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Department of Corrections: Managing offenders to reduce reoffending

Progress in responding to
the Auditor-General's
recommendations



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Presented to the House of
Representatives under section 20 of
the Public Audit Act 2001.

September 2016

ISBN 978-0-478-44247-2

Introduction

- 1.1 In December 2013, we published a report on a performance audit we carried out on how well the Department of Corrections (the Department) was managing offenders¹ to reduce their likelihood of reoffending. As part of the Better Public Services programme launched by the Government in March 2012, the Government has set a target to reduce reoffending by 25% by 2017. Achieving this would result in fewer imprisonments, fewer community reconvictions, and fewer victims each year. We wanted to assess how well the Department was managing offenders to achieve this target.
- 1.2 This report reviews the progress the Department has made in response to the three recommendations in our 2013 report. Since our 2013 report, the Department has had to deal with several challenges, including a prison population that is growing faster than forecast and reviews initiated after several high-profile incidents. The Department's progress toward the reducing reoffending target peaked at 12.6% and has recently decreased to 6.8%. The Department has acknowledged that it will be difficult to reduce reoffending by 25% by 2017.
- 1.3 Overall, the Department has made progress in addressing our recommendations, but there are still some opportunities for further improvement. It has improved the scheduling system and strengthened the alignment between case managers who work in the prisons and probation officers who work in the community. The Department is confident that its current mix of approaches to collect feedback from offenders assists in meeting its obligations to the public, and focuses on where it can reduce reoffending.

Our 2013 findings

- 1.4 Our 2013 performance audit looked at how well the Department:
- identified and prioritised offenders to take part in rehabilitation and reintegration programmes;
 - met the rehabilitation and reintegrative needs of offenders, including by providing access to appropriate programmes such as prisoner employment, alcohol and drug treatment, and cultural programmes;
 - managed offenders' transition from prison into the community; and
 - ensured that its programmes and activities to reduce reoffending were effective and efficient.

¹ For the purposes of this report, we use the term "offenders" to refer to all people managed by the Department in prisons or on community-based sentences unless we are specifically referring to prisoners.

- 1.5 In 2013, we found strengths in how the Department was reducing reoffending. These included the Department's:
- approach to managing offenders being based on, and supported by, international research;
 - targeting of Māori offenders, who represent half of all prisoners and 45% of offenders serving community-based sentences; and
 - continuous assessment of the effectiveness and efficiency of its interventions, learning from success and failures, and using that information for improvements.
- 1.6 However, the Department needed to continue to work on the challenges it faced to maintain and enhance the effectiveness of its approach. To help the Department in addressing some of those challenges, we made three recommendations about:
- effectively and efficiently scheduling offenders into programmes;
 - continuing to strengthen the alignment between prisons and community probation; and
 - being more consistent in getting feedback from offenders and stakeholders.
- 1.7 The following sections describes the Department's progress against each of these.

Although some improvements have been made to the scheduling system, further improvements are needed

- 1.8 In 2013, the system the Department used to schedule offenders' activities and rehabilitation programmes (the scheduling system) was reactive. It did not plan for or forecast demand for programmes. Because scheduling was reactive, it did not seem to consider what other activities offenders could take part in at the same time or what would happen when they completed their rehabilitation programmes.
- 1.9 Our concern was that, by increasing the number of offenders entering rehabilitation programmes without improving its scheduling system, the Department would become less effective and efficient. We recommended that the Department continue to investigate ways to improve its scheduling system so it could support rehabilitation and reintegration after an offender had completed a rehabilitation programme.

- 1.10 Since 2013, the Department has investigated ways to improve its scheduling system through two projects: the Offender Scheduling Project Phase One and the Offender Booking Project.²
- 1.11 The Department started the Offender Scheduling Project Phase One in May 2014. The project focused on improving the existing scheduling function for rehabilitation programmes by improving business processes and ensuring greater consistency in scheduling practices. The Department completed the project in November 2014. The project introduced an online referral system to external training providers, and a nationally consistent process for scheduling rehabilitation programmes.
- 1.12 To build on the work from the first project, the Department started the Offender Booking Project in November 2014. This project was designed to address three concerns with the scheduling system:
1. sequencing not fully supporting the desired outcomes (for example, being able to engage in multiple activities simultaneously);
 2. limited ability to forecast the demand for rehabilitation and reintegration activities and therefore ensure that resources could meet that demand; and
 3. the lack of a single end-to-end view of planned activities to support effective management of each offender.
- 1.13 However, in April 2015, the Department changed the scope of the project to focus on what could be done in six months. This meant that the focus changed to addressing only the first concern and looking at the future state of the Department's scheduling system. The Department addressed the first concern by:
- expanding the improvements made in scheduling rehabilitation programmes to other scheduled activities (see paragraph 1.11); and
 - implementing scheduling processes for transitioning offenders between prison and the community and between prisons.
- 1.14 The Department completed the project by November 2015. The project resulted in a nationally consistent process for scheduling all activities, and increased visibility of the activities on an offender's plan. Overall, the improvements to the scheduling system mean that each offender has a clearly defined path and sequence of activities.
- 1.15 The implementation of a technology solution to support scheduling should assist the Department to forecast demand for and supply of its programmes, and to enable it to have a single end-to-end view of an offender's planned activities. The

2 Originally called the Offender Scheduling Project Phase Two.

Department decided to defer any technology solution until after it had achieved consistency in preparing offender plans,³ which feed into the scheduling system.

- 1.16 Without the technology solution, the Department's ability to plan the effective and efficient use of resources, and identify gaps in the supply of programmes, remains limited. We encourage the Department to prioritise implementing a technology solution to its scheduling issues once there is consistency in preparing offender plans.

Greater alignment between case managers and probation officers

- 1.17 In our 2013 report, offenders said that knowing their probation officer before release was important to them. We found that the handover to community probation needs to start before the prisoner is released so that the proper support mechanisms are in place and offenders know what is expected of them before they leave prison.
- 1.18 We noted that collaboration between case managers in prisons, other prison staff, and probation staff was in its early days. We recommended that the Department continue to strengthen the alignment between case managers and probation officers. We encouraged the Department to ensure that the knowledge and experience of other prison staff was used in managing and transitioning offenders from prison into the community.
- 1.19 Since 2013, the Department has focused on strengthening the alignment of practice between case managers, who work with offenders in prison, and probation officers, who work with offenders in the community.
- 1.20 In July 2014, the Department implemented an Integrated Practice Framework for case management. The Department based this case management framework on the one in place for probation officers, and it was designed to create alignment between the two. The frameworks are set up in a similar way, with three parts: Standards of Practice, Structured Decision Framework, and Knowledge Bank. The frameworks draw on similar, and, sometimes, the same, information and tools.
- 1.21 In 2015, a Departmental restructure resulted in case managers and probation officers receiving practice support and supervision from the same role, a practice leader. Some practice leaders were formerly case managers, and others were formerly probation officers. This means that there is greater opportunity for sharing lessons and practice between the two. For example, practice leaders

³ Every offender entering a prison is assigned a case manager. The case manager interviews the offender to assess their needs and prepare a plan that covers: the needs or characteristics that are directly related to offending; behaviour, attitudes, and compliance; education and work; health, well-being, and lifestyle support; and housing, finance, and victim-related issues. The plan is then used to put offenders on the appropriate programme(s).

facilitate reflective practice sessions involving case managers and probation officers, and there are also national meetings of practice leaders.

- 1.22 The Department has also made other improvements to strengthen alignment between case managers and probation officers. This includes having case managers and probation officers use similar risk assessment tools, secondments of case managers and probation officers into each other's positions, and new Probation Standards of Practice.
- 1.23 The Department told us that these improvements have enabled staff to develop a better understanding of each other's role and what they are trying to achieve. The Department said that the changes had improved offenders' transition from prison into the community. Case managers can now provide advice to offenders on probation officers' expectations (for example, on the type of accommodation). There is also more thorough planning and collaboration between case managers and probation officers before an offender is released into the community.
- 1.24 We were told there were still some opportunities for further improvement – for example, defining the role of a probation officer when an offender goes from the community back into prison. If an offender is going back to prison for a short time, the probation officer could work to keep the offender's accommodation available.
- 1.25 Overall, the Department has strengthened alignment between case managers and probation officers. The Department has further activities planned, including:
- joint training for case managers and probation officers in motivational interviewing;
 - having the same quality framework for case managers and probation officers; and
 - further improvements to the handover of offenders from case managers to probation officers.
- 1.26 We encourage the Department to continue the work it has been doing to strengthen the alignment between case managers and probation officers.

Feedback is collected in a variety of ways

- 1.27 In 2013, the Department had a mix of approaches for getting formal and informal feedback from offenders and stakeholder groups. We considered that, as well as surveying the general public's perceptions, the Department could adopt a more consistent approach to capturing the experiences of offenders and stakeholder groups.

- 1.28 We recommended that the Department use a survey tool that would:
- provide a more consistent approach throughout the Department for collecting feedback from offenders and stakeholders groups;
 - measure the factors that are important to New Zealanders when receiving public services;
 - fit with the offender-centric approach that takes into account the offender's circumstances and what works for offenders to stop reoffending; and
 - allow the Department to benchmark with other justice sector entities, such as the New Zealand Police and courts.
- 1.29 The Department collects feedback from the public in two ways that allow it to benchmark its performance. One is a survey by a private research company on the public trust and confidence in individual public entities. The other is the Ministry of Justice's survey of the public's perception of the justice sector, and individual aspects within it (for example, the criminal court system, the parole system, and the New Zealand Police). The Department could use these surveys to benchmark its performance against other public entities, including the New Zealand Police.
- 1.30 The Department uses some consistent approaches to collect information and feedback from stakeholders groups. The Department collects feedback from them through a standard survey when it does a review of a prison or community probation centre. The results of the survey can be used to compare sites. The Department has also done surveys of stakeholder groups involved in specific programmes. For example, in October 2014, the Department surveyed employers' satisfaction with the Department's jobseeker services.
- 1.31 The Department continues to use various ways to collect information and feedback from offenders. These include:
- each prison collecting feedback from offenders in its own way;
 - collecting feedback from offenders managed in the community through surveys and telephone interviews;
 - complaints to Department staff, to the Department's Inspectorate, or to the Office of the Ombudsman; and
 - information from specific groups of offenders for research purposes, using an offender-centric approach to understand recidivism and inform interventions to reduce reoffending. For example, in July 2014, the Department commissioned research into why youth offenders stop offending.

1.32 The Department also makes use of the surveys of prisoners completed by the Office of the Ombudsman during its unannounced inspections of prisons to compare prisons and prisoners' views. The Department believes that these independent and unannounced surveys provide a more robust methodology than a survey carried out by Department staff.

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