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Watch House Investigation Report



**Own motion investigation into conditions for
Territory prisoners in Northern Territory
Police Force watch houses – November
2025**

Committee: Ombudsman
Topic: NT Police Watch House - November
Tabled By: Ms. ...
Signed: ...

Ombudsman NT

Investigation Report

Watch House

Investigation Report

Pursuant to Section 119 of the Ombudsman Act any information or document obtained during an investigation is not admissible in any proceedings before a Court, Tribunal or Board except for the prosecution of a person for an offence under this Act.

OMBUDSMAN'S FOREWORD

This report considers the experience of prisoners who were housed for lengthy periods in Northern Territory police watch houses designed for short-term stays rather than established correctional centres.

I would like to thank each person who had the courage to contact our office themselves to make a complaint or through a concerned family member. I appreciated the candid way those interviewed recounted their experiences. Some individuals compellingly recounted terrible conditions that made me concerned for their welfare and dignity, but then also spoke positively about their care and conditions in established Corrections facilities where the facilities and systems were in place to generally ensure their wellbeing. I would also like to acknowledge the significant work of legal service providers through assisting people to make complaints to us; the number of complaints was substantial as was the volume of work.

Section 10(1) of the *Ombudsman Act 2009* provides me, as Ombudsman, with a broad range of functions to investigate the administrative practices of public authorities, such as the Department of Corrections and the Northern Territory Police Force. In particular and most relevantly, section 10 (1) of the Act provides:

10(1) The Ombudsman's functions are:

- (a) to investigate, and deal with complaints about, administrative actions of public authorities; and
- (b) to consider the administrative practices and procedures of public authorities whose actions are being investigated, or dealt with on complaint, and to make recommendations to authorities:
 - (i) about appropriate ways of addressing the effects of inappropriate administrative actions; or
 - (ii) for the improvement of their practices and procedures; and
- (c) to consider the administrative practices and procedures of public authorities generally and to make recommendations or provide information or other help to the authorities for the improvement of their practices and procedures; and
- (d) to investigate, and deal with complaints about, conduct of police officers...

It is important to understand that while the role of the Ombudsman is broad, as set out above, it specifically excludes any investigation or questioning of the merits of decisions of the Executive Council, Cabinet or Ministers as provided for in section 15(1) of the Act. I do not do so.

However, with my mandate to investigate the administrative actions and practices of public authorities, it is necessary to have an understanding as to why those authorities took specific actions or approaches and the context in which they did so. Accordingly, it is important that my report should acknowledge the context of what has occurred with respect to watch houses in the broader Northern Territory community including the Government, people in custody, the public service, the Department of Corrections, the Northern Territory Police Force and the communities we are all part of and serve.

In August 2024, the Government of the Northern Territory changed with the election of the Country Liberal Party with a strong majority of 17 seats on a campaign promising to reduce crime, rebuild the economy and restore the Territory Lifestyle. Following that election, the Northern Territory Public Service's role was to support the new objectives of the Government. Furthermore, significant machinery of government changes saw major change to departments and more than half the public service was subject to, or in a department subjected to, machinery of government changes. Corrections became its own agency, separate from the Department of the Attorney-General.

Throughout the last quarter of 2024, significant legislative reforms were introduced aimed at reducing crime including amendments to bail legislation which resulted in an increasing Northern Territory prison population.

It is clear to me that the Department of Corrections had no alternative but to find a way to accommodate the growing prison population and was legally obliged to do so. However, as this report sets out, the conditions for Territory prisoners held in police watch houses during this period was unacceptably poor in several key regards. No prisoner, regardless of their offence, should be held in such conditions.

The Department of Corrections has provided me an account of how the use of police watch houses developed in the circumstances it found itself in; I accept that, and it is replicated in full at the end of this report. Similarly, the Northern Territory Police Force has described the pressure the increases in prisoner numbers placed on its operations and staff during this period. I similarly accept the comments made by Northern Territory Police Force, with the exception of paragraph 6 where it related to a stated impact of a change in practice by the Local Court, which the Local Court has clarified. The role of both the Department of Corrections and the Northern Territory Police Force in being the custodians of Territory prisoners during this period would have been immensely challenging, and I acknowledge the effort of their staff to care for Territory prisoners in trying circumstances.

Section 59 of the Act sets out a range of categories where I may be satisfied that a particular adverse matter has occurred, and in this investigation I have concluded that the practice of holding Territory prisoners (as defined in this report) in watch houses and the way that was implemented, included them being held in conditions that were unreasonable and oppressive within the meaning of section 59(1)(a)(iv) of the Act. In the alternative I would also consider that the conduct was such that it also could be said to fall within section 59(1)(a)(ii).

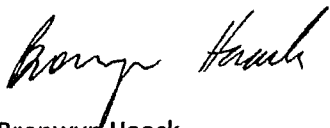
It is important that I did not find that action appeared to have occurred in a way where the following adverse findings may be made pursuant to section 59(1)(a):

- the action appears to be contrary to law- section 59(1)(a)(i);
- there was action taken in the purported exercise of a function or purported function for an improper purpose, on irrelevant grounds or taking into account relevant considerations- ss (a)(v);
- the action was based wholly or partly on a mistake of law or fact - section 59(1)(1)(a)(vi);
or
- that the action fell into to circumstances of section 59(1)(a)(iii).

I have thought carefully about whether further recommendations are required having made a first recommendation to remove Territory prisoners from police watch houses as a matter of urgency. However, having reflected on my general knowledge of the history of damage to correctional facilities

in the Northern Territory over the past 15 years, it appeared to me that every handful of years damage does occur to these facilities which results in a loss of bed capacity or otherwise necessitates the transfer of some prisoners to other facilities. Accordingly, I do make further recommendations to improve practices for the care of longer-term occupants of police watch houses to ensure that if there is no alternative but to hold people in watch houses for extended periods as a result of some crisis in the future, that the Department of Corrections and the NT Police Force use these recommendations to ensure that people are not subjected to the same terrible conditions as detailed in this report.

Lastly, I would like to thank my predecessor and the incredibly hardworking staff of the Ombudsman's Office who have worked so diligently on this report.



Bronwyn Haack
Acting Ombudsman

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Context

The use of Northern Territory Police Force (**NT Police**) watch houses to hold Territory prisoners¹ in an overflow capacity appears to have been reported publicly around January 2023, with media publishing at the time that '[c]hronic overcrowding in the Territory's prisons has led to police watch houses in Alice Springs, Katherine, Tennant Creek and Palmerston all being used for overflow for corrections prisoners.'²

Police watch houses are designed as temporary holding facilities, and following the revelation that Territory prisoners were also being held in the Darwin City Watch House and the Peter McAulay Centre Watch House, my officers visited those facilities in April that year to view the conditions for Territory prisoners housed there.

My officers identified shortcomings in the watch houses' ability to humanely accommodate Territory prisoners for extended periods of time, with many of the shortcomings inherent in the design of the facilities. They wrote to the Northern Territory Commissioner of Correctional Services (**Corrections Commissioner**) to report their observations and suggest how conditions could be improved notwithstanding the facilities' apparent limitations.

Despite concerns about the shortcomings, my officers noted that at the time of the visits there appeared to be relatively few Territory prisoners being held in watch house facilities and for relatively short periods of time, and the Department of Corrections (**Corrections**) was observed to be taking meaningful steps to mitigate the impact of the restrictive nature of the facilities on Territory prisoners.

Watch house use continued through 2023, 2024 and into 2025, and my officers made more visits to watch house facilities in that time, including to the Alice Springs, Katherine and Palmerston Watch Houses. In the visit to Alice Springs Watch House in May 2024, my officers assessed conditions there as being more restrictive and concerning than those of the Darwin City Watch House and the Peter McAulay Centre Watch House. Following that visit, my Office again wrote to the Corrections Commissioner in June 2024 to repeat concerns that it is highly undesirable to hold prisoners in watch house facilities for extended periods and as anything more than a stop-gap measure, and to call for their use [as surge accommodation] to be phased out as a priority.

In responding to the correspondence, Corrections noted the prisoner population had increased by 18% over the preceding 24 months, and that while the use of watch house facilities was intended as

¹ I use the term 'Territory prisoner' throughout this report to refer to prisoners who, as a result of being sentenced or placed on remand, would generally be held in a correctional services facility designed for longer-term accommodation, but due to overcrowding in those facilities, have instead been held in a police watch house. For the sake of clarity, this definition is not intended to incorporate any existing legislated or other definitions of 'Territory prisoner', such as the definition in s 3 of the *Prisoners (Interstate Transfer) Act 1983* (NT).

² Zizi Averill, 'NT Police Association slams use of Alice Springs, Katherine, Tennant Creek and Palmerston watch houses for prison overflow', *NT News* (online, 16 January 2023) <<https://www.ntnews.com.au/truecrimeaustralia/police-courts-nt/nt-police-association-slams-use-of-alice-springs-katherine-tennant-creek-and-palmerston-watch-houses-for-prison-overflow/news-story/2e8aa130e43dcbc517c4192b0079285f>>.

a temporary arrangement, the continued increase in prisoner numbers extended the requirement to use the facilities for longer than anticipated.³ Corrections also stated it anticipated that completion of new modular facilities, the creation of more work camps and the establishment of new facilities for female prisoners would remove the need to use NT Police watch house facilities as surge accommodation for Territory prisoners.

Despite my officers' concerns about conditions for Territory prisoners at the watch houses, up until late 2024, my Office had received few complaints about them from either prisoners, their families or their representatives. However, in late November 2024, my Office received its first complaint about conditions in the Palmerston Watch House, which heralded an influx of complaints about watch house conditions over January, February and March 2025, totaling 31 in that period. This rise appears to have coincided with a rapid increase in overall prisoner numbers and in Territory prisoners being placed in watch houses.

Investigation

Based on the significant number of complaints being received, the concerning observations made by officers in their visits and that the situation appeared to be worsening rather than improving, my predecessor decided to cease making preliminary inquiries into the situation and commence an own motion investigation into the conditions for Territory prisoners in the NT Police watch houses.

To ensure the investigation could provide timely information regarding ongoing and urgent issues affecting Territory prisoners being held in watch houses, my predecessor chose to examine conditions at three watch houses considered to be representative of the different ways in which Territory prisoners were being held in watch houses broadly:

Katherine Watch House	The Katherine Watch House contained a mix of Territory and other prisoners who were managed entirely by NT Police.
Palmerston Watch House	The Palmerstone Watch House contained a mix of Territory and other prisoners; however, the Territory prisoners were managed by Corrections officers stationed at the watch house.
Alice Springs Watch House	The Alice Springs Watch House had the same arrangement as Palmerston Watch House but also had a significant population of female Territory prisoners.

My predecessor also limited the timeframe for detailed review of watch house conditions to the period of 1 November 2024 to 31 February 2025, as this was a period where watch house usage was acute and having a severe impact on prisoners.

I then considered the evidence my office obtained about identified key issues against the Guiding Principles for Corrections in Australia, which, to some extent, operationalise various international rules, standards and practices for the treatment of prisoners in the Australian correctional context.

³ See Table 1 below on page 11 for a graph that depicts changes in the total number of Northern Territory prisoners over time.

Conclusions and recommendations

My review of the evidence found that, at least for the period examined, Territory prisoners were held in extremely poor conditions that fell significantly below those set out in the Guiding Principles.

The combination of the conditions identified in the investigation and detailed throughout this report, particularly those listed immediately below, meant that prisoners were held in conditions that were unreasonable and oppressive within the meaning of the *Ombudsman Act 2009* (NT):

- severe crowding
- requirement to use exposed, in-cell toilets in front of many other cell occupants
- requirement to access drinking water atop frequently used toilets
- no time outside or access to fresh air and practically no time outside cell
- limited access to showers and teeth brushing
- poor sleeping conditions including sleeping on mattresses on the floor and in constant lighting
- very limited access to family and loved ones
- stays of weeks at a time, if not a month or more.

My office received assurances from as early as April 2023 that works underway to increase capacity at correctional centres would remove the need to hold Territory prisoners in watch house facilities for surge purposes. However, at the time of writing some two-and-a-half years later Territory prisoners are still being held in watch houses for that purpose, albeit in less crowded circumstances than the period I examined.

Noting watch house facilities are simply ill-equipped to accommodate prisoners for anything more than a short stay, I recommended the NT Government remove Territory prisoners from watch house facilities as a matter of urgency. I also made 15 other recommendations about how Corrections and NT Police could reduce the impact of the restrictive nature of the watch house facilities for Territory prisoners in the highly undesirable situation where they cannot avoid holding them there for anything more than a short stay.

Both Corrections and NT Police accepted or otherwise supported my recommendation to remove Territory prisoners from the watch houses as a matter of urgency, accepting also many of my other recommendations. They acknowledged that police watch houses are designed for short-term detention, and that the surge in total prisoner numbers resulted in Territory prisoners being placed in those facilities, creating challenging conditions for the Territory prisoners and placing extraordinary pressure on their staff.

CONTENTS

Ombudsman’s Foreword	1
Executive Summary.....	4
1. Background	9
1.1 Our role and authority to investigate	9
1.2 Lead up to the Investigation	9
1.2.1 First awareness.....	9
1.2.2 Further visits.....	10
1.2.3 Influx of complaints.....	12
1.3 The investigation.....	13
1.3.1 Scope of investigation	13
1.3.2 Investigative process and procedural fairness.....	14
1.3.3 Relevant Standards	14
1.3.4 Acknowledgements.....	15
2. Watch house issues.....	16
2.1 Physical conditions.....	16
2.2 Access to basic rights and entitlements.....	18
2.2.1 Water.....	18
2.2.2 Clothing	21
2.2.3 Bedding	22
2.2.4 Lighting.....	24
2.2.5 Sleeping arrangements	25
2.2.6 Access to family and loved ones	28
2.3 Dignity.....	30
2.3.1 Showers and oral hygiene	30
2.3.2 Toilets.....	34
2.3.3 Women’s hygiene.....	36
2.4 Health and wellbeing.....	37
2.4.1 Incidents	37
2.4.2 Medical assistance and mental health support	38
2.4.3 Effective lockdown conditions and lack of exercise and recreation	40
2.4.4 General health.....	43
2.5 Prisoner numbers, cell crowding and length of stay.....	43
2.5.1 Length of stay	44
2.5.2 Cell crowding.....	46
2.5.3 Total watch house usage.....	54

2.6	Governance and management	56
2.6.1	Decision making and transfers	56
2.6.2	Ability to complain	57
3.	Current situation	58
3.1.1	Palmerston Watch House statistics from 1 March 2025 to 30 September 2025	60
3.1.2	Katherine Watch House statistics from 1 March 2025 to 30 September 2025	62
3.1.3	Alice Springs Watch House statistics from 1 March 2025 to 30 September 2025.....	63
4.	Conclusion	65
4.1.1	Recommendations	65
4.1.2	Corrections' response	71
4.1.3	NT Police's response	76
4.1.4	Northern Territory Local Court Response	77

1. BACKGROUND

1.1 Our role and authority to investigate

1. The Ombudsman is appointed under the *Ombudsman Act 2009* (NT) (**Ombudsman Act**) to be an independent and impartial investigator of complaints and issues relating to government administration.

2. I, and by delegation, staff in the Ombudsman's Office (**Office**), have authority to investigate administrative action taken by a public authority.⁴ Both the Department of Corrections (**Corrections**) and the Northern Territory Police Force (**NT Police**) are public authorities within the meaning of the Ombudsman Act.

1.2 Lead up to the Investigation

Territory Prisoner

3. I use the term 'Territory prisoner' throughout this report to refer to prisoners who, as a result of being sentenced or placed on remand, would generally be held in a correctional services facility designed for longer-term accommodation, but, due to overcrowding in those facilities, have instead been held in a police watch house.⁵

What is a police watch house?

4. Police watch houses are temporary holding facilities for people who are in protective custody or have been arrested, are being processed, and are awaiting bail, transfer to a correctional services facility or their first court appearance. They are designed to hold people for short periods of time, usually a couple of days.

1.2.1 First awareness

5. The use of NT Police watch houses to hold Territory prisoners in an overflow capacity appears to have been reported publicly around January 2023, with media publishing that '[c]hronic overcrowding in the Territory's prisons has led to police watch houses in Alice Springs, Katherine, Tennant Creek and Palmerston all being used as overflow for corrections prisoners.'⁶ My Office learned that Territory prisoners were also being held in the Darwin City Watch House and the Peter McAulay Centre Watch House and



Figure 1 - Darwin Police Station exterior. The Darwin City Watch House is located within the police station. Photograph taken by the Ombudsman's Office.

⁴ *Ombudsman Act 2009* (NT) s 14.

⁵ For the sake of clarity, this definition is not intended to incorporate any existing legislated or other definitions of 'Territory prisoner', such as the definition in s 3 of the *Prisoners (Interstate Transfer) Act 1983* (NT).

⁶ Zizi Averill, 'NT Police Association slams use of Alice Springs, Katherine, Tennant Creek and Palmerston watch houses for prison overflow', *NT News* (online, 16 January 2023)

visited those watch houses in April and the Darwin City Watch House again in May that year to view the conditions for prisoners housed there. Following the April visit, my Office wrote to the Northern Territory Commissioner of Correctional Services (**Corrections Commissioner**) to report on my officers' observations and to suggest how conditions could be improved. My officers identified shortcomings in the watch houses' ability to humanely accommodate Territory prisoners for extended periods of time, with many of the shortcomings inherent in the design of the facilities, including:

- insufficient capacity for prisoners to be exposed to sunlight or to access an outdoor space and fresh air
- facility layout and staffing making it potentially difficult for Corrections to respond to incidents or emergencies
- prisoners experiencing interrupted or limited access to legal visits, continuity of care and supports, and contact with family.⁷

6. Despite these concerns, my officers noted that at the time of the visits there appeared to be relatively few Territory prisoners being held in watch house facilities and for relatively short periods of time, and that at least in respect of the visited watch houses, Corrections was observed to be taking meaningful steps to mitigate the impact of the restrictive nature of the facilities on Territory prisoners.

1.2.2 Further visits

7. Despite early indications from Corrections that its work to expand prisoner accommodation at NT correctional facilities would hopefully negate the need to hold Territory prisoners in watch houses as overflow, watch house use continued through 2023 and into 2024. My officers revisited both the Darwin City Watch House and the Peter McAulay Centre Watch House in March 2024, and, upon learning that Territory prisoners were still being held in the Alice Springs Watch House also arranged a visit there in May 2024.

8. My officers assessed conditions in the Alice Springs Watch House as being more restrictive and concerning than those of the previously visited watch houses. Noting their assessment and that the use of watch houses remained ongoing, if not expanding, my Office again wrote to the Corrections Commissioner in June 2024 to repeat concerns that it is highly undesirable to hold prisoners in watch house facilities for extended periods and as anything more than a stop-gap measure, and to call for their use [as surge accommodation] to be phased out as a priority.

9. In responding to the correspondence, Corrections noted the prisoner population had increased by 18% over the preceding 24 months, and that while the use of watch house facilities was intended as a temporary arrangement, the continued increase in prisoner numbers extended the requirement to use the facilities for longer than anticipated. Corrections also stated it anticipated that completion of new modular facilities, the creation of more work camps and the establishment of new facilities for

<<https://www.ntnews.com.au/truecrimeaustralia/police-courts-nt/nt-police-association-slams-use-of-alice-springs-katherine-tenant-creek-and-palmerston-watch-houses-for-prison-overflow/news-story/2e8aa130e43dcbc517c4192b0079285f>>.

⁷ For a more detailed summary of the issues identified by officers and a statement made by the then Ombudsman regarding the use of NT Police watch house facilities to hold prisoners longer-term, please refer to pages 15-16 of the *Ombudsman NT Annual Report 2022/23*.

female prisoners would remove the need to use NT Police watch house facilities as surge accommodation for Territory prisoners.⁸

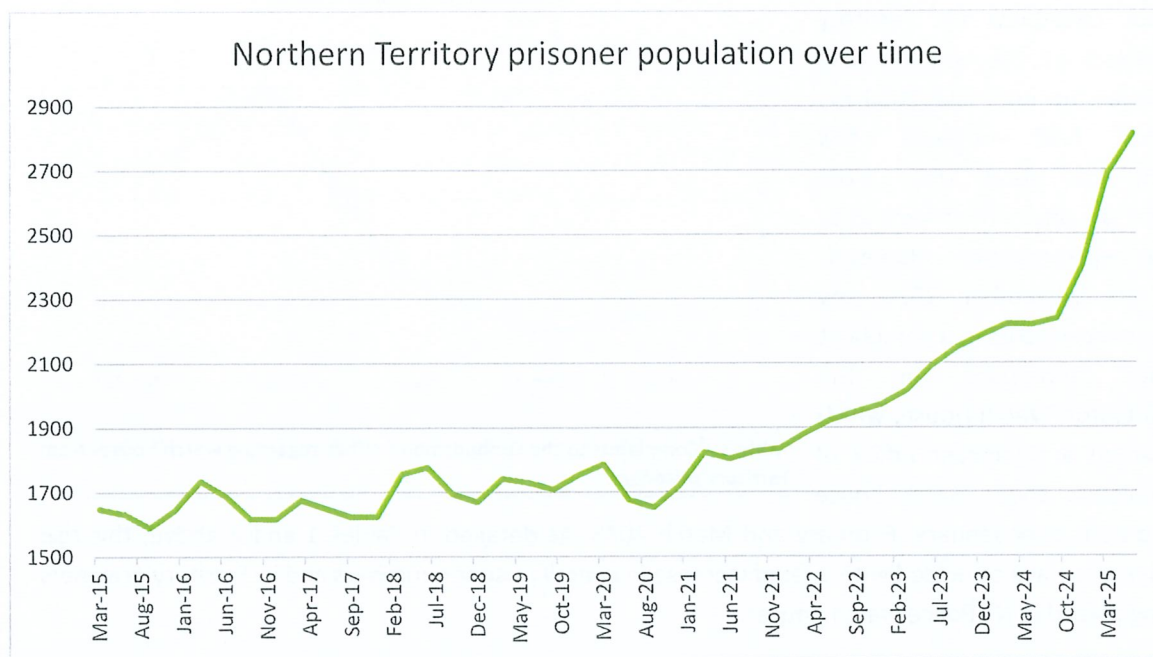


Table 1 – A graph depicting changes in the total number of Northern Territory prisoners over time. Data sourced from the Australian Bureau of Statistics.⁹

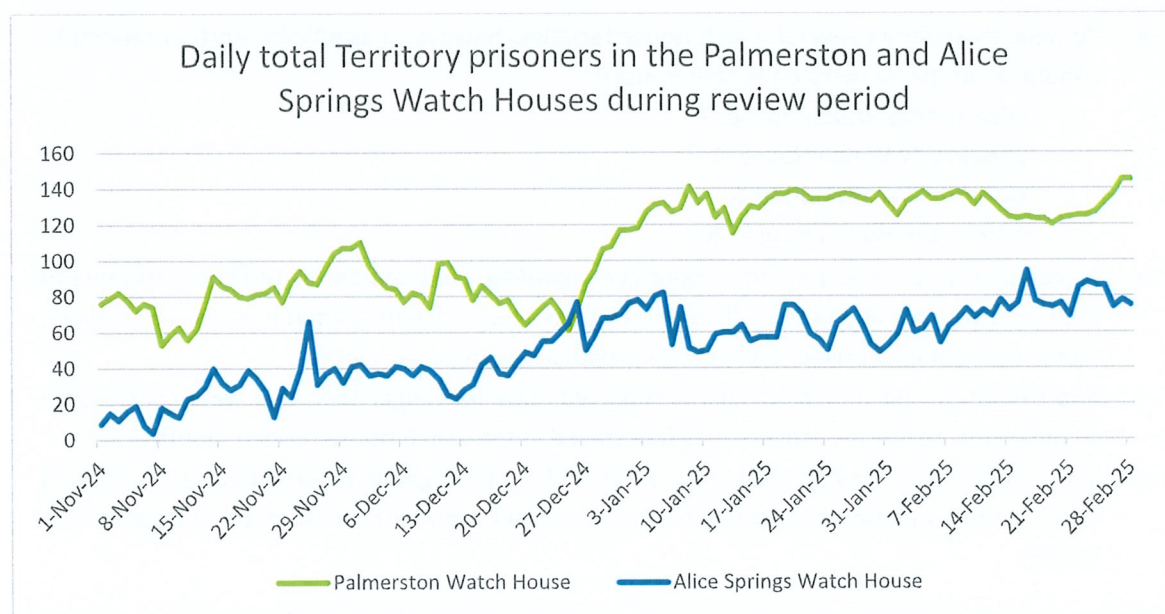


Table 2 – A graph depicting daily total Territory prisoners in the Palmerston and Alice Springs Watch Houses during the review period. Daily Territory prisoner numbers for the Katherine Watch House were not included as NT Police’s data did not differentiate between Territory prisoners and other prisoners in the Katherine Watch House until the end of the review period. Data provided by Corrections.

⁸ For more detail on my Office’s correspondence to the NT Corrections Commissioner in June 2024 and Corrections’ response, please refer to pages 63-65 of the *Ombudsman NT Annual Report 2023/24*.

⁹ The Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Latest release: Corrective Services, Australia* (Web Page, released 18 September 2025) <<https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/people/crime-and-justice/corrective-services-australia/latest-release>>.

1.2.3 Influx of complaints

10. Despite my Office's concerns about conditions for Territory prisoners at the watch house facilities, up until late 2024 my Office had received few complaints about them from either prisoners, their families or their representatives. However, in late November 2024, my Office received its first complaint about conditions in the Palmerston Watch House, which heralded a significant influx of complaints about watch house

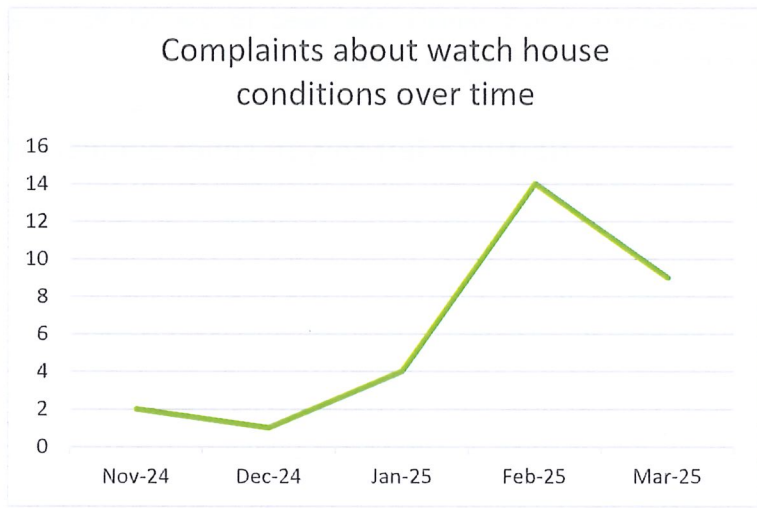


Table 3 – Complaints to the Ombudsman's Office regarding watch houses from Territory prisoners.

conditions over January, February and March 2025. As detailed in Tables 1 and 2 above, this rise appears to have coincided with a rapid increase in overall prisoner numbers and in Territory prisoners being placed in NT Police watch houses.

11. Between the start of November 2024 and the end of March 2025, my Office received 31 complaints about watch house conditions. In summary:

- Complaints spanned several watch house facilities, however a significant portion related to conditions at the Palmerston Watch House:¹⁰
 - Alice Springs Watch House: 7
 - Darwin City Watch House: 1
 - Katherine Watch House: 6
 - Palmerston Watch House: 20
- All complainants raised concerns about overcrowding, confinement of Territory prisoners to their cells without any outside time and hygiene issues including limited access to showers, toilets with minimal privacy and problems with accessing clean clothes.
- Approximately half the complainants reported stays for longer than two weeks with some complainants telling my officers they had stayed in the watch house for two months.
- Most complainants stated they suffered some kind of negative health effect as a result of watch house conditions, ranging from scabies, head lice and colds to deteriorating mental health.

12. These complaints prompted further visits to watch house facilities, with my officers visiting Palmerston Watch House in November 2024, Darwin City Watch House in January 2025, Alice Springs Watch House in February 2025 and Katherine Watch House in March 2025. My officers also made extensive preliminary inquiries into specific concerns raised by complainants and management arrangements for the watch house facilities in general.

¹⁰ Numbers sum to a total greater than 30 as some complainants raised concerns about more than one watch house.

1.3 The investigation

13. Based on the significant number of complaints being received, the concerning observations made by officers in their visits and that the situation appeared to be worsening rather than improving, my predecessor decided to cease making preliminary inquiries and commence an own motion investigation into the conditions for Territory prisoners in the NT Police watch houses.

1.3.1 Scope of investigation

14. The investigation is not a comprehensive review of watch house usage. Such an investigation would necessarily be wide-ranging and lengthy, and the investigation has been intentionally limited to provide timely information regarding ongoing and urgent issues affecting Territory prisoners being held in watch houses.

15. To facilitate a prompt investigation, my predecessor chose to examine conditions at three watch houses considered to be representative of the different ways in which Territory prisoners were being held in watch houses broadly:¹¹



Katherine Watch House contained a mix of Territory and other prisoners who were managed entirely by NT Police.

Figure 2 - Katherine Police Station exterior. Katherine Watch House is located within the police station.



Palmerston Watch House contained a mix of Territory and other prisoners, however the Territory prisoners were managed by Corrections officers stationed at the watch house.

Figure 3 – Palmerston Police Station exterior. Palmerston Watch House is located within the police station.



Alice Springs Watch House had the same arrangement as Palmerston Watch House but also had a significant population of female Territory prisoners.

Figure 4 – Alice Springs Watch House exterior. Alice Springs Watch House is separate to the Alice Springs Police Station.

Photographs provided by NT Police.

¹¹ I note my officers also visited the Darwin City Watch House and the Peter McAulay Centre Watch House, which were managed exclusively by Corrections and which my officers observed to have less restrictive conditions than the watch houses examined, though still at a level which was of concern. Those watch houses were not selected for inclusion as they were not considered to be broadly representative of the conditions experienced by Territory prisoners in the watch houses.

16. My predecessor also limited the timeframe for detailed review of watch house conditions to the period of 1 November 2024 to 31 February 2025 (**the review period**), as this was a period where watch house usage was acute and having a severe impact on prisoners.

1.3.2 Investigative process and procedural fairness

17. To conduct the investigation, my Office:

- Identified key issues for consideration based on complaints received,¹² information obtained through preliminary inquiries and visits that had been made to the various watch house facilities.
- Issued two sets of notices to produce to both NT Police and Corrections.
 - The first round required both agencies to answer questions and to produce records in response to questions regarding physical facilities of watch houses, governance and management, access to basic rights and entitlements, dignity, health and wellbeing and statistics regarding prisoner population, demographics and duration of stay.
 - The second round sought to clarify information provided in response to the first notices, to request photographs of the conditions within watch houses and to request updates on the use of watch houses to house Territory prisoners.
- Interviewed Territory prisoners who stayed in watch houses during the relevant timeframe, and family members who were impacted by the conditions. The stories they told provided insight and perspective to the investigation.
- Considered the evidence it obtained about identified key issues against relevant standards.

18. The investigation was guided by the civil standard of proof which requires facts to be proven on the 'balance of probabilities'. This differs from the criminal standard of 'beyond reasonable doubt'.

19. To reach my conclusions, I considered:

- the nature and seriousness of the matters examined
- the quality of the evidence
- the gravity of the consequences an adverse opinion could create.

20. My report makes adverse comments or includes comments which could be considered adverse about the actions and decisions of Corrections and NT Police. In line with section 61 of the Ombudsman Act, I provided the relevant parties with a reasonable opportunity to respond to the draft report. My report fairly sets out their response at sections 4.1.2 and 4.1.3.

1.3.3 Relevant Standards

21. There are local and international standards governing the conditions in which prisoners in the Northern Territory are to be held.

¹² To be able to conduct a systemic investigation into watch house conditions for Territory prisoners in a timely manner and within its limited resourcing, my Office made the difficult decision to cease dealing with the many individual complaints it had received about those conditions. In communicating this decision to complainants and their representatives, my Office noted that it would still deal with complaints about time-critical matters, such as difficulty accessing medication in a watch house.

22. The most well recognised and foundational standard is located in the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, wherein article 10 provides: 'All persons deprived of their liberty shall be treated with humanity and with respect for the inherent dignity of the human person.'

23. Corrections, along with correctional services across Australia, have recognised the United Nations Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners (otherwise known as the Nelson Mandela Rules), operationalising them to some extent with other internationally accepted rules, standards and practices in the Australian correctional context in the Guiding Principles for Corrections in Australia (**Guiding Principles**).¹³

24. The Guiding Principles cover a wide range of subjects including appropriate minimum accommodation standards, hygiene standards, clothing and bedding standards, standards regarding health services and more. While my report refers to relevant standards when discussing watch house conditions throughout, key minimum standards include:

- Prisoners are accommodated in a safe, clean and liveable environment which considers both risk and individual needs, particularly the needs of those who are most vulnerable (2.12).
- Prisoners have continual access to clean drinking water (4.2.1).
- Prisoners are provided with clean clothing, bedding and sanitation facilities appropriate to the climate, to support and maintain personal and group health and ensure decent living conditions in prison (4.2.4).
- Prisoners are provided opportunities to safely engage in a range of recreational and sporting activities which promote good health and wellbeing (4.2.9).

25. In the absence of a specific, minimum Australian standard about living space, I have also referred to the European Committee for the Prevention of Torture and Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment's minimum standard (**European Standard**). That standard prescribes a minimum of four square meters of living space per prisoner (not including space for sanitary facilities) in cells holding more than one prisoner, and has been adopted by the Queensland Corrective Services into its accommodation capacity for its corrective service facilities.¹⁴

26. I evaluated the evidence my Office obtained about key issues against these standards, as well as against other standards such as those found within custodial operations practice directives and legislation, to form a view as to whether the conditions for Territory prisoners in NT Police watch houses met minimum standards.

1.3.4 Acknowledgements

27. I wish to acknowledge the support and assistance I and my officers received from Corrections and NT Police. Despite dealing with an unprecedented rise in prisoner numbers, both agencies generously facilitated various visits to watch house facilities and provided detailed, candid responses to my officers' many questions.

¹³ Corrective Services Administrators' Council, *Guiding Principles for Corrections in Australia* (Revised 2018).

¹⁴ Council of Europe, European Committee for the Prevention of Torture and Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment, *Living space per prisoner in prison establishments: CPT standards*, (Guideline, 15 December 2015); Queensland Corrective Services, 'Prisoner accommodation capacity definitions', (Web Page, last updated 12 May 2025) <<https://corrections.qld.gov.au/documents/procedures/prisoner-accommodation-capacity-definitions/>>.

28. I would also like to acknowledge the efforts of the North Australian Aboriginal Justice Agency in assisting their clients to raise concerns about watch house conditions and to coordinate my officers' access to their clients for interviews.

29. Lastly, I wish to thank the prisoners, their family members and their representatives for contacting my Office with their concerns and for graciously agreeing to share their stories. My report is enriched by having had them recount the conditions they experienced in their own words.

2. WATCH HOUSE ISSUES

30. My report organises key issues for consideration into 6 overarching sections as follows:

1. A summary of physical cell conditions
2. Access to basic rights and entitlements
3. Issues of dignity
4. Health and wellbeing
5. Prisoner numbers, cell crowding and length of stay
6. Governance and management

31. Most of the individual issues considered in each section were identified in complaints to my Office, although some were identified by my staff when they visited the watch houses or when they reviewed responses from Corrections or NT Police.

32. I acknowledge that a number of the individual issues could be considered from the perspective of several different sections – for example, access to toilet facilities could be considered from both dignity and health and wellbeing perspectives. However, for the sake of readability I have for the most part limited discussion of individual issues to the overarching section that best reflects the concerns raised by Territory prisoners and the harm I observed.

2.1 Physical conditions

33. The most confronting and common aspect of complaints to my Office were about the physical conditions of the cells. In their complaints, Territory prisoners frequently focused on:

- overcrowding
- a lack of privacy especially regarding toilets
- a lack of access to showers
- that lights were kept on at night
- that prisoners could not leave the cells to go outside
- a lack of access to phones to contact family members, loved ones and lawyers.

34. These issues are explored in detail in further sections. However, in short, I found that these issues were widespread in the four months my Office analysed. A stark visualisation of these issues can be seen in the photographs in Figures 5 and 6 below, showing prisoners at the Palmerston Watch House.



Figure 5 – Photograph of cell F1 in the Palmerston Watch House with 17 prisoners. Corrections assess this cell to be capable of holding a maximum of 17 prisoners. Photograph provided by NT Police.

35. The photographs are still images taken from CCTV camera footage at midnight on 12 February 2025 and broadly reflect the physical conditions across the representative watch houses in the review period. They depict artificial lighting switched on and cells filled with mattresses on the floor, with little empty space. Every mattress is occupied by a sleeping prisoner. The toilets and issues regarding privacy are also obvious in the still images, with some Territory prisoners using mattresses as makeshift privacy screens.

36. The complaints to my Office and data received from Corrections and NT Police indicate that Territory prisoners were kept in these conditions for weeks, with stays of, on occasion, more than a month.

37. It was common for Territory prisoners to have less than 2.5 square meters per prisoner in these cells, especially in the Palmerston Watch House where prisoners could have less than 2 square meters to themselves.



Figure 6 – Photograph of cell M5 in the Palmerston Watch House with 5 prisoners. Corrections assess this cell to be capable of holding a maximum of 5 prisoners. Photograph provided by NT Police.

38. The same complaints and data also indicate that, at least for the Palmerston and Alice Springs Watch Houses, the only opportunity most Territory prisoners had to leave their crowded cells were to shower at most once every two days. There was at least one occasion when female prisoners from the Alice Springs Watch House were able to visit the nearby Paperbark Facility for outside time and recreation, but I have not been able to confirm when this occurred and for how long this occurred.

39. Against any sort of domestic or international standards for the humane treatment of prisoners, such as the Guiding Principles, these conditions are extremely poor.

2.2 Access to basic rights and entitlements

40. This section covers the basic amenities that minimum standards dictate all prisoners should be provided in custody, including meeting basic needs like water, bedding and suitable amenities.

2.2.1 Water

41. In their complaints, Territory prisoners regularly raised concerns about access to drinking water – particularly about the location of access.

“ We had to get the water next to the toilet, toilet was blocked and we had to drink water from that bubbler, it was disgusting. It stinks. We kept asking the officers for a cup of water and they said no. ”

42. The relevant Guiding Principle provides:

Guiding Principle 4.2.1: Prisoners have continual access to clean drinking water.

43. Territory prisoners indicated that drinking water was accessible via bubblers (drinking fountains) located above toilets, which was supported by my officers' observations and the written responses and photographs provided by Corrections and NT Police.

44. Territory Prisoners complained that the requirement to drink water from bubblers situated atop cell toilets meant they were close to the toilet bowl when drinking water, and that the close proximity of urine and feces to their drinking water was unpleasant and unhygienic.

45. Whilst the water basin and toilet combination may be an acceptable fixture for short-term accommodation at normal occupancy levels, in the crowded conditions observed in the period of review – with as many as 17 prisoners sharing two toilets – continuous shared usage is likely to have made these fixtures putrid, logistically difficult to access and a potential hygiene risk.

46. In such conditions, it does not appear to me that prisoners could be said to have had continual access to clean drinking water.

47. Of note, in the review period correctional officers at the Alice Springs Watch House commenced providing bottled water to prisoners, however this practice was not adopted in respect of the other watch houses. When questioned about this, Corrections advised that it commenced providing water to Territory prisoners as a result of prisoners' lawyers seeking to provide bottled water to Territory prisoners in the Alice Springs Watch House following claims from their clients about access to water. Regarding the Palmerston Watch House, Corrections advised it was not necessary to provide prisoners there bottled water as prisoners had access to in-cell bubblers.

Key takeaway:

In most cells in the Alice Springs, Katherine and Palmerston Watch Houses, drinking water was provided through bubblers located above cell toilets. This included in very crowded cells where continuous shared usage would likely have made access logistically difficult and a potential hygiene risk.



Figure 7 – Water bubbler and basin in the Palmerston Watch House.



Figure 8 – Combined toilet and water basin in the Palmerston Watch House.



Figure 9 – Water bubbler and basin in the Alice Springs Watch House.



Figure 10 – Combined toilet and water basin in the Alice Springs Watch House.



Figure 11 – Combined toilet and water basin in the Katherine Watch House.



Figure 12 – Water bubbler and basin in the Katherine Watch House.

Photographs provided by NT Police.

2.2.2 Clothing

48. Access to clean clothing was another source of frequent complaint.

49. The relevant Guiding Principle provides:

Guiding Principle 4.2.4: Prisoners are provided with clean clothing, bedding and sanitation facilities appropriate to the climate, to support and maintain personal and group health and ensure decent living conditions in prison.

50. In most complaints to my Office, Territory prisoners said they were not provided clean clothes and they would have to re-wear dirty clothes after their showers. The most consistent theme my staff heard in the complaints about clothing was that prisoners were required to wash their own underwear and they were not provided any fresh underwear.

51. Complainants also told my staff that they were required to wear the same clothes for long periods of time. Some complainants told me that they were only given clean clothes after they were given access to a weekly shower. Other complainants told me that they had spent much longer in unwashed clothes and the longest period my staff heard of was a period of four weeks.

52. In particular, a number of female complainants who stayed in the Alice Springs Watch House told me that they were not provided fresh clothes after showering and that they were made to wash their bra and underwear in the shower.

53. In response to questions from my office about prisoner clothing, Corrections advised, among other things:

- It issued fresh clothing to Territory prisoners upon entry and again during showers or upon request.
- It did not provide underwear to male Territory prisoners due to stock and logistical limitations, however it also does not provide underwear to prisoners in correctional centres, who can purchase underwear through the 'prisoner buys' system. (I note the prisoner buys system is not available to Territory prisoners held in the watch houses). It did provide one set of underwear to all female Territory prisoners with the expectation that they clean and maintain the underwear themselves.
- It did not maintain individual records of laundry collection or clothing distribution.

54. NT Police advised, among other things:

- Prisoners generally retained and wore the clothing in which they arrived into custody.
- NT Police maintained a stockpile of generic clothing that it would give to a Territory prisoner if the prisoners' clothing was unsuitable.
- NT Police generally did not wash Territory prisoners' clothing, but it was sometimes able to facilitate clothes washing for prisoners who had longer stays. It found this logistically challenging given the amount of bedding it had to wash with very limited laundry facilities.

55. What NT Police and complainants tell me about the Katherine Watch House is consistent – at the Katherine Watch House prisoners were left with extended stays where they either stayed in unwashed clothes or they hand washed their own clothes. This is an obvious issue that affects prisoner comfort

and dignity and reflects that the Katherine Watch House is not designed for longer stays with limited laundry services available.

56. Regarding the Palmerston and Alice Springs Watch Houses, comparing what Corrections and complainants told me, in particular considering what complainants told me about their lack of regular access to showers (see section 2.3.1 below):

- Both Corrections' and complainants' accounts reflect that underwear was not issued to men, with men required to hand wash their underwear in the shower if they did not want to re-wear dirty underwear.
- Both Corrections' and complainants' accounts reflect that showers were when prisoners were issued clean clothes, with the accounts differing regarding frequency of showers where complainants told me they may spend over a week without a shower and Corrections telling me that prisoners were offered showers every two days.
- Corrections told me it issued women with underwear which conflicts with female complainants telling me they were not issued with clean underwear and they resorted to hand washing their bras and underwear.
- Some complainants told me that Corrections did not provide them with any fresh clothing.

57. Combining the statement of Corrections that it did not provide male Territory prisoners with clean underwear with the number and consistency of complaints regarding the lack of provision of clean clothes, I consider it is likely that some prisoners were not provided clean clothing for lengthy periods of time at the Palmerston and Alice Springs Watch Houses.

Key takeaways:

- Territory prisoners reported spending extended periods of time in unwashed clothing in the Palmerston, Katherine and Alice Springs Watch Houses and also reported they did not receive clean underwear.
- NT Police confirmed that it was unable to provide routine laundry services to Territory prisoners at the Katherine Watch House
- Corrections confirmed it did not provide male prisoners with clean underwear, although it stated it provided female prisoners with a set of underwear.
- Whilst Corrections told me that it provided laundry services on a regular basis to Territory prisoners, Corrections' records were insufficient to determine how often this occurred.

2.2.3 Bedding

58. I received a number of complaints regarding bedding, namely that prisoners were sleeping on uncomfortable mattresses on the floor with blankets that had become dirty with use and no pillow.

“ We just got two or three blankets so that was your pillow. No pillow, you had to use your blanket as a pillow. It was pretty hard without a pillow. It's pretty hard to sleep on a blanket because when you fold it up it's still hard ”

“ It was pretty cold. One blanket wasn’t enough, you sort of had to rug it up. ”

“ When people would leave watch house, I would actually take their blankets and stack them up for a better pillow. But that’s probably why I caught tinea as well, using other people’s blankets. ”

59. Many complainants who complained about bedding told me they were sleeping on ‘rubber’ or waterproof mattresses. Complainants also said:

- they found sleeping on the floor uncomfortable
- the conditions they were sleeping in meant their bedding became dirty
- the conditions in watch houses were cold and so they stockpiled blankets
- bedding was not washed frequently, and its dirtiness was exacerbated as prisoners were stockpiling blankets and hiding them away.

60. Corrections and NT Police both confirmed that Territory prisoners slept on standard issue mattresses either on the floor or on raised concrete slabs. Territory prisoners were issued with either Corrections mattresses which were foam with a cloth cover or NT Police mattresses which were foam with a waterproof canvas cover. Both confirmed that Territory prisoners were issued with a clean bed pack when admitted to the part of the watch house used to hold Territory prisoners, which included two fresh bedding items which were normally sheets and a blanket. Both also confirmed that pillows were not provided to Territory prisoners in the three watch houses we reviewed, despite Corrections confirming that pillows are routinely provided to prisoners held at correctional facilities such as the Darwin Correctional Centre.

61. When questioned about the discrepancy, Corrections advised that pillows were not provided to Territory prisoners as there was:

- limited cell space
- pressure on prisoner hygiene to ensure head lice and scabies were mitigated
- limited storage space to ensure enough pillows would be available for all present and new prisoners
- an insufficient supply of pillows to cover the significant increase in prisoner numbers and a view that it would be better to supply no pillows than provide pillows to some Territory prisoners and not others
- a limited ability to regularly clean the pillows.

62. Regarding laundry, Corrections and NT Police advised that bedding was washed once per week and that Territory prisoners could otherwise request a new sheet or blanket if either had become dirty due to, for example, food spillage when eating on their mattress. At the Corrections managed watch houses, bedding was laundered at the nearby correctional facility and returned. At the Police managed watch house, bedding was laundered by police officers when they had spare time using two washing machines at the facility.

63. Neither NT Police nor Corrections maintained individual level records for laundering, although Corrections provided me with some records of bedding being transported to and from the Alice

Springs Correctional Centre and Alice Springs Watch House, and likewise between the Darwin Correctional Centre and the Palmerston Watch House.

64. The relevant Guiding Principle provides:

Guiding Principle 4.2.4: Prisoners are provided with clean clothing, bedding and sanitation facilities appropriate to the climate, to support and maintain personal and group health and ensure decent living conditions in prison.

65. In my view, the bedding provided was sufficient for temporary usage but not for the longer period Territory prisoners stayed at the watch houses. To ensure decent living conditions, Corrections and NT Police ought to have provided bedding comparable to that provided to prisoners in other correctional facilities. The logistical difficulty in providing equivalent bedding in the watch house as indicated by Corrections supports a view that watch houses are not appropriate places to accommodate prisoners longer-term. Further, as with clothing, due to the inability of prisoners to launder their bedding, Corrections and NT Police ought to have kept records to transparently demonstrate how Corrections and NT Police are fulfilling minimum standards to provide prisoners clean bedding.

Key takeaway:

Many Territory prisoners were sleeping on canvas and foam mattresses on watch house cell floors without pillows and in bedding that would become dirty with use.

2.2.4 Lighting

66. Watch house lighting was another source of complaint from Territory prisoners.

67. NT Police and Corrections confirmed that Territory prisoners were subject to constant artificial lighting, save for some areas of the Alice Springs Watch House used to hold Territory Prisoners where the lighting was turned off at night.

68. In interviews and complaints, Territory prisoners spoke about how the constant artificial light prevented them from sleeping and impacted their mental health and perception of time. One interviewee stated:

“ And I didn’t know how many days I’d been there until after the fact. Because you don’t get any outside time so you use meal times. ... It sort of affected my concept of time and it sort of made my brain really hazy. ... The only light you get is from the actual lights. At the Palmerston watch house specifically the lights never turn off. That’s why it was really hard to gauge the time. You don’t know when it’s night time. ”

69. Others spoke of the need for creative solutions to seek respite from the constant lighting, with another interview advising:

“ Couple of the boys made me jump on their back, and what they gave us was newspaper. So they put toothpaste on the newspaper, made me jump on their back, and they [used the newspaper to] block the light. ”

70. When asked about lighting, NT Police confirmed that it did not dim or turn off the lights for operational and safety reasons, nor did it allow Corrections to dim or turn off lights where NT Police and Corrections shared cells in the same areas for the same reasons. Those reasons relate to ensuring that watch house officers can regularly monitor prisoner welfare via CCTV. I was told that watch house officers were concerned for prisoner safety with increased prisoner numbers and conducted 30-minute checks on prisoners where they observed, amongst other things, the rise and fall of the chest to confirm breathing.

71. Whilst monitoring of prisoners in a watch house is necessary, CCTV and lighting technology has advanced – both cameras that can see in dark conditions, and light bulbs that can dim in ways that still allow for prisoner monitoring, have been developed.

72. Further, I note that prisoners dealing with constant lighting conditions at night would cover their faces with their blankets as evidenced by the photographs provided to my office. These blankets would block prisoners' faces, partly defeating the monitoring of prisoners via CCTV.

73. Some simple solutions to enable CCTV monitoring without constant lighting include having night-time light bulbs installed that are dimmer, or the use of red lights at night, or the use of a CCTV camera with night vision capabilities. A simple stopgap solution is to provide prisoners with eye masks. An upside to the use of eye masks is that prisoners would not need to cover their heads with bedding, allowing CCTV monitoring to see prisoner's heads and faces.

Key takeaway:

Many Territory prisoners in the Alice Springs Watch House and all Territory prisoners in the Katherine and Palmerston Watch Houses were subjected to constant light.

2.2.5 Sleeping arrangements

74. Overcrowded sleeping arrangements were also common themes of complaint to my Office.

“ *[I shared with] 14, 15 including myself ... but there's only enough bench space for five inmates, and the rest is floor space. And with 15 people you're sort of sleeping shoulder to shoulder. ... Sometimes it would go over maximum capacity and there would be people sleeping in between the toilets. It was pretty gross.* **”**



Figure 13 – Photograph of cell F2 in the Palmerston Watch House with what appears to be 17 prisoners. Corrections assess this cell to be capable of holding a maximum of 17 occupants. Photograph provided by NT Police.

75. Prisoners were required to sleep on mattresses on the ground during virtually the entire period my officers analysed. The photograph in Figure 13 is cell F2 at the Palmerston Watch House. There appear to be 17 people (all Territory prisoners) in the cell, which is the maximum capacity Corrections assigned to that cell.

76. The photograph also shows a prisoner sleeping in between the two toilets in the cell, which most likely would have been used throughout the night while that prisoner tried to sleep. Cell lights are on despite the time of night (being 11.59pm) and numerous prisoners appear to be covering their heads with blankets.



Figure 14 – Photograph of cell 4 in the Alice Springs Watch House. Corrections assess this cell to be capable of holding a maximum of 15 occupants. This photograph was taken in October 2025 but is representative of the conditions during the review period. Photograph provided by Corrections.

77. Figure 14 above is a photograph of cell 4 at the Alice Springs Watch House. The photograph depicts 12 Territory prisoners in the cell, which Corrections assesses as capable of holding a maximum of 15. It also depicts prisoners using rolled up blankets as makeshift pillows. The photograph was not taken during sleeping hours but indicates what sleeping conditions would be like insofar as bedding, prisoner numbers and mattress location.

“ Interviewee: Palmerston [Watch House] was the worst one.

Interviewer: What was Palmerston like?

Interviewee: They had the little cell, probably with nine people in it. It was all blocked up.

...

Every time one of them used a toilet, I would have to get up and wait for them.

Interviewer: So you moved every time someone wanted to use the toilet?

Interviewee: Yeah, because I was near the toilet.

”

“ *Interviewer: Were you worried you were going to get splashed?*

Interviewee: Yeah, that’s why every time I would grab my blanket I stand and wait until they were finished.

Interviewer: How would that go with sleeping? Because if that happens at night, what do you do?

Interviewee: I just sit up every night.

Interviewer: So you sat up every night. Were you sleeping sitting up?

Interviewee: Yeah, sometimes I sleep sitting up. I didn’t get much rest in the Palmerston Watch House. ”

78. In relation to cramped and overcrowded sleeping conditions, the records I received from Corrections and NT Police show that:

- **Palmerston Watch House:** For the period November 2024 to February 2025, watch house cells in Palmerston were above 80% capacity, meaning that cell F2 in Figure 13 would have held, on average, at least 13 prisoners. Even with five fewer prisoners, in my view the sleeping conditions would have remained crowded.
- **Alice Springs Watch House:** For most of the period between 27 December 2024 and 28 February 2025, the watch house cells in Alice Springs were above 80% capacity, during which the conditions would be similar to that shown in the Figure 14 above.
- **Katherine Watch House:** Territory prisoners in the Katherine Watch House had slightly more space when at higher occupancy levels and high occupancy levels did not last as long. However, sleeping conditions were still cramped and prisoners in Katherine still had to sleep side-by-side and close to toilets during periods of high occupancy.

Key takeaways:

- Territory prisoners were kept in severely crowded conditions, requiring some prisoners to sleep next to toilets that would have been used frequently.
- Territory prisoners in the Palmerston Watch House and many prisoners in the Alice Springs and Katherine Watch Houses were kept in conditions that were likely to lead to sleep deprivation. Those conditions include constant artificial lighting, overcrowded conditions and mattresses on the floor.

2.2.6 Access to family and loved ones

79. Many complainants told my staff that they were unable to speak to their family and loved ones whilst they were kept at the Palmerston, Katherine and Alice Springs Watch Houses. My officers spoke with an affected partner of a prisoner who talked about her experience trying to contact her partner, including the challenges she faced providing for their young child while unable to obtain his assistance to access money in his bank account:

“ After that first initial notification of where he was, I had no idea for an entire month of where he was being held. I contacted Corrections, Darwin, Berrimah, Palmerston, I said, ‘Where is he?’ only to be told, ‘I don’t know’, or ‘we can’t disclose that information’.

I had no idea, we weren’t allowed to call, we weren’t allowed to obviously visit, and we weren’t allowed to know [where he was]. His mother wasn’t allowed to know, his father, just nobody.

That was the first time I had gone without [my partner]. I was a stay at home mum. I didn’t have an income. I didn’t know how to get into his finances. So I had a whole another situation on the outside of where the heck is [my partner] – just trying to get food in the fridge!

There was no dual account – it was just his and mine. He was the worker of the family so any money we had was in his account so going through that was overwhelming. It was a lot. I didn’t know where he was a lot of the time so I just couldn’t access any of that. ”

80. In response to my Office’s questions, Corrections and NT Police both confirmed that at the Alice Springs, Katherine and Palmerston Watch Houses there was very limited provision of telephone access and they limited access to call family members to exceptional cases. They also confirmed that Territory prisoners were unable to arrange any personal visits while held at the watch houses.

81. They clarified that operational constraints meant that visits were unable to be accommodated and calls were difficult to facilitate as there were limited phone facilities, and access and priority was given to legal representatives and to Community Corrections (who normally wanted to talk to Territory prisoners for bail assessments or pre-sentence reports).

82. This is contrasted with other correctional facilities where prisoners can regularly access phones to call family and loved ones who have had their contact details vetted, and where prisoners can arrange to receive in person visits.

83. I note the standard operating procedures for both the Palmerston and Alice Springs Watch Houses stated that Territory prisoners are to have the same access to the Prisoner Telephone System (PTS) as they have at the correctional centres. The information I obtained indicated that this was not the case in practice.

84. Keeping in contact with family is important as it allows family members to know their imprisoned loved ones are safe and encourages prisoners to maintain healthy and positive connections with their family and community. An outlet for Territory prisoners to talk with family and other loved ones, if not in person, then at least over the phone, would have been particularly important in the challenging conditions they faced in the watch houses.

85. The relevant Guiding Principles provide respectively:

Guiding Principle 2.3.3: Prisoners are provided with timely opportunities to inform their families or other approved persons of significant changes in their circumstances, location and the visiting procedures which apply.

Guiding Principle 5.2.2: Prisoners are supported to maintain family relationships and links to the community through personal and professional visits.

86. From the information I obtained, Territory prisoners do not appear to have been afforded timely opportunities to inform their families or other approved persons of significant changes, nor do they appear to have been sufficiently able to maintain family relationships or links to the community while housed in the watch house facilities.

Key takeaways:

At the watch houses reviewed, Territory prisoners:

- did not have timely opportunities to inform their families or other approved persons of significant changes in their circumstances, location and the visiting procedures which apply
- were unable to arrange in-person personal visits
- were generally unable to speak to their family members or loved ones unless there was some exceptional circumstance or emergency.

2.3 Dignity

87. This section covers basic conditions that recognise that prisoners, like all persons, are deserving of some amount of privacy, access to personal hygiene and the ability to manage things such as periods in a sensitive and humane way.

2.3.1 Showers and oral hygiene

88. Territory prisoners told my staff about how they were unable to shower for days at a time and other issues they faced with showering and their oral hygiene. The below extracts from two interviews illustrate these issues:

“ *[Interviewer]: [Your imprisoned partner] comes out after three weeks, has a million things to say, what were some of the first things he had to say?*

[Interviewee]: After telling us he loved us, one of the first things [he told us] was that he was glad to have a shower and be able to brush his teeth. **”**

“ *[Interviewer]: If there was one thing you could change about watch house conditions, what would it be and why?*

[Interviewee]: I'd say hygiene, it's pretty basic. You need to look after your body, even just your teeth. Prior to me getting arrested like I'd spent thousands on getting my teeth fixed because I didn't look after them when I was younger and then I felt like I was taking a backwards step after being put in custody because I wasn't allowed to look after my teeth. So I think that's a pretty basic necessity. **”**

89. In its responses to questions, Corrections confirmed that whilst it intended to provide opportunities for daily showering for all Territory prisoners in both the Palmerston and Alice Springs Watch Houses, it was not always able to do so. In the Palmerston Watch House, from late November

2024, Corrections advised it had implemented an alternate day access schedule for showering and maintained a shower journal.

90. Corrections also advised that Territory prisoners were provided opportunities to brush their teeth during shower times or upon request outside of shower times in the Palmerston and Alice Springs Watch Houses.

91. NT Police similarly advised that it provided prisoners in the Katherine Watch House with toothbrushes and toothpaste on a daily basis.

92. Health advice from the Australian Government is that adults should brush their teeth twice a day with fluoridated toothpaste.¹⁵

93. When requested, Corrections was unable to provide a copy of the shower journal for the Palmerston Watch House. Corrections provided sample pages from a general journal for the Alice Springs Watch House which included entries for showers provided both to specific cells and to prisoners appearing in court. I was unable to determine from those journals whether showers were routinely provided in line with Corrections' advice.

94. I hold concerns that Corrections' advice that Territory prisoners were offered opportunities to shower and brush their teeth every two days does not reflect what occurred in practice in a busy and overrun system. First, because the records I have received from Corrections do not show prisoners being offered showers and opportunities to brush their teeth in line with this advice, and second, because I received a significant number of complaints from different Territory prisoners telling me they accessed showers and brushed their teeth less often than Corrections and NT Police state.

95. An important side issue about showering practices was raised with my staff by a number of female complainants from the Alice Springs Watch House. They told me that whilst they were at the Alice Springs Watch House, a Corrections guard watched them through the small transparent glass window at eye height whilst those women were showering (see Figure 17 below for a photograph depicting the door). The complainants were worried that the male Corrections officer was watching them shower, making them feel unsafe. Prior to commencing the own motion investigation, Corrections provided me with the male officer's direct response to one of the complaints. The officer confirmed that he was working with a female officer to escort women to and from the showers, and that whilst he was situated opposite the shower door at the time and that the door did have transparent glass at the top and bottom, he was positioned in such a way that he was unable to see into the shower.

96. I cannot reach any conclusions about this complaint, in part because I did not receive enough information and in part because of the standard of proof for serious allegations means I should not form an opinion without sufficient supporting evidence. What I can say is that, if possible, only female officers should accompany female prisoners for shower escorts. Where this is not possible, the male officer/s should be positioned in a way that they are not visible from the shower door. This incident made those female prisoners feel unsafe about showering, which is concerning when I have made other concerning observations about the limited capacity for Territory prisoners to access showers.

¹⁵ Health Direct, *Dental care and teeth cleaning*, (Web Page, last updated November 2024) <<https://www.healthdirect.gov.au/teeth-cleaning>>.

97. Regarding the shower facilities themselves (depicted below in Figures 15-19), whilst basic, they do appear to me to be broadly sufficient:

- **Katherine Watch House:** Comparatively, the Katherine Watch House shower facilities are more basic and less private than those of the other watch houses as they are located in an open courtyard. Information provided to me indicates prisoners erected makeshift privacy screens out of mattresses to shield showering prisoners from view, and that the placement of the shower in an open area that could be accessed by Territory prisoners without an escort made access to showers more flexible.
- **Alice Springs Watch House:** Whilst located in a separate room behind a door, the doors have transparent windows at head and ankle height which could enable a passing officer to view the showering prisoner. In response to questions about this, Corrections advised that while the corridor adjoining the shower was patrolled by guards, including guards of the opposite sex, they employed a knocking system whereby officers knocked on the door without looking in the window to confirm a prisoner had finished showering and was ready to leave. Despite this system, in complaints, prisoners raised concerns about the prospect that officers could even inadvertently see them naked when patrolling the corridor.
- **Palmerston Watch House:** The Palmerston Watch House shower facilities are private and located behind opaque glass doors. My staff received no complaints regarding the shower facility itself – the issue was the lack of access.

98. There is no specific guiding principle that discusses showering or teeth brushing, however a relevant Guiding Principle states:

Guiding Principle 4.2.4: Prisoners are provided with clean clothing, bedding and **sanitation facilities** appropriate to the climate, to support and maintain personal and group health and ensure decent living conditions in prison. (Emphasis added)

99. It is fundamental for basic prisoner hygiene and health that they are able to undertake regular showers and brush their teeth on a daily basis, and it does not appear to me that prisoners were afforded sufficient opportunities to do so. Where prisoners are unable able to undertake these activities proactively by themselves, such as in the watch houses, every effort should be made to ensure that at minimum, prisoners are able to shower and brush their teeth regularly and that records are kept to demonstrate this has occurred.

Key takeaway:

Territory prisoners in the Palmerston Watch House, Katherine Watch House and Alice Springs Watch House were only able to access showers and brush their teeth, at most, every two days, but likely less frequently.



Figure 15 - Shower door at the Palmerston Watch House.



Figure 16 - Shower internal at the Palmerston Watch House.



Figure 17 - Shower doors at the Alice Springs Watch House. Note that the path in front of the doors is the end of an operational watch house corridor.

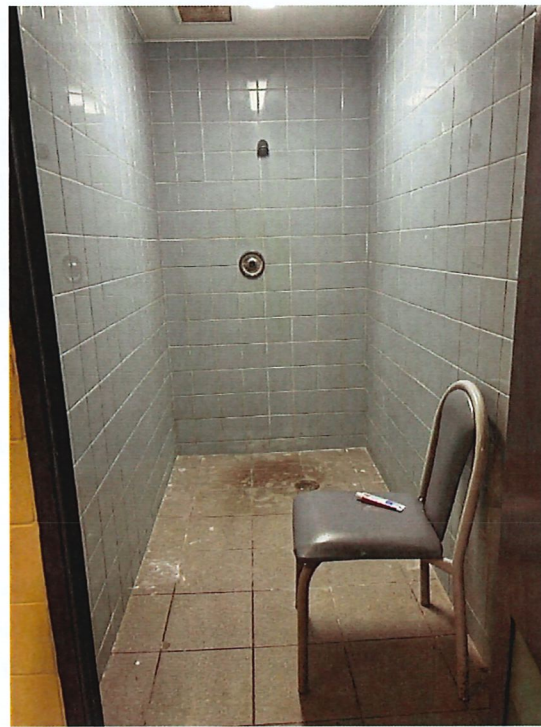


Figure 18 - Shower recess in the Alice Springs Watch House.



Figure 19 – Shower in the exercise yard at the Katherine watch house.

Photographs provided by NT Police.

2.3.2 Toilets

100. Another common and confronting theme of complaints received by my Office concerned toilets. Prisoners complained that toilets were unhygienic, dirty, and that they had to use the toilet in view of their many other cell mates.

101. Complainants reported that the combination of open cell toilets and crowded conditions meant that prisoners did not feel safe using the toilets, were embarrassed and thought the toilets were unclean. The following quotes from interviewees illustrate these concerns:

“ We were jumping over each other and there’s a toilet in the corner and big mob sleeping in one cell ... they put six in them small cells ... they haven’t got any toilets there in a privacy or separate area, nothing. ... There was one toilet in the cell and we kept asking can we go to a toilet in another cell or something. Because, common decency you know, we have respect for our other fellas in the same cell. ”

“ Some of them just put their face under the door, so they can get fresh breath when people doing number 2. ”

“ It’s sort of like me to you [arm’s length away] while another prisoner uses the toilet. ... In the 21 days I didn’t go to the toilet at all. I waited until I came to prison to use the toilet. ... I was in a lot of pain and I was extremely constipated. ”

102. Some prisoners, like the interviewee quoted immediately above, became constipated as they did not want to use the toilet in front of so many other prisoners. NT Police confirmed that they had observed prisoners becoming constipated and would on occasion provide constipated prisoners with medical assistance if needed. I also received complaints about broken and leaking toilets. NT Police

confirmed that toilets did have routine malfunctions which were managed and repaired within 24 hours of the fault being recognized. NT Police would close off the cell until the toilet was repaired and prisoners would be moved out of affected cells. Corrections confirmed similar arrangements were in place for toilet faults and malfunctions.

103. Information obtained by my Office indicated prisoners improvised solutions to combat some of their hygiene and privacy concerns. One example was the use of mattresses as privacy screens. Photographs of cells in this report already show this practice, and another example of this can be seen in Figure 20, below. A further example is that for cells with two toilets, some prisoners agreed that one toilet was for urination and the other toilet was for defecation.

104. Once again, Guiding Principle 4.2.4 relevantly provides:

Guiding Principle 4.2.4: Prisoners are provided with clean clothing, bedding and sanitation facilities appropriate to the climate, to support and maintain personal and group health and ensure decent living conditions in prison.



Figure 20 – A toilet in the Alice Springs watch house with a mattress placed over the toilet to act as a makeshift screen. Photograph provided by NT Police.

105. Having a partially screened, open-air toilet in shared cells is a common and accepted practice in prisons. However, at the Darwin or Alice Springs Correctional Centres, for example, prisoners do not share their cells with nearly as many prisoners. Also, prisoners can leave their cells and access toilets that are not in their cells. They can also wait for their cell mates to leave their cell to use the toilet in private.

106. Privacy whilst using a toilet is particularly important for female prisoners who are dealing with their periods, and for any prisoner experiencing health issues such as diarrhea or constipation whilst using the toilet.

107. As I have mentioned above and explore in more detail below at sections 2.5.2 and 2.4.3 respectively, the watch house cells were very crowded with no opportunity for prisoners to leave the cell. This combination of conditions makes the use of exposed toilets undignified and inhumane, particularly where prisoners were subject to these conditions for extended periods of time.

Key takeaways:

- Territory prisoners were required to use open air toilets in often very crowded cells in front of other prisoners.
- The use of open-air toilets in very crowded cells may have caused or contributed to health issues amongst Territory prisoners.

2.3.3 Women's hygiene

108. My Office received a number of complaints stating that there was insufficient provision of women's hygiene products (such as tampons and pads).

109. The relevant Guiding Principle provides:

Guiding Principle 2.1.1: Prisoners are accommodated in a safe, clean and liveable environment which considers both risk and individual needs, particularly the needs of those who are most vulnerable.

110. When women and other persons who menstruate are incarcerated, appropriate and sensitive provision of tampons or pads and proper and discrete disposal is an essential and basic right. It is also essential for women's hygiene.

111. Corrections advised that it provided feminine hygiene products upon request, although the Alice Springs watch house staff did not provide tampons. Corrections also advised that whilst sanitary bins were provided in the Alice Springs Watch House, Corrections staff at the Palmerston Watch House provided 'body waste disposal bags'.

112. NT Police also confirmed that for the Katherine Watch House, products were provided on request and 'appropriate disposal facilitated'.

113. Regarding the situation in the Palmerston Watch House, what I understand this to mean in practice is that a woman with soiled period products will place the used products in a bag she has been given by a Corrections officer. She then has to request Corrections officers remove those products from her.

114. This process of having to request period products and a disposal bag and use them in an open watch house cell is already problematic. However, such arrangements are justified in a watch house where having period products and sanitary bins in a cell poses a potential biohazard attack risk by people who have been freshly arrested (and accordingly may be coming off substances or suffering from a mental health episode) to others and those that care for them.

115. However, for female Territory prisoners who are being held for longer periods of time, and who would consequently have a lower risk profile, having to publicly ask Corrections staff for assistance with period products is embarrassing and undignified. Given that the watch house cells are crowded, and that showering and clean clothing is limited for prisoners in watch houses, these issues all compound together.

Key takeaways:

- Female Territory prisoners were required to request feminine hygiene products such as pads or tampons from Corrections staff.
- That women in the Palmerston Watch House had to dispose of their used and soiled sanitary products in a bag and hand that bag to Corrections staff.

2.4 Health and wellbeing

116. Deterioration of Territory prisoner health and wellbeing was another major theme in the complaints received by my Office. Complainants alleged that watch house conditions contributed to the spread of communicable diseases such as colds, scabies and skin infections. The complainants also talked about sleep deprivation, incidents in watch houses and general poor health and wellbeing from challenging conditions inside watch houses, such as the inability to exercise or move around.

2.4.1 Incidents

117. Watch houses at the best of times are difficult and high-risk places where newly arrested people are placed. Those people can be aggressive, withdrawing from substances, suffering from physical or mental health crises or more. Incidents of aggression and health crises are not uncommon at watch houses.

118. Notwithstanding, my staff received a number of complaints alleging significant and concerning incidents including:

- that a man's finger was severed by a door at the Palmerston Watch House¹⁶
- there was screaming and fighting in the Alice Springs Watch House
- there was a fight between two prisoners in the Katherine Watch House where NT Police used tear gas on the fighting prisoners, resulting in others in the cell being tear gassed.¹⁷

119. I am not able to draw any definitive conclusions regarding most of the individual incidents reported to my staff. However, it does appear to me that the conditions of the watch houses contribute to issues regarding non-compliant prisoners and prisoner aggression, and contributed to incidents where prisoners were injured or suffering from mental or physical health issues.

120. An interviewee did discuss one incident that my Office was able to confirm with Corrections – and it appears to me that this incident was in part caused by the crowded conditions:

“ It was an old guy, he'd just come back from court I think. Because the cells were overcrowded so there were mattresses in the doorway. He'd grabbed the door seal to sort of step over people. And then as he done that guard closed the door. And then his thumb just came off completely [The Interviewee confirmed this was an accidental rather than deliberate incident and Corrections staff immediately responded to provide first aid].¹⁸ ”

¹⁶ My Office has obtained information about this matter from both Corrections and the Department of Health. Their responses clarify that the Territory prisoner sustained a partial finger amputation/loss of fingernail. However, they confirm that the accident occurred in circumstances where the Territory prisoner had lost his footing when stepping over other prisoners laying on the floor, and reached out to stabilise himself with his finger in the door jam while an officer was closing the door. The responses further indicate that the prisoner received immediate first aid, was transported to a hospital in an ambulance, received stitches, and discharged to a correctional centre later that day.

¹⁷ In its response to my draft report, Corrections advised that NT Police use Oleoresin Capsicum Spray and Aerosol Subject Restraints, and not 'tear gas', which have different chemical components.

¹⁸ See above n 16.

121. More generally, regarding the Katherine Watch House NT Police told me that:

“ It was evident that the long period of detaining in a facility not designed for such detention caused a drop in mental health for some prisoners. Anecdotally, [watch house] staff reported that those in custody for 20+ days were often irritable, cranky and less likely to be compliant. ”

122. I am concerned that the watch house conditions made conditions for staff and prisoners less safe and contributed to incidents of prisoner aggression, prisoner-on-prisoner assaults, prisoner-on-NT Police or prisoner-on-Corrections staff assaults and mental health episodes.

2.4.2 Medical assistance and mental health support

123. My Office received a number of complaints about the medical assistance available to prisoners in the Palmerston and Alice Springs Watch Houses.

124. Some complainants alleged they were unable to see a nurse and others complained that they were unable to access their medications. Others also told me that they suffered from communicable diseases including colds, scabies and fungal skin infections.

125. When my staff spoke to complainants, they described the process to see medical staff as follows:

“ It was like a prolonged process. Like I seen a lot of request to see the nurse and then they wouldn't get to see the nurse. Like you sort of had to keep bugging them. That's what I noticed. Like the people I did see get to see the nurse were ones really bugging them to get in. ”

126. The Guiding Principles have an entire section regarding health and wellbeing. While each principle is important, the most foundational and relevant to the circumstances I considered are:

Guiding Principle 4.1.5: Prisoners are provided with appropriate health practitioners to deliver the right care at the right time, consistent with equivalent codes of conduct and professional/ethical standards as those applying to public health services in the community.

Guiding Principle 4.1.12: Appropriate mental health care is accessible to prisoners with systems in place to refer persons with deteriorating or acute mental illness for specialist mental health treatments.

127. Corrections told me that it provided nursing staff on a daily basis in the Palmerston and Alice Springs Watch Houses. NT Police also told me that it provided nursing staff in the Katherine Watch House. I was also told that a pharmacist attended the Alice Springs Watch House three days a week. I was not provided enough information to assess if this was sufficient.

128. An issue of concern to me was that despite the number of Territory prisoners telling me at interview and in complaints that they suffered from communicable diseases including colds and fungal skin infections, Corrections told me that no outbreaks of infectious diseases occurred. NT Police told

me it identified multiple outbreaks of scabies and that it managed those outbreaks by isolating affected prisoners and conducting deep cleans of cells.

129. NT Police provided me with a list of medical incidents that occurred at the Katherine Watch House, which indicated there were 58 incidents over the review period of (1 November 2024 to 28 February 2025 timeframe). Of those, 42 required the prisoner to be conveyed to the Katherine District Hospital. On 38 occasions, NT Police members were involved in the conveyance.

130. Corrections also provided me with a list of 51 incident reports recorded in Corrections' Integrated Offender Management System (IOMS) for the Alice Springs Watch House, of which 39 related to the review period. That data contained 15 reports of injury or illness, of which 11 involved hospitalisation, 2 reports of self-harm, of which 1 involved hospitalisation, and 3 reports of assault.¹⁹

131. Corrections provided only high-level data for the medical incidents at the Palmerston Watch House.

Palmerston Watch House

132. Corrections advised that there were 55 incidents at the Palmerston Watch House in the review period where Territory prisoners required mental health support. Of those, 23 episodes involved the Territory prisoner being placed 'at risk', which meant much more close observation of those prisoners. Corrections also advised me that the at risk procedure at the Palmerston Watch House would see prisoners transported to the Darwin Correctional Centre to be seen by the Forensic Mental Health Service where the at risk status would be reviewed.

Alice Springs Watch House

133. I was informed that there were four incidents where prisoners were placed 'at risk', and there were two incidents where self-harm was recorded in the IOMS reports I received.

Katherine Watch House

134. NT Police advised that it had recorded 13 medical incidents in the review period with the self-harm or mental health flag. In six of those incidents, the prisoner was conveyed to the Katherine District Hospital.

135. Also of concern were reports from NT Police that the high prisoner numbers at the Katherine Watch House had a flow on impact to operations. I was told that there were occasions when Katherine police members would be tied up conveying prisoners from the Katherine Watch House to the Katherine District Hospital or to medical appointments instead of being able to respond to incidents.

136. I was also told that the Katherine Police Station aimed to have two to three response vans available to respond to incidents, but there were occasions when only one van was available. Where a prisoner conveyance was required, that would tie up that van. With prisoner numbers increasing and prisoners staying for longer in the Katherine Watch House, the number of medical incidents

¹⁹ In its response to my draft report, Corrections clarified that an 'incident' is recorded any time something occurs beyond what is expected within a custodial environment, and as such incidents can vary significantly from minor to severe issues.

requiring a police escort increased. Additionally, routine medical appointments were not normally accommodated by Katherine police but deemed necessary given the longer time in custody, increasing the need for police to convey prisoners and reducing the number of police available to respond to incidents.

137. NT Police told me the net effect could be that ‘priority code 1 matters’ began to pile up whilst police were tied up conveying prisoners for medical purposes. I understand that a priority code 1 requires immediate response under the relevant NT Police General Order and includes fatal road accidents, domestic disturbances and armed hold-ups.

138. I am concerned that the practice of placing prisoners in watch house facilities tied up NT Police resources in Katherine, requiring them to manage medical emergencies and appointments of prisoners rather than respond to requests for police assistance.

2.4.3 Effective lockdown conditions and lack of exercise and recreation

139. Complainants all raised concerns about the impact of being kept in their cells without opportunities to go outside for exercise or recreation. Some of the Territory prisoners interviewed by my officers recounted the conditions and their impact as follows:

“ *Interviewer: And what about exercising – was there enough room to stretch?*

Interviewee: Not really, just walk around just here to stand, and up to here and up and back again, just like that.

Interviewer: So what did you do to fill in your time, how did you to occupy yourself?

Interviewee: I wasn't really good inside. It was so terrible.

”

140. From a different Territory prisoner:

“ *Like I've been [at the Darwin Correctional Centre for] three months, it feels quicker than three weeks in watch house, yeah. Here there's a rotation every day, makes the day go really quick. But [at the Palmerston Watch House] you're in one room and that's it. You've got your meals and that's it. ... [Whereas in the Darwin Correctional Centre] I get up early maybe 7 o'clock, get ready for block, do my hygiene ... I'm in production assembly, we've got a lot of cleaning to do but when I'm not cleaning I'm making crab pots or wheel barrows. We finish around 2pm maybe, come back to the block, jump on the phone, maybe have one or two phone calls, I do some training, talk to a couple of mates and the day's pretty much done.*

You sort of don't feel human after a while of only being inside and the only light you see is artificial.

”

141. In their responses to questions, Corrections and NT Police both confirmed that Territory prisoners did not have access to any outdoor spaces at any of the watch houses considered.

142. Regarding indoor recreation opportunities, Corrections advised that the Palmerston Watch House was: ‘primarily designed for short-term custodial holding and not equipped with the infrastructure typically found in correctional centres, such as outdoor exercise yards.’ Corrections also confirmed that the Alice Springs Watch House lacked any designated exercise yard or outdoor space.

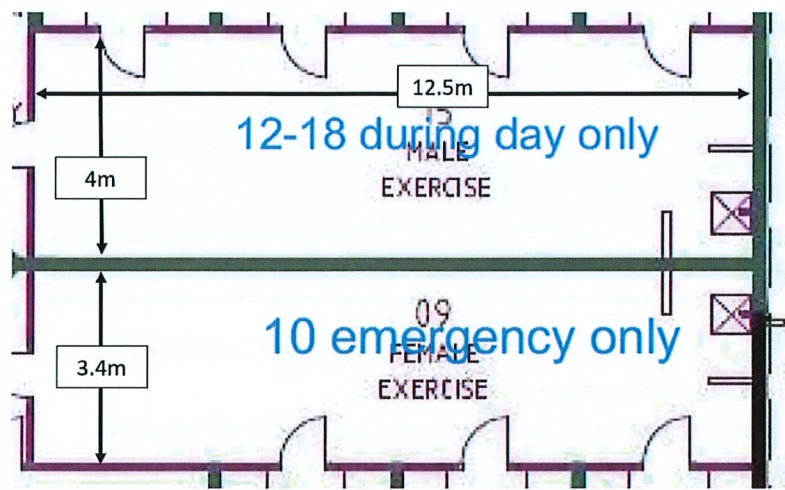


Figure 21 – Katherine Watch House ‘exercise yard’ layout with measurements. Floor plan provided by NT Police.

Corrections did however note that Territory prisoners would on occasion stack their mattresses during the day to create space in their cells to perform basic physical exercise. Even if this did occur, I note that given the size of those cells and the crowded conditions, Territory prisoners would have had a very limited ability to exercise or otherwise engage in recreation in those watch houses.

143. Opportunity for indoor recreation appeared to be improved in the Katherine Watch House, which had two larger cells depicted in Figure 21 in which prisoners could engage in physical recreation in the day. One yard was available to the ‘male’ cells and the other was available to the ‘female’ cells. NT Police advised that it would cycle prisoners through the exercise yards. The exercise yards are still indoor cells and NT Police stated that some prisoners were observed to do body weight exercises. Photographs of a Katherine Watch House ‘exercise yard’ and lighting are reproduced below in Figures 23 and 24.

144. Given the length of stay data detailed in section 2.5.1 and the conditions explored above, I can only conclude that Territory prisoners in the Alice Springs and Palmerston Watch Houses were confined to cells in overcrowded conditions for weeks at a time, with the only time out of cell being to shower.

Daily Routine/Normal Day in prison

7 am	Cell wakeup call via loud speaker
7.30 am	Unlock
8.15 am - 8.30 am	Medication rounds
9 am	There is work and programs
12.15 pm	Muster and then lunch
1.15 pm	Programs and work continue
4 pm - 5.30 pm	End of work day
5 pm	Evening medication issue
6 pm	Lock down and evening meals

Figure 22 - Typical daily routine of a prisoner at the Darwin Correctional Centre as described in the Prisoner Handbook.

145. Contrasted against a prisoner’s typical daily routine at the Darwin Correctional Centre as described by the second interviewee above and set out in the Prisoner Handbook (see Figure 22), conditions for Territory Prisoners in the watch houses reviewed were severely restrictive, particularly in the Alice Springs and Palmerston Watch Houses.

146. Time outside of a prisoner’s cell is considered a basic right and essential to maintaining good physical and mental health, which is recognized in the Guiding Principles. The relevant Guiding Principle provides:

Guiding Principle 2.3.2: Prisoners are provided a minimum of one hour out of cell per day, and in fresh air (weather permitting).

147. Complainants told us that being essentially locked down in their cells was harmful to both their mental and physical health.

148. Ultimately, none of the watch house facilities reviewed appeared capable of meeting guiding principle 2.3.2, and at least in respect of the Palmerston and Alice Springs Watch Houses, Territory Prisoners were subject to lockdown-style conditions for the duration of their stay, which appeared to have an impact on their physical and mental wellbeing.

Key takeaways:

- Territory prisoners were not provided access to fresh air for the duration of their stay at the Palmerston, Alice Springs and Katherine Watch Houses.
- Territory prisoners were unable to leave their cells to engage in physical recreation at the Palmerston or Alice Springs Watch Houses. Territory prisoners were able to access a larger in-door cell at the Katherine Watch House to engage in such recreation.



Figure 23 – A CCTV still photograph of the exercise yard. Take note of the shower in the rear corner. Whilst difficult to see, there is a mattress propped up in front of the shower to act as a privacy screen. Photograph provided by NT Police



Figure 24 – The only source of external light in the Katherine watch house, above the 'exercise yard'. Photograph provided by NT Police.

2.4.4 General health

149. Multiple prisoners told my staff they either became unhealthy or ill whilst in the watch house. Causes of ill-health included viral diseases such as colds, fungal infection, and poor mental health.

150. Some excerpts from interviews are below:

“ *I thought I would die in there, I was thinking a lot ... I was losing my mind ... I was sad and thinking a lot, what are these guys going to do to us? I don't know, I seen the girls, screaming and angry, they wanted to speak to their lawyer.* **”**

151. And from a different Territory prisoner:

“ *Some of the boys from the watch house up here were in watch house for months and months and one of the boys went to the prison with a chest infection and coughing up blood and everything.* **”**

152. I have quoted other Territory prisoners in this report who say they suffered from skin infections as well.

153. As mentioned above, at the Katherine and Alice Springs Watch Houses, custodial staff perceived a decline in the mental health of Territory prisoners who had been kept in those watch houses for longer periods of time. In Alice Springs, custody staff linked the poor mental health conditions to the constant lighting and noted an improvement once watch house lights could be turned off at night:

“ *Prior to obtaining permission to switch off the cell light, prisoners held at the [Alice Springs Watch House] did seem to have higher degrees of emotional distress, caused most likely from sleep disturbance caused by the 24hr light.* **”**

154. I note that the following conditions of custody when taken together are likely to worsen prisoner mental health and physical health:

- overcrowding (discussed in section 2.5.2)
- constant lighting (discussed in section 2.2.4)
- constant close exposure to high use toilets (discussed in section 2.3.2)
- drinking water in close proximity to high-use toilets (discussed in section 2.2.1)
- lack of access to exercise or to outside time (discussed in section 2.4.3)
- infrequent access to showers and teeth brushing (discussed in section 2.3.1)

155. Given the consistent presence of the above matters, I am concerned that the conditions of watch houses contributed to prisoners having poorer general physical and mental health.

2.5 Prisoner numbers, cell crowding and length of stay

156. In this section I provide an analysis of the data I received to outline how long prisoners stayed in each watch house and how many prisoners were in each watch house. I also set out my analysis of cell crowding in each watch house.

2.5.1 Length of stay

157. In their complaints to my office, complainants stated they stayed in the watch houses for weeks at a time, with some saying they spent up to two months there.

158. I sought records from both NT Police and Corrections to substantiate the amount of time Territory prisoners were held in watch houses.

159. Unfortunately, the data I received was incomplete. Whilst NT Police was able to provide comprehensive data for persons in its care, that data only covered the period between arrest and handover to Corrections. NT Police also did not routinely record whether a prisoner was in custody pending court, or whether they were subject to a warrant of imprisonment (which would make them a Territory prisoner). Accordingly, Katherine Watch House Territory prisoner length of stay data and other prisoner length of stay data could not be separated out.

160. Further, Corrections was unable to provide any data to me regarding how long Territory prisoners stayed at the watch houses. Whilst Corrections indicated it kept records from which it could contemporaneously view how long a prisoner had been at a watch house and from which such information could be produced at a later date, the form in which the data was kept meant producing that information a later date would be prohibitively time consuming.

161. What this means is that I do not have a clear indication of how long Territory prisoners stayed at the Palmerston, Katherine and Alice Springs Watch houses in the review period. In order to get an idea of how long a Territory prisoner may have stayed at those watch houses, my staff and I spoke to complainants. One reported to me that:

“ I met people in Palmerston Watch House that had been there for say, three weeks, come back [to the Darwin Correctional Centre] for a week and then sent back there for another three weeks. ”

162. What I also received were numerous complaints from prisoners stating that they had been held in a watch house for between 2 weeks and 2 months. In respect of a number of these complaints, Corrections confirmed that prisoners had been held in watch houses for weeks at a time.

163. I provide an analysis of the available information for each specific watch house below.

Palmerston Watch House

164. The data I received about the Palmerston Watch House from NT Police reflected how many prisoners NT Police had in its care and how long they stayed in its care. The data does not identify which prisoners became Territory prisoners, nor does it identify where a prisoner went. A prisoner may be released from NT Police care to stay with Corrections in the watch house, to go to Darwin Correctional Centre, or the prisoner may have been released without charge, released on bail or released to serve a non-custodial sentence. The data shows that most prisoners left police care within two days. In summary, the data showed:

- There were 2,150 custody events during the period examined for the Palmerston Watch House. A custody event is a police record of information where a person is received into the

watch house by police. A person may have multiple custody events if they leave and later return again to a watch house.

- Of those events, around 2,000 prisoners were released from police custody within a week. I note that the data does not reflect where the prisoner went and may not have left the watch house if they went into Corrections' care within the watch house.

165. My Office received 17 complaints about the Palmerston Watch House, of which:

- Around a third were received while complainants were still at the Palmerston Watch House and so no final length of stay was recorded.
- The remainder reported stays between a few days and two months, with the average of those able to provide a final length of stay being around 30 days.

Katherine Watch House

166. That data I received regarding the Katherine Watch House for the review period was more complete and is summarized in the following table. The limitation of this data is that NT Police did not differentiate between Territory prisoners and those prisoners who were brought into custody and then released on bail, released without charge, or released and transferred to any custodial facility. It is likely, however, that the prisoners who stayed for longer periods of time at the Katherine Watch House were Territory prisoners.

Territory prisoner length of stay at Katherine Watch House

	0-7 days	7-14 days	14-21 days	21-28 days	28+ days	Total
No. of prisoners	539	30	33	12	4	618
Percentage	87%	5%	5%	2%	1%	

Table 4 – Territory prisoner length of stay at Katherine Watch House. Data provided by NT Police.

167. The data shows that whilst 539 of the 618 prisoners (or 87%) were moved on from the Katherine Watch House within a week, it also shows that 79 prisoners (or 13%) stayed in the Katherine Watch House for longer than a week.

168. Please also note that Territory prisoners might be transferred from the Katherine Watch House to other watch houses. This was borne out in the complaints to my Office where prisoners advised they could spend time at the Katherine Watch House before being transferred the Palmerston Watch House.

169. For example, one complainant spent two weeks at the Katherine Watch House before spending another four weeks at the Palmerston Watch House. This is too long.

170. There is a separate side issue in relation to the Katherine Watch House which I distinguish from the above relating to its geographical location and absence of a local correctional centre. In its response to my report, NT Police clarified that even prior to the circumstances considered in my investigation, Katherine Watch House was used, on occasion, to hold Territory prisoners sentenced to short-term periods of imprisonment (days) as there is no correctional centre in Katherine. NT Police advised further that the rationale for the practice is that it lessens the burden on prisoners by avoiding

unnecessary long-distance transport for a short sentence, keeps the prisoner closer to family and simplifies repatriation back to their community and lessens the burden on both Corrections and NT Police regarding resourcing and transport requirements. Noting the benefits outlined by NT Police and provided the periods are short and the facility is not overcrowded, this practical arrangement appears reasonable to me in the circumstances.

Alice Springs Watch House

171. Similar to the Palmerston Watch House, I did not receive complete data from Corrections and I have no data regarding how long Territory Prisoners stayed at the Alice Springs Watch House except from complainants themselves. Whilst I received data from NT Police regarding the Alice Springs Watch House, that data showed that NT Police moved prisoners on from their care quickly, with only five of 1,580 custody events having a duration longer than seven days.

172. My Office received seven complaints regarding the Alice Springs Watch House. Four complainants were able to provide a final length of stay figure; of those four complainants, all advised they stayed at Alice Springs Watch House for at least a month with the longest stay being 52 days. Most complaints my Office received concerning the Alice Springs Watch House indicated that prisoners were routinely staying there for at least two weeks at a time.

173. I note that the length of stay of some prisoners in the Alice Springs Watch House was exacerbated by the temporary closure of the women's section of the Alice Springs Correctional Centre during the review period, meaning that women either had to be housed at the Alice Springs Watch House or moved to Darwin with no alternative available in Alice Springs. Corrections have advised me that women returned to the Alice Springs Correctional Centre from 12 March 2025.

Length of stay overall

174. It is of significant concern to me, and should be of concern ultimately to the public, that data does not appear to have been kept in such a way as to allow me or others to easily scrutinise how long Territory prisoners were spending in the watch houses. It is imperative when implementing unorthodox approaches, such as the placement of Territory prisoners in watch houses, that records are kept such that the agencies directly involved and oversight agencies can transparently monitor and review the situation.

175. Despite the limited and fractured nature of the information I have been able to obtain about the length of time Territory prisoners spent in watch house facilities, what it does tend to show is that prisoners could be held at a watch house for weeks at a time, if not a month or more.

2.5.2 Cell crowding

176. The most common refrain in complaints to my Office was that the watch house facilities are overcrowded.

177. I received calculations from NT Police that showed it considered 2.5 square meters per Territory prisoner to be the minimum space required for prisoners in the Katherine Watch House. As far as I can tell from my analysis of the floor plan and maximum capacity for cells in the Alice Springs and Palmerston Watch Houses, Corrections assessed a figure of around 2 square meters per Territory prisoner.

178. Overcrowding has real effects on prisoner health and wellbeing. An interviewee said the following regarding her partner's incarceration at the Palmerston Watch House:

“ *You're cooped up with, I think he [the interviewee's partner] said something crazy like he was there with fifteen other individuals for a space that should only hold five, [it] was just insane. ... I think he tried to shelter me from a lot of how he was feeling.* **”**

179. Nearly all 31 complaints to my Office raised concerns about overcrowded conditions, with prisoners complaining that they were sleeping head-to-toe and side-by-side, with mattresses pushed together and with nowhere to sit during the day except on their mattresses.

180. Whilst this issue affected all watch houses, the information received by my Office showed it was more acute at the Palmerston and Alice Springs Watch Houses. The Katherine Watch House was at or close to full occupancy for less time than the other watch houses and NT Police provided slightly more space to each prisoner during full occupancy than what was provided at the other watch houses.

181. Statistical analysis conducted by my Office shows that for significant periods of time, the cell area per prisoner in the Palmerston and Alice Springs Watch Houses was less than two square meters. This area includes floor space for the toilet and for the cell door to swing.

182. An example of what this looks like in practice can be seen in Figure 25, which is still photograph taken from a cell's CCTV camera in the Palmerston Watch House.



Figure 25 – Photograph of cell M3 in the Palmerston Watch House with what appears to be 17 prisoners. Corrections assess this cell to be capable of holding a maximum of 18 occupants. Photograph provided by NT Police.

183. I provide more detail about each individual watch house below.

184. Before doing so, I note, however, that the Guiding Principles do not include a specific standard which indicates the minimum living space to be afforded to each prisoner. In its absence, I refer to the European Standard, which has been adopted by the Queensland Corrective Services into its accommodation capacity for its corrective service facilities, and provides a minimum living space per prisoner of four square meters, not including space for sanitary facilities, for cells holding more than one prisoner.

Palmerston Watch House

185. Figure 25 above is a still photograph of cell M3 in the Palmerston Watch House. The photograph shows 18 mattresses with at least 17 Territory prisoners (some wrapped in blankets) visible in the photo. A floor plan of the cell with measurements can be seen in Figure 26 below.

186. My staff calculated the floor area of the cell, including toilets, to be approximately 31.5 square meters.

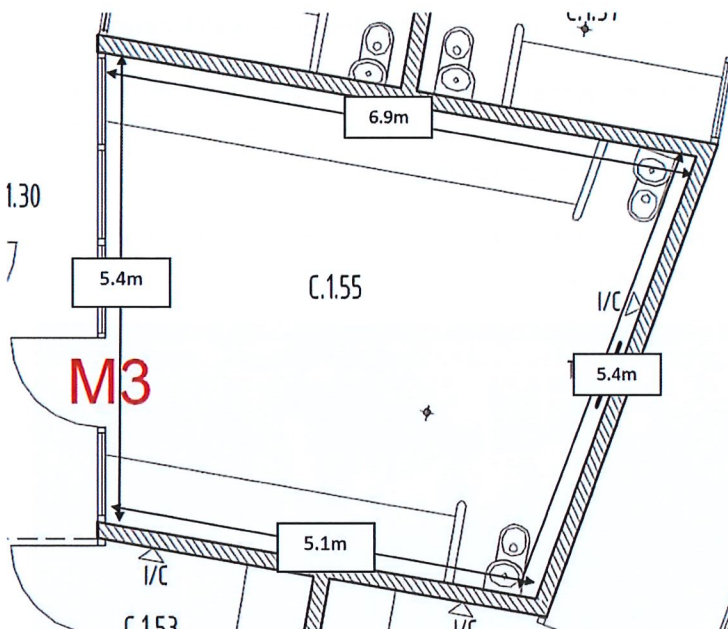


Figure 26 - M3 Cell layout. Floor plan provided by Corrections.

187. This would mean that in terms of cell floor space, each prisoner in the photograph has approximately 1.75 square meters to themselves, including their mattress which, from information provided, occupies approximately 1.62-1.70 square meters (depending on who provided the mattress). The reality is that each prisoner has less space due to the space taken up by toilets.

188. The information I received from Corrections indicates that cell M3 was assessed by Corrections to have a capacity of 18 prisoners, or one more than the number of prisoners depicted in Figure 25.

189. I was told that NT Police have not identified a maximum capacity for the Palmerston Watch House. Using the numbers provided by Corrections, my officers calculated that the total maximum capacity of the Palmerston Watch House was approximately 160 prisoners when including all cells, including observation cells used for at risk prisoners.

190. To see for what periods Territory prisoners in the Palmerston Watch House would have endured the severely crowded conditions depicted above in Figure 25, my staff compiled the following graphs from data provided by Corrections. The data, as depicted below in Tables 5 and 6, shows that for a significant portion of the review period, cell capacity in the Palmerston Watch House was at levels equal to or more than the maximum cell capacity as assessed by Corrections.

191. Please note that this calculation uses the reported cell capacity of Corrections based on the cells Corrections reportedly had access to on a given day and so total actual capacity varied on a day-to-day basis.

192. The day-to-day variation in the number of cells available to Corrections and capacity of cells is reflected in the second table (Table 6) where the maximum cell capacity fluctuates.

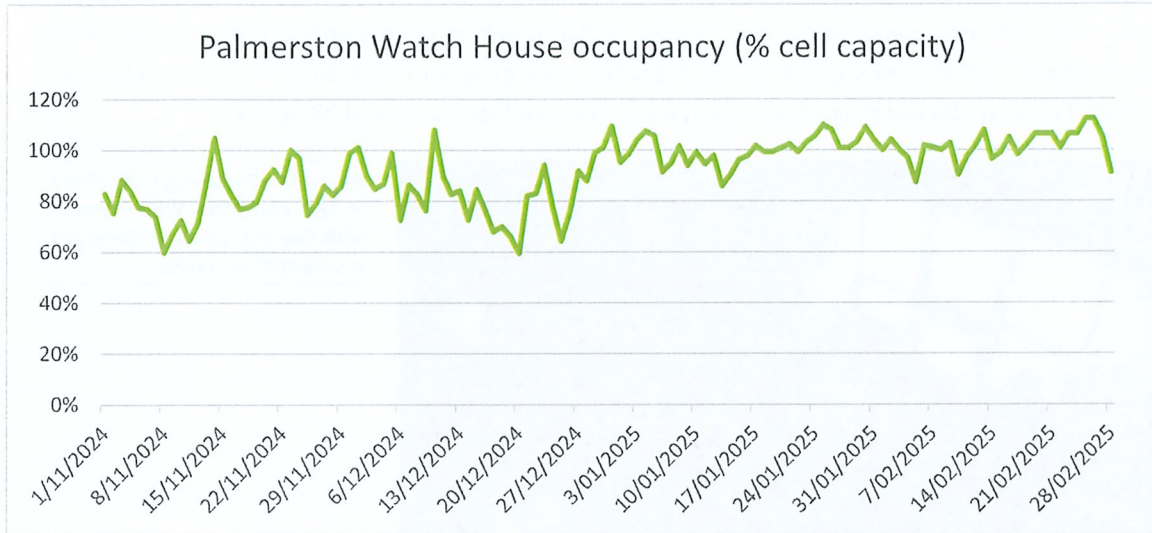


Table 5 – Palmerston Watch House occupancy (% cell capacity) based on cell capacity figures provided by Corrections.

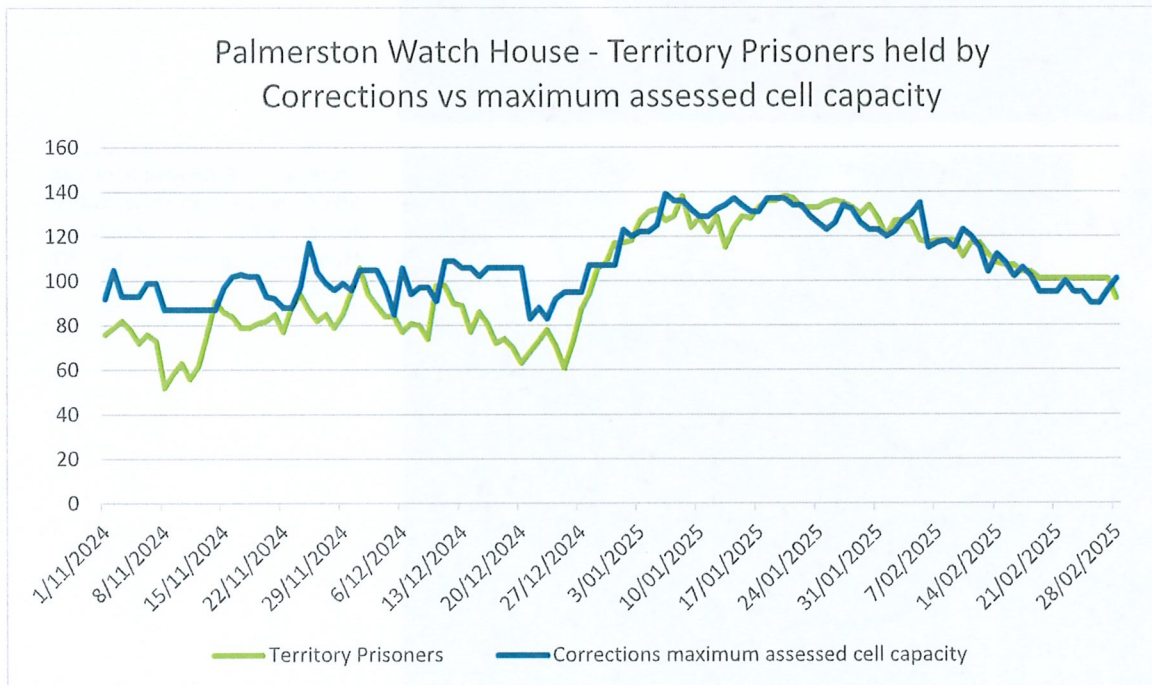


Table 6 – Number of Territory prisoners against maximum cell capacity as assessed by Corrections for Territory prisoners in the Palmerston Watch House over time.

193. These tables indicate that for significant portions of January and February 2025, Territory prisoners were being held in maximum occupancy conditions at Palmerston Watch House such as those depicted in Figure 25. While November and December 2024 were, for the most part, below

maximum occupancy, occupancy was still close to maximum and cells would still have been substantially crowded. At all times, floor space would not have met the minimum standard of 4 square meters per person not including space for sanitary facilities.

Katherine watch house

194. NT Police informed me that it could hold at maximum 52 male prisoners at the Katherine Watch House, with 60 prisoners being the highest total number of prisoners that can be safely accommodated. When holding that many prisoners, each prisoner has around 2.5 square meters in their cell. For an understanding of what that looks like, see Figures 27 and 28 below.



Figure 27 – Photograph of cell M1 in the Katherine Watch House with five occupants. Photograph provided by NT Police.



Figure 28 – Photograph of cell 'MPCC' in the Katherine Watch House with 12 occupants. Photograph provided by NT Police.

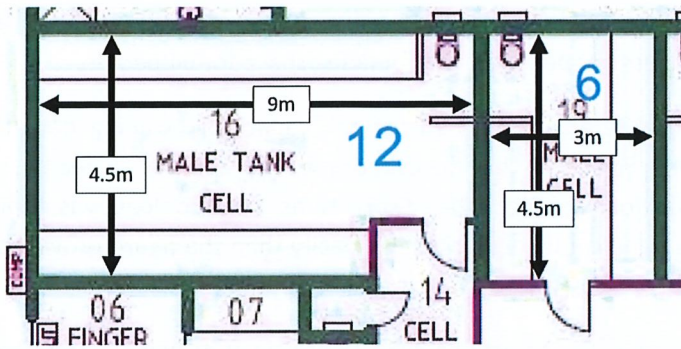


Figure 29 – Layout of cell ‘MPCC’ in the Katherine Watch House and an example of a cell layout similar to ‘M1’. Floor plan provided by NT Police.

195. As can be seen from the images above, at full occupancy there is not much room inside of cells and prisoners are forced to sleep on mattresses on the floor side-by-side next to other prisoners.

196. Looking at the photograph of cell M1 above (Figure 27), I was told that the smaller cells could sleep six prisoners. This was corroborated by a complainant who told my officers he shared the smaller cell with five other prisoners. Looking at the photograph, it is not clear to me how six mattresses could fit in the cell.

197. Notwithstanding the crowded conditions in the Katherine Watch House when cell occupancy was high, data provided by NT Police as depicted in Table 7 indicates that for the review period Katherine Watch House was only particularly crowded for two-to-three weeks. For that period, however, floor space would not have met the minimum standard of 4 square meters per person not including space for sanitary facilities.

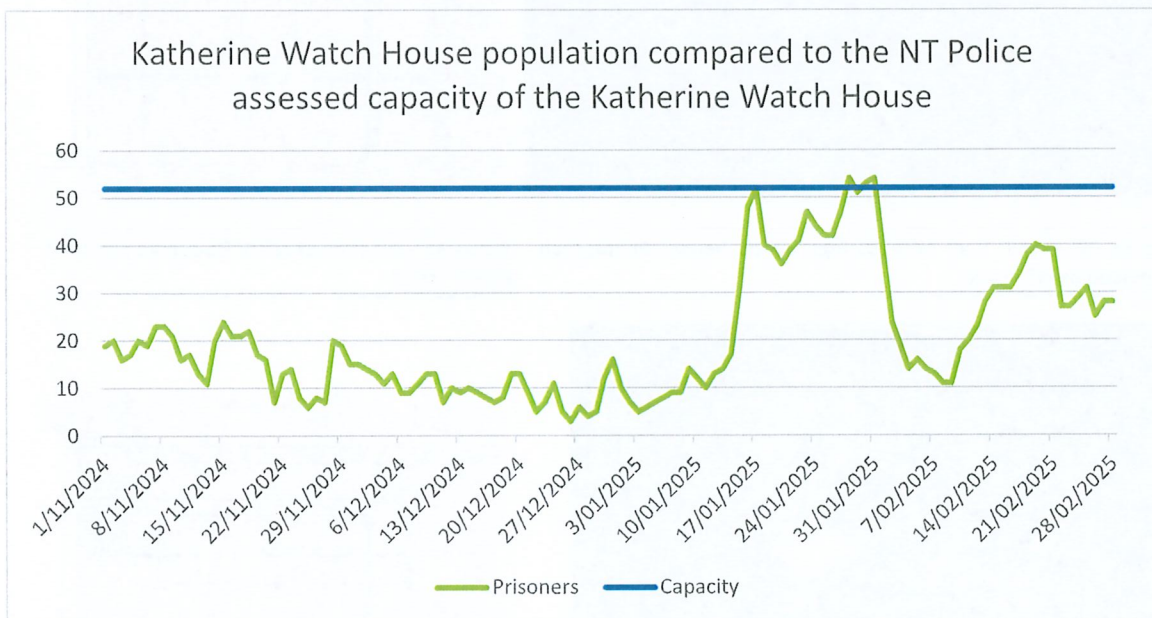


Table 7 - Katherine Watch House population compared to the NT Police assessed capacity of the Katherine Watch House (capacity is 52 prisoners).

Alice Springs watch house

198. Of the seven complaints received by my Office regarding the Alice Springs Watch House, three related to overcrowded conditions.

199. In response to my questions, NT Police told me that the maximum capacity of the Alice Springs Watch House is 61 with four square meters per prisoner, with bedding space for 64 people.

200. Corrections appeared to make a different assessment of cell capacity, providing data that suggested that in a cell like cell 3 below in Figure 30, that the capacity for that cell was 15 people, and that for a smaller cell, the capacity was four people. When Corrections' methodology was applied across the whole facility it produced a significantly higher total capacity than the figure provided by NT Police.

201. Figure 30 shows cell 3, which, according to Corrections, held 18 people at its highest occupancy. The cell has a floor space of approximately 27 meters squared, which, if housing 18 people, would mean each person has 1.5 meters squared. Figure 30 shows 12 mattresses – it very difficult to conceive how 18 people might sleep in that cell.

202. I note that for cell 14 (Figure 32), Corrections combined this cell with other small cells and a small common area to provide more combined space to prisoners.



Figure 30 – Cell 3 at Alice Springs watch house. Photograph provided by NT Police.

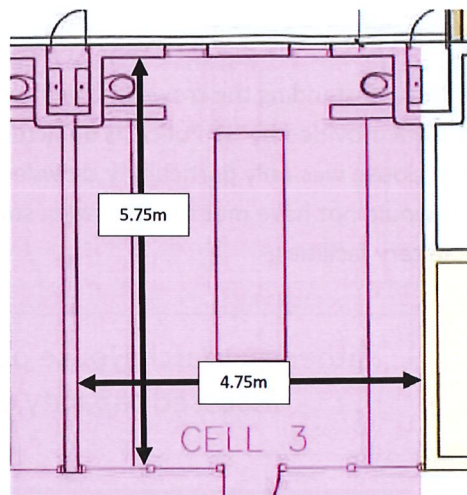


Figure 31 – Diagram of cell 3. Floor plan provided by NT Police.



Figure 32 – Cell 14 at the Alice Springs watch house. Photograph provided by NT Police

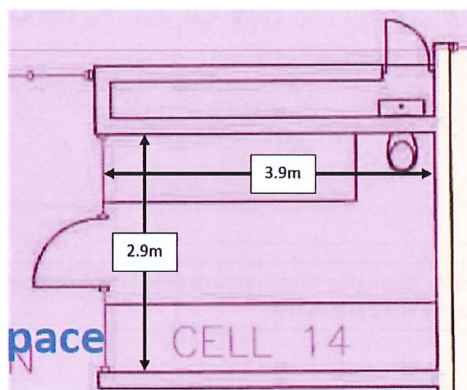


Figure 33 – Layout of cell 14 with measurements. Floor plan provided by NT Police.

203. Based on the data I received from Corrections and as depicted in Tables 8 and 9 below, the Alice Springs Watch House would have been particularly crowded from the start of January 2025 through to the end of February 2025. For at least that period, floor space would not have met the minimum standard of 4 square meters per person not including space for sanitary facilities.

204. See especially the photo of cell 3 above. Corrections told me that the capacity of this cell was 15 people. There are 12 mattresses in the picture with two overlapping. The maximum amount of people this cell held was 18. With 15 or more prisoners, there is a mattress in between the two toilets in the cell and mattresses that overlap with each other.

205. In my view, this level of overcrowding is severe and is a major cause for concern.

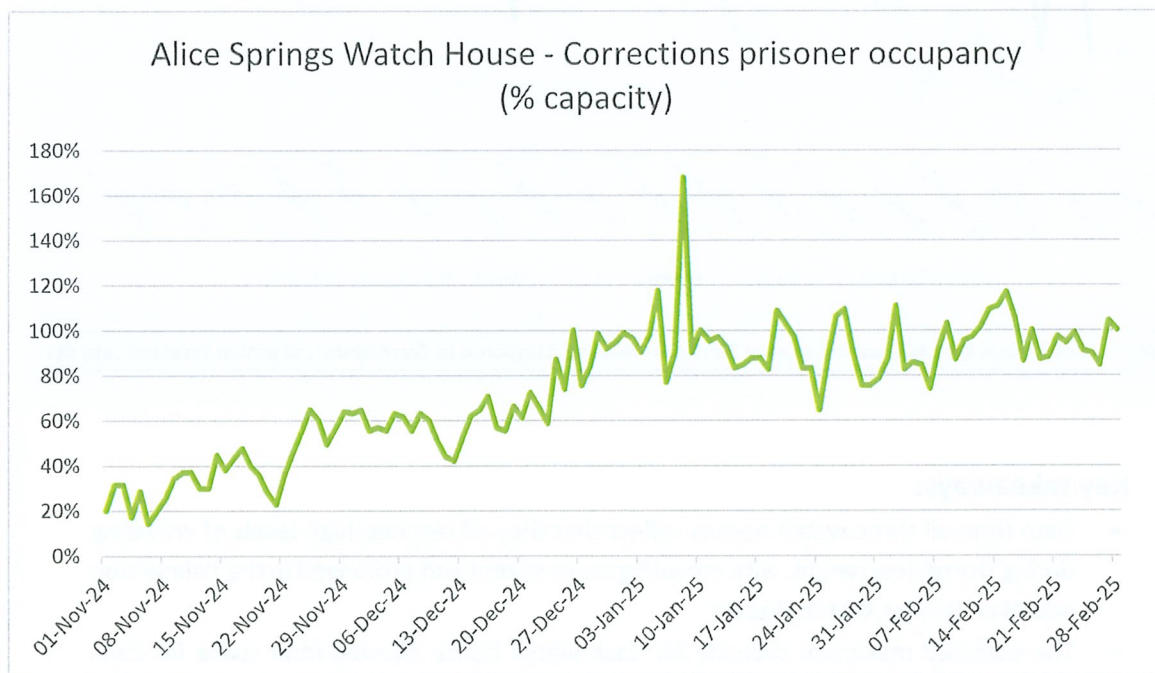


Table 8 – Alice Springs Watch House occupancy as a percentage of capacity

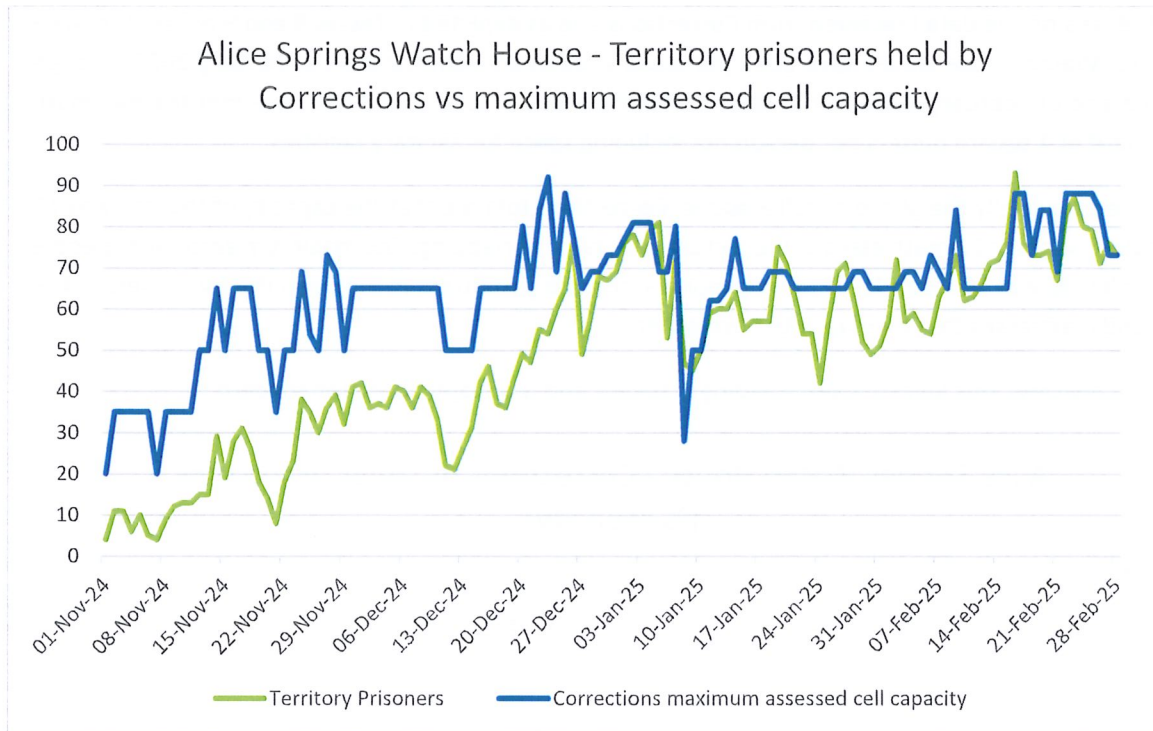


Table 9 – Alice Springs Watch House number of Territory Prisoners compared to Corrections’ maximum assessed capacity.

Key takeaways:

- Data from all three watch houses reflect that they all reached high levels of crowding during the review period, with crowding more severe and prolonged in the Palmerston and Alice Springs Watch Houses.
- The assessed maximum capacity for each watch house allowed little space for each prisoner and provided much less than the minimum space the European Standard prescribes.
- When crowding was at its worst, prisoners practically had only enough space for their own mattress.

2.5.3 Total watch house usage

206. I briefly note that the watch houses were used to house more than just Territory prisoners. My analysis above for the Katherine Watch House already goes through total prisoner numbers (including Territory prisoners), however I also wanted to outline the total number of prisoners held over the review period in the Palmerston Watch House and the Alice Springs Watch House.

207. Please refer to Tables 10 and 11 below. I note that the Palmerston Watch House reached a maximum of 197 prisoners and the Alice Springs Watch House reached a maximum of 117 prisoners. These numbers are very high – the Alice Springs Watch House prisoner population well exceeded the occupancy of 61 prisoners that NT Police told me was the recommended maximum occupancy of the Alice Springs Watch House.

208. The same was true at the Palmerston Watch House where the Corrections' assessed cell capacity was around 160 prisoners, but at the end of the review period there were close to 200 prisoners held at the Palmerston Watch House.

Key takeaway:

The total prisoner population for both the Palmerston Watch House and the Alice Springs Watch Houses became concerningly high and exceeded the assessed maximum capacity ratings provided by Corrections and NT Police respectively.

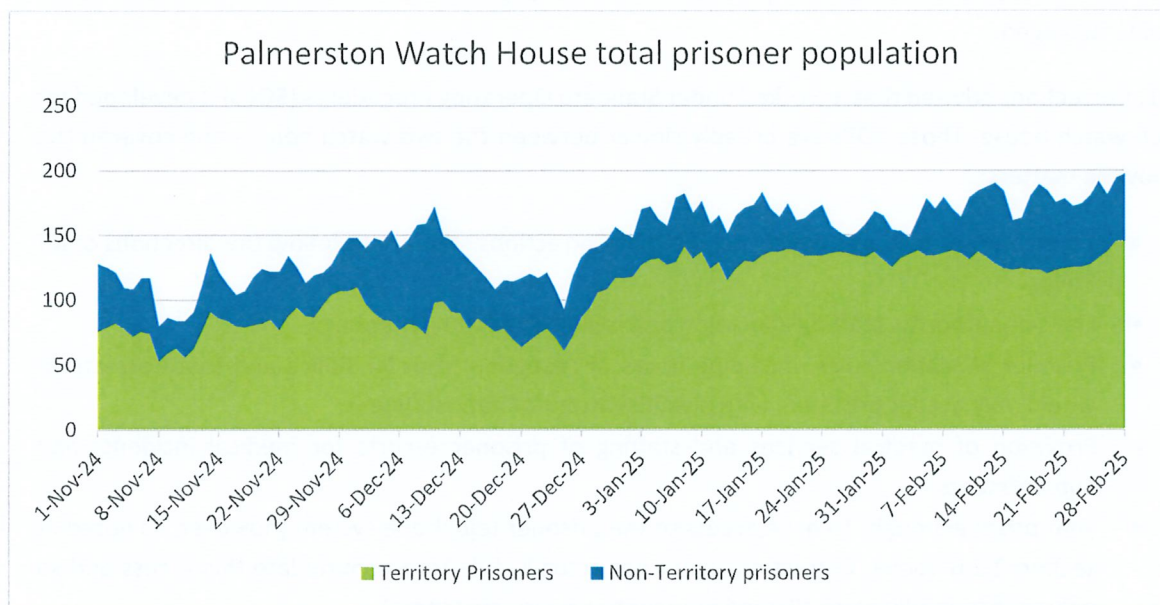


Table 10 – Palmerston Watch House total prisoner population. Data provided by NT Police and Corrections.

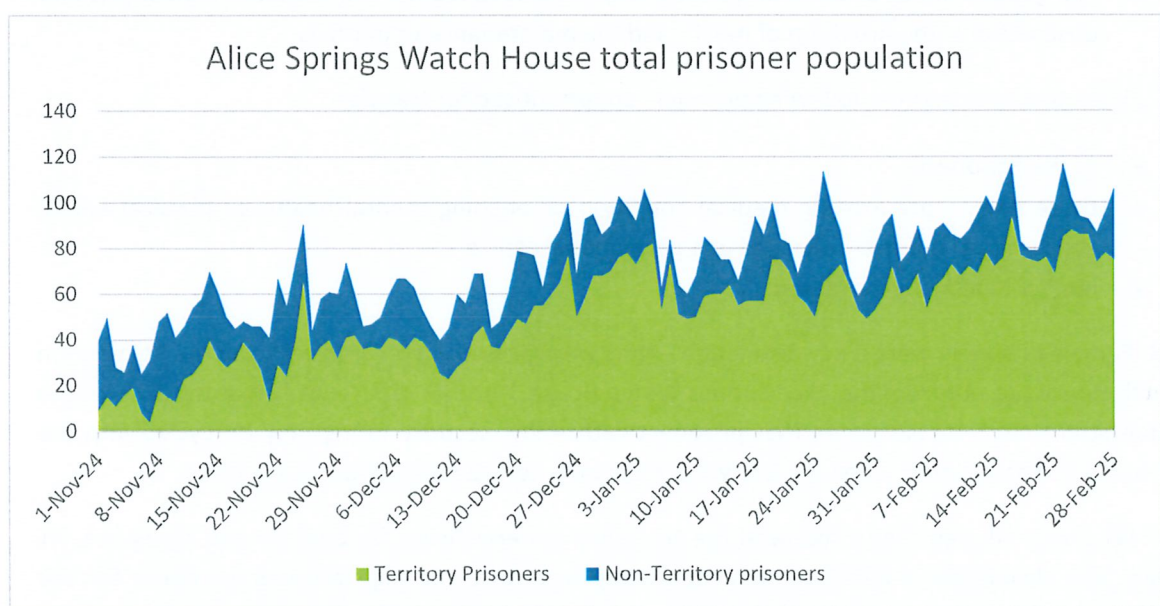


Table 11 – Alice Springs Watch House total prisoner population. Data provided by NT Police and Corrections.

2.6 Governance and management

209. Good governance is essential to the appropriate and safe management of prisoners. This is particularly so when using unorthodox measures to hold prisoners longer-term in facilities designed for short-term stays. This section covers the decision-making framework governing placement and management of Territory prisoners as well as Territory prisoners' ability to complain about the conditions they were experiencing and have their concerns addressed.

2.6.1 Decision making and transfers

210. To understand management arrangements for Territory prisoners in the watchhouses, I asked both Corrections and NT Police to explain the how prisoner placement decisions were made and each facility managed.

211. Corrections advised that it worked under Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) it developed for each watch house. Those SOPs are broadly similar between the two watch houses and covered the following matters:

- Emergency procedures which include that Corrections staff are to follow the directions of NT Police.
- Lines of authority, staffing allocation and minimum staffing numbers.
- Prisoner allocation rules, including hours of reception from NT Police and that Corrections would only accept prisoners with a valid warrant of imprisonment.
- Provision of medical services and staffing of prisoner escorts for medical incidents and appointments.
- That prisoners ought to have access to the prisoner telephone system (however, as noted at section 2.2.6 above, Corrections were not actually able to accommodate this access and so only calls to family were allowed in exceptional circumstances).
- At risk procedures which generally required at risk prisoners to be removed to a correctional centre as soon as possible.
- The general duties of Corrections staff, which included regular cell searches, regular prisoner observations, the provision of meals, and the maintenance of journals.

212. They also note that the following prisoners are prioritised for transfer:

- at risk prisoners
- those with a pre-existing medical condition or ongoing mental health or physical health concern that is better managed at a correctional centre
- mental health court ordered.

213. Female prisoners were a key distinction – they were prioritised for transfer from the Palmerston Watch House but not from the Alice Springs Watch House. Another difference is that the SOP for the Palmerston Watch House states that prisoners with a low security rating may be cycled into the Palmerston Watch House when the Darwin Correctional Centre needed to free up space.

214. NT Police advised that it followed the NT Police General Order for Custody and Transport. NT Police also developed a local standard operating procedure for high prisoner numbers for the Katherine Watch House in circumstances where it was anticipated that NT Police would have issues housing the anticipated number of prisoners safely.

215. Both NT Police and Corrections told me that there was no formal agreement in place regarding the transfer of prisoners but that they were in daily contact regarding their transfer.

216. In my view, the SOPs reflect the effort on behalf of Corrections and the NT Police to create appropriate frameworks to manage prisoners in circumstances that were far from ideal. Further, while there was no formal agreement in place, and while the relationship at times appeared to be tense, I and my officers observed a genuine effort on behalf of Corrections and NT Police to work together to deal with the diabolical logistical challenge that was managing unprecedented prisoner numbers and the requirement to house so many prisoners in the watch houses.

2.6.2 Ability to complain

217. One major concern I noticed in the course of my investigation was that despite the stark conditions of the watch houses and number of complaints I received, I received no direct complaints from Territory prisoners while inside a watch house. Rather, the complaints I received were either from the legal representatives or family members of Territory prisoners in watch houses, or from Territory prisoners after they left the watch houses and were either released from custody or transferred to a correctional centre.

218. Territory prisoners, their legal representatives and their family members communicated to me that Territory prisoners waited until they were out of the watch houses to complain. Importantly, some legal representatives contacted my Office whilst the Territory prisoner on whose behalf they were complaining was still in the watch house. Whilst my staff did not ask those Territory prisoners why they chose to complain through legal representatives or through family members, I suspect that they did so as they did not know how to or were not supported to complain to me without going through their lawyer or family members.

219. Correctional centres have established processes for dealing with complaints and prisoners held there have a direct phone line to my Office, which they use often. As part of my investigation, I asked both NT Police and Corrections to explain how they managed Territory prisoner complaints in the watch houses as well as facilitated calls from Territory prisoners in the watch house to my Office.

220. NT Police told me that there was no induction process whereby Territory prisoners were told of their right to complain to my Office and that it dealt with complaints as they arose. NT Police also told me that it would facilitate any request to contact my Office upon receipt, but advised further that it did not receive any such requests in the review period.

221. Corrections referred to its SOPs and outlined that prisoner complaint forms and writing materials were available upon request from officers. Corrections also outlined that Corrections staff were available to field informal complaints. In my second round of questions, I requested copies of any formal complaints made by prisoners in the review period, and received advice from Corrections that no formal complaints were made by Territory prisoners in that period. I find this remarkable given the conditions for Territory prisoners in the watch houses as detailed throughout this report.

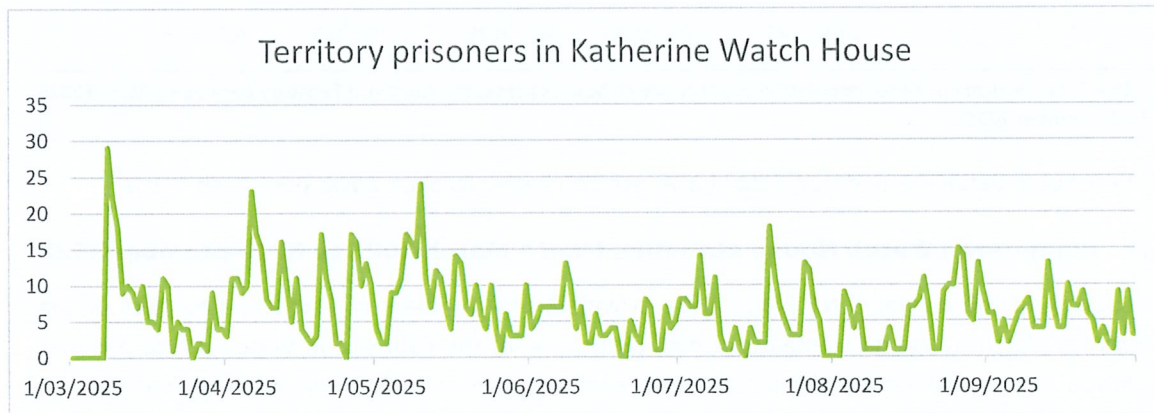
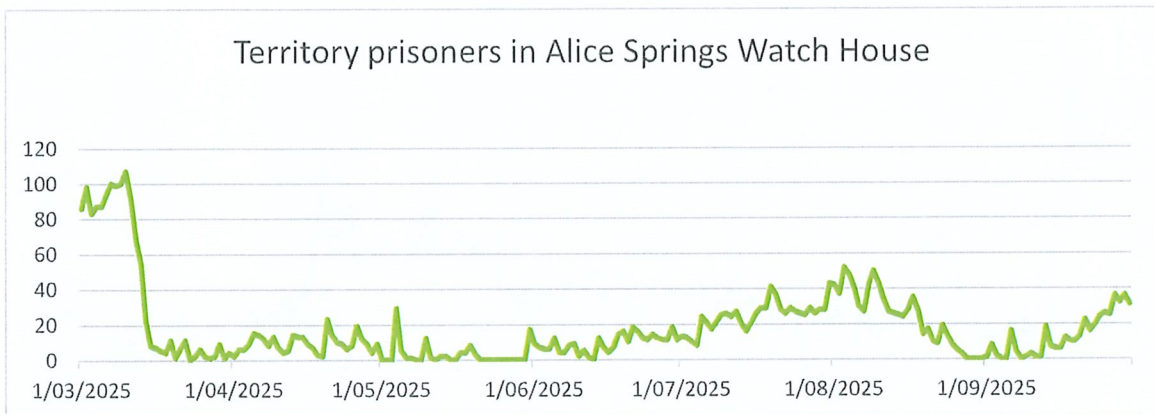
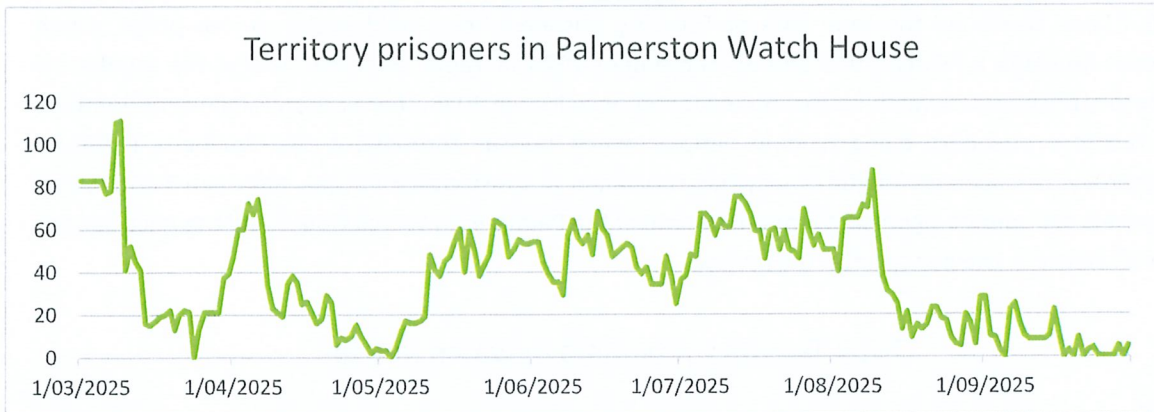
222. Corrections also told me that prisoners were able to contact my Office through the prisoner telephone system. Given the challenges prisoners had contacting their loved ones whilst at the watch houses, I find it difficult to accept that prisoners were able to contact my Office over the phone whilst at the Palmerston or Alice Springs Watch Houses.

223. I am concerned that Territory prisoners were not told they could contact my Office whilst they resided at the Palmerston, Katherine or Alice Springs Watch Houses, and I am also concerned that they were not informed of their ability to complain or supported to make a formal complaint and have their concerns addressed whilst at the watch houses.

3. CURRENT SITUATION

224. I requested and received updated information from NT Police and Corrections regarding the current situation regarding watch house usage in the Northern Territory. In summary, I learned that:

- Corrections staff left the Palmerston Watch House on 10 March 2025 and the Alice Springs Watch House on 14 March 2025.
- The Palmerston Watch House continued to house Territory prisoners until 22 September 2025. Prior to 22 September 2025, NT Police received prisoners back from courts with remand warrants or warrants of commitment for sentence who NT Police would hold until Darwin Correctional Centre had sufficient space to accept prisoners. The data is available below in Table 12.
- The Alice Springs Watch House continues to hold Territory prisoners, the data is graphed below in Table 13.
- The Katherine Watch House continues to receive and hold Territory prisoners. This is a standard practice as there are no custodial Corrections staff in Katherine. The Katherine Watch House holds Territory prisoners until transport is arranged to Darwin, or who have release dates less than ten days away. Data regarding the number of Territory prisoners in the Katherine Watch House is graphed below in Table 14.
- That NT Police are reviewing the maximum occupancy of the Palmerston and Katherine Watch Houses, noting that NT Police previously did not have an assessed maximum occupancy for the Palmerston Watch House and identified that 52 prisoners was the maximum safe occupancy of the Katherine Watch House.
- The NT Local Court restricted after hours and weekend judge bail reviews which has lengthened stays at all examined watch houses.
- The Alice Springs Watch House Custody Sergeant now turns off cell lights for Territory prisoners in the Alice Springs Watch House.
- The Darwin City Watch House continues to hold prisoners as graphed below in Table 15.



Tables 12, 13, 14, 15 – Total Territory prisoner population broken down by watch house between 1 March 2025 and 30 September 2025. Data provided by Corrections.

225. I have combined the total data of Territory prisoners being held in the various police watch houses between 1 March 2025 and 30 September 2025 in Table 16 below. Whilst the number of Territory prisoners in watch houses has dropped since March 2025, there are still significant numbers of Territory prisoners being held in various watch houses throughout the Northern Territory. Thankfully, the average length of stay has shortened at most watch houses, although I note some prisoners still spent a significant amount of time at the Palmerston Watch House and the Alice Springs Watch House in the period after my review.

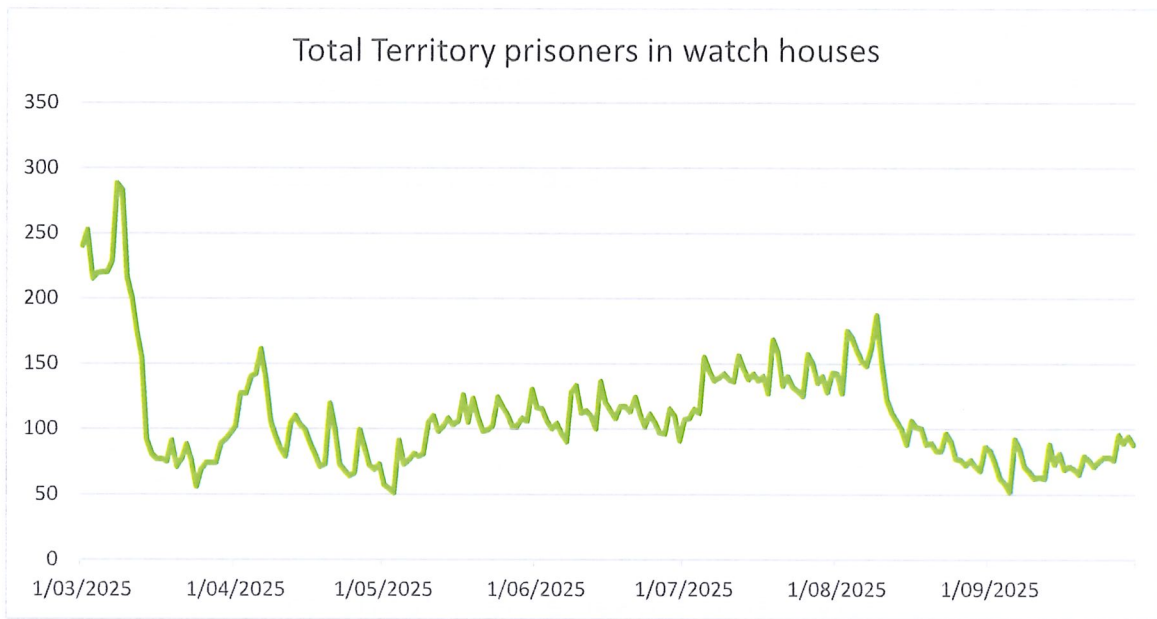


Table 16 – Total Territory prisoner population in police watch houses across the Northern Territory between 1 March 2025 and 30 September 2025.

226. I set out in detail the updated data I have received below, broken down per watch house.

3.1.1 Palmerston Watch House statistics from 1 March 2025 to 30 September 2025

227. Looking at the numbers NT Police have provided, the numbers of Territory prisoners at the Palmerston Watch House has remained a high proportion of the Palmerston Watch House prisoner population. The population has also increased at times as shown in Table 17 below. NT Police updated their data collection methodology to flag Territory prisoners, which has enabled me to break down the length of stay data in a way I was unable to do for the review period.

228. The length of stay data also shows that whilst most Territory prisoners leave the Palmerston Watch House within a week, around a third still stay for at least a week, and 5% stay for longer than two weeks. This is a very long time to stay in a watch house.

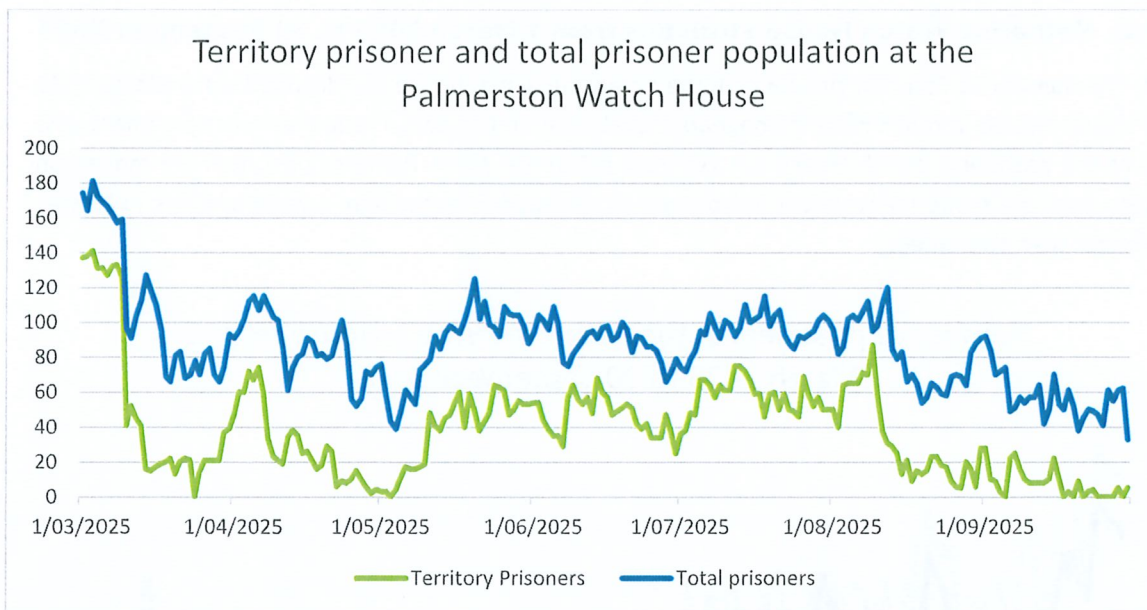


Table 17 – Number of Territory prisoners at the Palmerston Watch House from 1 March 2025 to 30 September 2025. Data provided by NT Police and Corrections.

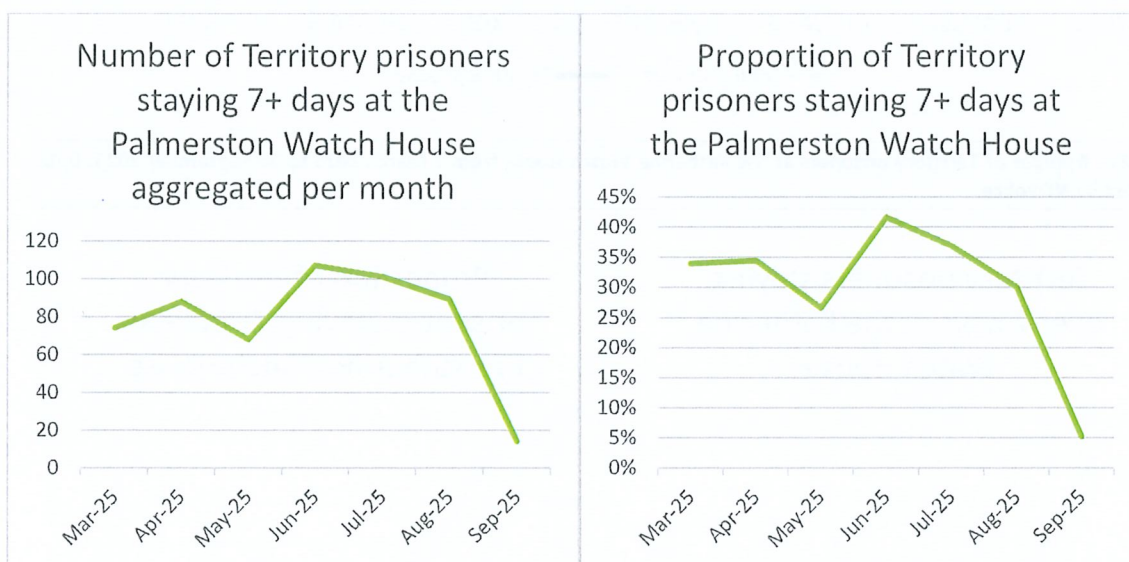


Table 18 on the left and Table 19 on the right - Number and proportion of Territory prisoners staying for 7 or more days at the Palmerston Watch House, aggregated per month. Territory Prisoners were held by both Corrections and NT Police between 1 March 2025 and 10 March 2025. The length of stay data for March 2025 is only taken from NT Police data and does not take into account any time that a Territory prisoner spent in Corrections' care.

Length of stay at the Palmerston Watch House for Territory prisoners						
	0-7 days	7-14 days	14-21 days	21-28 days	28+ days	
Number of prisoners	1281	458	58	10	15	1822
Percentage of prisoners	70%	25%	3%	<1%	<1%	

Table 20 – Length of stay at the Palmerston Watch House for Territory prisoners. Territory Prisoners were held by both Corrections and NT Police between 1 March 2025 and 10 March 2025. The length of stay data for March 2025 is only taken from NT Police data and does not take into account any time that a Territory prisoner spent in Corrections' care.

3.1.2 Katherine Watch House statistics from 1 March 2025 to 30 September 2025

229. The number of Territory prisoners in the Katherine watch house has dropped since March 2025 and appears to be at much more manageable levels than in the past. I note that most prisoners who stay at the Katherine Watch House are Territory prisoners. Most Territory prisoners are moved on quickly from the Katherine watch house but one in six stay for longer than a week and one in 20 stay for longer than two weeks.

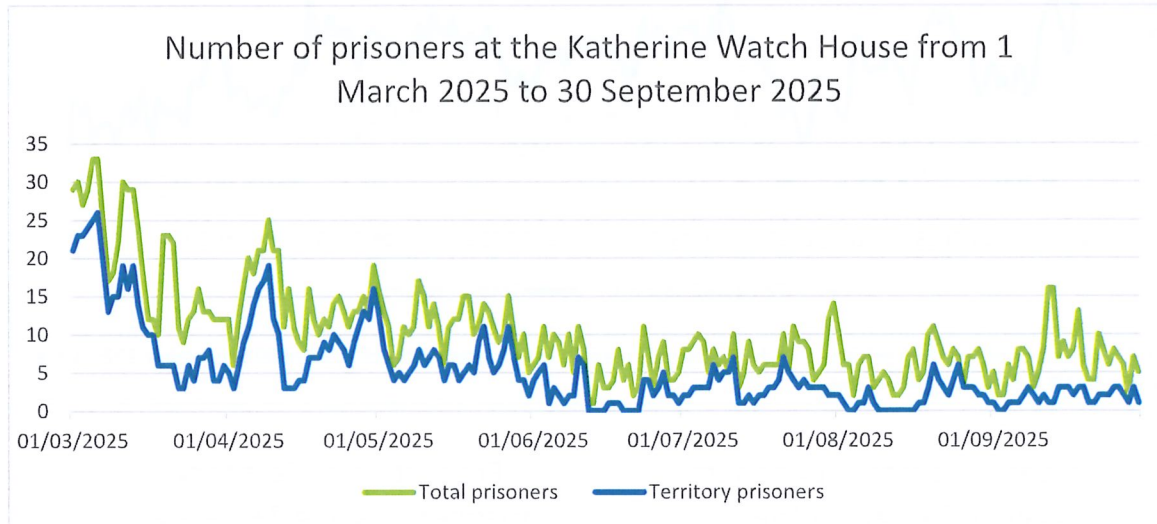


Table 21 - Number of Territory prisoners at the Katherine Watch House from 1 March 2025 to 30 September 2025. Data provided by NT Police.

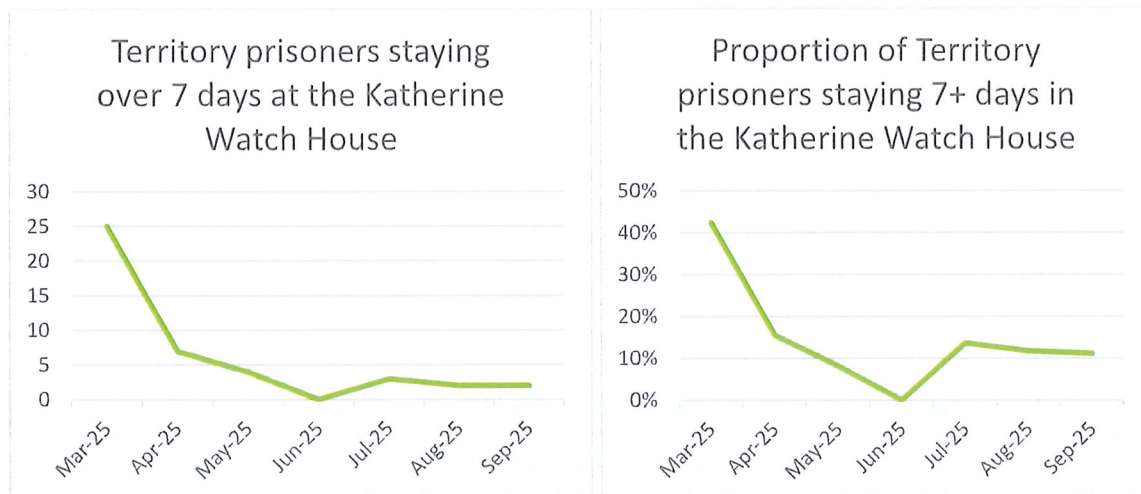


Table 22 on the left and Table 23 on the right - Number and proportion of Territory prisoners staying for 7 or more days at the Katherine Watch House, aggregated per month. Data provided by NT Police.

Length of stay at the Katherine Watch House for Territory prisoners						
	0-7 days	7-14 days	14-21 days	21-28 days	28+ days	
Number of prisoners	193	27	10	5	1	236
Percentage of prisoners	82%	11%	4%	2%	<1%	

Table 24 - Length of stay at the Katherine watch house for Territory prisoners. Data provided by NT Police

3.1.3 Alice Springs Watch House statistics from 1 March 2025 to 30 September 2025

230. The number of Territory prisoners in the Alice Springs Watch House has fluctuated over time but dropped significantly from when Corrections managed Territory prisoners in the Alice Springs Watch House. I also note that in July and August and again in September that Territory prisoners have risen to the point where most prisoners in the Alice Springs Watch House are Territory prisoners. All prisoners were moved on from NT Police custody within two weeks.

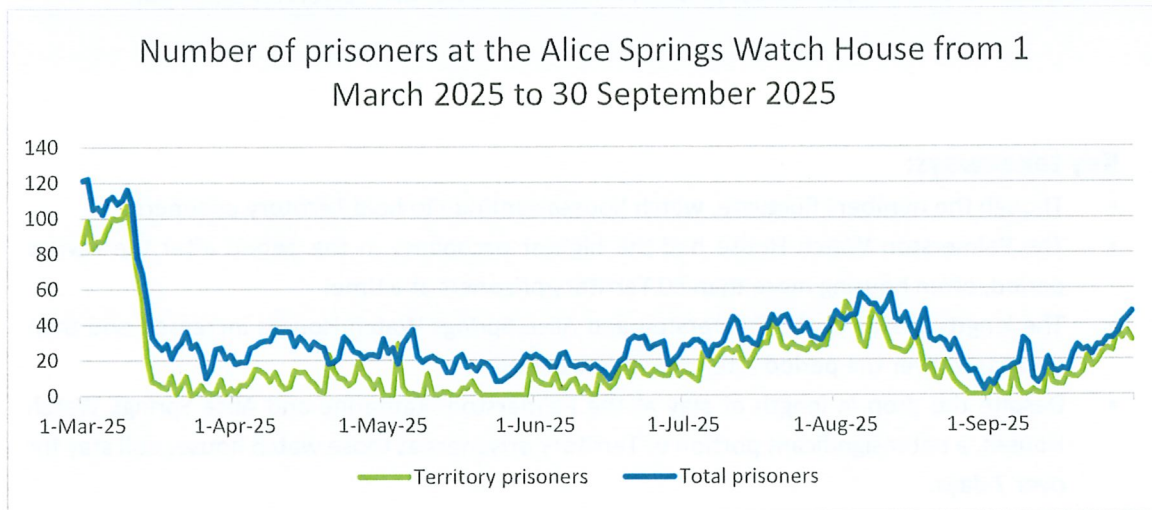


Table 25 - Number of Territory prisoners at the Alice Springs Watch House from 1 March 2025 to 30 September 2025. Due to aggregating data from both Corrections and NT Police, some discrepancies may show the number of Territory prisoners exceeding the number of total prisoners.



Table 26 on the left and Table 27 on the right - Number and proportion of Territory prisoners staying for 7 or more days at the Alice Springs Watch House, aggregated per month. Territory Prisoners were held by both Corrections and NT Police between 1 March 2025 and 14 March 2025. The length of stay data for March 2025 is only taken from NT Police data and does not take into account any time that a Territory prisoner spent in Corrections' care.

Length of stay at the Alice Springs Watch House (Territory prisoners)

	0-7 days	7-14 days	14-21 days	21-28 days	28+ days	
Number of prisoners	404	44	0	0	0	448
Percentage of prisoners	90%	10%	0%	0%	0%	

Table 28 - Length of stay at the Alice Springs watch house for Territory prisoners. Territory Prisoners were held by both Corrections and NT Police between 1 March 2025 and 14 March 2025. The length of stay data for March 2025 is only taken from NT Police data and does not take into account any time that a Territory prisoner spent in Corrections' care.

Key takeaways:

- Though the numbers fluctuate, watch houses continue to hold Territory prisoners.
- The Palmerston Watch House had the highest occupancy in the period after the review period, often housing more than 50 Territory prisoners at a time.
- The length of stay at the Palmerston and Alice Springs Watch Houses increased and then decreased over the period after the review period.
- Despite the drop in length of stay at the Palmerston, Katherine and Alice Springs Watch Houses, a not insignificant portion of Territory prisoners at those watch houses still stay for over 7 days.

4. CONCLUSION

231. The conditions for Territory prisoners that I encountered in my investigation were extremely poor and fell significantly below those set out in the Guiding Principles.

232. As a result of their offending or alleged offending, Territory prisoners had lost their liberty, but the conditions I observed in the review period appeared to also take their dignity.

233. The combination of the conditions identified throughout this report, particularly those listed below, meant that Territory prisoners were held in conditions that were unreasonable and oppressive within the meaning of the Ombudsman Act:²⁰

- severe crowding
- requirement to use exposed, in-cell toilets in front of many other cell occupants
- requirement to access drinking water atop frequently used toilets
- no time outside or access to fresh air and practically no time outside cell
- limited access to showers and teeth brushing
- poor sleeping conditions including sleeping on mattresses on the floor and in constant lighting
- very limited access to family and loved ones.

234. Even short stays in such conditions would be extremely challenging. However, my investigation identified that prisoners were frequently subject to those conditions for weeks at a time, if not for a month or more.

235. My Office received assurances from as early as April 2023 that works underway to increase capacity at correctional centres would remove the need to hold Territory prisoners in watch house facilities for surge purposes. However, despite such efforts to rapidly increase capacity at correctional centres, at the time of writing some two-and-a-half years later Territory prisoners are still being held in watch houses for that purpose, albeit in less crowded circumstances than the period I examined.

236. For the reasons outlined in detail above, watch house facilities are simply ill-equipped to accommodate prisoners for anything more than a short stay (being a few days or less than a week). I call upon the Northern Territory Government to end the practice of holding Territory prisoners in watch house facilities for surge purposes which is my primary recommendation and would alleviate the vast majority of the issues raised in this report.

4.1.1 Recommendations

Recommendation 1: I recommend that the Northern Territory Government remove Territory prisoners from watch house facilities as a matter of urgency, and that NT Police and Corrections provide me monthly updates on steps taken to remove Territory prisoners from those facilities. This recommendation is subject to a caveat for the Katherine Watch House, as there are no other custodial facilities in Katherine and the Katherine Watch House has some design features that make it more suitable for shorter medium-term stays.

Corrections

Accepted

Corrections acknowledges this recommendation and is committed to reducing reliance on watch houses. As of November 2025, there are minimal prisoners in watch

²⁰ See specifically s 59(1)(a)(iv) of the Ombudsman Act.

houses awaiting entry to a correctional centre. These are the result of daily court activity. It will always be normal to have a small number of prisoners in watch houses awaiting transfer to a correctional centre. Work is progressing under the Infrastructure Masterplan to expand custodial capacity. Monthly updates will be provided to the Ombudsman as requested.

NT Police	<p>NT Police support the Ombudsman’s recommendation addressed to the NT Government to remove Territory prisoners from watch house facilities as a matter of urgency.</p> <p>It is not accepted that NT Police provides the Ombudsman monthly updates on steps taken to remove Territory prisoners from the watch houses.</p>	<p>Corrections has a statutory responsibility for the care and management of Territory prisoners. While NT Police is strongly supportive of Territory prisoners being removed from police watch houses, this recommendation relies on Corrections having suitable prison facilities. NT Police therefore submits the proposal for monthly reporting to the Ombudsman on steps taken to remove Territory prisoners from watch houses should rest with Corrections, with data supplied by NT Police as required. This allows for a single point of reporting.</p>
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While highly undesirable, where Corrections or NT Police cannot avoid holding Territory prisoners in watch house facilities, to reduce the impact of the restrictive nature of those facilities I make the following further recommendations.

Recommendation 2: That Corrections and NT Police take all steps necessary to ensure Territory prisoners are not kept in cells with less than four square meters per Territory prisoner, not including space for sanitation facilities.

Corrections	Noted	<p>Corrections notes this recommendation. While police watch houses are designed for shorter-term holding, we will continue to work with NT Police to minimise crowding and prioritise transfers to correctional facilities as capacity allows.</p>
NT Police	Not accepted	<p>While NT Police agrees in principle with the concept of this recommendation, it is unable to accept it.</p> <p>Police watch houses are designed for short-term custody episodes. It is operationally limiting to meet this recommendation in totality where high numbers of Territory prisoners are positioned within a police watch house.</p> <p>NT Police are legally required to accommodate people lawfully taken into custody.</p>

Recommendation 3: Corrections and NT Police provide an alternative source of clean drinking water to Territory prisoners upon request, as is practicable.

Corrections	Accepted	<p>Corrections accepts this recommendation. Bottled water is provided in some locations and will be considered for broader implementation where operationally feasible and other delivery modes such as paper or plastic cups will be considered.</p> <p>Noting Corrections does not hold cross contamination concerns with the current toilet/water bubbler designs and the provision of drinking vessels (including bottled water) may increase the risk to the items being used as weapons or as vessels for biohazard fluids to be thrown at staff.</p>
NT Police	Accepted	<p>NT Police has reviewed and implemented a process for the provision of alternative sources of drinking water, where requested and operationally viable.</p>

Recommendation 4: Corrections and NT Police make available to all Territory prisoners sufficient underwear to maintain hygiene.

Corrections	Accepted	<p>Corrections accepts this recommendation and confirms that it will investigate additional underwear provisions to women in detention.</p> <p>Corrections notes it will evaluate the safety and security risks posed by underwear materials before a final decision is made.</p>
NT Police	Accepted	<p>NT Police has altered its watch house clothing procurement to include underwear.</p>

Recommendation 5: Corrections and NT Police maintain records of the clothes that have been issued to Territory prisoners and of when their clothes have been laundered.

Corrections	Accepted in principle	<p>Corrections notes this recommendation and will review record-keeping processes to improve transparency and accountability.</p>
NT Police	Not accepted	<p>NT Police is unable to accept this recommendation as this function is largely managed by Corrections.</p> <p>NT Police will collaborate with Corrections to determine current and future record keeping requirements.</p>

Recommendation 6: Corrections and NT Police provide a suitable substitute for pillows to Territory prisoners as appropriate and where possible.

Corrections	Accepted in principle	Due to hygiene and storage constraints, pillows are not currently issued; alternative comfort measures will be explored.
NT Police	Accepted in principle	Pillows are not provided due to security, safety and hygiene issues. Alternate comfort measures are being explored in consultation with Corrections.

Recommendation 7: Corrections and NT Police maintain records of the bedding that has been issued to Territory prisoners and of when their bedding has been laundered.

Corrections	Accepted in principle	Corrections accepts this recommendation in principle and will review processes to ensure bedding exchanges are documented.
NT Police	Accepted	NT Police currently updates prisoner custody logs when Territory prisoners receive fresh laundered bedding.

Recommendation 8: Corrections and NT Police explore ways to ensure that Territory prisoner accommodation in watch houses have lights that can be dimmed or can modify their light output to be conducive to sleep, and then implement a lighting time schedule.

Corrections	Noted	Corrections notes this recommendation and supports measures to improve sleeping conditions and will work with NT Police to implement lighting adjustments where feasible. Noting these are NT Police facilities and are not under the control of Corrections.
NT Police	Accepted	NT Police notes all major NT Police watch houses are fitted with dimmable lighting which is compatible with CCTV. NT Police will utilize this cell feature for Territory Prisoners when a risk assessment indicates it is safe to do so.

Recommendation 9: Corrections takes reasonable steps to notify a Territory prisoner’s family or other approved persons as soon as practicable after they enter a NT police watch house.

Corrections	Accepted in principle	Corrections notes this recommendation and accepts it in principle. Operational constraints limit phone access in watch houses; however, emergency and legal calls are prioritized. Corrections will review processes to include notification during the Territory prisoner transfer processes arrangements.
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NT Police	Not applicable	While this recommendation is not directed toward NT Police, NT Police will provide support to Corrections to make such notifications where requested and able to do so with the resource available.
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Recommendation 10: Corrections and NT Police take steps to ensure that Territory prisoners are able to routinely contact their family or other approved person, at least via telephone, from NT Police watch houses.

Corrections	Accepted in principle	Refer to Corrections’ response to Recommendation 11.
NT Police	Not accepted	Although NT Police accepts the principle of this recommendation, NT Police is unable to accept it. NT Police watch house staff have a limited capacity to accommodate prisoner phone calls due to the operational nature of a short-term custody facility.

Recommendation 11: Corrections and NT Police ensure that prisoners are able to shower and brush their teeth on a daily basis.

Corrections	Noted	Corrections notes the recommendation. Shower access is provided as frequently as operationally possible, with hygiene journals maintained. Prisoner hygiene regimes conducted in prisons cannot be replicated in watch houses. Specialist custody-safe toothbrushes are used in prisons under controls. Normal retail toothbrushes cannot be used.
NT Police	Accepted in part	NT Police agrees with the concept of this recommendation. NT Police now offers all Territory prisoners a toothbrush and toothpaste daily and on request where operationally viable. Showers are also available upon request and where operationally viable. However, due to operational requirements of a short-term custody facility, and infrastructure limitations, NT Police is unable to fully accept the aspect of this recommendation ‘on a daily basis’. NT Police will work with Corrections to ensure regular rotation of Territory prisoners out of watch houses to ensure hygiene requirements can be maintained.

Recommendation 12: Corrections and NT Police maintain records of the showering and tooth brushing opportunities provided to Territory prisoners.

Corrections	Accepted	The recommendation is accepted and processes will be reviewed to improve compliance.
NT Police	Accepted in part	Refer to NT Police’s response to Recommendation 11. The provision of toothbrushes is not recorded as it is now a daily practice.

Recommendation 13: Corrections and NT Police provide sanitary bins and sufficient feminine hygiene products in places where female prisoners have ready access to allow for the discrete management of periods.

Corrections	Noted	Feminine hygiene products are provided upon request; disposal arrangements will be reviewed to ensure privacy and dignity, noting safety and security risks.
NT Police	Noted	All care will be provided to female Territory prisoners for sanitary requirements to ensure privacy and dignity, however items such as sanitary bins will not be placed in cells due to safety and hygiene reasons. NT Police watch house staff will continue to assist female prisoners with dignity and care. NT Police are formalising a policy on this to ensure consistency across the agency.

Recommendation 14: Territory prisoners held in watch houses by either Corrections or NT Police be provided an opportunity to leave their cells to use an outdoor area at least once a day for at least an hour a day.

Corrections	Noted	Corrections notes this recommendation. Watch houses lack outdoor facilities; transfers to correctional centres remain the primary means of meeting this standard.
NT Police	Not accepted	As recognized by the Ombudsman’s investigation, NT Police watch house facilities are designed for short-term custody episodes only. NT Police watch houses are not designed with an outdoor area and as such this recommendation is unable to be accepted.

Recommendation 15: Corrections and NT Police keep readily extractable prisoner data that:

- differentiates between Territory prisoners and other prisoners held in watch house facilities
- details how long Territory prisoners have been kept in a given watch house facility.

Corrections	Accepted in principle	Corrections accepts this recommendation in principle and will investigate means to enhance the current data systems to ensure timely reporting compliance.
NT Police	Accepted	NT Police has reviewed its business practices regards data recording and reporting specific to this recommendation. NT Police now keeps readily extractable prisoner data in line with this recommendation. However, further review and minor modifications to current custody record keeping practices may be required to improve the data provided.

Recommendation 16: For a period of 18 months following tabling of this report, Corrections and NT Police provide the Ombudsman a list of the Territory prisoners that have been in a watch house facility for seven or more days (including spread across multiple watch houses) when this occurs and weekly thereafter for listed Territory prisoners so long as they remain in a watch house. The list is to include the following details:

- the Territory prisoner’s name
- their sex
- their date of birth
- the watch house they are held in
- how long they have been held at that watch house, the reason for their length of stay, and any action to exit them from the watch house.

Corrections	Accepted in principle	Corrections will provide reporting as requested.
NT Police	Accepted in principle	NT Police will work with Corrections to identify suitable reporting mechanisms between agencies to compile the requested information for provision to the Ombudsman.

For recommendations where Corrections or NT Police have indicated they will take steps to consider or implement the recommendation, it is intended that such action will be followed up in six months’ time for potential inclusion in the 2025-26 Annual Report.

4.1.2 Corrections’ response

This response was provided on 17 November 2025 and is set out in full.

Introduction

The Department of Corrections (**the Department**) recognises the importance of the Ombudsman and their Office as an independent and impartial investigator of complaints and issues relating to government administration.

Further, that their independence and own motion investigation reporting, provides government departments with the opportunity to improve systems and processes for the betterment of Territorians.

Response Summary

The Own Motion Investigation undertaken by the Ombudsman’s Office into the suitability of Northern Territory police watch houses to hold prisoners longer-term, has identified key takeaways and recommendations for the Department to consider.

It is understood that this investigation was triggered in part due to complaints received by the Ombudsman into the use of the watch houses for longer periods of time than is desirable. With prisoner numbers reaching record highs at unprecedented pace, the use of police watchhouses for surge accommodation was not preferable, yet practical and lawful. Their use, with the supportive collaboration of the Northern Territory Police Force (**NTPF**), became a critical and necessary component of the Department’s efforts to receive and house prisoners as the Commissioner of Corrections is legally bound to do. This enabled the safe and secure management of prisoners while

urgent and expedited infrastructure works were undertaken to rapidly increase capacity across custodial facilities in the NT.

The Department acknowledges the key takeaways observed through this investigation. The recommendations have in large part been addressed as identified by operational management during the surge period. The Department has elected to respond to the recommendations as either: Accepted, Accepted in Principle, Noted, or Not Accepted.

Accepted – Denoted where the Department is in agreement with the recommendation and has either completed actions to address it entirely, or has a documented plan to do so.

Accepted in Principle – Denotes where the Department agrees with the recommendation and has addressed or has a documented plan to address it, however the response may be achieved via different methodology or needs to be delivered in collaboration with another party.

Noted – Denotes an acknowledgement of the recommendation, with a commitment to recognising key takeaways and considering how action to address it may occur, where security, safety or other considerations take precedent.

Not Agreed – Denotes a recommendation response where the Department does not agree to the recommendation as the authorising agency. This does not mean that the Department will not continue to collaborate with other agencies to affect its achievement.

Our people

As legislative change introduced by the Northern Territory Government as part of their elected commitment to Reduce Crime came into effect, Correctional Services staff and NTPF members were on the frontline, responding every day to the associated increased pressures of the system.

While this report considers the appropriateness of the surge accommodation usage, it is important to recognise the extra-ordinary efforts and response of frontline staff. The custodial environment presents unique challenges and never more so during this unprecedented period where staff went above and beyond to fulfill their duties and duty of care. It is important to recognise that these staff faced daily challenges within the ever-changing landscape and that despite the outcomes of this investigation, they achieved an incredible task. It was frontline staff faced with identifying solutions to never-before-seen issues as they dynamically delivered their services, and they should be applauded for their achievement.

Context to Population growth

The growth in prisoner numbers experienced by Corrections across multiple years that resulted in the use of watchhouses as surge accommodation was significant. Multiple Government Departments including the Department of Logistics and Infrastructure (DLI), The Department of Attorney General, Department of Health and importantly, the Northern Territory Police Force (NTPF) worked together in good faith to achieve the best possible outcomes in complex and unrelenting environments.

An urgent and expedited infrastructure program led by DLI worked to deliver increased custodial capacity at the same time as the Department and NTPF worked to meet daily operational needs and troubleshoot.

This response addendum provides context to the strategic and operational approaches taken to address the increase in prisoner numbers. Appreciating that the use of NT Police watch houses was

not a preferred long-term arrangement, the demands on services through increased prisoner numbers and limitations of existing infrastructure and the need for secure placement, left no other option.

For several years Corrections identified that projections of prisoner numbers indicated that total capacity would be surpassed if additional infrastructure was not added to the Corrections estate. Rising prisoner numbers are the result of multiple factors, including increased offending rates, increased policing activities, and a backlog in courts as a result, pushing the remand prisoner population higher. Planning and infrastructure reviews were reconsidered, and strategies developed for the medium and long-term to accommodate additional prisoner numbers. In the interim, initiatives were actioned and proposed in the short term to address the immediate need by adding in additional prisoners at the existing correctional centres. At the peak of the population pressures, Corrections had reached the operating capacities at prisons, and the use of the watchhouses as an overflow measure was unavoidable, and essential.

It is important to note that the use of NT Police watch houses to accommodate Corrections prisoners has decreased significantly from its peak, noting that the short-term housing of a small number of prisoners in these facilities is always business as usual. This is due to the process involved in apprehension, court appearance and custody transfer, as well as the vast distances involved in Justice Service delivery across the Northern Territory.

As shown in Figure 1 (below) the total prisoner population increased from 1730 in 2019-20 to 2640 in 2024-25.

Figure 1: Yearly Prisoner Averages 2019-20 to 2024-25

Yearly Averages	2019-20	2020-21	2021-22	2022-23	2023-24	2024-25
Darwin Correctional Centre	1083	1081	1147	1241	1398	1509
Alice Springs Correctional Centre	560	573	611	647	672	756
Berrimah Correctional Centre*	-	-	-	-	-	256
Barkly Work Camp	47	53	62	68	73	72
Datjala Work Camp	40	43	46	48	48	48
Total	1730	1750	1866	2004	2191	2640

*Berrimah Correctional Centre came on-line during 2024-25

The decision to use NT Police watch houses was undertaken in a collaborative, planned, considered manner and managed as a necessary, lawful and appropriate means to house excess prisoners.

While management plans and risk assessments were being undertaken for use of the NTPF watchhouses, numerous additional plans were being actioned to alleviate both infrastructure and resourcing pressures.

From the utilisation of modular infrastructure purchased from interstate, to the establishment of supported bail accommodation in Darwin and Alice Springs, and external resourcing through to secondments from other jurisdictions, no stone was left unturned.

Penultimately, the maintained use of the facilities was one piece of a masterplan that critically delivered on a plan for community safety, crime reduction and the expectations of government and the broader public. It remains the Department's view, that the use of watch houses over the peak period was the best and most common-sense solution.

It is acknowledged that there are limitations with the physical design of watchhouses and thus mitigations and additional operational support was provided for prisoners as and where appropriate, with some inconsistency of delivery across facilities because each watch house is different. Corrections created systems and provided for additional food and snack packs; increased mail access; TVs, DVDs, cards, board games and exercise equipment were purchased and installed. It should be noted that the regularity of these additional supports was at times limited, due to safety or security concerns.

Criticism of the watch house arrangements and the findings of internal reviews led to amendments in the way in which these facilities were utilised overtime. It was recognised and accepted that conditions in watch houses had potential to lead to poor physical health outcomes and a negative impact on the mental health and wellbeing of prisoners. The Department worked closely with the Department of Health to monitor the health needs of all prisoners in watch houses. Where prisoners required health services or medical care, it was either delivered in situ or the prisoner was transferred to a correctional centre health clinic or hospital care. In February 2025, a document provided an overview of operations in each of the watch houses being utilised in Darwin, Palmerston and Alice Springs. The document specifically addressed concerns raised by prisoners in police watch houses regarding health and hygiene issues. These issues are consistent with those raised in the NT Ombudsman's report.

In recognition of the longer-term use of the facility, and the need to ensure prisoners were provided with appropriate support, an updated procedure was produced in March 2025: Prisoner Support at Watch Houses. The procedure provided guidance to staff supporting prisoners in watch houses and prisoners external to Darwin Correctional Centre (DCC) and Alice Springs Correctional Centre (ASCC).

Many of the Ombudsman's recommendations have already been implemented (either fully or in part) and work continues to improve the way the Department manages its prisoners in watch houses, noting that the numbers are far less than those experienced early in 2025. Some of the recommendations require collaboration and partnership with NT Police and these discussions are continuing.

Despite substantial investment and expansions to prison capacity, the rising prisoner population and future projections will continue to place pressure on the correctional services system.

Infrastructure Master Plan

The Corrections Infrastructure Master Plan approved in October 2024 is a critical, multi-year project that will enable Corrections to build capacity, expand our Territory-wide network and improve community safety.

Significant investment is already enabling Corrections to deliver urgent solutions and implement medium and long-term strategies to address prisoner numbers, increase capacity across our correctional facilities and build a stronger, more connected Corrections system.

The Master Plan was designed to:

- reduce pressure on existing correctional facilities,
- return police watch houses to Police for use as soon as possible, and
- provide a staged solution to accommodate future growth in the prisoner population.

On completion of the Masterplan, Corrections will much larger network with a better system for management of remand and sentenced adult prisoners; an enhanced focus on skills training, prison industries and employment through more Work Camps; and a network of youth justice facilities that work together to provide rehabilitation and therapeutic support for young people. The Master Plan also includes development of the Alice Springs Women's Correctional Centre, scheduled to deliver staged and progressive opening, and the repurposing of the Paperbark facility for young people.

In total, this will provide 14 facilities across adult and youth operations:

- Four adult correctional centres (including two new women's facilities)
- Four work camps (including two new work camps)
- One primary youth detention centre in Darwin
- One youth detention reception/intake centre in Alice Springs
- Four youth boot camps and bail facilities in Darwin, Katherine, Tennant Creek and Alice Springs.

Since Machinery of Government changes in September 2024 and the creation of a stand-alone Corrections agency, a significant body of work has been undertaken to increase capacity.

- Emergency measures were implemented, with the capacity of correctional centres expanded by 93 beds (October 2024)
- The first accommodation block of the Berrimah Correctional Centre was activated, and 30 prisoners transferred from Darwin Correctional Centre (December 2024)
- The Alice Springs Correctional Centre capacity was increased to 730 beds, and 30 prisoners transferred from the Alice Springs Watch House (January 2025)
- Total numbers of beds at the Alice Springs Correctional Centre increased to 826 with a new 96-bed modular accommodation block (March 2025)
- Berrimah Correctional Centre increased to 410 prisoners with construction underway to further expand capacity to 844 prisoners (June 2025).
- Holtze Youth Detention Centre capacity increased from 46 to 86 beds. This work was actioned as part of the Master Plan.

Bail Support Program

The Bail Supported Accommodation Program (also known as 'Open House') commenced in 2023, providing integrated support and accommodation services to individuals who experience issues with housing or homelessness as an alternative to being in custody. The integrated support and accommodation services are operated by the Salvation Army and funded until 30 June 2026:

- Darwin commenced in January 2023, male and female participants, funded for 30 beds with up to 9 additional beds available under a fee for service model.
- Alice Springs commenced in February 2023, males only, funded for 27 beds.

- The Department funds the Salvation Army to deliver the Katherine Outreach Program, providing case-management support to individuals subject to bail. This is an outreach only service with no accommodation provided.

Conclusion

As outlined via this response, while not preferred, the use of the NTPF watchhouses as a surge accommodation option was an essential decision.

Every effort was taken to ensure the most expeditious relief of the watchhouses through collaborative partnerships with other Departments, which is ongoing today.

The NTPF should be commended for their patience and their support, whilst navigating the complex situation with the Department's incredibly dynamic and resilient staff.

The Department thanks the Ombudsman for the diligence shown throughout the investigation and notes it will continue to deliver both upon recommendations and its strategic reform journey.

4.1.3 NT Police's response

This response was provided on 14 November 2025 and is set out in full.

The extraordinary circumstances that saw a surge of Department of Corrections prisoners (Territory prisoners) being held in police watch houses across the Northern Territory (NT) placed tremendous demands on the Northern Territory Police Force (NTPF).

At times, holding high numbers of Territory prisoners alongside police prisoners in our watch houses created difficult and challenging conditions, placing extraordinary pressure on our staff. As our watch houses are not designed for the long-term accommodation of prisoners, the conditions at times did not always meet the standards expected by prisoners, staff, or the community.

As acknowledged by the Ombudsman's Office (OO), police watch houses are designed for short-term detention. Police officers are trained primarily in frontline policing, not long-term custodial management. The facilities are intended to support high-risk and short-term accommodation. Whilst 'short-term' is not defined, police prisoners (as opposed to Territory prisoners) are generally held for much shorter periods, typically measured in hours, and on rarer occasions a day or more (with the exception of the Katherine Watch House).

Prior to these extraordinary circumstances, prisoners sentenced to short-term periods of imprisonment (days) were on occasion kept in the Katherine Watch House to serve out their sentence, as there is no correctional centre in Katherine. The rationale for this practice is that it lessens the burden on prisoners by avoiding unnecessary long-distance transport for a short sentence. It also keeps the prisoner closer to family and simplifies repatriation back to their community. Furthermore, it lessens the burden on both the Department of Corrections (DoC) and the NTPF regarding resourcing and transport requirements. This practice occurred prior to the recent events and will continue for the foreseeable future.

Acknowledging the OO's definition of a Territory prisoner, the information provided in our responses aligns with this definition, that is, a sentenced or remanded prisoner who would normally be conveyed to and held at a correctional services establishment.

Whilst not part of the OO's investigation, it should be noted that during this extraordinary period, a decision by the Local Court to no longer provide after-hours bail reviews resulted in a significant rise in overnight and weekend prisoner numbers in police watch houses. This, in turn, led to larger numbers of first appearances for people held in custody. Increased court listings often meant first mentions were not reached, with matters adjourned to the following day. This increased the amount of time before an arrested person was afforded their first opportunity to make an application for bail to a judge. This remains a major issue for police watch houses today.

It is also relevant to note that the Bail Act 1982 ('the Act') was amended in January 2025 to strengthen statutory presumptions against bail for recidivist offenders, both by creating a new presumption for persons with relevant prior convictions within the previous two years (section 7(1)(dea) of the Act), and by amending an existing presumption for persons on bail or charged with the offence of breaching a domestic violence order (section 7(1)(de) of the Act).

The NTPF welcomes Recommendation 1, to remove Territory prisoners from watch house facilities as a matter of urgency. The NTPF can also report that the number of Territory prisoners held in police watch houses has reduced significantly.

4.1.4 Northern Territory Local Court Response

The operations of the NT Local Court were not within the scope of this investigation and the complaints received were directed at those in charge of watchhouse facilities. However, as the NT Police's response referred to a stated change in practice by the Local Court and comments on its impact, I provided the Local Court an opportunity to respond to the NT Police's comment. In its response provided 20 November 2025, which I set out in full, the Local Court advised:

Thank you for the opportunity to provide comment and context regarding the NT Police response to the proposed recommendations for the Investigation.

NT Police have noted that 'during an extraordinary period, the Local Court's decision to cease after-hours bail reviews led to a significant increase in overnight and weekend prisoner numbers in police watch houses. This resulted in larger numbers of first appearances for people held in custody. Increased court listings often meant that first mentions were not reached and were adjourned to the following day, delaying the first opportunity for arrested persons to apply for bail. This remains a major issue today.'

There have been two significant amendments to NT bail legislation in recent times: the first commencing in January 2025 and the second in May 2025. The January amendments introduced additional presumptions against bail and mandated electronic monitoring where the presumption was overcome. The May amendments altered the test for granting bail. The Court's previous on-call arrangements were revised on 28 February 2025 (six weeks after the January amendments) and again on 24 April 2025 to allow weekend review of bail refusals for children.

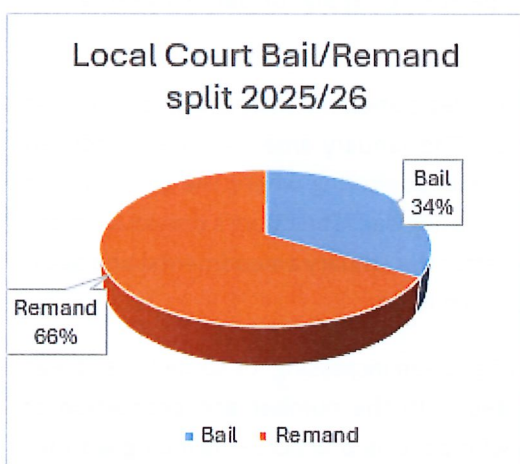
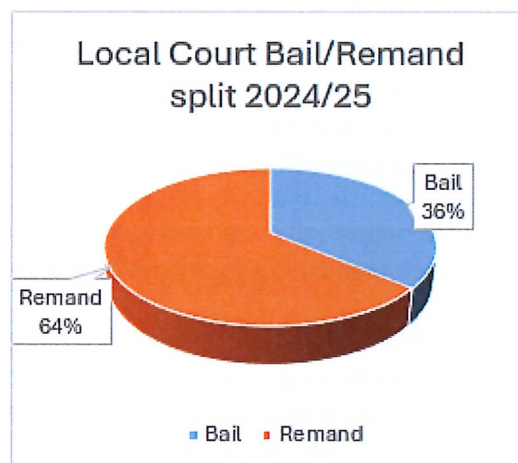
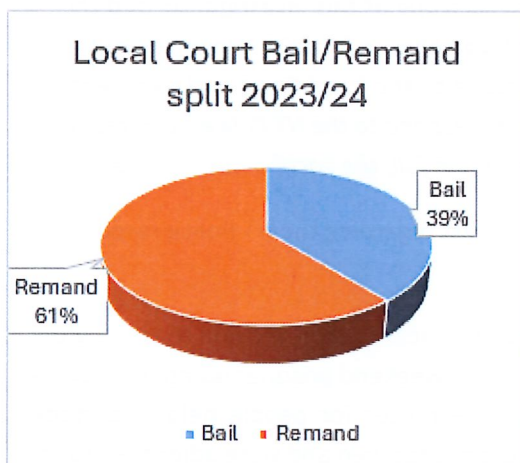
Court data demonstrates that, although remand numbers had been increasing for some time, it was these two legislative amendments that further accelerated both the number and proportion of people remanded after arrest. These changes, combined with policing practices—including warrant sweeps and a reduced use of police discretion to grant bail—have significantly contributed to rising custody numbers.

Where electronic monitoring is required, bail cannot be granted by a Judge over the telephone; a Court appearance is necessary to obtain the assessment. The absence of after-hours telephone bail applications therefore had only a minimal impact on custody numbers when compared with these other legislative and operational factors. The data also shows that very few bail applications were successful, even when made in Court.

The Court has redirected resources to meet the increased demand on sitting days, including creating additional bail and arrest courts and ensuring more Judges are available to hear bail applications at first mention. Nonetheless, both the total number of people on remand and the proportion of alleged offenders held in custody rather than on bail continue to rise.

In summary:

1. The rise in custody numbers is not attributable to the unavailability of an after-hours Judge to hear telephone bail applications.
2. Bail cannot be granted by telephone where electronic monitoring is required by law.
3. The Court has increased in-court opportunities for bail applications at first mention through additional judicial resources.



Numbers of prisoners on remand

DATE	Local Court Darwin	Local Court Alice Springs	Youth Court	LOCAL COURT TOTAL
01.07.2019	228	95	19	342
01.07.2020	231	88	13	332
01.07.2021	304	108	44	456
01.07.2022	317	133	48	498
01.07.2023	391	202	41	634
01.07.2024	512	267	32	811
31.12.2024	600	323	38	961
06.01.2025 new bail laws 1	600	323	42	965
07.05.2025 new bail laws 2	914	390	48	1,352
01.07.2025	914	312	46	1,272
21.07.2025	994	352	39	1,385
14.11.2025	735	253	45	1,033