

Inspector's Overview

A prison with strengths tested by sustained pressure

Bunbury Regional Prison has long been regarded as one of Western Australia's stronger performing prisons. Previous inspections have identified a facility with a clear rehabilitative focus, positive staff-prisoner relationships, and a commitment to preparing people for return to the community. This inspection found many of those strengths remain evident.

At the same time, Bunbury is operating in an environment of increasing complexity and pressure. Population growth, staffing shortages, ageing infrastructure and system-wide constraints have combined to create challenges that are evident throughout this report. What stood out to me, however, was not simply the existence of these pressures, but the extent to which staff continue to work around them to keep the prison functioning effectively. The question facing Bunbury is no longer whether staff are committed enough to manage these challenges, it is whether local effort and ingenuity alone can continue to compensate for systemic pressures beyond the prison's control.

During the inspection, we heard a consistent message from management and staff. The focus has become maintaining daily operations, meeting immediate needs and keeping the prison open. Strategic planning, innovation and longer-term improvement have become increasingly difficult when resources are stretched, and attention is directed towards responding to operational demands. Bunbury was operating without a local operational plan, a reality openly acknowledged by local leadership, not through a lack of commitment, but rather the extent to which managing daily pressures had become the overriding priority.

Yet despite these constraints, there were many examples of good practice. Bunbury continued to achieve levels of out-of-cell time above the state average and remained committed to avoiding unnecessary lockdowns. Staff and management recognised that a prison that remains active, connected and engaged is generally a safer prison. This philosophy was evident across the facility and reflects an approach that prioritises rehabilitation, progression and constructive engagement rather than restriction alone.

We also found encouraging signs that workplace culture had improved since the previous inspection. Staff survey results, interviews and observations pointed to stronger teamwork, improved perceptions of safety and a more positive working environment. The work undertaken to address psychosocial hazards demonstrated a genuine commitment to supporting staff wellbeing. While challenges remain, particularly in relation to workload and staffing pressures, the progress achieved should be recognised.

The inspection identified a number of programs and initiatives that deserve recognition. The STEPS alcohol and other drugs program stood out as a strong example of throughcare in practice, connecting treatment, reintegration and post-release support in a meaningful way. Education staff continued to adapt limited space and resources to create opportunities for prisoners, while peer support prisoners played an increasingly important role in supporting vulnerable individuals and helping people navigate what can be a difficult and stressful environment. Throughout the inspection, we observed examples of staff working collaboratively across disciplines to support prisoner wellbeing and rehabilitation outcomes.

However, the report also highlights several areas where local effort cannot solve broader systemic problems. Delays in treatment assessments continue to impede prisoner progression. Access to healthcare is increasingly constrained by workforce and infrastructure limitations. Rehabilitation opportunities, employment pathways and support services are all affected by staffing pressures that extend beyond Bunbury itself. Many of the challenges identified in this report are not unique to this prison and reflect pressures that are currently being experienced across the custodial estate.

One observation stayed with me throughout the inspection. Bunbury continues to operate well because of the commitment, professionalism and resilience of its staff. Time and again we encountered people who were finding practical ways to overcome obstacles, support one another and maintain services despite limited resources. While this is commendable, it also carries risk. Reliance on goodwill is not a sustainable strategy. Without adequate investment in staffing, infrastructure and support services, there is a danger that the strengths that have traditionally characterised Bunbury will become increasingly difficult to maintain.

Overall, this is a prison that continues to perform well in difficult circumstances. It retains many of the qualities that have historically made it a positive and progressive correctional environment. The challenge now is ensuring these strengths are supported, rather than stretched, by the broader system in which it operates. The recommendations in this report are intended to assist both Bunbury and the Department to address these issues and to ensure the prison remains capable of delivering safe, humane and rehabilitative custody into the future.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We have two Independent Prison Visitors for Bunbury. They are community volunteers appointed by the Minister for Corrective Services, who attend Bunbury on a regular basis and observe the operations of the prison. They also provide an opportunity for the men 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 Bunbury.

I extend my appreciation to Superintendent Kerri Bishop and her team, and the Department of Justice for their cooperation and openness throughout this process. Most importantly, I thank the men who shared their experiences and insights with us so generously.

Finally, I acknowledge the professionalism and dedication of the inspection team, and particularly Jim Bryden for coordinating the inspection, and for preparing this report.

Jane Higgins

Acting Inspector of Custodial Services

24 August 2026