

Dear ERA

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the above paper. It is a good paper which asks some interesting questions and raises some dilemmas

I think you have addressed the problems facing the system though I am not yet so sure you have given the correct weight to the emerging solutions (on which i feel you might be leaning too heavily). I am not yet convinced that the procurement method is the overriding solution to the problems that the prison system faces. As such just focusing on one part of the criminal justice system, whilst understandable, is insufficient. Preventing people offending in the first place must be given at least the same weight as the focus on recidivism/rehabilitation. The overrepresentation of some groups in society like the Indigenous community is a very poor reflection on our society. What we need is a society at ease with itself where everyone had the opportunity to contribute - criminalising swathes of your community does little to achieve this sort of outcome.

However, I do understand your TOR and will now focus on your report. I agree strongly that rehabilitation must be the primary purpose of the prison system. The punishment is the taking away of liberty - thereafter rehabilitation must be the priority to prevent re-offending. I think there is little doubt, in fact no doubt, that rehabilitating prisoners (i.e. preventing recidivism as well as helping them off drugs or to improve their mental health) will undoubtedly reduce the burden on the tax payer. Interestingly of course, and with our siloed approach to government, DOCs budget would be worse off. So tax payer savings but Docs would require an increase in resources (p7 top of page)P8 the target reduction of 6% in recidivism per year addresses only part of the rehabilitation problem and seems rather ad-hoc, but I am sure there are good reasons why 6% is a good target - a 60% reduction over a decade seems really quite attractive.

You make interesting references to capacity - this is a tricky issue to sell to the public, but this is why we need an informed debate. I think you might come to some recommendations about public debate and communication as the criminal justice system and prisons in particular could benefit from a much more informed public.

As a person suffering from a mental health problem I am terribly concerned about the mental health of our prisoners. An ex US attorney general once remarked that if people are not mentally ill when they enter prison they will be by the time they leave. There is a strong group at Curtin University (let by Drs Steels and Goulding - I was involved at the margins) that are looking into ways to improve the mental health of the prison population through design and practice rather than just through intervention. I strongly urge you to talk to them as you consider your next phase. They are very well informed (indeed are working with a consortia of European countries on this issue). There is a lot that can be done to reduce stress and improve mental health in the prevention space. This must be tackled as a priority, since if for no other reason that the link between mental health issues and offending are strong. I find it truly appalling that the mental health services provided to those people who are in the state's care is worse than that provided to the general population. You state on P14 that if this is not addressed then mental health issues may be worsened. I believe there is no doubt at all - and would recommend a fuller discussion so that society can understand the facts and ministers can base their decisions on evidence.

I strongly endorse the call for a strategic approach - both by the department and each prisons. The department needs to have an informed strategy which sets out Ministerial expectations along with priorities and timelines. Once that is firmly established then each prison can focus on the priorities set by the department but in their own distinctive way. There must be a strong focus on autonomy (but within a strategic framework) as well as a focus on delivering results rather than following a rote. What matter is what works - for the prisoners, the prisoners to be and the recidivists as well as society. This can only truly be informed by and open and transparent systems that welcomes the contributions for NGOs etc. I endorse your proposal for DOC to be included in the Forum.

On p25 you state that DOCs is unable to evaluate some programs. One does wonder why they are running programs if they don't know if they are successful or not. If true this is quite disturbing. Evaluation must be an integral part of everything the government does - not just prisons.

I fear that you are starting too soon on setting performance standards and service standards. I'd be happy to be involved in a discussion but these can't be conjured out of a strategy free zone (p31). That said a focus on cultural issues must be relevant.

Finally I think we should **run our prisons as if prisoners matter**. I know we will say they do, but I do wonder if that is true when you consider the recidivism, the level of drug/alcohol abuse (and non treatment) and the woeful state of mental health services.

With kind regards

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