.

We heard that e-visits were well-utilised and mostly fully booked. There were seven e-visit stations located in the visits centre. Positively, these visits were available to all women, not only those who did not receive in-person visits. E-visit sessions align with the timing of social visits but are shorter (30 minutes rather than an hour). These visits had to be booked at least 24 hours in advance.

However, we could neither verify the prison's claims about the number of e-visit sessions provided each month (around 196) nor those claiming these sessions were mostly fully booked. The session we observed was not full and officers supervising appeared unfamiliar with the technology. This impacted the length of the visit and caused frustration for prisoners and their e-visitors.

Recommendation 6

Increase opportunities for women to maintain contact with family.



Photo 4: E-visit terminals were located in the visits centre.

4 An unsuitable environment for a vulnerable population

Women entering custody are likely already vulnerable, traumatised and anxious. The women at Melaleuca felt less safe in 2026 than when we surveyed the cohort in 2023. The unsafe environment potentially exacerbated rather than eased their trauma.

Staff were not specifically trained to manage the women using a trauma-informed approach. While this model of care was acknowledged in departmental documents, it was not included in the suite of training courses offered to new recruits.

The processes and living conditions did not demonstrate a trauma-informed approach. Reliance on a paper-based complaints system presented barriers to women making requests and complaints. They relied on the availability of staff for the paperwork. They seldom received responses to the issues they raised.

Cleaning and laundry deficiencies presented hygiene risks across the site. Equipment was not fit for purpose, cleaning products irregularly supplied, and training and PPE not provided. Women reported their living conditions had deteriorated and were not maintained.

This chapter assesses the performance of Melaleuca against the following standards:

Standard 8 – Feeling safe

People in custody feel safe from bullying, abuse, violence and victimisation, and those seeking protection are appropriately located and safely managed to prevent harm, abuse and neglect.

Standard 9 – Victims of abuse or trauma

People in custody identified as victims of abuse or trauma experienced prior to coming into custody, receive appropriate interventions and support, and they can seek redress if they wish to do so.

Standard 10 – Complaints

Request and complaints procedures are effective and people in custody can lodge complaints without being victimised.

Standard 11 – Living conditions

The built environment is clean, functional and culturally appropriate.

Standard 12 – Hygiene, clothing and bedding

People in custody are provided with adequate clothing, bedding and basic hygiene items to maintain personal hygiene and dignity

4.1 Women did not feel safe

Women arriving at Melaleuca often feel vulnerable, traumatised, and unsafe. Newly sentenced women may fear long periods in custody, while those recently remanded or arrested can be anxious about upcoming legal outcomes. These experiences commonly lead to feelings of fear, uncertainty, and emotional insecurity, which can exacerbate existing trauma.

Both officers and prisoners reported feeling unsafe at Melaleuca. Similar concerns were identified during the 2023 inspection. However, the evidence indicated perceptions of safety had deteriorated further by 2026.

This decline was reflected in prisoner survey results, with the proportion of women who reported feeling safe falling from 66% to 49%. Women at Melaleuca were also less likely to feel safe than the state average, indicating the prison was perceived as a less safe environment than other facilities across Western Australia.

Table 1: Prisoner perceptions of safety had declined.

Prisoner survey	2023	2026	State average
Mostly feel safe	67%	49%	68%
Mostly feel unsafe	28%	42%	23%
No answer	5%	9%	9%

In 2023 the women were worried about their safety at Melaleuca. They spoke about bullying, assaults, feeling scared and unsafe (OICS, 2024, p. 30). In 2026, perceptions about feeling safe were even worse. These were some of the comments made by the women in the pre-inspection survey:

Lack of physical safety

Violence and verbal abuse by prisoners on prisoners and officers

Officers antagonise us

Intimidation and feel isolated

Bullying needs to stop

Violence towards targeted prisoners

Comments by women about safety

Perceptions of safety for staff had also declined although not as noticeably as for the prisoners. But almost half (49%) said they had experienced physical assault from prisoners and 73% said they had been verbally abused by prisoners.

Table 2: Staff perceptions of safety had declined.

Staff survey	2023	2026	State average
Mostly feel safe	49%	41%	51%
Mostly feel unsafe	12%	49%	14%
No answer	39%	10%	35%

These figures do not reflect a safe working environment. Officers also mentioned this when discussing the most negative aspects of working at Melaleuca:

Unprovoked assaults from prisoners

Fear of getting assaulted

Abuse and no respect from prisoners

I do not feel safe in the workplace

Prisoner to staff ratio making it an unsafe environment

Being abused regularly and the constant threat of being assaulted

Comments by staff about safety

4.2 Inadequate training and support for traumatised women

We found limited evidence that custodial staff were receiving training on how to manage women in custody using a trauma-informed approach.

This gap sits alongside the Department's own recognition that most women in custody have experienced complex trauma and abuse prior to imprisonment. For example, the Melaleuca Business Plan (DOJ, 2021), although now dated, acknowledged the importance of supporting autonomy, self-determination, and an environment of dignity and respect as central to recovery. Similarly, the Department's 'Better Futures' framework set out a clear commitment to a women-centred, trauma-informed approach to management (DOJ, 2022).

However, despite these policy commitments, there was little evidence of a structured training framework to equip staff to apply trauma-informed practice in their day-to-day work.

While 64% of custodial staff reported in the pre-inspection survey they had received adequate training in trauma-informed management, this was not reflected in practice. During on-site interviews, officers consistently reported receiving little to no trauma-informed or women-specific training, either at the Corrective Services Academy or elsewhere. Trauma-informed care was often misunderstood or conflated with suicide prevention or general mental health awareness, likely explaining the gap between survey responses and staff accounts.

This lack of a consistent understanding of trauma-informed practice increases the risk of greater reliance on restrictive measures and use of force and limits the effectiveness of support provided. In turn, this can deepen existing trauma and reduce women's opportunities for recovery.

Prisoner feedback also indicated there was a lack of appropriate training for staff. Pre-inspection survey data showed 45% of prisoners felt staff did not treat them with respect, an increase from 31% at the previous inspection. Confidence in staff was also low, with only 37% of respondents reporting they would raise their concerns with an officer.

Half (50%) of women surveyed also reported the prison was not providing support to address past experiences of abuse or trauma.

In practice, identification of prisoners with trauma histories was often unreliable or incomplete. This was driven by limited staff training, chronic staffing shortages, and environments that were not conducive to safe and sensitive disclosure.

Although mental health, peer support, and transitional services were available, their effectiveness for women with trauma was constrained by understaffing, restricted access, and inadequate infrastructure.

4.3 Women faced barriers to lodging requests and complaints

Women had to rely on paper-based processes to lodge requests or complaints. Unit interview forms were used by women for internal complaints or requests and women could lodge external complaints to various oversight agencies using confidential envelopes. These forms and envelopes should be freely available in the accommodation units. We were concerned to find this was not the case.

Rather, women were required to attend designated enquiry times to request these materials from officers. This arrangement created an additional barrier to accessing complaints and request mechanisms, particularly given the frequent staff shortages the prison was experiencing.

Women also raised concerns about a lack of transparency and follow-through once forms were submitted. Many reported that they were not provided with copies of complaints or requests they lodged and that responses were often delayed or not received at all.

This was contrary to the Department's policy around managing complaints, which specifically requires a copy of a formal complaint be provided to the prisoner within 24 hours and a response provided to the prisoner within 10 days. It also requires that complaint forms be freely available (DOJ, 2023).

The current paper-based system continued to undermine confidence in complaints and request processes and contributed to inefficiencies across the prison. When the facility first opened there was an electronic kiosk system which women used to manage their requests, complaints, appointments, gratuity accounts, programs, and education courses among others. The kiosks were referred to as CMS (Custodial Management System).

It was introduced by the private contractor, Sodexo, who opened the facility. When it transferred back to public management, all the kiosks were removed. The previous inspection report argued this was a lost opportunity, increased the administrative burden on staff, and reduced opportunities for interaction between staff and prisoners (OICS, 2024, pp. 8–9). In that inspection report, we recommended the introduction of an electronic system similar to CMS (OICS, 2024, p. 9). However, at the time of this inspection, there had been no action to reinstate an electronic kiosk system, despite broad local support from both staff and women.

CMS provided autonomy for women that is a key element of a purposeful trauma-informed framework. Women were empowered to manage their own lives through choosing and booking the activities they needed or enjoyed.

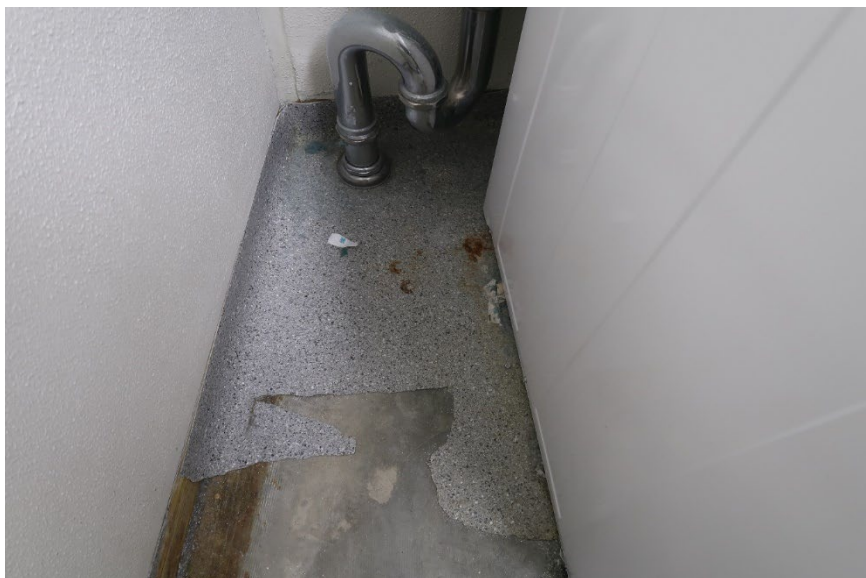
Recommendation 7

Introduce an electronic system for prisoners to manage requests and complaints.

4.4 Deteriorating living conditions and poorly managed cleaning processes posed hygiene risks

There were ongoing hygiene and maintenance issues across both accommodation units, in the living and communal areas. Showers were mouldy and leaking, the grout was deteriorating and drains were regularly blocked.

Cleaning and laundry processes were impacted by staff shortages. Short staffing frequently led to VSOs being redeployed to other positions, resulting in their usual jobs not getting done. Some adaptive routines required prisoners to be locked in their units or in their cells. Women who had jobs in areas like cleaning or maintenance could not work when they were locked down, even if the VSO managing them had not been redeployed. This cycle of short staffing, lockdowns and redeployment contributed to the lack of cleanliness and hygiene in the units.



Photos 5 and 6: Unaddressed maintenance problems.

Availability and quality of cleaning products was irregular. Women could not access these when they were locked down. But when they did request these from officers, they were not always provided for various reasons – short staffing, available officers tending to more urgent issues, supply issues, etc. Women said they resort to using personal products like shampoo to clean the showers and toilets in their cells. The women were unhappy with the state of cleanliness in their units and 61% of survey respondents rated conditions in their unit as poor.

Recommendation 8

Implement a structured daily cleaning regime and ensure consistent access to approved cleaning products.

There were small laundries in each wing of the accommodation units. Women were employed as laundry workers to manage the washing for the women on their wing. Bedding was also laundered in the unit laundries. The laundry workers did not have specific training in laundry operations and correct handling procedures for contaminated clothing. They also were not issued with Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) equipment, exposing them to potential health risks when handling soiled clothing and bedding.

Laundry equipment was not fit for purpose. The washing machines were domestic use machines, not built for the large volume of loads that were required. The machines lacked programming for high-temperature washing and did not meet commercial laundry or hygiene standards.

There was a lot of pressure on the laundry workers to wash and dry up to 60 bags of dirty clothes each day. The wash cycles were long. Workers did not have time to sort through the washing in the bags to make sure heavily soiled or unsanitary items were removed to be washed. There were industrial-grade washing machines in reception which reception workers used to wash clothing worn by women who had just arrived at the prison, some straight from the streets. These machines had the correct temperature and wash cycles to properly clean and sanitise clothing.



Photo 7: Domestic-style washing machines.



Photo 8: Commercial-style washing machines in the reception centre.

There were no checks done on bedding that was handed in for washing. And we observed far fewer bedding packs than clothing bags being sent for laundering. Some women commented that they had purchased their own bedding, and they knew it would not be returned to them if they sent it to the laundry. They preferred to wash their own bedding in their cells and hang it over shower curtain rails to dry.

When women were locked down, laundry services stopped. They often waited two or more days before handing in their bags, creating a backlog once unlocked that overwhelmed laundry workers. Overall cleaning and laundry processes were a hygiene risk for the facility. As many as 68% of survey respondents rated laundry services as poor.

Recommendation 9

Implement a centrally managed laundry system with adequate capacity and processes to ensure safe and hygienic cleaning of all clothing and bedding.

5 Health and wellbeing services were stretched

Instability within the health workforce increased the risk of disruption to service delivery and continuity of care. While the Clinical Nurse Manager was experienced, they were not substantively appointed, and the team relied on a mix of longstanding and casual nurses. Although a range of primary and allied health services was available, women reported ongoing difficulty accessing care. This was consistently raised through the peer support system, prisoner interviews and staff feedback.

The physical environment at Melaleuca continued to undermine effective service delivery. Previously identified as not fit for purpose, the facility remained unsuitable for women, particularly those who were pregnant.

The mental health team was committed but unable to meet the demands of a complex and growing population. Conditions in the Crisis Care Unit (CCU) had further deteriorated since 2023, with increased crowding exacerbating an already unsuitable, isolating environment. By 2026, the CCU no longer functioned as a therapeutic setting, and its capacity to provide trauma-informed care and support women at risk was significantly compromised.

The peer support system remained an important protective factor within the prison, providing support to vulnerable women and assisting staff to maintain a safe environment. However, at the time of inspection, the peer support team was too small to meet the needs of the population.

This chapter assesses the performance of Melaleuca against the following standards:

Standard 17 – Physical health care

People in custody are treated with respect and have equal access to all health services, including prompt care, clear information, and culturally sensitive practices, supported by a multi-disciplinary approach and strong partnerships.

Standard 18 – Mental health care

People in custody receive thorough mental health care and support.

Standard 19 – Substance use treatment

The facility has a comprehensive drug and alcohol strategy and provides personalised and culturally appropriate supports.

Standard 20 – Support

All people in custody can access a culturally sensitive support system, including a Prison Support Officer, peer support groups, and Aboriginal Prison Visitors.

5.1 Instability in the health team presented some risk

Some instability in the health workforce increased the risk of disruption to health service delivery and continuity of care. While the Clinical Nurse Manager (CNM) was experienced, the position was not substantive, and the team relied on a mix of experienced and casual nurses.

Daily health service staffing at Melaleuca should be:

- Three-day shift nurses working 12 hours each (7 am to 7 pm)
- One afternoon nurse working from 12 pm to 8:30 pm – this position is dedicated to conducting intake assessments for recent arrivals
- One night nurse working from 7:15 pm to 7:15 am

Although staffing levels were generally adequate at the time of inspection and most shifts were being filled, recent difficulties in covering some night shifts highlighted the fragility of the model. Inconsistent coverage increased the risk that clinical oversight, responsiveness to health needs, and timely escalation of concerns could be compromised, particularly during higher-risk after-hours periods.

There were also times when the after-hours nurse position in reception was not filled. When this occurred, new arrivals to Melaleuca could not be medically assessed. In these instances, the woman was either placed in the Crisis Care Unit (CCU) where she could be constantly observed until a medical assessment was completed the following day, or she was transferred to hospital by ambulance if there were immediate concerns.

Notwithstanding this, the nursing team in place at the time of the inspection had a mix of experience and length of service. Some had worked at Melaleuca since it opened, some had only a few months' experience, and some had never worked in a prison setting before. The substantive CNM had recently retired. The acting CNM commenced in August 2025 and had a lot of experience working in prison health centres but was not substantive in the position. There had not yet been any progress made to substantively recruit for the CNM position.

5.2 A range of health services provided but did not meet demand

Despite an adequate range of primary and allied health services being available, women reported difficulty accessing health services. We heard this through the peer support system, from interviews with prisoners and from some, mostly non-custodial, staff. Only 14% of women who responded to the pre-inspection survey thought general health services were good. Fifty-four per cent rated these as poor.

The nurse-led health centre at Melaleuca managed a range of health services. There was also GP coverage five days a week. In total there were four doctors working at Melaleuca working different days to ensure at least one GP was on site each weekday. On some days there were two GPs in attendance.

Other health services on offer included:

- Phlebotomy once a week – 20 to 24 pathology completions per clinic
- Physiotherapy also weekly – 4 to 6 patients per session
- Podiatry every 3 months – 8 to 10 patients per visit
- Optometry every three months – 8 to 10 clients reviewed per session.

The women's frustration was about access to these services and not the range of services available.



Photo 9: Well-equipped health centre offered a variety of services.

Barriers impacting women's access to the health centre varied. Women had to fill out a form to get an appointment at the health centre, which would be with a nurse in the first instance. They had to include on this form relevant information about their health issue so the nurses could triage all the appointments according to priority. If this information was missing or inadequate, the nurses could not triage the appointment appropriately which could lead to delays in accessing treatment.

Nurses were frequently required to respond to on-site medical emergencies, which took precedence over scheduled health appointments. As a result, appointments were often delayed, creating backlogs throughout the day. At the same time, custodial officers were managing competing operational demands, procedural responsibilities and prisoner requests. We observed that this could create a chaotic environment in which health appointment request forms provided to officers could be overlooked or misplaced. Women commonly reported waiting between one and three weeks to see a

nurse. Given Melaleuca's role as a remand facility and the complexity of its population, delays of this length for an initial nursing assessment are concerning.

The wait for a doctor's appointment can be significantly longer. Nurses said that if a request to see the doctor is urgent, the appointment can go ahead immediately either with the on-site GP or via e-consult. If it is not triaged as a priority, women can wait between six and eight weeks to see a GP.

Access to dental services was poor

By far the biggest complaint was poor access to dental services. Women at Melaleuca receive dental care at Wandoo Rehabilitation Prison (Wandoo), which has a fit-for-purpose and contemporary dental suite. However, few women were receiving treatment. Out of a possible 51 dental visits to Wandoo in 2025, only 14 had occurred. Unsurprisingly, only 8% of prisoner survey respondents rated dental care as good.

There were two main barriers impacting access to dental care: staffing shortfalls and security classifications. Melaleuca was responsible for transporting prisoners to Wandoo for treatment. However, the facility could seldom release officers to provide these escorts due to chronic staffing shortfalls. Women also had to have a medium-security classification to attend Wandoo. This prevented maximum-security women from receiving treatment unless they were eligible for a reclassification. Maximum-security rated women could attend Bandyup Women's Prison for dental care – but the waitlist at that facility was lengthy (119 women as at July 2026), preventing access to timely care.

In the absence of dental care, Melaleuca's primary health care staff provided symptomatic treatment to those with dental pain while they awaited appointments with the dentist. But we heard many women were released before receiving dental care.

5.3 An unsuitable environment for pregnant women

We have previously reported that Melaleuca is not a fit-for-purpose facility for women, having been originally built as two male accommodation units attached to Hakea Prison. Unlike Bandyup Women's Prison (Bandyup), Melaleuca has no dedicated accommodation spaces for pregnant women.

Bandyup has specialised accommodation available and provides a more suitable place for pregnant women, including designated self-care houses for pregnant women and women with children in their care. However, several factors must be considered before an expectant mother at Melaleuca can be approved for placement at Bandyup, and not all women will be considered suitable. Some women will have no alternative to Melaleuca because of the nature of their charges or conviction, or because of association risks with other women at Bandyup. This increases the need for dedicated accommodation for expectant mothers at Melaleuca, similar to those available at Bandyup.

Melaleuca is a particularly unsuitable environment for pregnant women.

We heard from pregnant women that they did not feel safe at Melaleuca. They felt vulnerable being pregnant and having to share a cell in accommodation units that were often chaotic. While this was common feedback from most of the women, the pregnant women felt this more acutely. They worried

not only for their personal safety, but also for their unborn child. They were more likely to put up with bullying and intimidation than to retaliate and risk getting physically assaulted. The extended lockdowns were especially difficult for pregnant women, particularly during hot weather (see Chapter 6).

There were five pregnant women at Melaleuca when we inspected at various stages of pregnancy. Pregnant women's health needs were met by the health services' team. The team kept track of the different stages the women were at in their pregnancy and the screening/testing required. The women were escorted to the public maternity hospital in Perth to attend their scheduled pre-natal appointments and when they were due to give birth. Their healthcare needs were well-provided for within the scope of healthcare services at Melaleuca.

5.4 Mental health care was stretched

The mental health team were committed but could not meet the demand of the complex population at Melaleuca. There were four mental health nurse positions in the team, but several were on leave. Two mental health nurses worked across seven days doing 10-hour shifts, some days were short staffed. The Clinical Nurse Manager who oversees the team at Melaleuca as well as other sites (including regional facilities and Banksia Hill) attended Melaleuca as many days as possible each week to provide additional support and services. There was also a psychiatrist who attended in person one day a week.

The team's focus was the most vulnerable, at-risk and mentally unwell women. The day-to day clinical responsibility fell to the two mental health nurses, often only one was on shift at a time. Their daily task list included:

- attend to women who had been referred for placement on the At-Risk Management System (ARMS)
- attend the daily Prisoner Risk Assessment Group (PRAG) meeting at which the women on ARMS were assessed
- consult new referrals of women who had been screened during the reception process as having a mental illness
- review patients on their case list with mental illness
- manage the psychiatrist's patient lists and appointments
- dispense medication to women in the CCU
- dispense schedule 8 medication from the health centre

There were a lot of women at Melaleuca who were vulnerable, traumatised and suffering with poor mental health who did not fit within the scope of the mental health nurses' services. They may not be acutely unwell or be on ARMS or have an active prescription for mental health medication. But they may also not be well. They survived with little professional support and perhaps only the occasional wellbeing support provided by peer support prisoners. But mostly they had to be managed by custodial staff in the units.

Only 9% of the women who completed the pre-inspection survey rated mental health care as good. This was down from 21% three years ago. Fifty-nine per cent of custodial staff thought that mental

health services for prisoners were ineffective. And 74% responded that they did not feel they had adequate training in the management of prisoners with mental health issues. This was an increase from 51% in the last survey. These results indicate that women did not feel adequately supported and officers did not feel properly equipped, creating significant risks for both prisoners and staff.

Psychological Health Services (PHS) also provided mental health support and worked closely with the mental health team. The PHS team was an A/Clinical Supervisor plus three PHS counsellors who worked the equivalent of 2.4 FTE. Their work included following up on the women on ARMS, daily reporting about these at the PRAG meetings and individual counselling.

There were approximately 50 women on the counselling waitlist, with wait times of three to four weeks. Counselling sessions were offered fortnightly and did not include specialist trauma counselling, limiting their relevance for many women. The remand status of most women also prevented engagement in the longer-term therapy needed to address trauma. While it was positive some women were receiving individual counselling, the absence of dedicated trauma support, particularly support that could continue following transfer or release, represented a missed opportunity to address the significant trauma experienced by the cohort.

5.5 Inadequate infrastructure for women in crisis

The CCU consisted of four cells located next to the medical centre. Women in the CCU were placed there because they were distressed, at-risk, possibly self-harming, traumatised, vulnerable, mentally unwell and required constant observation.

In 2023, the CCU's infrastructure and environment were found to be unsuitable, isolating, and lacking support (OICS, 2024). By 2026, conditions had deteriorated further as crowding worsened. The CCU no longer fulfilled its role of offering a therapeutic setting for women at risk, and its trauma-informed services and support fell short of enabling these women to heal.

While some effort had been made to soften the appearance of the CCU, many of the cells remained stark and often dirty. There were no private interview rooms for women to see prison counsellors, the mental health team or for telehealth appointments. Rather, these interactions occurred in the communal living area which was surrounded by cells that open directly into this area. This compromised confidentiality as women secured in the cells were likely to be able to hear these conversations and see what was happening through the hatches in their cell doors.



Photo 10: Communal area in the CCU.

The four cells in the CCU often accommodated more than four women. In the lead up to and during the inspection, management and CCU officers reported that there had been as many as 11 women in the CCU. In this situation, there could be up to three women sharing a cell meant just for one, with two of them sleeping on mattresses on the floor. Such overcrowding was not therapeutic, increased stress and tension, and was likely to exacerbate existing mental health issues and crises.

Recommendation 10

Invest resources to improve the conditions for the most vulnerable women at Melaleuca, specifically pregnant women and those most at-risk.



Photo 11: Cells in the CCU.

5.6 Welfare support was under-resourced

There was a Prison Support Officer (PSO), a peer support team and an Aboriginal visitor (from the Aboriginal Visitor Scheme – AVS) on site to provide welfare and cultural support for the women at Melaleuca.

The peer support system provides an important source of support for all prisoners, particularly those who may be vulnerable or at risk. A good peer support team can provide a strong platform for staff and prisoners to build and maintain a safe environment. Peer support prisoners can check in on prisoners needing support thereby alleviating some pressure from officers.

At the time of the inspection the peer support team was too small to provide the level of support and wellbeing for the vulnerable cohort of women there. There was only one PSO position allocated to Melaleuca which was inadequate given the demands, vulnerability and at-risk needs of the population. There were only two women on the peer support team, which did increase to three by the end of the inspection week, but was still not enough. The risk of having an under-resourced peer support system is that women who may be struggling get lost in the crowd.

The PSO spent most of her time monitoring women on ARMS and reporting at daily PRAG meetings, leaving limited opportunities to provide general welfare support in the units. She was also responsible for managing the peer support team, processing applications from women to join the team and submitting these for security vetting. These responsibilities would be better performed across two PSO positions. One could focus solely on supporting the women most at risk through the ARMS and PRAG processes. The other could provide more general wellbeing support to the women by being present in the units, supporting them one-on-one as well as being a co-support for the peer support team prisoners.

The Aboriginal Visitor Scheme (AVS) visitor was a valuable cultural resource for the women. She provided a connection between the women in custody and their families and communities outside. She attended Melaleuca five days a week and was present in the units most days. While the presence of AVS was positive, the service for Melaleuca was under-resourced. A meaningful social, cultural and welfare service for the First Nations women needs more than a single AVS resource.

Recommendation 11

Increase the number of Prison Support Officer (PSO) and Aboriginal Visitor Scheme (AVS) positions at Melaleuca.

6 Limited opportunities to engage in a purposeful regime

Employment and meaningful activity at Melaleuca were constrained by infrastructure and staffing limitations. While employment is important for keeping women constructively engaged and supporting personal development, the prison lacked the facilities to support consistent or meaningful work opportunities. Custodial staff shortages further disrupted access to work. First Nations women were disproportionately affected, with higher rates of unemployment and greater reliance on unit-based roles compared to non-Aboriginal women.

Recreation was similarly impacted despite a well-designed schedule and proactive staff. Chronic custodial shortages and frequent redeployment of recreation officers led to regular cancellations, reflected in declining prisoner satisfaction. Infrastructure limitations further restricted delivery.

Program delivery across the prison remained limited by both infrastructure and staffing constraints. With only one dedicated program room available, and competing demands for space, the number of programs and participants was restricted. Low staffing levels also led to frequent cancellations, with external facilitators sometimes unable to enter the prison due to insufficient staff to escort them. Lengthy security clearance processes further delayed the introduction of new programs.

Education was a relative strength, with programs well aligned to the needs of a remand population and focused on practical skills and employability. Demand was high and engagement was positive. However, delivery capacity was constrained by infrastructure and staffing limitations.

This chapter assesses the performance of Melaleuca against the following standards:

Standard 15 – Purposeful activities

Individuals in custody have access to a range of purposeful activities during the day and at least two hours of recreation in the open air.

Standard 22 – Programs and education

All people in custody are assessed to identify their risks and needs, and receive evidence-based programs, education and life skills training tailored to their requirements.

Standard 23 – Employment

All people in custody can participate in meaningful work that is fair and non-exploitative and boosts their employability upon release.

6.1 Organised recreation was inconsistent

There was a good recreation schedule in place, and the two Recreation VSOs were keen and proactive. But chronic short staffing and redeployment of the VSOs resulted in regular cancellations. This was reflected in the prisoner surveys with 80% reporting the amount of organised sport was poor, up from 55% in 2023.

The lack of recreation infrastructure also impacted the potential to facilitate a meaningful recreation program. There was no indoor gym or multi-purpose recreation area. The only recreation spaces were outdoors - a multi-purpose court and oval. The exercise equipment was also located outside and was rarely used.

Only 38% of survey respondents reported they get access to outside recreation during the day. When custodial staff numbers are low and adaptive routines must be implemented, activities like recreation are cancelled to facilitate the altered routine. This is when the VSOs are redeployed and women are locked down either in their units or in their cells. This made it difficult for the VSOs to plan and schedule recreation activities.

We did observe what a functioning recreation schedule could be like during the on-site inspection. For some of the days of the week OICS were on site, custodial staffing numbers were adequate and activities like recreation went ahead. We observed a range of recreation activities on these days, including organised sport - softball games – and less structured activities – women walking around the oval and some making use of the opportunity to socialise with friends or family from other units.



Photo 12: The women enjoyed being out of the units when staffing levels allowed.

The women were most positive about having access to these activities. Recreation is an important and constructive activity that should be an integral part of a purposeful and structured day for women in custody.

Recommendation 12

Limit the redeployment of the Recreation VSOs.

6.2 Limited programs and multiple barriers

Although the prison continued its efforts to provide a suite of voluntary programs and services, delivery remained limited by several factors.

Infrastructure continued to be a barrier, with only one room available as a program space. There were four rooms available for services and activities, one attached to each accommodation wing. Some were permanently reserved for specific purposes like education, the library and art classes. This left only one room available for programs, which also had to be shared at times. This restricted the number of programs that could be facilitated and the number of women who could attend.



Photo 13: One of the four rooms was the art room.



Photo 14: One of the four rooms was the library.

On days when custodial staffing was low, programs were likely to be cancelled. Facilitators arriving to deliver programs could not even enter the prison because there were not enough officers to escort them and to support program delivery.

Lengthy security clearance processes, often taking three to four months, also made it difficult to bring in new providers and delayed the start of programs. Limited funding meant the prison relied mainly on free services from not-for-profit organisations, which reduced the range and consistency of programs available. These challenges were further compounded by the transient nature of the remand population, with many women in custody for short periods and unable to complete longer programs. Together, these constraints reduced the consistency, frequency and reach of voluntary program delivery. This was reflected in our prisoner surveys, with 62% of respondents reporting no access to voluntary programs.

Notwithstanding these limitations, the voluntary programs and services that were available were relevant and appropriate to the needs of a remand population. Delivered programs focused on wellbeing, healing, managing stress, healthy boundaries and substance use information and were aligned with the short-term needs and circumstances of women at Melaleuca.

Recent programs include:

- Cognitive Brief Intervention (CBI) facilitated twice in 2025 with total of 16 participants and 10 completions

- One CBI so far in 2026 with 11 participants and 7 completions
- Financial Literacy Education – 4 workshops
- Zonta House Women's Refuge, Creating Healthy Boundaries – 2-hour workshop
- Understanding and Managing Stress - 5 workshops
- ReSet / Wungening information sessions – parenting, re-entry services
- Palmerston Rehab information session – 2 x 2-hourly workshops.

Criminogenic programs were not offered at Melaleuca because these are only delivered to sentenced prisoners and Melaleuca is a remand facility.

6.3 Education was effective but limited

Education at Melaleuca was valuable and appropriately focused on employability and practical life skills. Courses offered included adult basic education, literacy and numeracy, art, workplace health and safety, public speaking, driver education, hairdressing and barista training. These programs were well suited to a remand population, focusing on confidence-building, transferable skills and short-term outcomes that women could use on release. Demand for education was consistently high, and women who accessed these courses reported positive engagement.

Delivery capacity though was significantly limited by staffing and infrastructure constraints. Unlike all other prisons in the state, Melaleuca is the only facility that does not have a dedicated education centre with offices for teachers and classrooms for students. Teachers had to use one of the four rooms attached to each accommodation wing, and as stated above, demand for these rooms was high and availability low. These rooms were also used for other purposes so could not be permanently set up as classrooms.

The education team was small with only two substantive positions. There was a Campus Manager and one Prisoner Education Coordinator (PEC). The PEC had been on personal leave for about six months, and the position had not been consistently backfilled. This reduced teaching capacity and increased the workload of the Campus Manager. Three casual tutors and one part-time clerk assisted but were not permanently funded.

Education staff worked from a single office located in the gatehouse. When tutors and the administration officer were on site, there could be up to five staff in this small office with only three workstations available. These limitations restricted course availability which in turn reduced the number of women who could engage in a variety of education activities. This was reflected in the pre-inspection survey with 60% of respondents reporting they could not access education.

The education team provided a valuable service despite these limitations. They maintained a positive rapport with the women they taught, and the Campus Manager worked hard to ensure consistent delivery of varied and relevant courses.

Recommendation 13

Address staffing and infrastructure shortfalls that impact education delivery at Melaleuca.

6.4 Insufficient meaningful employment opportunities

Employment offers valuable activity for women in custody. It keeps prisoners constructively occupied and offers opportunities for personal development. Melaleuca lacked appropriate infrastructure to support full and meaningful employment for the women. Custodial staff shortages also impacted women's capacity to work consistently.

Nothing had changed since our previous inspection in 2023. Then we found Melaleuca was fundamentally unable to provide sufficient meaningful employment opportunities for women, with most women unemployed or underemployed. These limitations were attributed to the absence of suitable infrastructure to support meaningful employment and insufficient resourcing to support a broader employment program (OICS, 2024, pp. 23–24).

Chronic custodial staff shortages and the frequent redeployment of Vocational and Support Officers (VSOs) significantly reduced the availability of employment. VSOs were regularly redeployed to cover custodial roles, disrupting work areas and preventing continuity of employment for women. Key roles that could develop and support industries at Melaleuca were missing. Most significantly, there was no Industries Coordinator position responsible for managing equitable employment across all industries and advocating for increasing work opportunities across the site.

Employment played a limited role in supporting a purposeful daily regime for most women. More than half of the population (54%) were not working at all. Another 22% were cleaners or laundry workers inside the unit. This meant more than three-quarters (76%) of the population were mostly confined to their unit for a significant portion of the day, leaving only to attend appointments like health, or for visits if these occurred.

Unit-based work was not full-time work on a par with someone working in the kitchen for example. Rather, this work was split into smaller jobs like emptying bins, mopping floors, or dishing up food. These jobs did not take up much time leaving women with a lot of spare time in the unit with nothing to do.

First Nations women were more likely to be either unemployed or have unit-based jobs. Of 138 Aboriginal women at Melaleuca, 80 (58%) were not working. Another 38 (28%) were unit workers. In comparison, 46 of 97 non-Aboriginal women were not working (47%) and 15 were unit workers (15%).

Recommendation 14

Increase employment opportunities for women at Melaleuca with additional industries infrastructure and additional VSO positions.

7 Overcrowding and understaffing impacted security operations

Operational pressures—including crowding, staff shortages and frequent lockdowns—disrupted security practices, with redeployments affecting essential functions and use of force incidents fluctuating, including a sharp rise in late 2025.

Inexperienced staff and limited availability undermined relational security, reducing meaningful engagement and contributing to more transactional interactions and increased strain for both staff and prisoners.

Despite access to a full-body scanner, strip searching remained the default in 2026, with the scanner not established as the primary, less intrusive option.

Lockdowns, largely driven by staffing shortages, were a defining feature of the regime and a major source of distress, isolating women from each other and external supports; time out of cell fell from an average of 8.45 hours per day in January 2025 to 5.36 hours by February 2026, leaving women locked in their cells for close to 19 hours, or 80% of their day.

This chapter assesses the performance of Melaleuca against the following standards:

Standard 25 – Encouraging positive behaviour

The relationship between staff and people in custody is positive and respectful, fostering pro-social behaviours and personal responsibility.

Standard 26 – Use of force and restraints

Force and mechanical restraints are used only as a last resort, never as punishment, and are subject to strict governance to ensure legitimacy, necessity, and proportionality.

Standard 27 – Isolation and confinement

Isolation of individuals in custody is permitted only with proper authority, as a last resort, and for the shortest duration possible, ensuring they are treated with decency and humanity.

Standard 31 – Searches

Searches are only conducted when necessary and with respect for the person's dignity and privacy.

Standard 30 – Relational security

Effective relationships between staff and people in custody foster a safe and humane custodial environment.

7.1 Frequent lockdowns increased women's isolation

Lockdowns were the biggest complaint among the prisoners. Locking women in units or cells for extended periods is contrary to a trauma-informed model of care. The practice isolates women from each other, their families, their children and their friends. Women reported lockdowns as one of the worst things about Melaleuca in the pre-inspection survey.

In the 12-months leading into the inspection, women at Melaleuca had experienced reduced time out of cell. In January 2025 the average time a woman spent out of her cell per day was 8.45 hours. In January 2026 this had reduced to 6.54 hours out of cell per day and by February 2026 this was even less at 5.36 hours (OICS, 2026). Women were spending close to 19 hours each day (on average, so more on some days) locked behind either wing grilles or cell doors.

In late January/early February 2026, inspection staff attempting to conduct surveys with the women could not proceed because they were all locked in their cells. This was peak summer season in Perth. The Bureau of Meteorology (BOM) recorded temperatures above 34 degrees Celsius from 29 January 2026, climbing to 42 degrees on 2 February 2026 (the day the surveys were scheduled to be conducted on site). The temperature inside the cells would have been higher given the lack of air conditioning or adequate ventilation.

When the lockdowns eased and the surveys could go ahead, many women told us they had been locked down (confined to cell) for continuous periods as long as 50 hours at a time over this period. The above reported out-of-cell hours are averages and do not fully reflect the day-to-day reality for prisoners. While some days may allow for more time out of cell, others involve very limited access, which is not apparent from monthly averages alone. As a result, it is difficult for us to verify these claims. Further, time out of cell does not necessarily mean access to the outdoors and fresh air; often it means women are out of their cells but still locked behind grilles in the wings of their accommodation units.

Women were socially isolated because of the lockdowns. They could not socialise with other prisoners, some of whom may be friends or family. When they were unlocked, there was a general urgency to use the phones to contact their family in the community. There were not enough phones for all women to be able to make a call during the time they were allowed out of their cells. There were long queues for the phones, and tension and anxiety among the women waiting heightened.

7.2 Relations between prisoners and officers were strained

Relational security at Melaleuca was undermined by chronic staff shortages, redeployments, an inexperienced custodial staffing cohort and frequent lockdowns. When custodial officer numbers were low the priority was staff and prisoner safety.

This created a disconnect between prisoners and officers. The women were frustrated because they could not access officers. Officers were stressed and preoccupied just trying to manage the basics like making sure women receive their medication, essential workers get to work, women get fed, those with appointments attend these, and so on. In this pressured environment, meaningful engagement between staff and prisoners falls away and relations become frustrated and strained. Barrier

management replaces human connection. Prisoners become increasingly isolated. The pressure experienced by officers becomes overwhelming.

Only 37% of prisoner survey respondents said they would reach out to unit officers for help if they had a concern. This result was 70% when we surveyed the women three years ago. Prisoner confidence in officer support had declined significantly. Other survey indicators of this are represented in Table 3.

Table 3: Prisoner perceptions of officers.

Do you think officers at this prison?	Yes	No	No answer
Are helpful and approachable	44%	40%	16%
Apply the rules fairly	29%	58%	13%
Are respectful during cell searches	44%	41%	15%
Are respectful during strip searches	46%	39%	15%
Use too much force	40%	46%	14%
Treat prisoners with care	39%	44%	17%
Treat prisoners with respect	38%	45%	17%

Custodial staff also did not feel safe at Melaleuca with almost half (49%) reporting they mostly feel unsafe. Three years ago, this statistic was 12%. Officer confidence in working safely with prisoners has also declined significantly. Officers rated the quality of their working life in the prison a four out of 10. This was low. Conversely, they rated their current level of work-related stress high at seven out of 10. The current environment at Melaleuca did not meet our standards of respect, positive relationships and humane treatment in custody.

7.3 Increased population and operational pressures led to high rates of use of force

Between January 2025 and February 2026, Melaleuca recorded 535 use of force incidents, the second-highest number in the custodial estate after Hakea Prison (634 incidents). However, when population size is considered, the rate of use of force at Melaleuca was substantially higher. During this period, Melaleuca had an average daily population of 237 women, compared with approximately 1,200 prisoners at Hakea. Melaleuca also recorded more use of force incidents than larger facilities such as Casuarina and Acacia prisons, which had average daily populations of 1,675 and 1,574 respectively.

Most incidents involved physical control and restraint. There were also 52 incidents involving the use of chemical agents, one use of a spithood, and one cell extraction. These patterns were broadly consistent with trends observed across other prisons.

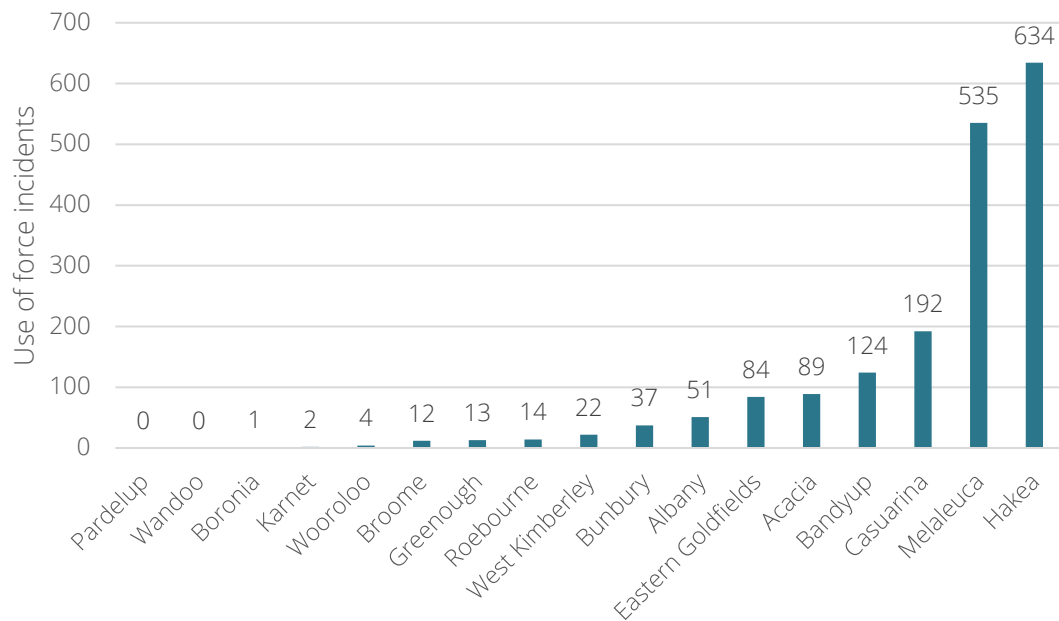


Figure 1: Melaleuca reported the second highest number of Use of Force incidents between January 2025 and February 2026.

Use of Force (UoF) incidents increased significantly during the second half of 2025, peaking at 80 incidents in a single month before declining in early 2026. Despite this reduction, incident levels remained comparatively high. This increase coincided with deteriorating conditions at the prison, including crowding, staffing shortages and frequent lockdowns.

Between December 2025 and February 2026, the average daily population at Melaleuca was 233 women, representing a reported utilisation rate of 96.7%. However, this figure does not reflect the complexity of the population or the operational challenges facing the prison. On 9 January 2026, for example, the population stood at 220 women, equivalent to 92% utilisation. Although this suggests the prison was operating below capacity, two women were required to sleep on mattresses on the floor in already double-bunked cells due to a lack of suitable accommodation. On the same day, custodial staffing levels were almost 27% below required levels and the Crisis Care Unit (CCU) was full.

Capacity figures are also affected by the need to manage women who cannot safely share a cell due to offence-related, physical health or mental health considerations. While these cells are counted as double-bunked accommodation, they may only be able to accommodate one person. Similarly, some cells may be temporarily vacant between prisoner movements. Population pressures were particularly evident in the CCU, which has four single-occupancy cells designed to support a therapeutic model of care. When demand exceeded capacity, women were required to sleep on mattresses on the floor,

meaning the unit regularly operated beyond its intended capacity even when overall prison utilisation appeared to be below 100%.

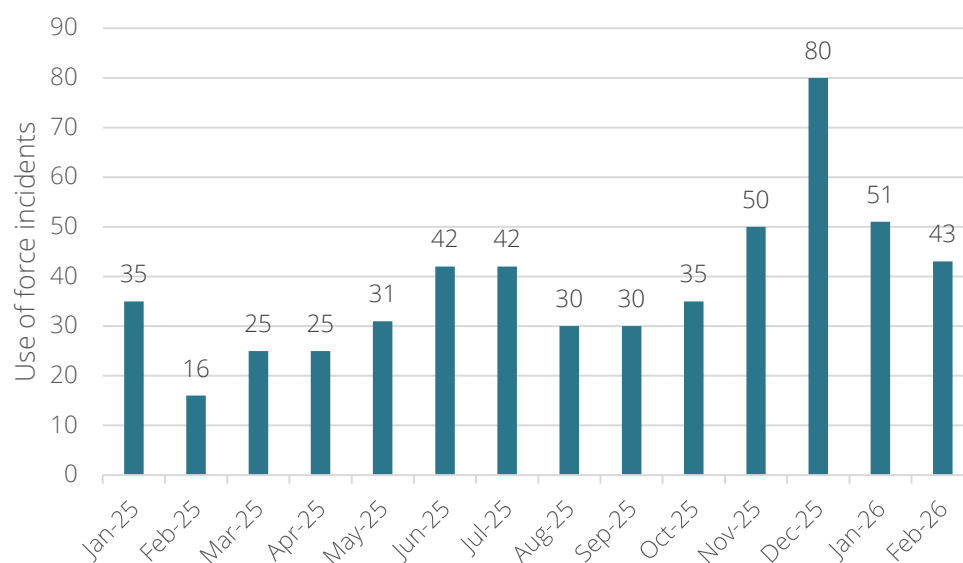


Figure 2: Use of Force incidents spiked at Melaleuca in late 2025.

These conditions coincided with the peak in use of force incidents. Staff were managing a complex population in an environment characterised by overcrowding in key areas, significant staffing shortages and limited capacity to safely accommodate vulnerable and mentally unwell women. To maintain safety, management frequently restricted services and imposed lockdowns. When these conditions persisted over extended periods, women became increasingly frustrated and distressed. Heightened tension and conflict sometimes resulted in behaviour directed towards staff, leading to situations where force was used after other de-escalation strategies had failed.

Frequent redeployment of security officers also affected the prison's ability to complete mandatory use of force reviews in a timely manner. We were advised that a backlog of reviews had developed as a result. These reviews are important for identifying trends, understanding the circumstances leading to the use of force, and identifying lessons that may help prevent future incidents. In a prison already facing significant population pressures, infrastructure constraints, staffing shortages and a complex prisoner cohort, timely completion of these reviews is critical. The Department should identify ways to better support Melaleuca to undertake this work and strengthen oversight of force-related incidents.

Recommendation 15

Prioritise completion of local Use of Force (UoF) reviews.

7.4 Inappropriate infrastructure and staff shortages impact disciplinary procedures

Security procedures had been heavily impacted by staff shortages. Security team officers were often redeployed leaving essential security-related processes unfinished. The impact of this on maintaining currency with the use of force reviews has been mentioned in the section above. Further impacts of a reduced security team include restricted capacity to manage internal prisoner disciplinary processes.

The prosecutor is a custodial officer position assigned to the security team to process internal charges against prisoners. The 2023 inspection found that this position was effective in processing charges punctually and there were no outstanding charges. The position was valued and seldom redeployed (OICS, 2024, pp. 32-33). In 2026 the prosecutor was more frequently redeployed. The result is a less structured disciplinary system and one in which both officers and prisoners were losing confidence.

Prisoners facing disciplinary consequences should be accommodated in fit-for-purpose management units where they can be segregated from other prisoners and their restricted regime appropriately managed by dedicated unit staff. Melaleuca is the only maximum-security, remand facility that does not have a specific management unit to facilitate these requirements.

Previous management have implemented a 'work-around' for this by re-purposing existing infrastructure. In 2023, 16 cells in Unit 2 A-wing were re-purposed as management cells. Women would serve periods of confinement in these cells as per the outcome of the disciplinary process. Six of these cells had been fitted with cameras so these could also be used for observation purposes.

This model was always fraught because it was imposed on existing infrastructure rather than purpose-built. Population pressure never allowed for this wing to be reserved for isolation and confinement purposes only. The wing became a confinement space as well as a mainstream, general living space for prisoners. The clash of regimes was untenable for officers to manage appropriately. We remarked on this in the 2023 inspection report:

...officers were constantly trying to manage these individual prisoners' regimes at the same time as allowing the mainstream prisoners in the unit access to all the services and activities to which they were entitled...We observed significant challenges for unit staff in trying to meet all these conflicting requirements (OICS, 2024, p. 33).

This situation remained in 2026 although further exacerbated by a less experienced and short-staffed officer cohort.

Recommendation 16

Explore options to build a multi-purpose management unit at Melaleuca.

7.5 Searching practices were compliant but not trauma-informed

Melaleuca was one of few facilities that had a full-body x-ray scanner for searching. This was similar to scanning equipment used in airports for passenger screening. At Melaleuca it was intended to be used for all prisoner searches reducing, if not removing, the requirement for women to be strip searched. The machine became operational in April 2023. When we inspected the facility in November that year, we found the scanner was being used appropriately, it provided a more decent and appropriate searching process and mostly removed the need for strip searching.



Photo 15: The x-ray body scanner.

A review on strip searching practices published by this Office in 2019 concluded that strip searching causes harm, is ineffective, and it conflicts with trauma-informed care (OICS, 2019). Using the x-ray scanner to search women was in keeping with a trauma-informed approach.

In 2026 we found strip searching was consistently being used at Melaleuca. The scanner was used in some instances, but strip searching had returned to being the default. Women were being routinely strip searched when they arrived at Melaleuca. Inspection team members were in the reception centre on a Friday night when many women were coming in – either from police or court or transfers from other prisons. They were present in the centre when these strip searches occurred, although not directly observing. They heard the officers engaging with the women about the strip search process and observed the officers observing the search.

The women who were transferred to Melaleuca from another facility were not strip searched. Officers searched them using the x-ray scanner, the premise being that they would have been searched at the departing facility and would have been in the custody of the transport contractor (Ventia) for the duration of the trip. They would not have had contact with anyone so no opportunity for trafficking or secreting contraband.

These processes were in keeping with the departmental policy on strip searching requiring offenders entering custody be subject to a strip search. The policy further states:

Search practices shall utilise various methods and available technology, adopting the least intrusive method possible to minimise the negative impact on a person, without compromising the integrity of the search (DOJ, 2025).

Strip searching is not the least intrusive method of person search. The use of the body scanner at Melaleuca is less intrusive and arguably more effective in detecting contraband hidden internally than strip searching. Inspection team members observed this in practice while on site. Prisoners from Bandyup, who were suspected of secreting contraband, were transported to Melaleuca to be scanned by the x-ray scanner. Multiple strip searches had not revealed any hidden contraband, but security intelligence was strong that the women did have contraband internally secreted. A scan of the women at Melaleuca confirmed that the women did have something hidden internally. Once detected, the women admitted to the offence and produced the hidden items for the officers. The scanner had detected what multiple strip searches had not.

The value of strip-searching women should be weighed against the outcome. Data on strip searches conducted at Melaleuca over a 12-month period from March 2025 showed no contraband was found out of 520 strip searches conducted. Strip searches are invasive and not consistent with a trauma informed approach. The practice only exacerbates distress particularly for those first entering custody.

The x-ray scanner was being used for other required searches such as following a social visits session and based on intelligence received by the security team. Use of this technology in these situations rather than strip searching was good practice.

The number of officers trained to use the x-ray scanner limited its use. Only 41 (32%) of staff were trained. Given the short staffing impacting the facility most days and the constant flow of prisoners in and out, it is understandable that there may be times when there were not enough officers on site trained to use the machine. There were plans to increase the number of staff trained to use the x-ray scanner.

Recommendation 17

Ensure sufficient staff are trained in the use of the x-ray scanner to reduce reliance on strip searching.

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Appendix B Acronyms

Term	Expansion of Abbreviation
ARMS	At-risk Management System
ASO	Assistant Superintendent Operations
ASWS	Assistant Superintendent Women's Services
AVS	Aboriginal Visitor Scheme
COPP	Commissioner's Operating Policy and Procedure
CCU	Crisis Care Unit
DOJ	Department of Justice
GP	General Practitioner
MHN	Mental Health Nurse
OICS	Office of the Inspector of Custodial Services
PHS	Psychological Health Services
PPE	Personal Protective Equipment
PRAG	Prisoner Risk Assessment Group
PSO	Prison Support Officer
SAMS	Support and Monitoring System
TM	Transitional Manager
TOMS	Total Offender Management Solution
VSO	Vocational Support Officer



Response to the Announced Inspection:

2026 Inspection of Melaleuca Women's Prison

August 2026

Response Overview

On 29 January 2026, the Office of the Inspector of Custodial Services (OICS) announced the Inspection of Melaleuca Women's Prison (Melaleuca), which took place from 23 to 27 March 2026.

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

On 21 July 2026, the Department received the draft report which raised 17 recommendations for review and comment.

Of the 17 recommendations:

- Three are supported;
- Eight are supported in principle; and
- Six are supported and considered current practice.

Detailed responses to the recommendations can be found below.

Response to Recommendations

1 Build a fit-for-purpose remand facility for adult women.

Level of Acceptance: Supported in Principle
Responsible Division: Corrective Services
Responsible Directorate: Adult Women's Prisons

Response:

The Long-Term Custodial Infrastructure Plan 2025 – 2035 (LTCIP) outlines the custodial infrastructure needs over the next 10 years based on the current and projected custodial population. The development of a fit-for-purpose remand facility for women will be considered in accordance with the priorities outlined in the LTCIP, subject to funding availability.

2 Develop and implement an appropriate staffing model for all aspects of Melaleuca's operations.

Level of Acceptance: Supported in Principle
Responsible Division: Corrective Services
Responsible Directorate: Adult Women's Prisons

Response:

The Safer Staffing Review is nearing completion, which will inform the staffing requirement for each custodial facility based on the current and projected custodial population. Once finalised, implementation of the Staffing Level Agreement (SLA) for Melaleuca will be subject to funding availability.

3 Melaleuca's reception should be fully staffed at all times by officers specifically trained in reception processes.

Level of Acceptance: Supported in Principle
Responsible Division: Corrective Services
Responsible Directorate: Adult Women's Prisons

Response:

Efforts have been made to strengthen resourcing levels within reception, recognising the importance of maintaining effective service delivery. While staffing coverage remains a priority, there are ongoing operational demands that can present practical challenges in sustaining consistent staffing levels.

Training opportunities are made available to all senior officers and prison officers as part of a locally led capability-building initiative. The Superintendent actively promotes participation through staff communications, encouraging attendance and supporting ongoing professional development across the workforce.

Additionally, efforts are being made to increase the overall resourcing in reception, with the revised SLA for Melaleuca developed as part of the Safer Staffing Review including an additional Reception Vocational Support Officer (VSO). As per the response to Recommendation Two, implementation of the revised SLA is subject to funding availability.

4 Ensure contracted supports at Melaleuca are sufficiently resourced to provide adequate and comprehensive services for women on remand.

Level of Acceptance: Supported
Responsible Division: Corrective Services
Responsible Directorate: Offender Services

Response:

In April 2026, the Department approved a funding variation with contract provider Wungening Aboriginal Corporation to increase resourcing for the ReSet service to meet the increased demand for support services in the metropolitan area.

The variation enables Wungening to support an additional 60 – 80 women and 40 – 50 men per annum through ReSet, with additional staff anticipated to commence delivering these services in August 2026.

The Department will continue to measure the performance of ReSet following the funding variation, to ensure there is a demonstrated improvement in service timeliness and reduction in waitlists in the coming months.

Noting the current service model does not include throughcare services to women on remand, a commissioning process in accordance with State procurement guidelines has commenced which will provide an opportunity for all rehabilitation and reintegration service agreements to be reviewed to inform the requirements of future service agreements.

5 Increase resourcing for bail services at Melaleuca.

Level of Acceptance: Supported
Responsible Division: Corrective Services
Responsible Directorate: Offender Services

Response:

As a Community Corrections Officer, the Bail Coordinator exercises delegated statutory authority under relevant legislative provisions, principally the *Sentencing Act 1995* and *Bail Act 1982*. This includes issuing and explaining lawful directions relating to community-based order requirements and facilitating electronic monitoring requirements. At Melaleuca, the Bail Coordinator has commenced fitting electronic monitoring equipment to eligible women prior to release, supporting more timely transition from custody into the community. There is extensive liaison with Adult Community Corrections centres across the state to facilitate the release of women on community orders and bail including making arrangements for transport back to country and residence.

The Bail Coordinator also undertakes extensive liaison with legal service providers where bail has been granted with surety conditions that cannot be met. Following efforts to identify and engage potential sureties through family or friends, the Bail Coordinator notifies legal representatives where surety has been refused or cannot be sourced, enabling further legal assistance or consideration of bail variations. The role also provides practical support to women to facilitate release arrangements and compliance with bail conditions.

Since the inspection, additional bail coordination resources have been implemented across the prison system, including a permanent Adult Community Corrections (ACC) Team Leader position and four dedicated ACC Bail Coordinators. In addition, two

Senior Community Corrections Officers have been temporarily appointed to support the newly established Adaptive Bail and Early Resolution Court at Perth Magistrates Court. This dedicated court list aims to reduce the number and length of time women spend in custody on remand and enable them to have their matters resolved early.

The introduction of additional ACC Bail Coordinator resources, has significantly improved the effectiveness of bail coordination by strengthening liaison with courts, legal representatives, and ACC centres, resolving bail related barriers more efficiently, and facilitating timely release arrangements. This has had a positive impact at Melaleuca by reducing delays for women who have been granted bail, enabling faster transition from custody to the community.

6 Increase opportunity for women to maintain contact with family.

Level of Acceptance: Supported – Current Practice / Project
Responsible Division: Corrective Services
Responsible Directorate: Adult Women's Prisons

Response:

At the time of the inspection, visits were running sporadically as a result of staffing shortages. Access to standard social visits at Melaleuca has now been increased and are available Monday to Sunday over four different sessions inclusive of public holidays, with additional sessions facilitated when staffing permits.

Separate weekday visit sessions can also be arranged for mothers whose children are in the care of the Department of Communities, Child Protection and Family Support (DCPFS). These sessions are facilitated by DCPFS staff and are conducted in quieter locations separate from the main visits centre to foster and support positive interactions between mothers and their children.

Further increases to the number of visits sessions held each week is supported by Melaleuca and will be implemented as staffing levels on site stabilise.

7 Introduce an electronic system for prisoners to manage requests and complaints.

Level of Acceptance: Supported in Principle
Responsible Division: Corrective Services
Responsible Directorate: Adult Women's Prisons

Response:

Melaleuca has reviewed current arrangements and restocked the forms for women to submit complaints to various oversight bodies and established a replenishment schedule.

The Corrective Services Digital Strategy is currently being developed and will consider this recommendation alongside other digital initiatives across custodial services.

In addition, all custodial facilities are also considered in the LTCIP 2025-2035, which provides the strategic direction for ensuring investment in custodial infrastructure across the estate is appropriately aligned with operational requirements, and the needs of the custodial population.

8 Implement a structured daily cleaning regime and ensure consistent access to approved cleaning products.

Level of Acceptance: Supported
Responsible Division: Corrective Services
Responsible Directorate: Adult Women's Prisons

Response:

Melaleuca has been reminded of the importance of adhering to established cleaning and maintenance standards on site. This includes ensuring daily cleaning regimes are completed each day immediately following cell inspections and supervised by unit staff, and for all maintenance issues to be attended to by the maintenance team or be logged with Infrastructure Services for repair if necessary.

Ongoing monitoring of these regimes will occur to ensure compliance with cleaning and maintenance requirements.

9 Implement a centrally managed laundry system with adequate capacity and processes to ensure safe and hygienic cleaning of all clothing and bedding.

Level of Acceptance: Supported in Principle
Responsible Division: Corrective Services
Responsible Directorate: Adult Women's Prisons

Response:

A business case to procure industrial-grade washing machines has been submitted and is being considered subject to funding. If approved, the new machines will replace the existing domestic-grade machines within the wings of the accommodation units, noting a centralised laundry system is not possible within the current infrastructure limitations.

Expansion options for Melaleuca detailed within the LTCIP include centralised laundry infrastructure, noting implementation of the LTCIP is subject to funding availability.

10 Invest resources to improve the conditions for the most vulnerable women at Melaleuca, specifically pregnant women, and those most at-risk.

Level of Acceptance: Supported in Principle
Responsible Division: Corrective Services
Responsible Directorate: Adult Women's Prisons

Response:

The LTCIP outlines the custodial estate's infrastructure priorities through 2035 and details expansion options for Melaleuca, including fit-for-purpose infrastructure for vulnerable prisoner cohorts. The Department will continue to advocate for funding for these infrastructure developments noting the needs of cohort of women residing in Melaleuca.

Established policies and procedures are also in place to support vulnerable cohorts – including pregnant women, including custodial and health procedures that supports the transfer of pregnant prisoners from Melaleuca to Bandyup Women's Prison if necessary, and mental health and counselling support for at-risk prisoners.

11 Increase the number of Prison Support Officer (PSO) and Aboriginal Visitor Scheme (AVS) positions at Melaleuca.

Level of Acceptance: Supported – Current Practice / Project
Responsible Division: Corrective Services
Responsible Directorate: Offender Services

Response:

An additional PSO has been established to address the growing demand for support at Melaleuca with recruitment underway to fill the vacancy.

The Aboriginal Visitors Scheme positions are not permanently assigned to specific facilities, providing flexibility to deploy resources in response to changing operational and cultural needs across the estate. Melaleuca is currently serviced by one FTE Monday – Friday.

12 Limit the redeployment of the Recreation VSOs.

Level of Acceptance: Supported – Current Practice / Project
Responsible Division: Corrective Services
Responsible Directorate: Adult Women's Prisons

Response:

Staffing challenges continue to present as the primary barrier for consistent access to recreation at Melaleuca, given redeployment of recreation VSOs is often unavoidable to ensure prisoners are provided with time out of cell.

The revised SLA for Melaleuca, developed as part of the Safer Staffing Review, provides additional custodial and VSO FTE to meet the current and projected prisoner population. Implementation of the revised SLA is subject to funding availability.

13 Address staffing and infrastructure shortfalls that impact education delivery at Melaleuca.

Level of Acceptance: Supported in Principle
Responsible Division: Corrective Services
Responsible Directorate: Offender Services

Response:

The allocation of additional education staff to Melaleuca is contingent upon addressing existing infrastructure limitations.

Education infrastructure is included within the expansion options for Melaleuca outlined in the LTCIP and is subject to funding availability.

14 Increase employment opportunities for women at Melaleuca with additional industries infrastructure and additional VSO positions.

Level of Acceptance: Supported – Current Practice / Project
Responsible Division: Corrective Services
Responsible Directorate: Adult Women's Prisons

Response:

The completion of the Safer Staffing Review and subsequent implementation of revised SLAs (subject to approval) is anticipated to improve the availability of meaningful employment opportunities on site by establishing additional Vocational Support Officer positions.

In addition, infrastructure developments under the LTCIP (also subject to funding availability) will introduce new industries and employment opportunities at Melaleuca, such as a centralised laundry service.

15 Prioritise completion of local Use of Force (UoF) reviews.

Level of Acceptance: Supported – Current Practice / Project
Responsible Division: Corrective Services
Responsible Directorate: Adult Women's Prisons

Response:

Following the inspection, Melaleuca has committed additional temporary resources to prioritise the completion of local Use of Force reviews in alignment with reporting requirements, recognising the importance of:

- identifying trends pertaining to the use of force;
- understanding the circumstances leading to such force; and
- identifying lessons that may help prevent future incidents.

Business improvement initiatives have also been implemented to strengthen staff capability and confidence in the application of conflict resolution and de-escalation strategies. These initiatives include increased leadership engagement and performance support to reinforce de-escalation as the preferred response to incidents where appropriate. Through this ongoing focus on staff development and continuous improvement, a reduction in use of force incidents has been observed over the past month.

16 Explore options to build a multi-purpose management unit at Melaleuca.

Level of Acceptance: Supported in Principle
Responsible Division: Corrective Services
Responsible Directorate: Adult Women's Prisons

Response:

A multi-purpose management unit is included within the expansion options for Melaleuca outlined in the LTCIP, subject to the availability of funding.

17 Ensure sufficient staff are trained in the use of the x-ray scanner to reduce reliance on strip searching.

Level of Acceptance: Supported – Current Practice / Project
Responsible Division: Corrective Services
Responsible Directorate: Adult Women's Prisons

Response:

Following the inspection, additional training in the use of the x-ray scanner was undertaken on the following dates:

- 8 May 2026: Six staff from Melaleuca and two from Bandyup Women's Prison (Bandyup); and
- 6 July 2026: Eight staff from Melaleuca and four from Bandyup.

Further training sessions are being planned, and Melaleuca will continue to monitor the progress of staff training.

Appendix D Inspection Details

Previous inspection		
11 – 16 November 2023		
Activity since previous inspection		
Liaison visits to Melaleuca Women’s Prison	9	
Independent Visitor visits	18	
Surveys		
Prisoner survey	2 and 9 February 2026	109 responses (45%)
Staff survey (online)	27 Jan – 10 Feb 2026	75 responses (60%)
Inspection team		
Inspector	Eamon Ryan	
Director Operations	Ryan Quinn	
Principal Inspections and Review Officer	Lauren Netto	
Senior Inspections and Review Officer	John Shenton	
Senior Inspections and Review Officer	Kieran Artelaris	
Social Work Masters Student Intern	Danelle Lever	
Environmental Health Expert, Department of Health	Shayna Burton	
Cultural Advisor	Justine Eades	

Key dates	
Inspection announced	28 January 2026
Start of on-site inspection	23 March 2026
Completion of on-site inspection	27 March 2026
Presentation of preliminary findings	27 March 2026
Draft report sent to Department of Justice	21 July 2026
Draft response received from Department of Justice	9 September 2026
Declaration of prepared report	9 September 2026



*Inspection of prisons, court
custody centres, prescribed lock-
ups, youth detention centres, and
review of custodial services in
Western Australia*

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